I never call (a crazy thing to do)

by ohnomydear

Summary

Tim might have a tendency to overwork, but he did not tend to forget people he personally hired for WE's research team. 'Course, the rest of the family didn't tend to forget Jason Todd existed either. Conclusion: You could never be too careful handling alien artifacts.

Notes

I've never written a Batfic before, but I've thrown myself headlong into the comics since this past October and the fanfiction, more recently, so... I'm hoping I can find my way along.

The work title is part of 'Pity the Child' from Chess. The first chapter title is from Guns and Ships (Hamilton). In other words, I was having fun.

No ships sailing in this fic (though some canonical pairings are mentioned if you squint), because I would rather make terrible life choices like trying to write in Leonid Kovar (so far, I don't have a use for him, but I wish I did).

#

Notes on edits performed in 9/30/18 (continuity fix), and 3/19 (continuity fix: the Remix). These fixes were graciously informed by readers who took the time to ask questions and remind me when I'd said things and contradicted myself and THANK YOU to anyone who informed that process.

5/25/19 notes: This is the final form of the fic, to avoid myself rewriting it for all eternity.
Thank you for reading.

##
For this to succeed, there is someone else we need

For once (and it was indescribably rare), his nightlife wasn’t the problem.

Nope, Tim thought as he reviewed the reports. No, this was all Wayne Enterprises, all people being secretive about things that should not be secret. For Heaven’s sake, W.E. collected and researched alien artifacts. What on earth made this man — he checked the name again, just because it was 3 a.m. and he was double-checking meeting notes at Wayne Manor after patrol — ‘Dave Strifle,’ think that he knew better than everyone else at W.E. and could take an artifact home? Who the hell was Dave Strifle?

And not just ‘who the hell did Dave Strifle think he was;’ it was that Tim honestly didn’t know who he was. Which was very, very wrong. He had hoped that going on patrol would dull his desire to pick up the phone and call his way through the company hierarchy to find this out, but it hadn’t worked. In fact, he wanted to make the calls even more now. Patrol tended to amplify his concerns, rather than dull them, so it was no great surprise.

And Bruce didn’t run the company by angrily calling through the directory. He would lose respect for Tim if the younger man started yelling at W.E. employees at 3 a.m. Yelling at people meant you felt you didn’t have control of the situation. Tim rested his head against the dining room table where all the papers were spread out. He didn’t, in fact, have control of the situation. No one knew the artifact had been gone for two days. Everyone was so blind to things—

No, no, that wasn’t fair; people didn’t know what to look for. Normal people weren’t control-obsessed vigilantes with insomnia. Some people just drew a paycheck, which sounded nice.

Damnit, damnit, damnit.

“Master Timothy,” Alfred said from the doorway, causing Tim to jerk his head up from the dining room table. A piece of paper tried vainly to stick to his forehead and he yanked it away. The last thing he needed was confidential human resources forms inked on his forehead.

“Sorry, yes, I’ll go to bed soon,” he said, the words jumbling together in his rush. Despite the late hour, the Wayne butler had a tea tray in hand — Tim could see the steam rising from several cups. He thankfully accepted a cup and took a sip of the tea. Something sweet and licorice-esque.

“May I ask what matter at Wayne Enterprises you find so pressing?” Alfred asked, taking an adjacent seat at the table and surveying the mess of papers. It would never stop amazing Tim how the older man could sound even-tempered when he must be exhausted. Sitting at the table with Tim and consenting to drink tea with him was evidence enough of that, for Alfred (‘it is a forward and egregious breach in protocol to sit with the family without invitation,’ as the butler had told him once). Tim tried to keep his explanation short while he sipped at the tea.

“Just... somebody took one of the research objects home.”

“Ah. Surely that can wait for the morning?”

“It could.” Tim rubbed an eye, trying to stave off the eventual migraine. “But it’s been gone two days and I just realized it was missing today while I was taking inventory. It’s not even one we’d catalogued, so there was no tracking beacon on it.” Alfred nodded with understanding. Tim took another sip of the tea, feeling nervous as his suspicions left his mind and gained reality with each word.
“It also worries me that I’m having so much trouble remembering anything about this researcher who took it. I should’ve been on the hiring team for any researcher in that department. We also knew, based on some preliminary tests that he would’ve been participating in, that it was supposed to alter memories in some way.”

“Fascinating,” Alfred said, in a sincere-sounding tone. “What can you do about it tonight, Master Timothy?”

It was the perfect question, because the only practical answer was ‘go to sleep, because I can’t do anything while half-unconscious’, but Tim hadn’t gotten this far in life by being agreeable.

“I could still go out and get it from his house. I could pull that from the W.E. directory.”

“Can’t you have someone else pick up the item?” Alfred asked. “I would very much like you to get several hours of sleep before tomorrow morning’s meeting. Which you scheduled.”

“Who’s going to break into a stranger’s house for me?” Tim asked.

‘Literally anyone you know’ said the look on Alfred’s face, but the butler didn’t mention it out loud.

“What about Miss Brown?” Alfred asked instead, finishing off the last of his own earl gray tea. Tim shook his head.

“She’s got a 6:30 class in the morning.”

“Miss Cassandra may still be up.”

“She’s had a couple long nights since she got back from Shanghai, and she was patrolling with Bruce earlier. It’s not worth the bother.” Tim stood, taking care to stride rather than shuffle as he headed for the doorway. “I’ll be back in an hour, tops, and ready for the 8:30 meeting.”

“Master Timothy, if you intend to commit breaking and entering at this time of night, I would prefer you take someone with you.”

It didn’t take super hearing to hear the steel in the request. Alfred was putting his foot down about this and that meant that Tim had better become agreeable. Problem was…

“Who’s going to be up?” he asked, turning to face the butler, who was gathering the tea items back to the tray. Alfred barely even looked up from the task, the answer prepared before the question was asked.

“Communicate your need and the address to Master Jason. I believe he is temporarily in Gotham for a case, with Master Bruce’s blessing.”

“Uh, the thief doesn’t really need killing…”

“I would think you knew that your brother enjoys breaking into places. Without committing homicide.”

“It’s kind of a stealth mission,” Tim said, knowing the argument had already ended. Alfred raised an eyebrow.

“Fine, fine…” Tim opened a text to the older man. As he felt half-asleep on his feet already, texting the address and the request to Jason took a little more effort than usual. Seconds later, he got a reply that suggested Jason hadn’t been asleep at all, given the proper grammar and spelling. Jay was
always a stickler for both in text communications.

‘Now, Replacement? Eeesh, must be an Agent A requirement. Fine, I’m heading out. You owe me
and better be there first.’

Tim’s growing migraine backed off for a minute as he texted his thanks and relief.

‘Tt,’ Jason texted back.

#

That exchange was the simplest part of the rest of their night. The Red Hood and Red Robin met up
at the large townhouse near Robbinsville and entered through a ground-floor window. According to
Tim’s notes, Strifle lived alone, so they could be less concerned about innocents in the home, even if
neither of them intended to be interacting with Strifle tonight. Among other things, Tim had
discovered that Strifle was a member of the local gun club and he didn’t want to see how good a shot
the man was. He’d even managed to convince Jason that wearing just the domino was a better idea
tonight than chancing the helmet as a reflective surface. Reluctantly, the Red Hood agreed.

Upon stepping into the living room and Tim climbing over the leather couch that Jason stepped over,
the vigilantes split up. Jason took the bedroom and living areas while Tim scouted out the kitchen
and dining room. Jason had decided on this arrangement, because the Red Hood had took one look
at Tim and announced that Alfred had given him some sort of sleepytime tea. Which, y’know, Jason
was all in favor of, but it did make Tim a ‘frakking nuisance’ when trying to stealthily move through
the house.

So, Tim went to the less populated areas and Jason, despite being bigger and louder, went to the
bedroom.

Everything had been going okay until Tim had heard the shout and a telling ‘WHUD’ from the
direction of the bedrooms, followed by a stream of South American cursing from Jason. They’d
agreed if one of them was caught, the other would avoid being detected unless things looked dire.
Sure, the Bats and the Red Hood worked together on big things, but for both of them to be caught in
the house of a former W.E. employee who was doing nothing known to be illegal? That’d look
suspicious. Tim moved towards the kitchen door, away from where he had been investigating the
garage, and stood in the hidden shadows of the doorframe.

“Frak you!” the Red Hood shouted. Someone grunted from the other room before (what sounded
like) stumbling into the wall.

Then, like a force of nature, the Red Hood came tearing out of the bedrooms and into the living
room, only putting on the brakes to look around for Red Robin. Tim recognized the artifact Red
Hood held, about as long as a man’s shoe and as dense, from the diagrams and schematics he’d been
pouring over all night.

“That’s it,” Tim said, stepping back into the kitchen. “We gotta go.”

From the bedroom came the distinctive sound of someone loading a gun as Strifle muttered a stream
of angry curses. Statistically, a .44 was likely in this neighborhood. Before Red Hood could lift his
weapon to preemptively return fire, Tim opened the door to the garage, stabbing at the door-opener
button just inside. Thank God people could be so predictable sometimes.

“Why not the front door?” the Red Hood hissed as they skidded under the opening garage door and
bolted into a nearby alley. Jason still sounded winded from whatever had happened inside the
bedroom. It must have been some hit.

“He’s a good shot and will still be hesitant to fire in a residential area. He had a clear line of sight to the front door though. No hesitation there.” Tim pulled out his grapnel gun and fired a line to the rooftop of one of the ritzy grocery stores that dotted this kind of neighborhood. “I would’ve thought you’d know that, being a marksman and all.”

“Some of us don’t function great if it’s been more than 24 hours since a nap,” Jason grumbled, landing heavily next to Tim. “What the hell is this thing anyway?” He pulled the item in question out of his coat and twirled it once like a baton. Tim was surprised to find that he was holding his breath until Jason safely gripped it again.

“A W.E. artifact which we don’t know enough about.” Tim relieved the Red Hood of the artifact, grateful that they both wore thick gloves as a part of their uniforms and knowing that it might not make a difference at all. “He stole it then… quit, or at least stopped coming into work. He may actually still be employed. The CEO of Wayne Enterprises should probably do something about that.”

“Yeah, yeah, while you’re at it, someone should tell him not to clock someone in the head with the thing they’re trying to steal.” Jason yawned, still looking a little uneasy. “You said you don’t know what it does?”

“I’m… sure it’ll be fine,” Tim said. He didn’t feel convinced by his own words, but there was nothing else he could tell the Red Hood in good confidence. Jason had been hit with the artifact and hadn’t blown up or been electrocuted or developed amnesia. Sometimes, that was all you could hope for. The Red Hood would know the same.

“Well, you’re the genius,” Jason said, either not picking up on the subtlety or content to let sleeping dogs lie for now. “Can you make it back alone, Replacement? I’m not carrying your sorry butt all the way back to the manor when that tea hits.”

“I’ve got an apartment nearby, I’ll just crash there and drop off the artifact at Wayne Enterprises tomorrow,” Tim said, already letting Alfred know about the change via text. “Thanks, Red Hood.”

“Yeah, yeah, go to sleep.”
Just in case they said 'who?'

Chapter Notes

Wow, I didn't expect the response! Thank you to everyone who interacted with this story. I really hope it keeps up with expectations. I'm about 10k into writing it now and the next update will be this Thursday.

On a side note, this chapter's a little choppy because I was deciding on plot. It'll smooth out, I swear. Again, thanks so much for reading.

Edit: Never put Damian's 'tt' inside greater than/less than symbols like they do in the comics. It screws up ALL the formatting, so my apologies to anyone who read it that way. I've fixed it now.

Four Days Later

No one did anything so friendly as to say, "Good morning, Jason!" when the second Robin drove the motorcycle into the Cave's ever-expanding garage. The closer Damian got to his license, the more motorized vehicles he wanted available for practice. Not that the kid hadn't had a Robin cycle available for years now, license or no license.

Jason pulled off the helmet and strode into the Cave proper, where he could see Tim staring a thousand-mile gaze at the Bat-computer, where he hunched, coffee within six inches of his hand. God, the kid had the posture of a gargoyle. Jason poked him in the spine, eliciting a flinch and a yelp from the over-caffeinated young man.

"What's up, Timbers? 's the Bat around?"

The younger vigilante scowled but just returned to his traditional hunch as Jason ruffled his hair with one hand. Bad sign.

"B's sick," Tim said, attention fixated on some Alaskan landscape on his screen, along with a bunch of photos of the scepter they'd stolen a couple nights back. "The demon convinced him to get some bedrest after they patrolled. Alfred's keeping an eye on him and cleaning up upstairs."

"Yikes. Did not mean to come to a house of sick." He eyed the younger vigilante. "You good, Replacement?"

Despite not being the detective Bruce or even Tim was, Jason could pick up on tells. Dick had almost banned him from their "family" poker nights because of it. Right now, the clock on the computer reading 7am, the untouched dinner tray, cold dregs of coffee, and Tim's growing annoyance as he figured out what Jason was doing were all clues that the kid was far from fine.

So naturally, the next words out of his mouth would be—

"I'm fine," Tim said.

"Sure. Can I check something on the computer then? 'S why I stopped by," Jason lied easily. Tim, suspicious but unresisting, pushed the swivel chair back, its wheels a streamlined 'whoosh' on the
hard floor. Jason minimized the photos of disturbed tundra and instead pulled up a computer application Roy had helped him design and Babs had helped him install when he proposed the idea, almost a month ago. He probably could have gone to Babs for help with the programming originally… but then Dick would have found out. He had no illusions that Bruce didn’t know about it, but the Bat hadn’t said anything to him about it. Yet.

It took Tim a minute to figure out what the app tracked. That delay was probably the sleep deprivation kicking in as he realized what all the little graph indicators next to their codenames meant.

"Bruce will kill you for installing something he didn't approve."

Jason grinned at the death joke opportunity but didn't take it.

"If Alfie signed off on it, who cares what the old man thinks? According to this, you’ve officially been using the computer for thirteen hours straight. Since no one is kidnapped, dead, or fighting a big bad, and you’re staring at landscapes, I’m calling it. You are going the hell to bed."

“Why the hell would you even build this?” Tim asked. Only half of his attention was on Jason as he quickly got into the settings of the program. “Why would you want notifications of how long we’ve been using the computer sent to your phone? You weirdo.”

“Because none of you will set up a messaging system on it? Come on, what happened to that AOL program you were so excited about?”

“Jay.” Tim’s tone wasn’t just because AOL had been out of fashion for almost longer than he’d been alive.

“Between the old man, and you, and the demon, I never know if there’s an emergency. If you’ve been using the computer thirteen hours straight and nobody’s stopped you, either no one in this stupid family is paying attention or someone is dying. I’m usually the last to know. Call it a fail-safe.”

“Maybe they don’t want you to show up and finish the job,” Tim said in a dry tone. Jason chalked the bad attitude up to sleep deprivation and closed out of the computer application before Tim could dismantle it altogether.

“If you slept like a normal person, I wouldn’t have the opportunity.”

“I have back to back meetings all morning after nine, so I definitely can’t catch up on it now,” Tim replied. He’d closed his eyes for what he probably thought was a moment, but it was quickly stretching into a long moment. He shook himself awake, as if remembering where he was. “And I've instituted a new policy after the sleepytime tea incident. Nobody who tells me to go to sleep gets to give me food or drink for 24 hours. So don’t even think of trying to go all Alfred on me.”

"Fine by me, wasn't gonna serve you anyway, Replacement." Jason strode towards the stairs and heard typing start up again. Red Robin was often steamrolled by his teammates to sleep more, eat more, smile more, etc. Jason wasn't about to get in the middle of that losing argument. Not when he’d been able to avoid the rest of the Bats for almost a week. He hadn’t meant to be in Gotham this long and didn’t want to be stuck here much longer.

Upstairs, the study smelled like lavender, as it had for as far back as Jason could remember. Alfred typically leaned on the smell to promote calm and well-being in those coming up from the Cave. If the deep sleep benefits had ever been proven, the butler probably would have draped Tim’s room in it, as one would do to protect someone from vampires.
But Tim wasn’t the one stuck in bed, Bruce was.

Jason hoped that meant this conversation might actually go okay, rather than the train wrecks he and Bruce usually had. The silence between him and the Bats for the past four days wasn’t a coincidence. Batman had been interfering in the case when he said he wouldn’t. Jason had politely tried to ignore the apparent crossover in Batman’s cases, because he was in Gotham as a vigilante ‘guest,’ more or less. He wasn’t welcome to work here as the Red Hood; they all knew it and Bruce had only let him in now because he’d been chasing a gang up the coast and determined that their next stop was Gotham. And, of course, Jason had sworn not to kill anyone. Their agreement had been a week and a half ago, Jason had arrived a week ago and he’d been moving between his three old Gotham safehouses ever since.

And yet, two nights ago, Batman had jailed Jason’s major lead. Check that, ONLY lead.

And not just thrown into a ‘break in and have a conversation’ jail; more like ‘break in and you will be staying’ jail, which would be tricky to get out of without a couple people getting shot. Jason didn’t doubt that if anyone had a fatal heart attack during his hypothetical breakout, Batman would blame it on him. The Red Hood reminded himself of this this, very deliberately, on his way to Bruce’s room and again as he nudged the door open. Be nice. Phrase this without yelling.

The bed had all the sickroom accoutrements of tissues, thermometer, linens and a surreptitiously-placed bucket, but no Bruce.

Jason tried the second-floor library next, because if Bruce escaped Alfred, that was usually his next stop. ‘So he could improve his mind,’ Bruce always argued, though what improvement you could get from snoring into a first-edition Dickens, Jason had never been sure. The library also yielded no Bruce.

"C’mon buddy, I just want to tell you how frakking frustrated I am..." Jason murmured, exiting the library. 'Frak' was what he had started using around the Bats, earning less chastisement when he used it over comms and from Alfred than his usual language did. And the modification helped when working with kids. Many of the street kids were used to having adults scream curse words at them. By comparison, a guy who was kicking the adults' asses and using a bizarre but versatile stolen term from a TV show... it seemed to reassure them.

However, he enjoyed all the colorful language he wanted when falling off a roof or accidentally kicking a table or kicking the shit out of some mobsters in a bar fight.

Because fuck that, he needed a reputation or he’d be dead.

Speaking of dead, he heard the distinct sliding sound of a katana being unsheathed behind him as he left the library. He took several quick steps backward to reenter the library. Bruce’s favorite snarling pre-teen (or was Damian an actual teen now?) followed him into the room, katana drawn and scowl at an advanced stage of ‘murderous’ rather than low-level ‘cranky’. Frak, the kid had been stalking him.

"Hey, Dames, didn’t expect you to be home. Know where your dad is?" he asked.

"It is a teacher education day. How did you gain entry?" Damian asked, shifting his weight in preparation for a lunge. What the frak.

"Uh, the Cave? Like someone who used to live here?" Jason took another step backwards. Damian followed and Jason did not like the look in his eye at all. Damnit, Tim couldn't have mentioned the brat was feeling homicidal? Of course, to Tim, Damian never stopped being homicidal.
“Why are you here?” Damian demanded again. Maybe he was possessed? Not impossible when your grandad was Ra’s Al Ghul, but Tim should have noticed that much. A possessed Damian would probably be nicer and that would set all the Replacement’s mental alarm bells off.

“Lookin’ for Bruce. Need to chew him out about somethin’.” Jason looked hard at the boy, who was still ready to chop off whatever body part came closest to the naked blade. This behavior didn’t line up. The Robins had done all sorts of things recently that meant Damian would recognize him as an ally, if not a brother. Damian’s death, that time Joker had almost burned Jason’s face off, the Robin War, the time Damian broke into his apartment and planted a crowbar in his bed before trying to kick the shit out of him… good times.

“Dami, you know who I am, buddy?” he asked, taking a different tack.

“An intruder in my father’s house,” Damian replied, with no lessening of animosity. An idea occurred to Jason.

“Okay, I know your dad. You may not know me, but I know your dad and Pennyworth. Came here to see ‘em. Can you take me to them?”

“Father is unwell.”

“Yeah, Timbers mentioned that and I saw his room, but it will be brief, I swear.”

Damian scowled but turned to lead the way without further protest. Jason took a breath and followed, running through his options. Leaving Damian in this selective amnesia state bothered him, so he didn’t want to bolt from the house. The kid’s psyche was a damn fragile thing and he didn’t want to be out on patrol and hear that the brat’s moral compass broke and Bruce was in thinly-sliced pieces on the sidewalk. Was it something to do with his resurrection? Jason didn’t like the thought – it was too close to thinking about what had happened to himself after the Lazarus Pit – so he followed Damian in speculative silence.

The kid led the way back to Bruce’s bedroom. This time, Bruce was in bed, sleeping so lightly he sat up with bright eyes as the door clicked open.

“Yes, Damian,” Bruce said, focusing with forced alertness at the katana-wielding child. Which seemed to perplex him before he said: “No swords in the hallway, Damian.”

“I was returning from the training room when I encountered this person.” Damian sheathed the katana and gestured at Jason, thankfully in that order. “He claims he knows you and Pennyworth.”

Bruce turned his attention to Jason. The Red Hood had only seen that expression, or a variation of it, once before, but that was when Batman wore the cowl and had caught Jason jacking his tires. He had only seen the shape of it then; the full expression at this point in their complicated relationship was unforgettable. To have Bruce Wayne look at him mildly, without a trace of recognition, and adopt the faintly-irritated but unflappable persona of ‘Brucie.’ If the man wasn’t clearly running a fever, Jason was sure Bruce would have gotten out of bed to shake his hand. As it was, the blue eyes were just crinkled in the imitation of a distant smile. His fingers twitched for his phone, as if to pretend that he was the persona that spent all his time playing silly cell phone apps while he was sick.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Brucie began. “If you’re here to see Timothy, I believe it’s, ha ha, a little early for him.”

“I’m not here for Tim,” Jason said, measuring out each word as he ran through all the options. “Do you know who I am?”
Beside him, Damian made a (tt) sound and looked apologetically at Bruce.

“I apologize, Father, he is apparently only a very forward journalist.”

“No – no, I’m not,” Jason interrupted. If this was sheer caginess on their part, it would be easy to clear up. “I’m—I was your second Robin, Bruce. Tried to jack your tires when we met. You gave me burgers… I hate to say it but there should be adoption paperwork for me somewhere in your files. We’ve done the amnesia game before and I gotta say, not a fan, so… if this is a long con, like with Dick ‘dying’, I’d rather not.” Enough insider information had been packed into the statement that it should raise Bruce’s curiosity, or alarm, if nothing else.

When he spoke next, Bruce’s tone remained cool. “I am afraid you are confused, Mister…? ‘Robin’? I’m not feeling so well myself, so it’s certainly not the time to deal with… whatever ailment you seem to be experiencing. Damian, can you show our guest out? Maybe get his number for future reference?”

Ha, any number Jason gave was going to be traced into the ground and, were he actually employed somewhere, he’d be fired by end of day and probably chased down by the Batman by that night, demanding to know ‘what he knew.’ Tough, he’d run Bruce’s gauntlet of ‘hide from the Bat’ already and knew he could keep well out of the Bat’s way if he wanted. Besides, he knew their patrol routes.

But if he wasn’t giving a number and Bruce had already decided to kick him out… fine. Fine. Jason let the pipsqueak nudge him out of Bruce’s room. The brat shut the door behind them both with a click of finality. Hey, at least Jason didn’t live at the manor anymore, he reflected. That would have been inconvenient. Jason eyed Damian to see if there had been any change in demeanor. Nope. While the sword had been sheathed and less noticeable while they were talking to Bruce, the brat clearly wanted it noticed now.

“I do not appreciate being lied to,” Damian said, his grip tightening on the katana handle. While a little of the hostility had petered out, it had been replaced by suspicion. “You were not lying in the hall about having something to say to my father, and that you knew him, but he does not know you and you did not say whatever it was you wanted to say.”

That was… a long sentence for Damian. And correct, actually; Jason hadn’t had the opportunity to bring up his argument about the jailed lead at all.

“So I will give you to the count of ten to get out of this house,” Damian continued. “I do not anticipate you will have any trouble.”

Well, yeah, Jason thought. He could be out of it in three seconds if he used the window directly behind Damian. It wouldn’t be the first time a Batkid had destroyed something to prove a point.

“You’re not curious who I am, brat?” Jason asked.

“If you return here despite this warning, I will become curious. You do not want me curious. For now, I simply resent your familiar treatment of the Wayne scion.” Damian leveled the sword at him.

“Ten.”

“Wait, just – okay, who is the Red Hood?”


“Robin, just think about why I would—”
“Eight. Do not call me Robin. Seven.”

“Oh, sorry, right, Tim Wayne is the superior Robin.”

“It’s Tim Drake, and it’s absurd to believe that Drake could be better at anything than anyone. Six. Five. Four.”

“You and me both died. Remember?” The reminder was a desperate and low blow meant to keep Damian from continuing the countdown. Instead, it solidified the anger in Damian’s eyes.

“THREE.”

Jason found it a little sad he didn’t get to see the expression on Damian’s face as he rushed past the katana-wielding kid and launched himself through the window. He wished he had the helmet but wearing one up into the manor would have caused Damian to attack him on sight. As it was, pieces of glass flew at his face and he protected it with his non-dominant arm. It impacted visibility, sure, but he knew the outcroppings well from his many visits on the roof. He had explored it many times as Robin when he couldn’t find it in himself to trust the kindness of the manor’s other inhabitants. Those were early days when he was small enough to hide halfway down the manor façade with the wind in his hair and the threat of permanent release just below. No one had caught him then except Dick and he knew for a fact Dick was working in Bludhaven for another six hours today.

He could hear Damian yelling for Alfred above. Thank God the brat wasn’t following him. Jason scaled down using the windows, rolling to slow his fall as he reached the lawn. In the daytime, Bruce didn’t have as many of the manor’s defenses on high alert, because taking out a ‘forward’ journalist or two with a turret was terrible publicity for the wealthiest guy in town. He could make that work to his advantage. Sprint across the lawn, vault the wall, get a bus back to town.

Or…

He could go get his helmet and motorcycle and self-respect back from the Cave. But, hell, if this was some kind of fast-acting spell, Tim could’ve forgotten him too. Picking a fight with Damian was hazardous. Picking a fight with his Replacement, especially without gear, would be a drawn-out event and both of them might need medical care by the end of it. Again, nope.

“Intruder!” Damian’s shout served as a way of catching his attention than anything else, the way a hawk might scream to freeze its prey. Jason looked up just in time for a hundred pounds of teenager to crash onto his shoulders. Shit.

He roared and tossed the kid away, howling “I was out of the manor!” and then, like the guiltiest intruder possible, he booked it for the front gate. Damian gave chase, which firmly put an end to the idea of sneaking back into the Cave.

Brat, Jason thought, lengthening his stride to easily outpace Damian’s sprint. Neither of them would be able to keep it up, but while it was a short walk back to the manor for Damian, it was a long, long walk back to Jason’s safehouse in town. The more the Red Hood thought about the upcoming walk, the more he hated it. He vaulted over the Wayne Manor’s fancy gate, officially exiting the property, and looked back to see Damian stop on the other side, like a dog hitting an invisible fence. Nothing but bark now, huh kid?

You’re gloating over a thirteen-year-old’s defeat, his mind whispered dryly. Really?

Hey, child assassin, always be happy when you survived those, he told himself as he jogged over the hill and out of sight.
Another thing he had done a lot as Robin was checking out all the blind spots he could see from the manor windows and make future escape plans. When he was too sick or too injured to leave the manor as a kid, it only took a few hours of consciousness for all hell to break loose in his mind about what could happen while he was stuck there, a car ride from Gotham’s hiding places. If he’d told Bruce or Alfred, they would be upset, so he didn’t talk about it. Rich people didn’t think about those kinds of things happening in their own homes, or dismissed the thoughts after they installed nice locks. Anyway, when he was stuck, the window was his respite, the curtain-framed map for his escape plan.

The step-by-step usually looked like: Don’t leave until Alfred has already come around once with tea for sick/injured you. Use the window on the first floor only if you can’t climb down. Get to the oak tree past the gate and wait. Don’t move to the copse of alder trees until you know Bruce has gone to work and Alfred has opened the kitchen window to air out the room. Once the window was open, Alfred went to the basement to do laundry. Once at the copse of trees, work your way to the bus stop four miles towards Gotham. When on the bus, sit in the second row to the back, keep your head down, and concentrate on how Dick is in Bludhaven and will not show up to ruin this plan. And, usually, experience some additional concerns about bleeding all over the seat or fainting or throwing up (or all three) would be part of the plan. He had a lot of time to think about it, age thirteen, because all the villains who hadn’t caught Dick were more than happy to go after his slower replacement with everything they had.

Years, later, the escape plan hadn’t really changed. The brat would probably run off with Jon Kent, if their school schedules lined up. Tim had meetings all day. Alfred would be tending to Bruce. Bruce seemed sick enough that he wouldn’t be down in the Cave all day.

So Jason crouched in the copse of trees and waited for everyone to leave.
It's nice to remember

Chapter Notes

The chapter title is a line of 'Try To Remember,' from The Fantasticks.

I'm now 19k into this story and that's pretty far for me without a plot outline! There is a caveat... I know very, very little about the Lantern Corps, particularly the Sinestro Corps. I'll do my research (thank God for the dedicated DC wiki and the people who upload comic panels online and the public library) and I can see where I'm going, but this is muddy new territory for me.

Apologies to anyone who was annoyed by the font change in the last chapter. (I would've been.) Moral is never put Damian's [tt] in those greater than/less than symbols the way they do in the comics, because that's HTML and ruins the formatting. I've fixed most of it now.

Again, thank you for your interaction, whether comments/kudos/subs/bookmarks/etc., with the story. :) Next update will be this Saturday and following updates will be T-Th-Sat.

1.19 clarifying edits: Tim briefly hypothesizes that everything that happens is a dream. I want to say, for certain, that the events in this story are not a dream for the characters. With the exception of Tim may be half-asleep all the time but that’s actually just how he functions, I think.

Most mornings, Tim thanked God that Bruce had agreed Tim could do his senior year online, thus eliminating the need to attend a physical high school, and allowing Tim to work on his diploma from 1am to 4am, rather than 7am to 4pm with all its social requisites. He needed to use most of that social energy for Wayne Enterprises.

Such as with individuals like Darren Collier.

“Thank you, Mr. Drake-Wayne, I’ll have my team get those reports on your desk by end of day.” The Director of Research shook Tim’s hand, glad to still have his job even after a resoundingly bad morning meeting, the third of six meetings for Tim today. It was one of those mix-and-match days, where a half-day was spent being Wayne Enterprises’ CEO (or at least, answering all the questions and making all the decisions of one in Bruce’s absence), and a half-day spent putting out fires as the ‘Research Manager Coordinator.’ The former was a job he had only held while Bruce was dead, the latter was a position he had begged himself into just to be able to do what he wanted to in Wayne Enterprises’ R&D without infringing on Lucius Fox’s projects.

CEO Tim had insisted that they fire Stifle (who was also unremembered by his department head) for job abandonment. Research Manager Coordinator Tim then had to deal with the fallout in the research team, who had mostly been taking direction from Strifle as ‘Research Lead.’ The man no one could remember had been important and Tim had had to keep wasting time finding out what he’d done in order to tell the team how to move forward. Strifle’s name had been scrawled on many of the reports regarding ‘Project Muninn,’ the name they had given the artifact when they first discovered it affected memories. Discovering the memory connection had been an investigation, in
and of itself. The weird, scepter-shaped object that explained why no one in the entire city of Seward remembered an aircraft crashing into the shore just three miles from town. Tim had been reviewing the case for the thousandth time before he came to work.

“Perhaps you want to consider some internal promotions to help you manage the workload, Darren,” Tim replied, extricating his hand from the enthusiastic embrace. “Most of the problems were generated by your taking too much of the workload.”

Darren didn’t appear to delegate anything to the rest of his team. In four months, Tim was certain he’d be laying this director off for a missed deadline or faulty product spec sheet. You couldn’t run a company that dealt with researching and implementing alien technology and have people who didn’t trust anyone.

No, Tim reflected, that was to be saved for family relationships.

Thus free of Collier, he set a quick pace down the hall to the other conference room, where he should be meeting with the leadership team in three minutes (wearing his CEO hat, for the moment). Three minutes – ten minutes? He glanced down to check his phone for the time and completely missed the mailcart being pushed through the door to his right. Tim sensed it, seconds too late to qualify as normal human reaction time, and the cart rammed into him. Gerald the intern made a sound of terror. The mailcart stopped. Tim pushed himself off the tiled floor (damn it, why did Dick grow up an acrobat and Tim had to be a tiny, easily injured teenager?!) and gave Gerald a ‘what can ya do’ shrug.

Meanwhile Gerald had ducked under the mailcart to retrieve Tim’s cellphone. “So sorry, Mister Drake-Wayne. I didn’t expect anybody to be back here…”

“It is on the way to a conference room, Ger.”

The statement appeared to throw Gerald for a loop looking down the hall, then to Tim, then back towards the elevators. “Um, I—I mean this with no disrespect at all and I’m sure you know the building much better than me and I know I shouldn’t be—”

“Mmhmm?” Tim tried not to sound impatient. Gerald had good ideas that his supervisors felt threatened by, which was why he was pushing a mailcart around Wayne Enterprises. That, and to learn to be more assertive.

“Are you thinking of the sixth floor, Tim? Cause we’re on the fourth.”

Tim looked down the hall. Oh… well, shit. “You are absolutely right, Ger. Ugh, guess I’ll be late for the next meeting too.” He pivoted to head back towards the stairs, inwardly cursing his past-self for burning the candle at all ends. This wasn’t even the first ‘wrong floor/room’ incident today. Earlier today, his research assistant had had to text him the reminder for where he was meeting his own boss and he could feel himself moving, inexorably, towards the pre-sleep crashing sequence. His eyes would drift shut and he would snap them open, cover it up with an insightful question or comment in the meeting, and throw back more coffee. The flawed methodology just had to hold out for another three meetings, then he would go home and add a couple of hours of sleep before patrol. Anything that totaled six hours within a 48-hour period appeared to make all the people who paid attention to him satisfied.

The next meeting had been cancelled for lack of participants. Someone had turned the lights off when they left and shut the blinds in order to accommodate the projector they hadn’t ended up using. So, Tim fell asleep in the conference room until his boss came in, blinded him with light, and told him to go home.
Embarrassed and unable to legitimately protest, Tim justified his departure by staying awake for the entire chartered car ride home and completing his two remaining meetings via video chat, multi-tasking the conference call by reviewing a list of product specs that would be going over to California tomorrow. If there were any errors, the corporation’s lawyers would jump right down W.E.’s throat and Tim needed to be prepared to handle that if no one else could.

The teenager stumbled up to the manor’s front door and pulled off his shoes once inside. He didn’t remember balling up his suit jacket for a pillow, but apparently that had happened. He held onto it until he got to his room where he could hang it up. He then considered the bed. Yes, he had come home in order to go to bed. He didn’t want whatever Bruce had and he certainly didn’t want to wander around the manor or play piano while the gremlin had the day off of school. Thanks to years of practice he could hear Alfred distantly moving in the house, assisting Bruce. The older man had probably passed through the thick of sickness by now, but no patrol tonight for Batman. Nothing would get done if Tim didn’t do it. Sleep, as always, helped nothing in terms of productivity.

So, Tim headed for the cave to get another look at that case before he came up for a nap… or at least before he fell asleep in front of the computer and got woken up by the demon coming down to change for patrol without Bruce’s permission.

Tim made his way down to the Cave, paying close attention to shadows and unexpected noises. It wouldn’t be out of the question for Alfred to find out he had come home exhausted and then instruct Damian to prevent him from going to the Cave before taking a nap. He wouldn’t stay down here that long; Alfred didn’t need to worry. The idea that it bothered someone else that he wasn’t sleeping always flew around his head and couldn’t find a resting place for the guilt to roost, like a bird over the ocean. Why would anyone care about how long he’d been awake? He was damn useful awake and he would make sure this day was good for something.

He startled as the sound of someone starting up a vehicle came from the garage – one of the motorcycles. Grabbing his bo from the armory wall, Tim stalked towards the garage and peered around the wall. And stared.

The Red Hood had collected what looked like every bit of equipment he had ever left in the Cave and stored it on the back of his motorcycle. And no, Bruce and Jason didn’t get along, but a moving out of his equipment on this scale meant they had had one hell of a fight.

“Hood!” he yelled over the motorcycle noise. The red helmet turned immediately to face him, looking almost as startled as Tim had felt earlier at the noise. The helmet’s unchanging surface revealed nothing, though the owner turning and killing the engine did. Jason didn’t pull off the helmet, didn’t approach, and even leaned back a little on the motorcycle, as if killing the engine might have been a mistake.

“What are you doing?” Tim asked, gearing himself up for what would probably be an angst-filled conversation about whatever angst-filled conversation Jason had with Bruce.

“Depends…” the Red Hood said with exaggerated caution. “What do you think I’m doing?”

“Damnit Jason, I don’t have time for this.” The words ‘I am so tired right now’ almost made their way out of his mouth, but Tim knew better than to admit it.

The helmet came off in one smooth movement. Jason was wide-eyed beneath it. “Okay, so you know who I am.”

“You did try to kill me and most of the family at one point, so yes, I know who you are,” Tim said, trying to lower the level of tension in the room. He didn’t often see Jason alarmed.
“Damian doesn’t.” Jason shifted position to face Tim, leaning against the motorcycle now on its kickstand.

“Ha! Lucky.”

“Or Bruce.”

That took Tim aback for a moment, twisting to look back up at the Cave entrance. “Uh… you’re sure? Sometimes he tries to be funny, because he forgets that all he can do are really dry jokes and…” He watched Jason’s unchanging expression. “No, huh?”

“Do they know who you are?” Jason asked. Tim shrugged with one shoulder.

“I haven’t seen them yet today, but they knew me last night and obviously I knew you this morning. You haven’t seen them in what, three days?”

“Aren’t contacted in four, since you and I did the pickup.” Jason plucked a piece of lint off the motorcycle jacket. “Kinda pissed at Bruce for jailing my main lead in a— you know what, it doesn’t matter. I can’t go upstairs because the demon brat banned me from the manor. Call up. See if they know you.”

A fair enough hypothesis. Tim crossed the room to return to the computer, looking at the upstairs intercom thoughtfully. Everyone at work had known him when he left. No one at home had seen him yet today… he found that he didn’t want to know. If Bruce had forgotten him, if Pennyworth had forgotten him, did he really want to know right now…? Couldn’t he put it off until after a nap? What if he was *already asleep and this was all a really wild dream*—

“Holy crippling insecurities Batman, will you just call them?” Jason said. Tim pressed the call button on the intercom and simply held it down before finding the words:

“Hey, Alfred?”

“Yes, Master Tim?” The line came over the line without a pause or any sort of confusion.

Tim looked immediately at Jason, not knowing what to say next and the older man gestured dramatically.

“Ah, I’m going to take a nap in the Cave.”

“Very well. I have restocked the protein bar supply in the desk. Master Bruce also heard that you ensured Dave Striflle was fired. It’s unfortunate that you couldn’t make the theft charges stick, of course, but job abandonment is quite legitimate reasoning.”

“Okay. Thanks, Alfred.”

Tim released the intercom button and sat there staring at it, inexplicably relieved. Jason in turn stared at him in shock and maybe a little happiness. Tim couldn’t figure out why until he thought about the dialogue he’d exchanged with Alfred. Not one attempt at trying to verify Jason’s story. But why would Jason make the story up anyway? The family had made what amounted to peace in Batman’s world and even if Tim pointed out that Jason had tried to kill him, it didn’t mean he thought another attempt was right around the corner.

“Could be localized amnesia.” Tim wondered aloud. Normally, he wouldn’t even suggest amnesia but he still felt exhausted. People got amnesia sometimes, right? About… specific people?
“Then why not you?” Jason said. “I thought of that too. Can’t be fear toxin, too complex and magical for a riddle, no plant does this that B ever taught me, I’m not a Dollotron– I mean, we’d know that. It’s nothing the clown would try.”

“And I’d worry more that it was something that happened to Bruce and Damian,” Tim said. “They’re the only two we have evidence for.” The faint concern in Jason’s voice represented something that he could grasp onto, something he could help with and avoid falling asleep for.

“Damian also didn’t know who the Red Hood was,” Jason said.

“Oh. Crap.” Tim sat up a little straighter now. Forgetting Jason Todd was one thing, but forgetting the Red Hood existed meant that the criminal element would no longer remember what he had done when under the influence of the Lazarus Pit. “No heads in duffel bags to reestablish your rep.”

“No plans to. But, what about documents? I’m in those, right?”

Tim checked. “Yup. But if no one can remember you and we didn’t establish much when you came back from the dead…”

“I’m a dead person that no one remembers,” Jason finished grimly. “Except you and that may be temporary.”

Tim scowled and started searching the desk for the promised protein bars. “Even if I forgot you, I’d be curious enough to research it.”

“Then do me a favor and figure it out while you remember.”

Tim resurfaced with the protein bars, tossing one to Jason. “First step is to reintroduce you to the family.”

Jason barked out a laugh as he unwrapped the cellophane casing. “They’ll think you’re gullible as hell.”

“What—no they won’t!”

“Remember when Bruce was dead, and I was crazy, and you were insisting that Bruce wasn’t dead and nobody believed you? This is that. Don’t beach yourself on this shore, Replacement, at least not yet.”

“That’s why they’ll believe me now,” Tim argued back. “They’ve ignored me before and I’ve been right. I’ll be right this time.”

“Master Tim, it occurred to me that—”

Both vigilantes turned in alarm to see the butler coming down the bottom of the stairs with a talent for stealth that Bruce himself would have envied. Alfred took in the newcomer without changing expression. Tim knew him well enough, and imagined Jason did as well, to see the slight stiffening of his posture to British gentleman, not family butler. This should be interesting.

“A friend, Master Tim?” Alfred asked, sticking with ‘Master Tim’ since neither wore masks or partial uniforms, other than the Red Hood having his helmet under one arm. Tim could use that.

“He’s—getting into the vigilante business.” The words practically fell out of Tim’s mouth, though he immediately wanted to shove them back in. Getting into the vigilante business so he brought a stranger to Batman’s Cave? “I blindfolded him on the way here. I meant to have him meet… Robin.”
“You want him to meet… Robin.” Alfred knew exactly how tense Damian and Tim’s relationship was and had to be mentally running over the potential reasons Tim would want anyone to meet the current Robin... besides a contracted assassin.

“It doesn’t have to be now,” Jason said finally. “I’m sure he’s busy at school or something. I’ll leave a note for him or for Batman if they… are interested.” He took a step forward and held out a hand. “Jason Peter Todd.”

Tim had never seen Alfred and Jason quite in these postures; Jason gentle and welcoming as someone greeting a suspicious cat for the first time, Alfred alarmed that someone was putting all of his charges in tacit danger just by being here.

Alfred, British to the core, shook the hand. “Sir.”

Given his usual smirk, Jason had probably some kind of quip ready but Alfred’s refusal to introduce himself appeared to hurt him more than he’d anticipated. The joke never left his lips, swallowed into tight welcome.

“I’ll leave that address and get out of here then,” Jason said, turning away.

“Earlier today, there was an intruder reported at Wayne Manor.” Alfred’s voice didn’t modulate with the statement. “That wouldn’t be you, would it?”

Jason looked back at the butler and Tim could only hear his voice, not see his face. “Alfie, I swear, I’m not up to anything.”

“Young man, I believe that you believe that. But you should not be here.”

Jason nodded just once, spun back to look at Tim with an ‘I told you so’ expression, and headed for the garage. The sound of an overloaded motorcycle roaring off became audible a minute later. Alfred looked at Tim, an eyebrow lifted.

“I thought you brought him here blindfolded.”

“It’s… ugh.” Tim ran his hands over his face. He really needed that nap now. “A Code Praeteritus? Isn’t that Bruce’s code for amnesia?”

Alfred considered this development. “Should Master Bruce know about this?”

“Not yet. I remember Jason but if I forget, you’re... going to have to remind me that this was important to me. Because he’s part of the family and, while he’s better at rebuilding his life than most of us, we can’t drop him.” Again, Tim added mentally.

“I suppose this is connected with the artifact you went out to steal the other night?”

Tim gazed at the butler in surprise. “I... good God, Alfred. That’s obvious. That’s it. It’s gotta be it. Why didn’t I think of that?”

The butler smiled faintly. “Well, I cannot say on authority what proper sleep looks like for us, but it does improve the cognitive processes when you have it. Now, will you go to bed before Master Bruce’s illness assails your immune system?”

“You got it.”
Phone rings, door chimes, in comes company!

Chapter Notes

Fun fact: The Lanterns Corps. don't use ships (except for Abin Sur, briefly??). Did I know this before I wrote it? No. But it has a good reason now and everything will be fiiiine.

Unrelated fact: Four months after leaving my last job, I have REGAINED EMPLOYMENT in my new state! This isn't really relevant to the story, updates will continue on schedule, but I finally, finally got another job in my field and I'm excited. :D

Fun fact #2: Thank you for interacting with this fic. <3

Fun fact #3: The chapter title is from "Company" in the musical Company, which is my favorite Sondheim musical.

Over the next week, Tim devoted himself to his role in Wayne Enterprises’ research division, ignoring most of the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ to get to the ‘how do we undo this’s. Since the team was out a lead and most of them remembered Tim’s time as CEO (more fondly than Tim himself did), they took to his direction well, especially since his leadership style left them to their own devices a lot of the time. Tim had the ability to focus whole-heartedly on Project Muninn.

And Jason… Jason hadn’t reached out since driving away and Tim had figured that if he didn’t know anything about how to undo whatever Project Muninn had done, it was pointless to bother the Red Hood about it.

Besides, while Jason hadn’t reached out to communicate verbally, the Red Hood had been busier in the past week than in the last six months. The busted drug dealers numbered in the double-digits, all left alive for GCPD to pick up. A major sex ring just blocks from a school found all of its sites destroyed and defaced with graffiti advising the girls on Gotham’s human trafficking ‘way out’ nonprofits. And while the Red Hood was intentionally avoiding the Bats, Tim had heard both Bruce and Damian now refer to the red-helmeted man who showed up when things were falling apart and who ran like hell the minute they were better. ‘Red Robin’ had not yet encountered him. Tim privately wondered if Jason had decided to spend his period of being forgotten by getting back at Bruce for jailing his main lead. If there was ever a time to be passive aggressive…

All that to say that Bruce was getting suspicious. Grateful for the help, still automatically predisposed to stop other vigilantes from feeling comfortable in Gotham.

Hannah, one of the other W.E. interns who Darren refused to let do anything important in the organization, had joined Tim in the observation room again today to analyze the item. The petite woman leaned against the reinforced glass as Tim placed his hands in the containment gloves to examine a scraping of the memory stick with a microscope. There was a strictly enforced rule of not touching the alien artifacts, particularly if they didn’t know how the item worked. Though Tim knew Jason had held it with just gloves and had been struck in the head by it, he hadn’t shared that with W.E., choosing instead to ‘uphold’ their rules.

He had had to make some stretchy logical leaps to create tests that demonstrated how it worked,
However, testing something like memory erasure was always a challenge since Damian had realized, that pre-Damian’s arrival, animal testing had been a standard. W.E. had kept the tests as humane as possible but Damian squalled, Bruce surrendered, and animal testing had been absolutely off-limits at Wayne Enterprises for two and a half years. Tim always suspected Selina had something to do with the decision as well. Poor Bruce populated his life with animal lovers and now he paid the price.

Nothing was working with inanimate objects, however, and Tim was losing his damn mind.

Hannah grinned nervously when he showed up to work with a box of mice that he had tagged with different colors.

“I adopted them all from someone who didn’t fix their mice soon enough,” Tim said, defensive of the box of squeaking curiosity in his arms. “If none of them die, which none of them should, I will give all of them to the demon child. If any do die, it’s because they were sick and ailing and I need something to work already. I know it works, I just need it to work.”

Hannah and Tim spent the last few days coming up with and performing several dozen tests of memory on the mice to see what worked for everything. At first, nothing worked. Hannah didn’t ask too many questions about Tim’s very specific expectations, just accepted that they were looking for what they were looking for.

Nothing worked, at all, despite the live subjects, until they isolated one of the mice. Tim moved the box of remaining mice to another room entirely while Hannah did the test on their chosen test subject. When they returned the mice to one another, not a single mouse indicated recognition of the isolated subject. They then did proximity tests for the next two days. Thirty feet, give or take, was how far the mice could be from the epicenter and still remember the ‘erased’ entity (though to be fair, they had a lot of confused mice by the end of the two days).

They ordered pizza. It was a good day.

“My question is, if it does affect memory, how could it impact everyone, even those not at the event site?” Hannah asked, the Thursday afternoon following their pizza celebration. Tim ran through what he remembered from Strifle’s reports which were, by and large, handwritten and shorthand.

“I’ve gone backwards and forwards over the location where we found it,” Tim said, opting for the easier response. “Strifle did everything right, took samples of the soil, photographs, surveying the environment insofar as that’s possible in such a rural area. I don’t know what he would’ve missed, if he went over it thoroughly enough to find this and the… ship.”

“Oh right, that guy,” Hannah said. Most of the team still struggled to believe they had forgotten their lead and she changed the subject quickly. “Is the explosives team done with the crashed spaceship yet?”

“No.” Tim could answer with confidence. One of his CEO-type meetings that morning had been with representatives of a very uncomfortable military. “And the feds are beginning to take notice. W.E. might control a lot of things here, but they’ll confiscate that ship as soon as we know it won’t explode.”

Tim set the original item down inside the room and detached his hands from the containment gloves, pondering what secondary sources might help in their analysis, now that they knew what it did and some aspects of how it worked (all without killing animals, you’re welcome Damian).

“We should pull up the Lantern files,” he decided. “They’re carrying all sorts of alien tech when they visit. Maybe they dropped something like this.”
“You’re a Lantern fan?” Hannah asked, her tone so dry Tim thought of Alfred for a minute.

“Bruce is a big fan,” he corrected. Hannah had said her roommate was media and sometimes, it was just fun to feed terrible Bruce Wayne facts to reporters, who would then bring them up in interviews. Tim was still searching for the correct files on his tablet when he heard his personal cellphone ring from the pocket of his jacket, buried in his locker. He always set it to its vibrate setting the minute he walked in Wayne Enterprises’ front door for work, but there were some exceptions that rang through. There was a particular line from the Cave, also accessible by inputting a certain spoofed number into a cellphone which would forward the call to him. The main phone at Wayne Manor. Bruce’s cells (both work and personal). Spoiler, who probably had no idea she was a priority and called so rarely he didn’t have to tell her. A series of proximity alerts for the Drake house. And Jason Todd.

Jason being on that list was something of a story. For one, the Red Hood had the same phone he had had while working with Bruce as Robin. Even with everything that had happened, same phone. So, during Jason’s crazy days, Tim had added Jason in case he called to… well, Tim had hoped at the time that Jason would call to turn himself in, get help, even apologize, and Tim couldn’t afford to miss that call. Naïve, he knew now, but then it had seemed like putting up a north star. When the Red Hood finally balanced out, Tim sometimes exchanged time-sensitive case information with him, so he stayed on the list. It took them a long enough time to get to that point, but they had.

And Jason was calling now.

He picked up the phone, smiling apologetically at Hannah for taking a personal call.

“I’m at work, can I help you?” Tim asked.

“You already have. I’m in your Gotham apartment.”

Tim glanced at Hannah, who studiously ignored the conversation and continued searching for the appropriate Lantern files where Tim had abandoned his tablet. Tim spoke quietly into the phone: “Why are you there? I don’t even stay there!”

“You know how the Batman hates other vigilantes operating in Gotham? You know how I’m having an identity crisis?”

Even though the phone line should be secure, the standard rules applied about names and specificity. Jason would be the last person to forget about that.

“But my apartment?” Tim repeated.

“You know how a certain cyber-goddess knows everything, including where all of a criminal’s safehouses might be? And, again, you know how I’m having an identity crisis?”

Barbara must have seen the list of Jason’s safehouses affiliated with what Google would name as a known criminal and outed him. But if she found Jason staying in Tim’s disused apartment, there would be more questions and all of them aimed at him.

“What about a hotel?” Tim found himself asking.

Jason sounded amused as he replied: “I’m not sitting on your couch naked or something. That’s Dick’s M.O. Anyway, you’re at work, so I’d like to see you stop me.”

“I upgraded the apartment to a smart home a year ago,” Tim said. “I could do everything from here and you would wish you could get to the couch.”
“Taking ‘the floor is lava’ game to a more literal concept, huh? I like it. But no thanks, just let me get a couple hours of nap. You know Gotham hotels are seedy as hell and require a name on check-in. And, if the cyber-goddess knows the safehouses, she definitely knows the aliases.”

“Fine.” Tim couldn’t think of an alternate answer. “I’ll check in later. Anyone in the family bother you about your… identity crisis?”

“Nope. G’night.”

“It’s 11:00 in the morning.” Tim ended the call, turning back to Hannah. She had heard his half of the conversation, how could she not, but she wasn’t doing what every socialite in Gotham would have done and prying. Instead, she handed him back the tablet, which was now doing a full search comparing the artifact’s 3D scan to every other piece of tech they had encountered with regard to Lanterns. It would take a while.

“Sorry about that,” Tim told her, taking a seat at the nearby steel table and setting down the tablet. “One of my brothers is having some issues with his W.E. key card so he decided to go home instead of waiting around for IT. He called to complain.”

“It’s only a matter of time before they skip key cards altogether and require a drop of blood to open any door. It’ll be way more efficient.” Hannah said it without appearing to think about it, which was something that Tim noticed interns did around him. A lot. A blush deepened across her face a moment later when she remembered who he was. Tim was already replying.

“If that’s the case, he’ll probably just quit.”

“That’d be a shame. I mean, I’ve only seen the rest of your family on TV and shared an elevator with Mr. Wayne once, but Damian looks like a good kid and Richard…” The blush made itself known again. Ah yes, the first Robin was known far and wide. Sometimes Tim wondered how far he would have to travel to not stand in Dick’s shadow. Well, hey, Ra’s didn’t care about Dick much. That was something.

If being a point of interest to the centuries-old maniacal grandfather of Tim’s eventual ‘cause-ofdeath’ could be considered a good thing.

“Okay…” Tim wondered aloud, picking up the tablet to see if the scan had finished yet. The graph hovered at 39 percent and had stopped moving. There was a reason IT sounded like a legitimate excuse to Hannah; their systems were forever running just a little slower than the humans in the company. He turned to face the containment chamber, minimizing the tablet’s ongoing scan, and pulled up Project Muninn’s 3D visuals of the area. Yet another thing Strifle had been careful to record.

“Where was the artifact in relation to the ship, again?” he asked. Tim knew the report backwards and forwards but sometimes it helped to have someone tell him in their own words. Hannah raised one shoulder, taking the tablet from him and projecting the images onto the closest empty wall.

She rotated the display to get a better look, watching the image on the wall accommodate her finger movements. “It was outside the ship, as if it’d fallen out. We’ve got reason to believe that one of the occupants of the ship entered orbit soon after. Residents reported a streak of yellow surging into the sky.”

“Could be a lot of things…” Tim mused. “And as far as I know, the explosives team still hasn’t found other sentients in their investigation.”
“None reported yet, though we still have that scout team in Seward keeping an eye out for anyone who might stumble out of the trees. Or, the sea more like because, to hear Priya tell it, it’s all waves and cold.” Hannah pulled up the scan again to check their process. Miraculously, it had finished. No matches. Both of them sighed.

“It could just be a visiting Lantern with new tech who… is just biding their time in the woods,” Hannah said, closing out of the scan. “Or dead, or antisocial, or buried their companion after the crash and left the planet.” She caught Tim’s quizzical glance and shrugged. “Lanterns don’t need ships, if I remember right. Besides, this is the size of a Prius? Single occupancy, maybe two-person occupancy? Seems like something they’d only have if they were travelling with someone else.”

Tim nodded absently, trying to align what Hannah said with the memory implications. If a second sentient existed, they could’ve been forgotten, and the Lantern would’ve left them behind. Or vice versa. Or they could have both been struck by the artifact or it could’ve hit neither of them and they had somehow missed it when they left the ship. Given the Bats’ usual luck, the pair would track it back here and launch a full-scale attack on the city screaming ‘REVENGE’ and also ‘WHERE IS IT?!’ Why be so careless with something important though?

He was still struggling to believe the ship had crashed by chance. To land in Seward, a strip of land hugging the coast, rather than in the ocean or further into Alaska’s massive landmass was so unlikely as to be intentional. Plus, to lose this touch-sensitive artifact at the site and not come back for it qualified as insane. What was the radius of its impact anyway? The planet? The community? Anyone who had come in contact?

Tim found his jaw clenched with concern of the implications and forced himself to relax. Whoever they were, they weren’t in control of Project Muninn for the moment. He could also ask Jay to contact some of his former… ‘colleagues’ on the other side of the planet, that would give them both a better idea of the effects.

“If anyone comes for that ship, don’t let them take it,” he told Hannah, who coughed in an attempt to stifle her laughter.

“I don’t know who told you I have a lot of authority…”

“On Bruce Wayne’s authority,” Tim said, playing the CEO card. “If things escalate, and they will, the fallout won’t be on you. Just give them the message. Okay?”

“Okay. Are you… leaving, now?” She looked slightly more anxious at the idea of his leaving her to tell her supervisors what to do.

“Just going to see the ship.” He pulled on the jacket and turned, remembering the manners Alfred had encouraged him to keep using in the corporation, though no one seemed to reciprocate. “Thanks for handling that.”

“Can you just make sure that Mr. Wayne knows that I’m doing things on his authority now?”

Tim pulled out his phone and shot off a text to Bruce. “Done.”

“Cool. The last thing I want is to get fired for insubordination before I find out how all this ends up.”

#

Destroying the safehouses of someone who had helped you six times over the past week seemed like a low move for Oracle. Maybe she didn’t remember him, but if she even suspected that he was the one assisting them as the Red Hood, Jason felt confident she wouldn’t have changed all the locks,
arranged a private security firm to guard the entrances, and taken most of the contents of all three
safehouses he operated in Gotham. And it was Barbara. She definitely suspected.

So, *Bruce* had ordered this excommunication from his religion of justice. Jerk.

Upon arriving at Tim’s (very nice) apartment, Jason performed what would have looked like casing
the unit to an untrained observer. He wandered through the kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and back to
the living room for the conclusion of his self-conducted tour. Careful not to move anything, he found
himself distracted by the veritable wall of sheet music and musicals on Tim’s floor to ceiling
bookshelf. It looked like a music store. Next to it sat a nice speaker system and an even nicer upright
piano. Jason noticed for the first time that the walls had been soundproofed in this room.

This was a lot of work to put into somewhere you ‘didn’t live.’ Tim hadn’t sounded too mad about
Jason’s taking up residence in his Gotham apartment which boggled the mind when Jason saw it.
Sure, Bruce had several homes he didn’t use, but for Tim to have a fully-furnished home (not a lab,
and not a safehouse) that he didn’t use? Jason would bet a month’s rent on this place that there was a
story behind why Tim had it.

Jason went back into the bedroom and flopped down on the bed, thinking that if Tim wouldn’t use it,
he sure as hell would.

But nope. Felt like drowning in cotton. High thread count, Egyptian, very posh, but he knew he
would be laying awake too long to ignore the feeling of being slowly smothered by cotton. Floor,
then, because ‘fully furnished’ for Tim didn’t include a couch.

Jason reset the security system, made a nest of Tim’s abundant supply of blankets on the floor,
connected his phone to the wifi (‘Boomerang’? Really Tim, that’s a password for you?’) and a
streaming classical music station. The New World Symphony lulled him to sleep.

After what seemed like minutes, Jason woke up to find Tim entering the apartment. His body had
been chiming a subconscious proximity alert ever since he heard Tim’s car horn chirping to
announce its locked status from the parking lot, confirming that it must be just a little past 8:30 at
night. Next to Jason’s nest of blankets, the phone played something light and adventurous…
Solfeggietto, that was it.

“So musicals, huh Timberland?” Jason said, sitting up easily from the nest and silencing the phone.

“Please no,” Tim replied, wrinkling his nose. The younger man shrugged his briefcase onto the floor
then, with more caution, set his coffee on the countertop. “Why are you on the floor?”

“You prefer Timborine?” Jason declined to answer the floor question.

“Do you want *me* to try to forget you?” Tim asked as he headed into the kitchen.

“Depends on how much you know about how it happened,” Jason replied. Tim had paused in the
kitchen doorway and now stood there, staring into the kitchen and looking a little forlorn. When
Jason followed him over, he hid the expression.

“I thought you cooked for people,” Tim said.

Jason felt a pang of guilt. He did, he’d cooked for most of the family whenever they were on good
terms and Alfred wasn’t available. However, with the safehouses off-limits and the imminent threat
of Batman trying to hunt him down, he hadn’t thought of cooking. It probably would have been a
stress reliever and far more productive then going to sleep, he hadn’t even done dishes which was
what you frakking did as an interloper to—
Tim stared at him in alarm.

“Good grief, Jason, we’ll get takeout! You staying here isn’t dependent on your cooking. If that was the case, Dick would never be invited anywhere. Neither would Bruce.”

Still trying to shrug off the guilt, Jason glanced at the array of takeout menus attached by various magnets to the fridge door. “And you would know all about takeout, huh Tim? You find anything nutritious in that wall of shame?”

“The Thai place gives you lots of vegetables.” Tim murmured before returning to the main room to retrieve his coffee and work tablet. The latter had ‘Wayne Enterprises’ branding on the side and Jason felt 90 percent sure that Tim shouldn’t be bringing it home with him. As in all things, ignoring Tim’s habits worked for both of them. Tim planted himself at the bar-style table in the corner, which seemed to be one of the few things in the apartment that could accommodate two people.

“Thai it is then.” Jason pulled the relevant menu off the fridge and started scanning for items as he sat on the opposite bar-height stool. “Holy frak, takeout used to be cheap. What happened to places like Happy Rice Emporium and their four-dollar meals?”

“I assume enough people got food poisoning that they closed.” Tim continued flicking through photos on the tablet, cross-checking some information with his phone. Jason drew a circle around the ($14 frakking dollar) Khao Mok Gai item and leaned over to see what had Tim so deep in thought.

“That’s a hell of a ship.” But small, he added mentally. Kori’s ship and its spacious quarters was his default, so any ship that accommodated less than three people was by definition small.

“It crashed in Alaska,” Tim replied. “Whoever brought it here hasn’t shown up to claim it.”

“Huh. Why’s the ship matter? Aside from cool, alien ship.” Jason tapped Tim on the head with the paper menu. “Also, pick your food.”

Tim accepted the pamphlet before it fell to the floor. “It’s more what was inside the ship. Back when we were at Strifle’s a couple of weeks ago, you got hit with the artifact. Remember?”

Jason could hear Tim’s voice grow a little more guarded, as if preparing to deliver bad news. It echoed a Bat trait: the news is bad, let the victim know you’re ‘right there with them’ in the trauma before you tell them it. No thank you, Jason was in the mood for some bluntness.

“Yeah, I remember,” Jason said. “Should we order the food before you tell me? Cause it sounds like you’re gonna drag this out.”

Tim got to the point. “Based on tests we’ve been doing, the artifact is connected to the sudden memory loss. It came from inside the ship which we’ve thinking means it is alien-designed. It’s actually good that you’re here, if we can run some tests—”

“Oh, what?”

“We don’t know how far away it works, if it’s a local radius or limited by miles or country borders. If you can call some of your contacts on the other side of the world and see if—”

“Yeah, tried already.” He hadn’t been able to get in contact with Bizarro, but Artemis had a) answered the phone, b) not remembered him and c) been downright hostile about why some ‘Red Him’ stranger was in Bizarro’s address book. That was standard – the big guy was no good with texting and Artemis and Jason had to guard his answering of phone calls like hawks to keep him from buying magazine subscriptions or attempting to give them Jason’s card number. Roy, wherever
he was, hadn’t answered the call or returned it. Starfire would be off on Tamaran and out of cell range. He had other contacts, more ‘professional’ contacts, and none of them had remembered him. Prior to showing up at Tim’s apartment, it had been a spectacularly shitty day.

“No luck,” Jason continued, realizing he hadn’t said the results aloud. “That the only test you wanted?”

“For the moment,” Tim said, sounding only more curious about the situation as he circled some vegetable-heavy dish and handed the menu back to Jason. “We’re also hypothesizing that it could be Lantern-affiliated tech, so if we find the Lantern, we might find an instruction manual for undoing it.”

“A Lantern who made it out of that mess of a spaceship,” Jason finished, glancing at Tim’s screen for confirmation. It had gone dark and doubtless locked. “But the Lantern would have to be alive. But you haven’t seen them and they’re avoiding everybody...” He groaned. “I bet it’s one of the terrible colors.”

“A Black Lantern would have made themselves known immediately,” Tim said, confident. “So would Red. Larfleeze is not the kind of guy who would fly a ship to Earth and then abandon it and hide, so that rules out Orange. It could be a super-embarrassed Green or Blue Lantern, but they would have cleaned up after themselves. I can see this being a Yellow activity. That’s about it. I don’t know enough about Indigo or Star Sapphire to guess at them, but acting alone doesn’t seem to be their style.”

“Have you tried dunking it in green paint?” Jason deadpanned.

“I don’t think it’d negate the effects...”

“You could always dunk Bruce in a bucket of green paint, see if that fixes his memory and then chalk it up to ‘definitely Yellow Lantern’ if it does. Though I won’t cry if you start with Damian.” A pause. “Wait, so how long have you known the thing we stole was the cause of all this?”

Tim adopted the poker face that meant ‘I’m going to attempt to lie to you,’ and said: “Not long.”

“Sure. Nice of you to invite me over the same day you made all these discoveries, then.”

“Alfred suggested it and I didn’t want to say anything until I knew for sure. But with abandoned spaceships in Alaska, there doesn’t seem to be a ‘sure’.” Tim snatched up his own phone and took back the menu to order – and get out of the conversation. Meanwhile, Jason started flipping through the images of the artifact and the ship on the tablet.

“Any ideas where they could be hiding?” Jason asked.

“Not a clue, but I’m keeping an eye out for suspicious amounts of power. If it is a Lantern, the ring allows flight, so they could be anywhere. The pictures you’re looking at are from Seward, Alaska. W.E. made a sizeable contribution to the town in exchange for being allowed to bring back the ship and the artifact without a lot of the import/export protocol completed in advance. Which also means our lawyers keep bugging me to ask Bruce what the hell he was doing.”

“I want to be in the know from now on” Jason said, leaning back on the stool until Tim looked up from his phone in silent admonishment. “Especially if, y’know, a side effect is that I die or something. Been there, done that.”

Tim nodded and returned his attention to the phone, dialing the Thai place to order their dinner.
“Don’t die while they don’t remember you,” Tim said, as he waited for the restaurant to pick up the phone. “As the only one who does, I’ll have to plan your whole funeral and I still have nightmares about planning Dad’s.”

Tim and Jason were deep in a discussion about why Tim didn’t have a flat-screen TV and waiting for dinner to arrive when Tim’s cellphone rang. When Tim checked it, the caller ID made him almost jerk back in surprise. It was tempting, very tempting, to just swipe it away, hang up immediately and let the caller deal with the answering machine. He knew for a fact that Damian felt threatened and angry at voicemails.

“Who is it?” Jason asked, having noticed Tim’s scowl. The Red Hood had begun investigating Tim’s ‘musical extravaganza’ again, as if he still couldn’t believe it was really there.

“It’s Damian. Damian is calling me,” Tim said, returning his attention to the still-ringing cellphone.

“Tell him I’m not here.”

Tim shot his older ‘brother’ a look and took the call, putting it on speaker.

“What do you want, demon?” Tim asked.

“Did you lose your way coming back to the manor, Drake?” Damian asked, sounding a little surprised. After all, Tim had let his calls go to voicemail more than a few times.

“I stopped off somewhere. Why?”

“Tt. It makes sense that your memory is as feeble as the rest of your body. Father insisted that we have family meals once a week, remember? On Thursdays. It is Thursday.”

Crap. The statement rang a lot of bells about Bruce being concerned his youngest sons didn’t get along and wanting at least one night of the week when they would pretend to. They were open events for the Bat clan, all of whom were ‘optional’ attendees, while Damian and Tim were ‘required.’ Dick typically made it, when he didn’t have a shift scheduled, but Jason had always bowed out and complained that he came to poker nights. Dick had then suggested he could stop coming to poker nights and taking all their money. It had been a whole Thing.

“Well, Drake? Do you have some sort of excuse you want to make?” Damian demanded.

Only that I hate you and never wanted to come, Drake thought. Out loud, he said: “Something’s come up with the Alaska ship at work. Bruce’ll know what I’m talking about.”

Ha, but you won’t, he continued mentally. And that will piss you the hell off.

“Pennyworth will not be pleased,” Damian said and hung up.

“Hey,” Jason said, once they were certain the line had been disconnected from the manor.

“Technically we’re still doing a family dinner right now. I did hate you once upon a time, so we’re even checking that ‘homicidal intent’ box you get with Dames. Just don’t tell Bruce I’m here.”

“Believe me, I remember.”

“So.” Jason looked at the musical extravaganza shelf for what must have been the millionth time. “What are we listening to? Is there a musical of ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’? Cause that’d be appropriate,
in an ass-backwards sort of way.”

“Don’t think so. And I’d rather not listen to anything.” Tim’s eyes felt bleary from staring at the tablet screen all day, then at his phone, then a while at his desktop, and now back to the tablet. They needed a breakthrough.

‘Rather not listen to anything’ wasn’t the answer Jason was looking for. The Red Hood waited for Tim to explain in detail why an entire wall of his apartment looked like it belonged to a drama major. Tim had actually thought about being one for a half second during college applications: major in Musical Performance for the piano, minor in Musical Theatre. Even if he was stuck doing theater accompaniments for the rest of his life, no one would ever suspect his nightlife activities and he’d be surrounded by dramatic yet loving people who weren’t and didn’t pretend to be related to him. He couldn’t be Red Robin at college. College students worked odd hours and spent so much of their time sleep-deprived that they could tell what was ‘I’m tired’ and what was ‘holy shit, that guy just climbed into his dorm in a full Red Robin costume and it’s the fourth time I’ve seen him do that.’

Instead of sharing that, Tim turned his attention to the door, which someone was knocking on.

“I’ll get it,” Jason said. Tim yawned and waved a thank you. As Jason retrieved the food and paid the delivery person, concern began to stir in the back of Tim’s mind. Even the garlic and ginger scent of red curry didn’t distract him from it.

“Thanks,” Tim said, awkwardly wondering if he should offer to pay Jason for his portion of the food. “How’s your bank account after all this memory thing?”

“Eh, banks only care about numbers. So long as I’ve got all of them, which I do, I’m good. Cash is just easier to have on hand.”

“Does Barbara have access to…?”

“She’s got some surface banking stuff, but nothing I’m using now. So yes, I can still get you a birthday present.”

“My birthday’s not until August.”

“Hey, you’ll see Hamilton when I decide you’re seeing Hamilton,” Jason said primly and took another bite of his meal. “Take Spoiler or something. You can pretend it’s my great apology for trying to kill you.”

“You keep bringing that up.”

Jason went quiet after that, focusing on the food and making less eye contact with Tim than before. They ate in silence for a few minutes, which Tim honestly preferred to forced conversation. If Jason had some unresolved issues with the attempted murder years back, he would talk when he wanted to.

Besides, Tim did want to see Hamilton. Even Stephanie wanted to see Hamilton and most of her involvement with musicals began and ended with the Legally Blonde musical. He didn’t know why (and was terrified of saying something like ‘Is it because she’s blonde?’), but that was Stephanie’s jam. Many criminals had been beaten up to the sound of her happily humming ‘Chip on My Shoulder.’

It could just be that Jason was self-sabotaging. It would be a very Bat-like move to find out that everyone had forgotten you and then try to make the one person who remembered you hate you, so you could run away and not feel bad. On some level, Tim was pretty sure they all felt like that would be better, if it were them at the epicenter of the forgetting. It was extremely Jason. But he wasn’t
having this angst right now though, not with dinner.

“I come out here to practice and listen to new soundtracks,” Tim said, breaking the silence with a breadcrumb of truth.

“Bruce has a nice piano,” Jason said, somehow without making it sound like an accusation.

‘With a nice feral child roaming the grounds.”

“Hey, I’m right here.”

Tim raised an eyebrow, then erased the expression. He had to think for a minute to avoid stepping on any of the thousands of landmines in Jason’s temper. “Do you ever go to musicals? Or concerts?”

“I may have snuck into the back rows of a couple.”

“They’re not Bruce’s thing, because Batman. Not really Damian’s either, because musicals are ‘asinine’ and concerts are a waste of time. Dick likes musicals but he would rather be acting or dancing than watching someone else do it.”

Ugh, he was phrasing this poorly. Stupid words. Tim pressed on: “So I can’t go home—go to the manor and go listen to something or play something that would make me… feel things. You’d really want to listen to the second act of Hamilton in the same vicinity as a child who’s on guard for any shred of vulnerability? Any physical expression I make is vivisected. I’m vivisected. Early on, Damian got angry enough at my staying in the manor that, even if I only came out of my room to play piano, he would stalk the halls. And I’d…” Tim felt shame turn his face red and yet he kept talking. “When he tried to kill me in the Cave, I was scared he’d surprise me again. For a while. I rented the apartment so I knew I’d have somewhere to go if I needed it. I’m not scared of the hellion anymore, but I can be myself here.”

The monologue sounded more personal (and petty) than he had meant it to be, but as always, explaining how things in his life could be traced back to Bruce’s ‘blood son’ always did. He studied his leftover food and thought about how much he didn’t feel hungry. Did Jason want leftovers? Was that even something one did with their universally-forgotten, formerly homicidal brothers – shove leftover Thai food at them?

“When was that happening?” Jason wore a patient expression.

“Come again?” Tim asked, looking up from the food.

“When was Damian doing all this and when did you stop playing and have you played in his vicinity since. Try to keep up, Replacement.”

“I stopped six months after he moved in,” Tim replied. “Haven’t played around him since.”

“So when I was living on the streets of Gotham—”

Tim’s confusion at the non-sequitur must have been visible on his face because Jason waved a hand to dismiss it.

“Shut up, it’ll follow. So when I was living on the streets of Gotham, we kids all knew the shelters. What they were like, what they would do for you or sometimes to you. We avoided some, frequented others. The Rigor, a big shelter between Dixon Dock and One Gotham Center, was a no-go for everyone. Rumor ran around that it was a mob project to get kids addicted to drugs and sell them to folks to get the Medicaid funding – nasty place, okay? But one of my friends, Amy, who
was too young to be on the streets and couldn’t settle anywhere, she went there. We’d all told her not to, she went anyway. We never expected to see her again. Six months later, I see her walking with a couple adults. She’s wearing a Gotham Academy uniform and looks at the adults like they’re her folks or something. I walk up behind her, making sure she sees me and the adults don’t, and ask her how the Rigor was. Well, more like ‘what the frak happened’, but, essentially, ‘how was the Rigor.’"

“She said Wayne Enterprises had taken notice of it. New oversight meant they boosted the staff so they could use all of their building and take care of the people who came in the front door. The new money meant better beds and a better security system so the staff members who were actually shady couldn’t get away with anything. Turns out, Gotham had willing foster families who were willing to go through the shelter’s new and intensive paperwork process. Amy’d been with this family three months now. But all I ever saw or heard about was the Rigor and what it used to be.”

“You want to work on your subtlety? Damn, Jason.”

“And I’m talking about a building,” Jason continued, as if the story needed even more of a blunt moral instrument to it. “That shelter’s been around for forty-odd years moving in one direction. Damian’s had thirteen to figure out who he is, and he’s had the worst damn influences you could look for.”

“I’m not saying it’s impossible for him to change, I’m saying I think it’s unlikely he’s going to change with regard to me. Please don’t tell me any more stories, if you think you have one about that.”

Jason grabbed Tim’s half-full container of food and took it into the kitchen along with his own. “No more stories. But you gotta figure out how you’re going to work with Damian. Yeah, B did a terrible job of connecting you two but now that we’ve brought everybody back from the dead, odds are you’re going to be stuck with Damian a good long while.”

Tim glanced at his phone, seeing the authoritative ‘9:09pm’ glaring back at him in white. “Wonderful. I’d better get back to the manor so I can get to work on building that happy new relationship before patrol. Do you need anything else here?”

“No, I’ll implement hotel checkout policies.” At Tim’s blank look, Jason shrugged. “Out by noon, towels left on the floor, toiletries stolen…”

“Are you going on patrol?”

“Takes more than a bunch of forgetful Bats and one angry Big Bat to stop me. Oh,” Jason snapped his fingers. “And Oracle shut me out of all the comm channels for the helmet, so I’ll be monitoring police broadbands. If you know Batman’s planning a massive response to one of the police tasks… try to let me know. I don’t need to get shot at and bataranged on the same night.” The statement appeared to send him into yet another of those dark memories that Tim didn’t know about. “Been there before too.”

“Can do. Don’t get caught.” Tim grabbed the briefcase from where he had left it on the floor. “Alfred believes me about you, but both the family and the GCPD will treat you like any foreign vigilante.”

“Preachin’ to the choir, Red. See you when you’re next in jeopardy.”

“Do you have to say ‘when’?”
Am I cut out to spend my time this way?

Chapter Notes

Warning this chapter and the one that follows: Child (Robin) in dangerous situation. I’ve changed the tags for the story to include ‘Canon-typical violence’ so, just a warning, that is a catchall that covers everything from Professor Pyg to Lady Shiva to the Year of Blood. Not that Pyg will appear in this because that guy scares the crap outta me.

Phenom and Bluetooth are from the book “Soon I will be Invincible” by Austin Grossman. It's really good… and I was being lazy, to be honest.

I’m not sure if this is required or not but for legality's sake: I own nothing in this fanfic except the writing. Things I do NOT own include Batman, Soon I Will Be Invincible, any musicals, Shakespeare, the Lantern Corps., and anything DC. Hell, the next chapter was inspired by Cdelphiki’s ‘Cracked Foundation’ so I don’t even own the idea for that one. (It's good, it's in my bookmarks.)

Finally, thanks as always for interacting with the story. Next update is Thursday and chapter title is from "Why" in Tick Tick Boom, which I don't quite have the range to sing but it neeeever stops me from trying.

Tim could feel Damian’s gaze on him the moment he entered the Cave and Robin continued to track him, more judgmentally than usual, throughout their period of patrol prep. Bruce paid no attention because, to Bruce’s mind, his Robin and Red Robin were going on patrol together and that meant that all their differences would be put aside for the good of Gotham. In other words, full-on Justice Crusade Mode.

Before long, the Bat and Birds were in the heart of Gotham and knee-deep in people who weren’t bright enough to look up for Bats while committing crimes.

Sometimes it felt like cheating to have such superior tech and abilities when going up against the run-of-the-mill criminals, Tim reflected. But then something would happen that reminded Red Robin that the criminals thought what they were doing was fine, as long as they weren’t caught. Come on, he reminded himself, get it together, keep moving. None of these people are or will be the Red Hood. The Batman stayed away from police activities for the most part and much of tonight was spent tracking the Scarecrow, who had been laying low, compared to the last several hundred times he had broken out of Arkham. It stressed Batman out to have Jonathan Crane running around, less so to beat his potential locations out of people. Robin and Red Robin acted as clean-up crew, making sure what few stragglers or bolters got rounded up. Again, in other words, Batman kept them close where he could make sure they didn’t get in arguments but didn’t actively have to mind them. They were not necessary.

After about an hour, Red Robin attempted to break off from the Dynamic Duo and head to Tricorner Shipyards. If Jason had decided to follow the police reports, he wouldn’t be following up on his original case, the one Batman had jailed the lead on. To his surprise, Damian noticed his attempted departure and insisted Tim stay near them rather than ‘skulking off’.

“Batman—” Tim tried but the Batman was having none of it. He straightened from the downed
member of Scarecrow’s gang and looked up at the two Birds perched in the upper beams of the warehouse.

“Since you missed dinner, I’d rather you two spend some time together,” Batman replied.

Ugh. Spend time with someone who probably thought he was ‘skulking off.’ Brat.

After his exit had been deferred, Tim trailed in their swinging wake as they left the warehouse and headed into Old Gotham, where police chatter had picked up about fifteen minutes ago as the different districts aggressively communicated about a potential meta that had crossed town in a flurry of violence, moving through Old Gotham.

Despite his close friendships with many aliens and modified humans, criminally-inclined metas always made Tim tense up. Usually, the ‘metas’ called in on police chatter weren’t metas and the police picked them up before the Bats needed to help, so at best this trip would be a waste of time. At worst, it would be an unpredictable and violent encounter where the Bats were better equipped to help. Like a 911 call, every report had to be taken seriously.

Tim lingered behind to text Red Hood and landed on the third-story building’s roof several seconds behind the Dynamic Duo. Damian sneered back at him.

“I would have thought catching up with us would have been within even your purview, Red Robin.”

“I just wanted to avoid seeing your face,” Tim replied, taking a few cautious steps toward the edge of the roof overlooking the office building. Cautiously because not only was it a dangerous position, but Damian stood not two feet from him and Batman another five feet from them both.

Below, he could see two security officers laying in the parking lot of a two-story office building. They would not be getting up again. Tim swallowed. The pair had just been doing their jobs, probably underpaid, probably bored out of their minds.

“Blood tracks head south,” Tim said, forcing himself to note the angle of the dark stains below. He refused to let himself say anything remorseful about the security guards, not in front of Damian, who would probably suggest he shouldn’t be in the field if he felt compromised. “Did you see the assailant, Batman?”

Batman was listening closely to something the officers were saying but shook his head in answer to Tim’s question.

“He’s not a natural meta,” Batman said, echoing what the police were reporting. “He’s modified his arms to conceal blades. They’re saying a foot and a half long and he is calling himself Phenom.”

A burst of chatter silenced them all for a moment as officers indicated the modified meta, Phenom, was now running for the City Hall District. Fortunately, the blades meant he had to be close range in order to attack.

“Shouldn’t we be chasing him?” Tim said, growing more anxious as they just stood here and a villain fled to another district. They couldn’t do anything from the security guards, other than call in the deaths, which Damian had already done based on the child’s distraction by his phone.

“We think there may be a second individual,” Damian piped up, closing out of his phone. Apparently ‘we’ meant he and Batman, before Tim arrived. “A telepath, significantly lessened in skill than their compatriot but still capable of influencing someone to let Phenom into the evidence locker and clean out an old villain cache containing a significant quantity of explosive materials two days ago. They did not have time to stay behind and wipe the video cameras, from which police
finally deciphered the plate of the car they stole and tracked it to a residence several streets over, at which point Phenom became violent. Batman will be pursuing Phenom and you will assist me in subduing his accomplice.”

“B, why is he telling me this?” Tim asked. Ordinarily Batman would be giving them their assignments, not the cranky Robin.

“So we communicate,” Damian said. “Your sullen silence has been obvious throughout patrol. Have some pride, Red Robin. You will be accompanying the best.”

“Play nice,” Batman said vaguely and grappled away. Damnit. Damn every bit of it. Tim forced himself to follow Damian’s lead down to the office building’s parking lot. The strikes on the security guards looked consistent with someone under six feet, powerful and reckless. Homicidal. Lazarus Pit levels of crazy.

“Have you actually seen the second person?” he found himself asking Damian. The teenager was standing to the side of the doorway, surveying the inside and looking like he wished he had his katana. Bruce had limited him to his fists since Damian was essentially a weaponized teenager, but even that didn’t comfort someone who loved anything with a sharp edge. Tim was still pretty sure Damian had a couple of knives somewhere on him at all times, including now.

“Of course I’ve seen someone, otherwise we would not stay.” Damian, unsurprisingly, sounded disgusted. “There was a blue shape moving around inside and the Batman trusted my judgment. Scale the exterior to reach the second floor and I will clear the passage here.”

“You sure I shouldn’t stay with— fine, fine.” Tim circled the building, trying not to think of how much trouble he would be in if the brat somehow managed to die again on his watch. Or was seriously injured on his watch. Or kidnapped. Or trapped in a condemned building.

Scaling the outside wall with the grapnel gun, Tim climbed in through an unlocked window. Despite the abandoned status of the building, the interior remained outfitted as office space with disused cubicles blocking his line of sight and throwing long shadows with the light from the parking lot. If the criminals hadn’t been clumsy enough to be noticed, this would have been a strong base of operations.

Stop reflecting on the poor training of criminals, Tim told himself. Scope through here and get back to Damian before the kid finds trouble. Crouching low, Red Robin crept forward through the cubicles, the collapsible staff in hand. Thank God he’d gotten rid of the cape. The last thing he needed was someone noticing a suspicious piece of fabric dragging along the floor. If he listened hard, he could hear Damian’s equally slow progress on the floor below. No sign of a meta yet, blue or otherwise.

Over comms, background noise crackled and Bruce spoke: “He’s not in the City Hall District. Keep an eye out. He may have doubled back for his partner.”

Sigh. Tim spoke with equal care: “Robin, do you want to—”

“Hush, Red Robin.” Yet Damian didn’t say anything else. Tim could practically feel Bruce’s anxiety jump over the phone.

“I’ll get him, B. We just split up a moment. I’m out.”

Damian still wasn’t saying anything, not even to protest that he didn’t need Red Robin’s subpar assistance.
Tim moved from where he had been bracing his back against one of the cubicle walls and headed for the stairwell. In comparison to the stark light and shadow of the office, the stairwell felt uncomfortably wide and extremely dark without windows to let in the glare of the parking lot. Red Robin used the surrounding blackness to his advantage to move, ghost-like and invisible, to the first floor. More than one would-be attacker had been tripped up by clumping down the stairs and he would not endanger Damian by doing so.

He pulled the first-floor door gently inward. The first-floor room had been arranged as a broad lobby, windows at the entrance letting the light from the parking lot flow in. Near the reception desk on the far side of the room, a blue figure kneeled over Robin, who lay on the ground. One of the figure’s blue hands pressed against Robin’s forehead. The boy didn’t so much as stir. Tim’s chest went cold and he fought panic, thinking of the security guards. Hell, thinking of Damian’s first death. One minute breathing, one minute gone. And everything that had followed.

No, no, it’s a telepath. He wouldn’t be reading the mind of a dead kid. Get it together, get over there!

Tim left the stairwell and moved like a shadow along the line of the wall. Less cracks there, less chance of atypical squeaks in the silence of the lobby. He passed the glassed-in front door. He had unfolded his Chinese fighting staff in the stairwell and now it waited like a friend to be called into action.

Something in him shouted an alarm and he had been in the field too long to ignore those. He braced himself against the wall, ready for an attack from any angle. If he needed to vault off the wall, he could do that too.

As it turned out, the front door banged open so hard the glass shattered. Phenom strode in.

“Bluetooth, you got a friend!” The intruder was dressed in a blazing orange suit which didn’t conceal the foot and a half blades surgically implanted into his arms. Tim really hadn’t wanted to meet Phenom but it looked like he was going to. He retreated towards the stairwell as the modified meta advanced. He’d have to work around Phenom, get Damian away from what was the telepath, get them both out of here. Crap, given the weight of Phenom’s footsteps and the power behind his movements, Tim suspected he had a metal skeleton. That particular advancement butted up against Luthor tech and would be a nightmare to fight hand to hand.

“Keep him busy,” came ‘Bluetooth’s’ toneless voice from the reception desk corner, sounding younger than Tim had expected. “The names of the Bats are going to buy us a lot more gear. Kid’s stupid mask already tried to electrocute me.”

There was a surprised grunt from that direction as Damian regained consciousness.

He began cursing the telepath out in Arabic. Tim felt a swell of relief at that, because Robin was probably thinking in Arabic too. Bluetooth wouldn’t be able to get anything unless this blue-skinned man had picked up fluent Arabic on his way to becoming a telepath. If Damian Wayne had one undeniable skill, it was being challenging on command and thank God for that.

Tim could turn his entire focus to the fight with Phenom, which was going better than expected. Phenom kept expecting the staff to snap in half as he struck at it and his surprise kept putting him off balance. Though this was good, Tim still couldn’t get close or Phenom would skewer him with those blades. Phenom was familiar enough with the enhancements to use them efficiently; the metal skeleton still telegraphed his movements long in advance.

Another upside to the metal skeleton was that it demanded a lot of energy just to keep up with Tim. While Tim could take a hit and leap off the wall on the rebound, Phenom’s ‘enhanced’ skeleton kept
him on a flat plane.

Now if only Tim could get in one good hit…

The loud recital of Arabic curses slowed. Even from across the room, Tim could hear Damian’s raspy breathing growing faster until Damian stopped talking altogether.


Tim saw red.

Phenom actively backed up as Tim attacked, caught off guard by the flurry of blows with the staff. When the villain finally grabbed the staff and snapped it over his metal knee, Tim snatched up the pieces and stabbed Phenom through the shoulder with one of them. That move surprised both of them – Tim had no idea he could put a non-edged weapon through someone’s shoulder, metal skeleton or not. It was a stroke of damn fine luck and training that he had missed Phenom’s collarbone and hit the trapezius muscle instead. Phenom’s blade retracted into his arm, probably because the trapezius influenced the scapula, and the man dropped to the ground near the stairwell door. Since Phenom lay there clutching his shoulder and out of the way, Tim ran at the telepath with anger burning under his skin. This blue-skinned, no-pupiled meta bastard holding Damian thought that digging around in someone’s head until they stopped speaking was a fair idea. What. The. Hell.

Not that Damian was unable to defend himself. The teenager had one of his countless knives in hand; he was soaked with sweat and frantic anger, but conscious. Tim could see the issue immediately: Damian would have to do something near-lethal with the knife to get himself free.

“Robin!” he shouted, hoping that would ground him.

It didn’t. Damian jerked forward with the knife in wide-eyed fury, getting it to Bluetooth’s throat before either of them reacted. Robin froze again, the knife trembling as part of him tried to shove the knife forward into the telepath’s neck and the rest of him tried to pull back and… probably have his entire family’s names revealed to someone who would sell them to the highest bidder. The no-killing rule took a lot of enforcement when someone was rifling around in your head.

Tim took a step forward and saw the knife press deeper into Bluetooth’s neck. The telepath must have been close to his goal.

“So, I’d stop doing what you’re doing,” Tim told the telepath and, technically, told Damian too. “Your buddy’s looking for a friend to wait for the cops with.”

“He won’t do it,” Bluetooth told Tim, still toneless but with a certain gleam in his eyes. “And you better run anyway. If you’re all ‘Bats,’ the explosion will mess with your sonar.” Bluetooth’s palm remained flat against Damian’s forehead, as if impressing a scrip into a golem.

“Who do you think you are then?” Tim asked. Damnit, it was hard to communicate anything to Damian while the teenager refused to look at him. Robin’s furious gaze bored into Bluetooth and would not be distracted.

“We’re the Chaos Pact and we’re gonna cause some chaos,” Bluetooth said.

“That is a tremendously stupid name,” Tim said, subletly checking over his shoulder to make sure Phenom was still down for the count. “Not surprising, but not bright.”

If there was a bomb, which there probably was, Tim needed everyone out of the building. Yesterday. Getting Damian to come back to himself was only tricky for those who hadn’t spent more than a
week in his company. Potential embarrassment was 10 out of 10 times the way to go. The teenager didn’t care enough about Red Robin seeing him in his element like this, demonstrating the lethality they both knew he had grown up with. He knew Bruce was elsewhere, in that semi-psychic way that father and son knew each other’s locations. There was, however, someone Damian couldn’t bear to disappoint.

“Robin,” Tim tried one last time. The knife against Bluetooth’s throat tightened, as the kid’s eyes went wide with rage.

“Damian,” Bluetooth said, the eyes without pupils going wide against the blue. The knife broke the skin of his throat; both a graze and a threat at once.

“Robin, I called for backup. Nightwing was already on his way, he heard you were in trouble and just walked off his shift and—”

Muscles tensed in Damian’s neck. Partially because his opponent was stupid enough to look away to say ‘Nightwing works somewhere?’ and partially because it was insulting to be pinned by someone stupid enough to look up. The teenager became lucid and, more importantly, angry, kneeling Bluetooth hard in the stomach. This action dislodged the telepath’s hand. If Damian had been alone, he probably would have broken the telepath’s wrist.

“Get the bomb!” Damian snarled at Tim, beginning to zip-tie the telepath’s wrists behind his back. Tim didn’t want to split up again, because this had already become a really bad night, but bombs took precedence. Damian would be fine.

Tim went for the basement, only to find that there were more like nine bombs. There were likely only two real ones (or just one), but he couldn’t waste time defusing all of them. Jason could’ve done it, Jason was brilliant at bombs, but Jason wasn’t here. The timer clicked away at one minute and thirty seconds. Getting out would be more important. Tim took the stairs up two at a time, skidding around the landings until he burst back into reception.

“We have to go!”

Damian looked up from where he had restrained Bluetooth. The teenager looked like hell after the telepathic ordeal and his gaze took several seconds to focus on Tim. “You can’t defuse it?”

“There’s nine of them,” Tim said, grabbing the telepath’s shirt collar and dragging him towards the door. “Move, move.”

“It’s likely only one is real!”

“Why are you fighting me on this?” Tim shouted. “Get out of the building! What are you doing?”

Damian ran (shakily, damnit, shakily!) back towards the stairwell and began to drag Phenom towards the door. They didn’t get along, but Tim could still be impressed at the kid’s dedication to being Robin. However, Damian had made the incorrect assumption that mental exhaustion wouldn’t stop him from dragging the blade-wielding man. Tim knew Damian could lift an adult male, but that was with difficulty and mostly dependent on momentum while they were swinging. Definitely not possible when the adult male stirred and slashed at his rescuer with his good bladed arm.

“Robin!” Tim shouted, his hands full with the telepath, who was trying to get loose of his bonds now that he saw his friend was awake.

Damian danced out of the way of Phenom’s blade, shaking his head to try and get rid of the last of the telepathic influence. Taking advantage of that uncertainty, Phenom kicked him in the shoulder.
With the steel skeleton’s weight behind it, the move cost Damian his balance. Phenom groaned with the pain to his shoulders and stumbled several feet towards the door. Damian rallied mightily – if he had had the katana, the fight would have already been over.

However, Phenom still had a head or so of height over the teenager and the advantage of not being shaky from telepathic interference. The modified meta regained his footing and seemed ready to push through the pain, turning to try again.

“Jared hasn’t been good since the implants,” Bluetooth said in a whisper, addressing the floor. “He’s going to kill your brother.”

Tim didn’t give a thought to how Bluetooth knew they were brothers, choosing instead to drag the still-bound telepath another six feet and get him outside of the building. Not far enough to be safe, but at least not on the building’s doorstep when it blew. He turned to go back—

Just in time to see the Red Hood slam into Phenom.

Damian froze against the wall, staring at the short-lived fight as if seeing a jaguar devouring a caiman. Phenom went down on the tiled floor of the lobby and didn’t get up. Jason left him there, grabbed the collar of Damian’s Robin outfit and started pushing the younger man out the door.

Damian’s eyes went wide. He turned to go back for Phenom, attempting to slam past the Red Hood.

“No killing!” Damian shouted. Even with the helmet on, Jason’s body language screamed confused anger.

“Jason, there’s a bomb!” Tim shouted, because Jason, of all people, knew what that would mean. The Red Hood’s whole posture changed, he grabbed Damian, and ran for the—

The bomb went off.

Bombs.

Definitely bombs.

Tim felt himself thrown backwards by the blast, hitting the telepath like a missile on target, and carrying both of them into the shrubbery that lined the parking lot. There were several seconds when Tim didn’t think anything.

He came back to himself in the rubble of an exploded building, struggling to breathe through the dust and raining drywall and other destroyed building materials. Damnit. He rolled over, painfully, and began coughing, fumbling for the filter in his uniform. All he could think now was how… inconvenient this was. Being unable to breathe meant he couldn’t move forward with checking himself for injuries, couldn’t restrain the telepath again, couldn’t help Damian or Jason or Phenom, couldn’t get… Bruce.

He might have blacked out again. It was tricky to tell: blacking out and falling asleep felt like the same thing. Either way, he woke to find himself looking up at the cowl. The Batman’s worried questions washed over him like a wave rushing into the shore. Black suit against a black sky became just solid blurry black and he closed his eyes.

You don’t have time for this, he told himself firmly. Get up. Get up. Get up. Your family is in there—

Oh.
Damian had thought of him as a brother. That was how the telepath knew. He’d been in Damian’s head and even if Damian had been concentrating on Arabic, on thinking ONLY IN ARABIC… even then, the telepath had found out Damian’s name and he’d found out that Damian… thought they were brothers.

Crap. While the touchy-feely sentiment was nice, Tim’s eyes snapped open again as he realized that Bluetooth might also know more of their names. Damian’s was bad enough; he’d put together the identity of Batman and Robin from much less information.

“Bat….” His throat rasped dry.

“Right here.”

Yeah, that made sense. Who else would be making sure he had bandages and what felt like some kind of pillow under his head? Tim was reasonably sure he wasn’t lying half under a bush anymore, so some time must have slipped by. No serious injuries that he could tell, so none of them were going to mess with the hospital. His ribs did feel like crap and he filed the thought away for later. Probably just bruised.

“Tele… n’mes…” he told the cowled figure who leaned over him.

Batman fell silent as he undoubtedly ran the statement though some kind of mental translation filter. Then:

“I’ll have him checked out with the Justice League.”

“Dam’n. J’sn…” Tim coughed and found a water bottle pushed into his right hand. His dexterity wasn’t shot either, that was nice. He drank the water, which vanished. “They’re in the bui— [cough cough] building.”

“Jason is the other assailant?”

“No, no…” Tim came closer to his senses and shook his head, remembering that Bruce wouldn’t take well to finding out Red Hood continued to operate in Gotham after all Barbara’s efforts. “’s a civilian. And Phenom, the telepath’s buddy, he’s in there.”

“We’ll get them.” Bruce turned to go talk to the police aka a mess of swirling red and blue lights just to the right of Tim’s vision.

“Batman!”

The cowled figure turned back. Tim could tell his situational awareness was slowly returning, because he saw the Batman’s growing impatience, his concern for Robin and the victims. He remained curious as to what Tim would say; that was the only way Tim could hold on to his attention. The knowledge hurt somewhere inside him, but the sentence slid out all the same, despite the rasp in his voice.

“Robin was good about the not-killing. Really, really good.”

The mouth turned faintly upwards. “Thank you.”

Then he went to talk to the GCPD and Tim started texting Oracle, even if it meant he turned the brightness on his phone so far down he could barely see it.

It was better than worrying about family.
I really enjoyed Cracked Foundation by Cdelphiki, which has the same sort of premise as this chapter (but is a Whole Plot and Better). I recommend it and definitely credit it for why I decided on this setting. (Hopefully, if they ever see this, they don't mind...)

Also, Damian says ‘Who ARE you’ later in this chapter and all I can think of is Heather Chandler from the Heathers musical. So, the chapter title is from 'I am Damaged (Reprise)' from the Heathers musical, which proceeded to be stuck in my head the whole editing period.

Thanks, as always, for interacting with this fic. :) Things'll get better for everybody, it'll just take a while. In the meantime, I've gotta find an apartment...

Okay, Red Robin had said ‘bomb.’ Jason had heard him clearly. He had not said bombs.

Frak, Timmy, this was bombs. You might be able to be forgiven, since you haven’t been blown up before, but how about a trigger warning next time, buddy?

Jason pushed himself onto all fours, feeling rubble shift around him but nothing that he could identify as load-bearing. Nothing over his head shifted, which was rule one of being buried in rubble. He could feel something dripping down his left arm, but it didn’t feel like anything that couldn’t be cleaned out and heal right up. His right knee rested on some dented metal piece of debris. He moved it experimentally and decided he didn’t like the way his knee complained when he shifted or tried to straighten it. Fine, he couldn’t go far anyway. Something had created a small space over his head, not walkable but maybe crawlable, with luck. He still felt the smallness of the space, the mountain of rubble over his head, all metal edges and heavy desks from the office above. Shit. Okay. Find Damian.

“Dames?” he called before he remembered that the teenager wouldn’t know who he was. Frak.

“Robin,” he called. Thank God the helmet filtered out most of the dust that filled the air or he’d be hacking up a storm. “You around, kid?”

Silence. Panic never stayed silent though and he could feel it tensing his shoulders, choking him as if replacing the dust in the air. No, come on body, we don’t have time for this right now. Get distracted, Jason, find something. Find a way out, preferably.

A few feet away, he heard coughing.

“…blade guy?” he called into the darkness, not trusting the environment enough to reach out and touch someone. The helmet had not appreciated the banging around and, as tended to happen with his older models (because no safehouses meant no access to newer models or recharging stations), the lighting sensors had been the first to go. It was as dark here for him as it would have been for a civilian.

“It’s Robin,” the coughing person croaked. “Phenom’s dead.”
“Oh?’

“Not by me.” Somewhere in the dark, Damian shook debris off himself. “A filing cabinet fell from the upper level in addition to your… efforts.”

“How are you?” Jason asked.

“I am uninjured.”

“Yeah, your breathing says otherwise.”

Damian snorted. “The air is polluted. Not all of us can be unemployed motorcyclists who rampage in where they aren’t needed.”

“Your FACE is polluted.” Jason sighed. “We need a way out.”

“I have set a beacon which will help them locate us. I am concerned that your bulk could cause some difficulty. We have fallen almost a floor, as the building suffered irreparable structural damage when it lost the load-bearing supports.”

“English?” Jason knew what Damian was saying, but it was distracting to keep needling him. Distractions helped keep Jason from getting locked into thinking about the violence of the explosion, the ringing noise in his ears, or the feeling of being trapped in a spacious potential tomb with another kid who didn’t deserve to die because he was Robin. Come on, breathe.

“I was speaking perfect English,” the teenager hissed. “But in moron’s terms, we are in the basement, with the building in shreds above us. You’re too big to climb out even if we found a passage.”

“You’re not going to find a passage out of the basement of a destroyed two-story building.”

“I have studied the schematics of most buildings in Gotham,” Damian said primly. “And you do not know what my training entailed.”

True. To the League of Assassins, dumping a building on a nine-year-old was probably just another Tuesday. Their situation really depended on the support team getting in here quickly before air and food and water became a concern. Tim’d make sure Bruce knew everything, if Tim was even okay. The sobering thought dragged at his mind. Jason had seen the too-skinny figure of Red Robin thrown backwards by the blast and it hadn’t looked like he’d land well. Why the frak was Tim so skinny?

The minute he got out of here, he was taking Tim to something bulkier than Thai food. Italian. Chili dogs. A bakery. The thought made him smile. There was a bakery in Bludhaven where Dick was always picking up treats and bringing them to the manor because if even Alfred appreciated them, they must be damn good. Maybe Dick could come on this calorie-building adventure – no, Dick wouldn’t remember him. Jason put the whole idea to one side, reaching out for Damian in the dark.

“Hey, if you can get out, get out, Robin,” he told the kid.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Robin stays with the victims.” The teenager sounded appalled by the idea of leaving. Good, Bats hadn’t forgotten that essential part of training Robin. “Besides, you are injured,” Damian continued.

“So are you.”
Silence descended again. Whatever had injured Damian, Jason wasn’t going to get to hear about it anytime soon. Instead, he heard Damian’s comm crackle and, surprise surprise, someone was asking Damian questions over a private channel. Damian answered them and they soon could hear the careful sound of a rescue team working above.

“You called me Dames, earlier,” Damian said. “How did you learn that name?”

“Oh, I’ve taken pictures of all the Bats. It didn’t take a lot of effort to find out who they were, especially with the Wayne family being outright supportive of the Bats movement.” Jason grinned. Damian lit a flashlight and shined it directly at him. He was still wearing the helmet which filtered the light even if the light sensors didn’t work, so nice try, brat.

“[tt]! Do not mock me! Who ARE you?”

“The Red Hood.”

“Are you affiliated with the Joker?”

“Do I look I’m affiliated with that clown?”

“Then I don’t know you or of you.”


“You are the reason he missed dinner,” Damian said, putting two and two together. “Why.”

“Why did you want him at dinner?” Jason replied. There were far worse things than playing Twenty Questions with an angry Robin when you were trapped in a collapsed building. Worse things such as wondering if there would be gas leaks in said collapsed building and at what rate the carbon monoxide would be rising.

“I’m certain he spoke to you about the reasons,” Damian said. Jason shrugged and nodded. The teenager scowled, the expression closer to Tim’s scowl than Jason would ever tell either of them.

“I am not in total disagreement with my—with Batman’s insistence about additional interaction with the Red Robin.”

“As civvies.”

“As civilians, Red Hood. Do not murder your own language.”

Jason let Damian’s irritation set for a moment. Eventually: “Do you want to get along as civvies because you want to or because your dad wants you to?”

“I see no reason to like Red Robin,” Damian said, pointedly ignoring that Jason had called Batman his father without prompting. “While we initially may have had our differences, I don’t have designs on his life or health at this time. I can appreciate his existence as a semi-functional member of the Batman’s team.”

“He mentioned something about attempted murder in the past,” Jason said, trying to make it sound like only half an idea, just passing through his mind.

“Tt. It has been years. I have made progress whereas he has stopped trying. Every time I have tried to explain that he could do the things he used to do at the— the headquarters for the Batman, he treats me with unspeakable disdain and dismissal. What am I supposed to like about him if I cannot
gain a foothold? And then it is insisted we be ‘friends.’”

Given the tone and stress, this was a question Damian had been carrying around for months. Jason didn’t have a great answer, having also hated Tim for a good long while. Then again, he had also thought blowing up the Batmobile would be a proportionate response to those feelings.

“Again, there was some attempted murder. Maybe he just hasn’t a reason to believe you’re different than you used to be.” Yeah, Jason, like you’re one to talk, but Damian didn’t know that. Giving advice was easier when someone didn’t know they should be sneering at you for your hypocrisy.

The rescue team would take a while to get down to them, Jason was sure of that much. One upside to having this particular building collapse, at this time of night, was that there wouldn’t be hundreds of casualties and injuries throughout the office building. Just two people and one body retrieval.

“Hey… Robin.” Jason pushed himself to a crouch and felt his right knee scream at him. Okay, okay, never mind. He shifted to a pigeon-type yoga pose, something that Dick would’ve enjoyed doing more. Damian lit that flashlight again, keeping it out of Jason’s face this time.

“Yes?”

“I’m gonna need you to put on my helmet for a minute.”

“No, thank you.”

“Ten minutes, then.”

“Tt. No.”

“Kid, the helmet’s sensors are starting to pick up carbon monoxide, which means you’ll be swimming in it soon. I’m not having the rescue team show up and find your tiny butt dead. Take the damn helmet.”

“I don’t know you and I certainly don’t want to wear something that’s been on your big sweaty head.”

“Red Robin knows me. Can you trust his judgment?”

Damian stared at him in the light of the flashlight for a long minute. Finally, he reached for the helmet. Jason helped him get it on, since the kid was trying to do it one-handed, and then ensured there wasn’t any gaps where gas would find its way in.

“Has anyone ever… sabotaged this?” Damian said, sounding and looking distinctly different with the full helmet covering his expressions and changing his voice to someone adult and metallic.

“Yeah. Damn near burned my face off. Which is why I would never do that to anyone else.” Jason leaned back against the wall. The rescue team couldn’t be more than ten feet above them now. Bits of debris fell from the ceiling and Jason covered his face with the leather jacket, his eyes protected by the white lenses of his domino. Damian had probably memorized his face already. Thank God the kid wasn’t saying anything, such as ‘you’re the intruder from my family’s manor!’ or brandishing one of the knives Jason was sure he had on his person.

Above, he heard the digging stop. Okay, so they were switching to heavy machinery? Silence. Come on, dig, he silently urged them. Someone yelled back to someone else and, judging by the way his silhouette moved, Damian started talking to someone on the comm channel. The kid had figured out his vocal broadcasting sequence in a matter of seconds, so Jason couldn’t even hear Damian’s half of
“Something’s wrong.” Damian said a second later, apparently having finished his private conversation over comms.

“Like what?”

“They have to get around an electrical center and they’re sure some of the shifting debris severed a water system.”

Yikes. Jason couldn’t crouch, so he rolled carefully to the best-lit corner of their debris-lined surroundings. At least the demon probably couldn’t see him in this dark. Thank you, helmet lighting sensors, for dying at the best possible time.

“What direction was the electrical center?” he asked Damian.

“Southeast corner. We are currently facing north,” Damian replied, as if the kid always knew what direction they were facing.

“How long’s is the workaround gonna take?”

“They think... three hours.”

Jason had been ready to tangibly survey the debris pile, see if he could do anything to get them out faster without killing them both via a crashing ceiling, but the assertion of how long they would be down here sent a shock through him. The blackness around them no longer had the shape of a cluttered office building in disarray. The reminder that he couldn’t move enough to stand without difficulty branded itself on his mind.

The darkness looked like a closed coffin lid.

The barely-visible debris like a warehouse exploded.

Dead Robins underground.

“Red Hood. Hood, respond.” Damian shook his shoulder, half-annoyance, half-guilt in his voice. Probably annoyed his victim to protect was suffering a mental breakdown. Against all better judgment, Jason forced himself unsteadily to his feet, mind working faster than his body would allow.

“I can’t be in here another three hours, Dames.”

“You will.” Damian said, probably thinking the certainty of his tone would force Jason to comply. “And then they’ll get us out.”

“We both remember dying. I’m not doing that ride again.”

And suddenly, the facts didn’t matter. Since he was standing, he might as well be digging. It had worked last time, his mind reminded him, loudly and in all capital letters. IT WORKED LAST TIME.

Jason began tearing indiscriminately at the wall of rubble. Every rescue team in the world would be screaming at him to stop. Tim would have kittens and shake him violently because he was a Robin, he knew better! This is why you’re the dead Robin, the Robin nobody trusts, but he was NOT going to be the Robin who let another Robin die in the aftermath of an explosion.
Jason heard the groaning of metal as it shifted dangerously above their heads but it didn’t register or... no, it registered as good – something is moving, something is changing; you are every self-help tape about actualizing your potential and changing your future.

In the background of his panic, Damian sounded like he was trying every bargaining chip and de-escalation technique Bruce had ever taught him. Start with the nonverbal, like open and nonthreatening body language, then communicate empathy, ask open-ended questions, repeat the answers to clarify and confirm understanding. Regrettably, if you knew what the other person was doing, it didn’t work as well. Jason had encountered far too many people who used those same techniques to build trust and then shatter it.

So Damian kicked his bad knee. It wasn’t nice, but it was very Damian and it brought Jason back to himself when he fell. The kid was at least nice enough to make sure he didn’t slam his head into the ground or impale himself on a piece of debris.

Pain whited out the panic.

At least pain was a constant and reliable witness to the consequences to actions. Jason caught his breath – and promptly lost it, coughing at the dust and building fibers in the air until, at last, they sat in silence again.

“Sorry, sorry,” Jason rasped, because apologizing to the demon was second to the fact that if Jason had gotten much farther, he would have killed both of them. He was shaking. The long cut on his arm was dripping again, aggravated by the frantic tearing away of debris. Well, now it probably needed stitches.

“You were not helping.” Damian spoke through that metallic, disaffected voice of the helmet. Jason knew that helmet voice though, knew what it sounded like when breathing was rushed and fearful.

“Yeah, I know,” Jason replied. “I’ve had some bad experiences with being underground. And dirt. And explosions. And dying.”

“Obviously.” The helmet tilted slightly and Jason could see that the teenager was analyzing his knee.

“It’s fine, demon,” Jason said, hoping that it was true. A fractured patella would bench him for longer than he could afford. “And how you doin’? Post-telepath. I never asked.”

“Fine,” Damian said defensively. “How do you know about that?”

“The police knew. Then I found out you and Timmy had gone in alone.” Jason paused to cough again. “Then I show up and find Timmy trying to shove you out of a building and you moving like Bambi.”

“Are you a detective.”

“No.”

They sat in silence again for a good few minutes, waiting out each other’s boundaries. Finally Damian flicked on the flashlight again. Jason squinted, having been trying to go to sleep.

“Frak, kid, what?”

The light went out. Damian said nothing. Fine, be that way, ‘blood-son,’ Jason thought as he tried to sleep again. He was almost there when Damian spoke quietly, though the helmet, to himself but without turning off the speakers. Jason sat up.
“What?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s the telepath,” Damian said. Jason could hear the scowl in the kid’s voice. “When he was looking for their names, he found memories that I couldn’t climb out of. I’ve been dead, Red Hood, and he thought that maybe I would have stored their names there. The telepath tried to trap me there, in death, in the hell that I deserved for being surprised by him, until Red Robin called me back.”

“And what, you can’t sleep cause of it?”

Damian’s voice got a little quieter. “I couldn’t do the same for Red Robin, if the situation arose. If that is the case, I would be inferior to Batman’s placeholder children in the area of manipulation.”

“Kid, I don’t think anybody could out-manipulate Red Robin when it comes to strategy and knowing everything about his siblings,” Jason said, more than a little exhausted. “He knew who the Bats were before anyone, just because he was curious. I don’t think you’ll ever come close to him and Batman wouldn’t want you to.”


“Goodnight, demon.” Jason closed his eyes to wait out the rescue team.

“Goodnight whoever-you-are.”
I'll keep you near me til night passes by

Chapter Notes

It's a bit of a sappy chapter title but *shrug* It's from Jekyll and Hyde's 'Lost in the Darkness'. Also, Waitress is growing on me? Not Sara Bareilles' versions, but the cast recording.

Sorry this chapter is a bit shorter than some of the others have been.

Thank you for all the responses and interactions with the fic. <3

“Red Hood, they’re here.”

The big man he didn’t know refused to move. Damian checked the atmospheric analysis in the helmet and determined that it was probably the gas. A slow carbon monoxide leak, not as dense as it could be but still dangerous considering how long they had been there. Damian tried taking off the helmet but, when he moved to pull it off, it began to beep a warning so piercing that he put it back on in seconds. If Red Hood had told it to go off when the air was dangerously polluted, Damian shouldn’t disregard the warning intended for a much larger man.

Grabbing one of the Red Hood’s arms with his right hand and hauling it over his shoulders, Damian dragged the other vigilante towards the approaching rescue team. They looked adequately surprised at the sight of a red-helmeted teenager approaching them wearing Robin’s costume and dragging a civilian. It suddenly occurred to Damian that this would be trouble. The medical team would want to examine him. They would want to examine Red Hood, as an unconscious civilian (to their knowledge). Otherwise, they would not be able to say they did their job if either of the boys died.

So, he pushed past the rescue team and into the crowded rubble of the former parking lot. He brought Red Hood as a matter of course, expecting to see Batman striding out of the darkness to collect him and determine what to do with the unapproved vigilante.

His father wasn’t there.

Damian felt out of place, standing there as Robin with an unconscious man over his shoulder and very little energy left to do so. He released the Red Hood to open the comm channel to Oracle. Tricky with the helmet on but not impossible. Now that he had worn the helmet for several hours, he found he didn’t want to pull it off and go around in the domino amidst this milling crowd. He couldn’t grapple with Red Hood over his shoulder and he felt uncomfortably earth-bound in the whole situation.

“I need an extraction, disinfectant, needle and thread, and equipment for oxygen therapy,” he told Oracle.

“Red Robin is there,” Oracle said the same time over the comms as Red Robin appeared at Damian’s side. Drake was still in full costume and looked like he had been running for quite some time. From the way he moved, Damian decided the older teen had cracked ribs and a few nonthreatening cuts to his arms, chest, and face. Drake was fine.
Robin? Are you hurt? What happened to Ja—Hood?” Red Robin demanded, giving them both a once-over. “Is Phenom—"

“Phenom is dead. Not me. Did you bring a car, Red Robin?” Damian asked, ignoring the questions.

“Yeah, Agent A had one delivered. Robin, are you hurt?”

“My wrist is fractured. If I am dying, I will let you know. Get the car.”

It indicated the severity of their situation that Red Robin neither protested or treated him like a petulant child as he went to get the car. Damian didn’t like pulling the pain tolerance card, though he could never deny its effectiveness. Drake would run like a madman if he thought a family member was in needless or self-destructive pain, even if it was Damian. It was one of the few redeeming factors the standoffish teenager had.

“Robin.”

He half-turned. The policeman who had spoken smiled tightly. “Son, where are you taking the civilian?”

Oh. This probably did look suspicious as hell. Damian grimaced and, when the officer failed to comment on it, realized that the woman couldn’t see his expression. He needed one of these helmets for patrol, immediately. Social niceties suddenly applied only to other people.

“Officer,” he said, reveling in how different his voice sounded coming out of the vocalizer. “This man was a victim acting under the influence of a new strain of fear gas. We would like to be sure it is fully out of his system before allowing him to rejoin the community.”

The officer must have not been the most diligent of her cohort, because she accepted this thin answer with a muttered “I’ll never understand you Bats, but I guess we can’t stop you,” before she walked away. Damian headed for the car as Drake pulled up, wondering why he was going through all of this for the Red Hood. Easier to ship him off to the hospital and tell Father what he looked like so he could be later apprehended. Barbara had already taken care of his many safehouses.

But Drake liked him and that might be a way to, as the Red Hood had said, make the Red Robin forgive him whatever imagined slight still stood between them.

And ‘we both remember dying,’ the Red Hood had said. Clearly whoever had rescued him from death wasn’t sticking around to watch out for him, the way Father had for Damian.

Drake helped him get the Red Hood in the back of the car, where Damian was relieved to find a full non-rebreathing apparatus. Though Damian knew how to do it, Drake had two hands available and made quick work of setting up the equipment for Hood before climbing behind the wheel. Damian monitored the oxygen flow as they sped out of town, relieved that the Red Hood was undamaged enough that he showed quick improvement. Red Robin leaned back a couple of times; for once, it wasn’t to check Damian’s work.

“He will need stitches when we return to the manor,” Damian said, annoyed at the wrist fracture that prevented him from sewing up the Red Hood’s wound himself. The cut had already soaked the Red Hood’s leather jacket arm. Blood would get on the car seat. Pennyworth hated blood on the car seats.

“Think about your own injuries,” Drake replied. “I thought we were going to need all this for you. Jason’s a big guy, he’ll be okay.”

“Jason,” Damian repeated.
“Oh. I figured you two would have talked.”

“He did not give me his name, but knew mine. Have you been talking, Drake?” Damian intentionally made the question as cold as possible. Drake shrugged one shoulder.

“No. He figured it out himself once, when he was trying to jack the Batmobile’s tires.”

“You are joking. We would all remember anyone that stupid.”

Drake got quiet. “Yeah, you’d think we would.”

“He said he died. You did not say that you knew anyone who had died.” Anyone that I could talk to when I died, Damian continued in the privacy of his own mind. Drake glanced in the rearview mirror. As always, an apologetic expression looked strange on Drake’s face, especially when directed towards Damian.

“Okay, I’m sorry about that. I didn’t think you’d want to talk to… you didn’t want to talk about it to anyone before. That’s all. Jason wasn’t always okay about the death thing and I don’t—didn’t think you’d like the person he became after it.”

Damian accepted this answer and made no effort to continue the conversation. By the time they arrived at the manor, ‘Jason’ looked less pale and had made some false starts in regaining consciousness. He didn’t look happy about the car ride and he outright dug in his heels when he saw where they were. Well, insofar as he could dig his heels in when his knee wasn't cooperating.

“Tim – Timmy, Dames’ll kill me coming back here!” The Red Hood moved backwards but Drake, having just opened the rear door to the car, was ready for it and grabbed Jason’s face almost faster than the older man could react. Regardless of their difference in size, the larger vigilante went very still and stopped trying to retreat into the towncar.

“Damian was with you. Remember?” Tim said, maintaining assertive eye contact. It was strange to see on Drake, who ordinarily shrank and avoided such intimate contact.

Jason thought about this statement and appeared to remember, so Tim let go. Both of them stopped making eye contact immediately.

“Is he good?” Jason asked. “I gave him the helmet…”

“He fractured his wrist in the fall but—”

“That ass didn’t tell me!” the Red Hood practically shouted, pulling himself out of the car and bracing his weight on the open door. “I asked, Replacement, swear to God I asked!”

“I’m sure. So, he’s fine, you’re not so good.”

Drake motioned the Red Hood to lean on him and Jason reluctantly agreed. The two hobbled towards to the medical section of the Cave. Jason followed as if he knew the place by heart, half-limping. He seemed less lucid now, his mind drifting to another realm. Damian couldn’t tell if it was a certainty on Jason’s part that he’d be killed for seeing Batman’s Cave or if, more likely, he wanted to take himself away from here. The Red Hood’s posture had not fully relaxed since he got out of the car, despite the looseness of his tone.

“You remember that time you got carbon monoxide poisoning with B?” Drake asked the Red Hood.

“I threw up. And peed blood. Heh, Bruce swore I could never run into a burning building again.
And then I blew up!” This appeared to be hysterical to Jason, for some reason. Drake didn’t look amused.

“Very funny, yes, stop talking.” Drake sat the older man down on one of the cots to set up another session of oxygen therapy and glanced over at Damian. “How’s the wrist?”


But 7.5 damn weeks to heal, according to recent studies. Longer than Damian wanted, but not long enough than he could demand superior treatment. The only thing that came to mind would be a Blue Lantern and only Drake knew anything about those.

“If you don’t put it in a brace at least, you’ll keep using it. Do it for your own sake, if not Alfred,” Drake said. “Dick’s good at noticing things but he loves to tackle hug people and sometimes he doesn’t assume they already have things like a cracked rib or fractured wrist.”

“Speaking from experience?” Damian asked dryly. He knew Bruce would want him to get it x-rayed. With a job like theirs, very few chances could be taken when it came to a broken bone.

“Always.” Drake finished up the oxygen therapy and began placing telemetry pads on the Red Hood, who looked at the younger man like he was losing his mind.

“I’m conscious. Don’t you think you’re going overboard?”

“Just wait until we get to the IV.”

“Hell no.” Jason tried to push himself up on his elbows. “I’ve seen you put in an IV. I would honestly rather fight Bruce’s entire rogues gallery than have you go hunting for a vein in my arm.”

Given that Red Hood refused to let Drake insert the IV, and rightfully so, it fell to Damian to set it up. It wasn’t the best thing he could do with limited use of his injured hand, but he managed. By the time Damian finished, Jason had quieted down and seemed a little less confused about location and people, as well as being newly apologetic about making Damian help with an injured wrist. Damian turned around to find Drake smirking.

“Why are you so smug?” Damian asked.

“The IV has the fluid he needs and a sedative. But, if he knew about the sedative, he would’ve stopped you too.”

Drake was correct; upon hearing the word ‘sedative’, Jason had begun swearing under his breath about ‘I wouldn’t frakking do this to YOU, Replacement.’ Damian couldn’t help looking back at the man as Jason tried to shake off sleep, murmuring more threats even as his intonation became more and more drowsy. Alarmingly, his drowsy tone became tinged with panic just before he fell asleep. Drake did not appear to notice.

“It’s almost morning. Why would he need any help falling asleep?” Damian asked.

“He shouldn’t, but it’s an ongoing problem. I don’t think he feels safe in the Cave anymore and… definitely not to fall asleep in.” Again, Drake glanced away. Whatever it was constituted a ‘big deal’ to Drake, which made his reticence infuriating.

“He shouldn’t,” Damian replied. “It is a secret and this clearly not the first time he has been here. Or
in the manor for that matter. Do you think Father will trust him as you do, Drake?”

“I don’t know. But that’s on me.” Drake looked up and met Damian’s glare head on. “Thanks for your help tonight, Damian.”

“Tt. You always need it.”

Drake wrinkled his nose a bit without disagreeing aloud. “Go get some sleep. I’m gonna keep an eye on him so he doesn't wake up and try to run.”

"He could not possibly run on that knee,” Damian said with confidence.

"Try telling him that.”

Damian couldn't refute the idea, so he headed upstairs without protest. He meant to find Bruce, if his father was still awake, but ended up sleeping in the study just outside the Cave’s stairs.
When it's up to you to hold your house together, a house you built with patience and with care

Chapter Notes

So what the hell was Bruce doing while his youngest son (and, y'know, Jason) was/were under a building? And, the chapter title is from Next to Normal’s ‘Just Another Day’ which, if you haven't heard it, it's FANTASTIC. And thank you for your interaction with this fic. <3

3/19 edits: Heads up: I know this one changed a lot. Sorry.

Damian was always the one bringing strays home. Cats, dogs, cows, snakes, rabbits, chickens; one could hardly name a species he hadn’t thought about acquiring. What stood out in Bruce’s mind was the capybara incident, followed by the ‘I-ordered-turkeys-online’ incident. Yes, the ethics of shipping live birds to customers were murky, but to buy out every hatchery that did it between here and Metropolis?

In any case, strays were Damian’s business. Bruce’s third son, Tim, just wanted people to know he existed and often for them to know he was incredibly smart.

But right now, the son Bruce entrusted with most of Wayne Enterprises’ day-to-day operations had decided to put his foot down about being allowed to keep a stranger in the Cave.

Alfred hadn’t been forthcoming on the background of the subject, merely mentioning that Tim had asked him to keep an eye on someone recovering from carbon monoxide poisoning in the Cave. Alfred had viewed the patient and agreed that he was in need of observation. That information had been presented to Bruce ten minutes before he and Tim headed to work.

Now, the teenager sat across from him in the town car on their way into Gotham proper, surrounded by both Wayne Enterprises’ reports and several advanced math books required by his online high school classes. Given that they were driving through strobing sections of light and shadow from the trees, Bruce didn’t know how the boy could read anything and not get a headache.

Well, better to try now than later. The whole conversation would have to be pretty vague. Since Alfred had been claimed as a patient-monitor, a car service had sent today’s Bentley and professional driver. The man might be professional now but who knew what he might say after having a few drinks later tonight. Vague, then.

“Tim,” he began.

The teenager looked up. “Yeah?”

“Alfred told me you had a friend staying over.”

“Oh.” Tim set about rummaging through one of the piles of paper for something. “Yeah, I thought you might ask.”

“We’ve talked before about having people stay over, especially in the basement,” Bruce pressed on,
feeling like he shouldn’t have to remind Tim of all people. “You need to tell me first. You have to
tell me first.”

“He really needed to get out of a bad situation. Damian didn’t mind him.”

That was a recommendation in and of itself, but Bruce couldn’t just accept everything because his
biological son liked it. Otherwise, they would have capybaras and turkeys in every corner of the
manor and Alfred would quit.

“I appreciate that you and Damian got along last night,” Bruce said, taking care to emphasize the
appreciation bit. Dick had told him that a little could go a long way with the kids living at home.
“But I can’t have you just leading people past security into sensitive areas of the house.”

“Here.” Tim unearthed a slim and stapled packet of paper from the other reports. He held it out to
Bruce. “I typed up a dossier.”

Bruce took the document. His son went immediately back to studying the mathematics book, though
it didn’t escape Bruce’s notice that Tim glanced up at him more frequently than usual, gauging his
reactions. Bruce cautiously flipped open the first page, where the title was centered.

‘Red Hood’
aka ‘Jason Todd’
aka ‘Your second Robin’
aka ‘Code Praeteritus Instance 14’
aka ‘Project Muninn Accidentally Underwent a Human Trial’

Bruce had read the entire report by the time they pulled into the parking garage at Wayne
Enterprises. The report stayed with him, certain phrases that Tim had used or points of fact that Tim
had used to sum up what Jason Todd was to the Wayne family. The teenager didn’t avoid any topics
of contention, like Jason’s Lazarus-crazed attack at Titan Tower or the years he had spent with the
League of Assassins. Even Bruce’s… Bruce’s apparent stabbing him in the throat in an attempt to
save both Red Hood and the Joker was included in the dossier.

This objectivity strengthened Bruce’s conviction that Tim believed what he had written was fact.

And, given Jason Todd’s list of crimes, it made sense why Jason might not be willing to knock on
Wayne Manor’s front door for help himself. The Bruce-who-remembered-Jason seemed perpetually
angry about the lives he’d taken and repeatedly contrasted Jason as he once was with who he
became as an adult.

The Bruce who remembered neither the crimes, the context, or the boy struggled to feel anything but
disappointment that he had let this happen on his watch.

And that, he thought, is probably why he’s going to Tim, and not to you.

With that unhappy thought in mind, Bruce’s workday lasted forever. Not in a time manipulation
hijinks kind of way, but because he couldn’t talk to Tim about anything in the report the young man
had put together. Tim made himself scarce as soon as they got there, vanishing into a meeting with
the research team, then leadership members who weren’t important enough to get a meeting with
Bruce Wayne, then heading off to check out the ship they had in quarantine with the explosives
squad.
Meanwhile, Bruce met with the federal investigation team and the Wayne Enterprises lawyers for what felt like the thousandth time. Everything revolved around the damn ship they had brought in from Seward, Alaska.

If Bruce had said even one word out of place, he felt sure that Agent Aaron Brokaw would have had the ship loaded onto a private plane within the hour. He could see the man waiting in his lobby as he walked up. The agent was facing the door, his rotund frame in a well-designed black suit. He’d accessorized it with a Batman tie which was black enough to perfectly match the suit. Brokaw was early thirties and an early-balding redhead, who didn’t let it stop him from getting along almost supernaturally well with everyone.

If he wasn’t being such a personal pain, Bruce would have appreciated his company.

“Mr. Wayne,” the agent greeted him as the door opened.

“Agent Brokaw! Better a late start than none, eh? As I’ve said before, call me Bruce.”

“We going to fly out of here today, Bruce?” Brokaw followed him into the board room as Bruce waved a fluttering hello to Brokaw’s already-seated assistant, Lieve Symrnoi, and a less welcoming hello to the Wayne Enterprises’ lawyer, Quay Vilachev, who sat with portfolio open and hands folded on the board room table. Every time he saw Quay, Bruce could imagine the lawyer was about to say ‘permission to treat the witness as hostile.’

Lieve stood from her seat at the table and reached out a hand to shake Bruce’s. The Russian expatriate played a fair fiddle to Quay in terms of unsettling Bruce. While Brokaw exuded amiability, Lieve had all the affability of a knife in the dark.

“Think of the greater good, Agent,” Bruce said, waiting as the two agents took their seats at the board room table. “I’m informed by the very best on my team that we’re hours away from establishing that the ship is no threat and we are still determining if the composition is altogether human. We’re anticipating great advances from the technology we’ve already unpacked in its composition.”

For some reason, Lieve’s lip curled slightly. Bruce filed the gesture away for safekeeping and kept going.

He shuffled through the notes someone had left on the table, assuming correctly that they were Tim’s notes from whenever he last worked through the night. The notes were… somewhat passive-aggressive about not being allowed to properly investigate the ship, free of agents or lawyers or the explosives squad.

“Back-engineering the spaceflight capabilities will galvanize the airline industry. The controls are sensitive to a variety of semi-psychic commands, far beyond current military advances, which could have thousands of possible uses for vehicular devices alone. And an artifact we found nearby has the potential to address a host of dementia issues.” Bruce grinned, pretending to be overwhelmed by the list of possibilities. “Gosh! We’ll be at hoverboards before you know it.”

“We can appreciate that,” Brokaw replied. “However, we’re not in the business of allowing private corporations to retain threats to national and global security. Even if their planes are faster than the U.S. government’s.”

“The ship suffered enough damage during its transport back to Gotham,” Bruce reminded the agents. “You want to risk moving it again? What’s the hurry?”
“We are aware that you are stalling,” Lieve said, for once speaking before her partner. “Wayne Enterprises cannot hope to maintain control of the ship. If you had let our staff survey it initially, rather than keeping it locked away, we would already know its potential for… ‘exploding,’ as you keep insisting it might. We need to begin considering its potential as a scout ship, or an act of war, not a way to build a better vacuum cleaner”

Bruce found a small post-it affixed to the bottom page of the report, scrawled in Tim’s tiny handwriting: ‘Don’t let them take it!’

Whatever the ship did, it was serious enough for Tim to use an exclamation point.

“48 hours,” Bruce said, hoping his detective son could figure things out by then. “Then, I’ll be happy to give it to the federal government, whether we have deemed it clear of explosive risk or not.”

“24,” Lieve said. Quay coughed and that was a signal to Bruce that they could get more. Bruce already knew that.

“48, Agent Lieve,” he smiled winningly. “Though if I can buy you a cocktail after this, I may be willing to take it down to 36.”

“48,” Brokaw confirmed with a glance at his partner. “I’ll have the plane ready. And I’ll take that cocktail if Lieve already has plans.”

“I would expect no less. Thank you, agents. And Agent Brokaw?”

“Yes?”

“Nice tie.”

Brokaw grinned. “Never let it be said I didn’t flatter the client’s taste.”

They shook hands, though Lieve and Quay were already busying themselves with drawing up the terms in writing. Bruce would doubtless be dragged back for a few signatures before the day was out, and a few more after the 48 hours had slipped by. Forty-eight hours felt like a short amount of time to him, but since Tim didn’t seem to ever sleep these days, it would probably be like having four days to him.

That was what he thought, anyway.

Tim stared in horror when Bruce mentioned the deadline later, as they sat at lunch. If they hadn’t been at Tim’s favorite coffeeshop and outside of the Wayne Enterprises building, the teenager might have stormed back to work immediately.

“Forty-eight hours. Now forty-four hours, since you had that meeting. I haven’t even been allowed to get inside the ship, Bruce, how could you think I’d know where it was and who it was from?” Tim wrapped his hands around the ceramic mug as if to keep from punching someone. Bruce insisted they stay here the whole lunch hour and cemented the demand by making Tim get his four-shot coffee drink in one of the café’s mugs.

“Hn. I assumed you’d been sneaking in,” Bruce said, taking a zip of his own, black coffee.

“I talked myself onto one tour, where they covered the whole hanger bay, but didn’t let me near it. It’s…” Tim closed his eyes, frowning in concentration. “It’s like something I’ve seen before, something alien, but not alien. I can’t place it. Not without being able to study it.”
“Will you be able to do it in our timeframe?”

“Do I get open access to the hangar bay?” Tim replied.

Bruce nodded once. Tim’s face brightened immediately as he pulled out his phone and began typing.

“What are you doing?” Bruce asked, watching as Tim keyed in a passcode, swiped several times, held the phone up to get facial recognition, and finally nodded with satisfaction at something on-screen. “Tim?”

“Giving myself access.” Tim set the phone back down on the table and returned his attention to the coffee cup.

If Tim ever went to the dark, they wouldn’t stand a chance, Bruce reflected.

“What about our other issue?” he asked, careful not to trouble the waters of his son’s sudden good mood. “Your post-it notes this morning and the dossier suggested you thought Project Muninn was connected to the sudden… forgetfulness. Have you made any progress?”

“It’d be easier if I had the materials on-site to work with,” Tim said, meaning bringing the artifact back to the Cave for study. “The lab animal’s not going to stay put though.”

Meaning— Bruce coughed to hide his laugh. “Ah.”

“Yeah, I’m a little worried he’ll skip town if I take too long.” Tim drummed his fingers against the tabletop thoughtfully. “Better to leave everything where it is and call him in if I think I see a connection. Can you kick the explosives team out over the weekend though? And the researchers? And… I hate to say it, but make sure the janitorial staff have a weekend of full pay and no work, if possible…?”

“I’ll institute a company holiday, so you’ll have some breathing room.”

“You don’t have to send everybody home,” Tim said, though that was what he’d been describing.

“You don’t think everyone would like a three-day weekend?” Bruce replied, his tone almost as dry as Alfred’s.

“If it’s going to be completely empty, I’ll just bring our… new employee, with me the whole time then. He isn’t comfortable where he is right now.” Tim glanced over the edge of the coffee cup at Bruce, almost using it as a buffer between them. “Is that all right with you?”

“I have no issues with you orientating him this weekend.” They were talking about Jason. Bruce had as many questions about the young man as there were gargoyles in Gotham. Probably more. “After reading your interview notes, I did have a few follow-up questions about him though.”

“Shoot,” Tim took a sip of the coffee and smiled, as if he’d made a private joke.

“Gun jokes, Tim?” Bruce asked.

Tim looked up guiltily. “Forgot you’d read the report. Sorry. Not funny. Go ahead.”

“Is he from somewhere like here, but not here?” Bruce asked. Translated, this meant a parallel universe. Tim contemplated his answer for so long that Bruce wondered if he should rephrase the question.

“No.” Tim set down the mug. “No, he’s not.”
“You’re the only one who has met him before?” Translated: you’re the only one who remembers him. Tim scowled, as if Bruce had done something he was trying to avoid.

“Yes, but we’re both from Gotham, same as you, same as Damian and Dick.” Translation: I’m from this reality and so is Jason and I’m not in the mood to be put through a testing sequence right now.

“Of course,” Bruce replied. Tim believed he was telling the truth, so even if Bruce couldn’t trust him, he could at least lean on that belief. “I’m not questioning the hire, though I did notice from his resume that he plays a lot of… laser tag.”

Tim lifted an eyebrow. “Really? Not paintball?”

“Perhaps it was Frisbee golf,” Bruce said. “In any case, I wondered if you were also interested in… paintball.”

“No, I have no interest in paintball and he’s stopped playing it so rough the last few years. He’s a good guy. Plays with teams much better now than he used to.”

“I’m still not sure…”

“He gave Damian his helmet, Bruce.” Tim leaned forward, careful not to get his tie in the cup he’d just set down. “How many other people would risk their safety to help Damian, given the kid’s skills at first impressions? And where were you last night?”

Bruce fell silent. He could feel his son’s distrust and disappointment radiating from across the table. He waited too long before speaking; Tim drained the last of the coffee and stood.

“Fine then. Keep your secrets, boss. Thanks for the coffee.”

They didn’t talk for the rest of the day, even when Bruce instituted the surprise three-day weekend for all of Wayne Enterprises. Those who absolutely had to could access their files for five hours remaining hours that Friday but nothing was expected. The holiday reasoning didn’t have to be anything elaborate. As ‘Brucie Wayne’, it could be pretty damn thin.

‘Mental Health Day for everyone!’ he had proclaimed brightly over the universally-hated W.E. intercom system. Everyone except his son, damnit.

Bruce extracted a promise from Tim that he would come home by noon on Saturday, whether he had made progress on determining where the ship was from or not. The agents would arrive to pick up the ship on Sunday morning at the absolute latest. Then, he had had to join Agent Brokaw for the cocktail, which hadn’t gone as terribly as it could have and Bruce was able to bow out within the next hour, explaining he needed to miss bridge traffic.

By the time he arrived at Wayne Manor, Jason Todd had gone.

Confirming his suspicions, Oracle reported that Jason hadn’t gone back to any of the watched safehouses and she hadn’t seen any of his aliases checking into hotels. So it was likely that Tim had contacted Jason the moment that Bruce left and let him know to leave. Yes. He would certainly be with Tim, Bruce reasoned. Safe. Both of them would be safe. Still… his mind kept drifting back to the murder statistics that Tim had included in the report. He opened the dossier again as he picked at his late lunch, dragging over the notations until the numbers seemed to dance before his eyes. He struggled to believe that any child he adopted could become so steeped in blood.

As if reading his mind, his phone chimed with a text from Tim: ‘If you’re thinking of coming, please don’t.’
“Has the rest of your afternoon opened up, sir?” Alfred asked, coming out of the kitchen to reclaim Bruce’s lunch plate.

“It seems to.”

“It is my understanding that Master Damian has been anxiously awaiting your return. If you conduct a successful conversation with him, I will unlock the video feeds to the W.E. research lab.”

“They’re locked?” Bruce said, surprised.

“I do want you to have that conversation, sir.” Alfred looked meaningfully at the dossier. “Rather than wracking your brains over that poor child’s history.”

“Damian’s upstairs?”

“Downstairs, sir. Training.”

Bruce headed for the Cave, listening closely as he walked down the stairs for a sense of what his youngest son might be doing. Alfred had been sure to inform him before he left that morning that Damian had suffered a slight fracture to his wrist. Tim’s ribs had been bruised from the night before but nothing more serious than he dealt with daily. He hadn’t wanted Damian to think Bruce was worried, but every time one of his Robins—one of his sons—was injured, it became a question of his own ethics. Particularly when it came to Damian and now, with this knowledge of Jason Todd’s history and decisions.

So it was difficult not to sigh when Bruce came to the base of the stairs and saw his youngest.

Damian currently fought in absolute silence against one of the training dummies, using only one hand. Given the sweat that soaked his shirt, he had been down here for hours, possibly even skipping a section of his classes. That meant ignoring homework, not that it ever took him long; snacks, internet video games with Jon, or communicating with the Titans.

“Damian,” Bruce said. His youngest son straightened immediately, half-guilty and half-pleased at being caught training when he shouldn’t be.

“Father.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Tt.” Damian glanced down at his wrist as if it had betrayed him. “Drake’s friend was the one who needed rescuing.”

Bruce sat down in a meditative pose at the end of the training mat. Damian paid close attention to this activity even while pretending he wasn’t. Some things Damian didn’t hide well enough yet. Bruce knew better than to smile.

“You wouldn’t tell Drake where you were last night,” Damian accused. Huh. So Tim had been in communication with Damian since his coffeeshop conversation with Bruce? Or maybe Damian had asked his nemesis outright if he knew anything. Either way, his boys were talking. That was good news.

“No, I did not,” Bruce replied.

Damian padded over and sat down next to him. Despite one wrist being in a brace, he moved with defined balance and grace. “Then you were waiting to tell me what happened.”
Bruce said nothing.

“Father, tell me right now.”

“You know I would have done anything to be there, Damian.”

“And yet you sent Drake,” Damian said sharply.

“Tim never left the scene. I had to deal with another threat.”

“What could have dragged you away?” Damian asked, doubt in every word. “No breakouts have been reported at Arkham, no wrecking balls smashed through Blackgate. I checked.”

“A Yellow Lantern at the Yards.” Bruce heard Damian’s sharp intake of breath, almost a flinch. “Oracle patched the police chatter through to me as priority while I was waiting for news of you with the rescue teams. People were dying. By the time I got to there, the Lantern had already killed four pedestrians and a police officer. She’d tied nineteen civilian hostages, still alive, to a construction crane and had the twentieth hostage dangling beneath it. Legs already broken.”

Damian nodded once, seriously. “That is a passable excuse. What did she want?”

“My attention,” he replied.

When he arrived, the Yellow Lantern had been wearing a bright yellow cowl similar to his own. Worse than that, she demonstrated intelligence about her powers. Not creating constructs she couldn’t maintain, hovering over a hundred feet of nothingness rather than landing anywhere, keeping out of range of a grappling line’s arc. It wasn’t the kind of situation he ever wanted to glide into, even with the forewarning of the police… all of whom were now dead.

Batman had landed on the nearest rooftop, calculating a path to the construction crane. As if a sixth sense warned her of his presence, the Lantern’s head swiveled to track his landing, not in concern but in flat bemusement. Then, she flew deliberately to the hostage dangling from the crane.

Bruce’s mind beginning to chant a steady stream of ‘no’ as she hid the rope securing the hostage from his view. Meanwhile, Batman’s internal monologue began to plot a path to the crane’s plateau and he followed it like a car following a GPS’s orders, certain he would arrive before she could cut the hostage loose to fall to his death.

The man wasn’t crying or screaming, though many of his compatriots tied to the crane were, so he must have passed out. Batman reached the crane in time for the Lantern to cut the rope with one hand and grip it tightly with the other. If he attacked her, the hostage would fall.

So he froze, several feet above her on the crane’s slewing unit, staring down at the pair on the mast. He had been close enough to see her face for the first time, could see now the insanity staring up at him from behind a familiar face. This wasn’t an alien or even an out-of-towner, he realized.

This was a Gothamite who had found the Joker’s abandoned face and stapled it to her own, near hidden beneath the bright yellow copy of the Batman cowl. As if she’d taken all the Joker’s cackling about he and Batman being the perfect pair and merged it into clown and Bat and now Yellow Lantern. He’d felt his mouth twitch in disgust and his reaction had made her grin.

“See? I can be scary. You’re not scary. And cranes aren’t scary at all,” the Lantern said, shifting a little to look down at her gently-swaying hostage. “Not this crane, not this crane. Though if you crane your neck, once in a while, you’ll see a crane/ly!”
And she let go.

Batman intentionally forgot the face and dove past her to chase him.

Damian asked the next question in a quieter voice, drawing Bruce out of the memory.

“Could you save the rest of them?” Damian asked.

“Yes,” Bruce said, without satisfaction. Sometimes, he had to accept that he was human. He never had to like it. “I even caught the man. But it took too long.”

He’d lassoed the man to the crane, which took a minute longer than it should have to secure him, without the man’s consciousness or assistance. By the time Bruce had looked up from the task, the rest of the hostages were reaching for him, those that had use of their hands, crying and screaming to be let down. He’d then realized that their bonds were also constructs of the power ring. The only person on this crane likely not to fall in seconds was the unconscious hostage he had just lashed to it.

It took three minutes to secure everyone to the crane with actual bonds, which retriggered many of them no many how much he tried to explain what he was doing. By the time he could even lift his head from the task, the police were arriving and the Lantern had announced this was ‘boring.’ The cowl construct vanished, replaced with a torn outfit of red, green and purple, appropriate for the jagged staples making up her face. Noticing his attention, she pointed to herself.

“’I’m going to be the scariest thing in Gotham,’” she’d told him. As if she were a little child, announcing she were going to be an astronaut one day, or a firefighter (or an astronaut-firefighter, as Dick had once wanted to be).

“You’re going to have to try a little harder,” Batman growled. She snorted.

“Watch.”

Then, she crossed her arms and nodded her head once, like a character on a 60’s sitcom. The hostages all yelped in horror as they slumped against nothing at all for a moment, then caught on Batman’s restraints. Safe. Safe, Bruce repeated to himself. Meanwhile, the Lantern had groaned in frustration.

“How did you get to all of them?!” This tirade had been interrupted by a bullet from a long range weapon went cracking past her, making the entire crane structure vibrate as it impacted. Batman felt his bad mood get a little worse, even as she had chortled. “Somebody found the special guns! Well. I’ll circle back when things are a little more private, Batsy. We have a lot to discuss.”

And so she’d gathered herself, bracing against the crane like a swimmer on a wall, and shot into the air.

Back in the Cave, Damian tsked at the story. “Should you be calling the League to deal with her?”

“Lanterns are an intergalactic jurisdiction issue, yes.” Bruce shook his head. “But the cowl means it’s personal and she seemed to know more about how I worked than newcomers generally do. It’s not worth involving the JLA yet. Anyway…” he sighed. “She’d been introducing herself to the hostages as the Joker’s Daughter. It’s safe to assume this is a Gotham issue.”

“Things I would already know if you hadn’t restricted the file access for the incident,” Damian said peevishly. “So, she is a delusional fan of the clown’s? Or perhaps Quinzel’s demented offspring? I can’t imagine Joker actually fathered someone, otherwise, much less approved the stapling of his gruesome discarded face to someone.” Damian squinted, trying to see the sense in this and finding
“Is his face that durable?”

“No,” Bruce said with a sigh. “Decidedly not. And while the resemblance to Harley is there, I don’t believe Harley would abandon or allow her daughter to do this. She makes her own choices regarding the Joker. Forcing your own child into insanity from childhood is a harder tea to steep.”

“She has tried to assault all of us with similar intentions,” Damian said.

“As a way of appeasing his desire to get at me,” Bruce replied. "Even Harley has her limits. She wasn’t there that night, if you remember."

“So,” Damian said, returning to the point. “Where is she now? Do we hunt her down tonight?”

“Well, as you know, I struggle to track assailants who can fly under their own power, even when they aren’t threatening to drop two dozen hostages from a crane,” Bruce replied, deadpan.

“Tt. A flaw which even Drake has yet to overcome with his precious technology.”

“So tonight will be surveying reports and sightings while I wrap up the Lahmer-Harrods case. But you won’t be coming on patrol tonight. Not with that wrist.”

Damian said nothing for several minutes, his eyes closed and legs crossed as he prepared to ignore what Bruce had just said.

“But you are not telling Drake,” Damian said, and Bruce wasn’t imagining the sly tone. “Why.”

“Because your brother can be very focused and may spend time attempting to track her down on his own. I don’t want him hurt.”

“Ha! So you admit Drake is more hotheaded than me! I knew he couldn’t fool you forever with his stupid research and his stupid—oh.” The celebration stopped, Damian’s victory parade suddenly rained out. “I can’t tell him either.”

“I would like to be allowed to parent my children, yes, Damian.”

“Tt.” Despite the dismissive sound that was his trademark, Damian sounded satisfied with the thought that they had a secret from Tim. “You learned about this Red Hood person as well, then?”

“Yes.”

“He is still not sharing the entirety of that information with me, Father. I have a right to know about security risks.”

So Bruce told him everything in the dossier, condensed for time, until Damian sat there, finally murmuring ‘that idiot shot me?’ Bruce was a little concerned this could be his youngest son’s only take-away, though Damian got to his feet and asked, louder: ‘How many children do you HAVE?’

“I’m sure this is the only one I’ve forgotten,” Bruce said, more bemused than offended.

“Grayson is acceptable. Drake would have been, if not for his being Drake. But then there is Brown, and Cain, and Thomas, and—”

“You got along with Duke, as far as I remember.”

“Stop acquiring children!”
“Hey, Baby Bat, pretty sure you were technically third,” came a mocking voice from the top of the stairs. “So I wouldn’t say that so loud.”

Damian put his head in his hands in frustration and Bruce half-smiled.

“Hello Dick.”

“Grayson,” Damian said sullenly, determined not to show how excited he was to see his favorite sibling. The acrobat came down the stairs and into the training area, looking around.

“Aww, don’t tell me Tim didn’t take your ‘Mental Health Day’?” he asked Bruce. “I was pretty sure he was the sole reason you had one.”

“Yes, but not in that way. He is helping a friend with a problem.”

“That sounds menacing and vague.” Dick ruffled Damian’s hair affectionately. “Almost as scary as your wrist. You do that on patrol?”

“In a way. What were you planning to do with Drake, if he were here?” Damian asked, ducking out of the hair-ruffling. The older vigilante stared at the ceiling in imaginative thought.

“Oh, well, first I thought we’d go to a nice vegetarian place, then wander around the dog park with Titus and maybe feed some ducks if the greatest Dane doesn’t scare them all away.”

Damian grinned. “Then let’s go. Father, if Drake cannot accept his own ‘Mental Health Days’, then I will take them for him. Come, Grayson.”

Bruce watched his oldest and youngest head out to enjoy the sunny weather for a few hours before it got dark, then returned his attention to the Batcomputer. The research lab’s feeds were, as promised, now unlocked. Tim and what must be Jason Todd were in Wayne Enterprises’ hanger bay.

Fighting Leonid Kovar, the Russian State Protector.

Red Star.
Into the woods, but mind the future

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from the Into The Woods Finale song.

Thank you, as always, for interacting with this flying-by-the-seat-of-my-pants fic. :)

Oh, right, and the Shakespeare quotes are from (in order), 1) King Lear, 2) Cymbeline, 3) Much Ado About Nothing, 4) Othello, and 5) Romeo and Juliet. If those aren't the plays, feel free to let me know, that's just what Google tells me. :P

Waking up carefully had become hardwired after Jason died.

He woke up screaming, of course, that couldn’t be helped, but when he didn’t wake up sleeping, there was a checklist to follow. It started with ‘am I in a bed-shaped place? Y/N’. This was followed closely by: does Y=moving? Does N=moving? If N to either, ‘am I injured? Y/N’, followed by ‘if Y, am I able to kick the door down with said injury?’ and ‘If N, is there a nearby weapon?’

This checklist had been an absolute nightmare in prison because his brain refused to stop starting it every time he woke up. It was a wonderful grounding mechanism that didn’t seem to care if just set off panic attacks instead of being useful.

Today, Jason had woken up in a cot (so Y=bed-shaped, Moving=N) with a massive headache and a throbbing knee (so Y=injured, but Y=could kick door down anyway).

After completing the checklist, questions still ran through his fogged brain, like: when had he collapsed? Why was his knee on fire? Had he been left alone? Was Damian okay? A squinted observation and he could see the Cave’s vaulted ceiling, far away and blurry black over his head. Location confirmed. He glanced to the side of the cot, where he could sense a presence.

Alfred sat very close, dangerously close even, to his cot and was busy repairing one of Batman’s capes. The cape was a bulky thing, overflowing from knees and threatening to slide off the older man’s lap at any second. Jason eyed him through narrowed slits, hazy and dark.

“How are you feeling, Master Jason?” Alfred asked. Of course Alfred knew he was awake.

“Wonderin’ how you got patient duty,” Jason said, carefully removing the Hudson mask and, as he did so, noticing the pull of an IV in his left hand. He had no doubt the butler noticed everything Jason noticed as he noticed it, but would be too British to mention the younger man’s confusion.

“Master Timothy said you would need surveillance while you slept and after you woke. He was fairly certain you wouldn’t have nightmares, but didn’t want you to do yourself an injury,” Alfred said.

Jason analyzed the IV Damian had put in, resisting the urge to do something rash to get it out.

“Yeah, Damian did a good enough injury to me with the knee, thanks. Uh… can you help me take this out, Alfred? Hate pulling out IVs.”
“As I’m sure people hate you removing them before their time,” Alfred replied, making no move to help remove the IV. “Allow another hour of nutrients before attempting to leave. I will not be going anywhere unless you require something. Master Timothy entrusted me with your care when he left this morning and I owe you a debt of gratitude, as does Robin.”

Jason blinked at the older man, feeling slow. “Uh?”

“For the loan of your helmet. While your unconsciousness came about more from the lack of oxygen than the carbon monoxide, Robin’s smaller frame would have been in serious jeopardy.”

“Um. Well, you can’t just… let kids die,” Jason said, unsure what else to tell the butler. “Bruce’d try to kill me. Again.”

Alfred was slow to answer, just in case Jason was fishing for an answer about Batman’s identity.

“If you mean Bruce Wayne, I believe he is vehemently opposed to murder as a method of justice. And an accidental death could hardly be your fault.”

“Thanks.” He respected Alfred, he did, but he still pulled the covers off so he could sit up and start looking for his clothes. Boxers were going to make for a crappy escape costume. But the moment the covers were away, he realized why his knee had been aching.

“What the hell is this?” Jason prodded at the black sleeve encasing his leg. “It needs a BRACE?”

“It is a miracle you didn’t fracture your patella,” Alfred said. “As it is, your armor prevented any breakage. It is badly bruised and sensitive.”

“Aw, just like my bleeding heart,” Jason said, unbuckling the flexible cast structure with a fierce grin to Alfred. “Let’s compromise with I’ll try not to do any somersaults, Alfie. A brace isn’t conducive to my lifestyle.”

Alfred watched disapprovingly as Jason peeled off the device. “It is my preference that you wait for Batman to return to go over your situation.”

Again, Jason looked at him in confusion and a growing sense of alarm. “My situation.”

“Master Tim created a dossier for Batman, to explain who you are as we seem to have forgotten.”

Fear thundered through Jason’s chest. A little of it was the typical cocktail of sedative+injury+gas and the rest of it was that it had taken years for Bruce to realize a murderer could ‘get better’ and act as an ally within the Bat fold. He doubted the man was going to jump on board with his rehabilitation after reading a report typed up by a sleep-deprived high school senior.

“And… did you read the dossier, Alfred?” Jason asked. He didn’t move, subtly scoping out the Cave for the duffel bag with his Red Hood gear. He’d seen Tim toss everything in such a bag last night before the sedative took over. Tim would know better than to take it upstairs or something; he’d know Jason would follow it, regardless of continued damage to his knee.

“Master Tim asked me to proof it,” Alfred replied, somewhat contentedly.

Okay, he could see his undershirt was on the nearby desk, reachable within a step. He would need bandages, some painkillers, maybe some antiseptic wipes for wherever he would be going from here, and water bottles because good God, he was thirsty. Could he steal a bike? Where were his pants?

“Then you know that Bruce only sees body count,” Jason said, feeling the lump enter his throat as he
spoke. Shit. That cocktail of sedative-injury-gas was rearing its head and trying to make him cry. Not frakking today. “And you know that he’s going to come back and the only ‘going over my situation’ we’re going to do is going to involve shipping me out to Blackgate. Or Arkham.”

The thought of Arkham charged the fear like a hot wire. Batman would send him to Arkham if he didn’t connect it with the thought of Joker and inflicting more trauma on him. He wouldn’t remember about the Outlaws or how few people Jason had killed this year. Finding its footing, the fear plunged into him like a diver into deep waters. He realized, distantly, that Alfred was speaking and grasped at the words, hoping it would be something grounding.

“That will not happen,” Alfred said. “Master Tim’s dossier was very clear that you do not pose a threat to Batman or his associates. And, given that according to the dossier, Master Tim was viciously attacked by the person he is now defending, Batman will keep his estimation in mind. I myself am under the impression Master Tim would not allow him to send you to any institution.”

And Jason had spotted his pants on the floor. He slid one of his feet out from the far side of the cot, grabbing for the pants with his toes.

“T-Tim’s a good kid,” he said.

“He is indeed. We will put this matter to rest, Master Jason. I imagine you must have despaired if you went in to your counselor and they had also forgotten you.”

“Uh… I don’t… I don’t go to counseling.” Jason snagged the pants off the floor but couldn’t keep himself from chuckling at the thought. “Unless you count some sessions with Quinzel, but I’m not seein’ her anymore. Insurance expired, or something.”

Alfred sounded a little surprised as he replied: “Master Tim stated in his report that it was the one request Batman made of you when he died, as well as apologizing for your circumstances... my apologies, I try to track each patient’s regimen and I assumed it part of yours.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine, I’ve got some friends and I do fine.” Jason didn’t make eye contact with the butler, limiting himself to saying: “What time is Batman coming?”

“I imagine he will be delayed almost another hour by a prior engagement.” Alfred’s position shifted ever so slightly, knowing that admitting they would be here, without supervision, for another hour was as good as inviting violence if Jason wanted to give it. The thought disgusted Jason.

“Yeah,” Jason shifted to yank out the IV with a single painful movement, applying pressure so he wouldn’t drip blood on the floor. “So I’m not going to be here.”

He made it to his feet and had the shirt on before Alfred could so much as reply. He snatched the pants from where they lay to the side of the medical cot and pulled them on. When he whirled (okay, not whirled, the knee was NOT handling whirling) and almost slammed into the cabinet, Alfred hadn’t moved. One eyebrow was raised though and that meant he had to move fast, before the butler realized he could physically push Jason back into bed. Turning back to the medical cabinet, Jason started stocking up. He hoped that, when he found the Red Hood gear, it was in the duffel so he could dump the medication in too.

“I wish I had the kind of faith you had in him,” Jason said, trying to make sure Alfred didn’t move from behind him. “But it took years for me to get here.”

He grabbed several rolls of gauze bandages and, after a brief search, one of the bottles of obscure ointment that Alfred swore by (and they swore at) for nearly all joint injuries.
“He’s just got some people that he’s close to, I’m not one. Probably something to do with the killing
guns and the fact he likes the glass memorial more than me.
Yuck, his IV wound was dripping all over the bandages. He pulled open the drawer with the ever-
dwindling supply of band-aids, grabbed several, and plastered one over his hand.

“And he’s really not gonna tolerate me this close to the date when his parents died. So I’m sorry, but
thank you and thank Tim and the demon for the stitches and the sleep and the IV and the bandages
and the trust and the——”

He slowed down, realizing how many things could be laid at Alfred’s feet, and turned back to the
butler.

“I’m… heh, I’m sorry.” He rubbed a hand over his face, feeling some of the exhaustion he would
spend the rest of the day denying. “‘How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless
child,’ huh Alfred?”

Alfred looked at him in surprise, probably not having expected a King Lear quote. “Well Master
Jason, I’ve always held that fortune brings in some boats that are not steer’d. Which would certainly
apply if you are who Master Tim believes you to be. I know he’d wish you to stay until he returns.”

“If I had my liberty, I would do my liking,” Jason replied. “In the meantime, let me be that I am and
seek not to alter me.” God, he hadn’t even thought about how much he would miss Shakespeare
battles with Alfred if they couldn’t get this worked out. He missed them now and fiercely.

Taking this quote as payment, Alfred moved aside the cape on his lap and pulled from beneath his
chair the duffel bag containing the rest of Jason’s Red Hood gear. Jason took the bag quickly,
because the other man could easily change his mind, and shoved the medical supplies in. Alfred
smiled.

Jason caught on quickly. “Really? I’m doing this fantastic Don Juan and you give me ‘the robbed
that smiles steals something from the thief’? What is that, ‘Othello’? You mainstream
Shakespearean.”

Alfred’s smile became a little more genuine, if sad. “If you run now, it may take longer to help us
remember you, as you certainly remember us. And the arrangement of my medical cabinet.”

“Can’t take the chance, Alf. Don’t worry, Tim’s helping me.” Jason braced himself for the upcoming
adventure of walking all the way back to Gotham and trying to find somewhere to crash. Maybe Tim
hadn’t changed his apartment’s locks yet. “I’ll replace the band-aids. And the Tibet ointment thing.
Sorry.”

Alfred watched him make his way out of the medical ward as if the butler could hear his internal
‘frakking knee… get with the frakking… COME ON, you frakking piece of cartilage, just six feet to
the garage, you frakking—’

“Master Jason.”

Jason looked up, duffel bag in hand, almost wishing he hadn’t been so resistant to the brace. Reading
his mind, Alfred handed the medical device to him and made sure Jason put it on correctly.

“Robin will be issuing an apology for injuring you, the next time you see each other,” the butler said.
“In the meantime, I will call a car to the front of Wayne Manor.”

Wait, had Alfred just revealed that Wayne Manor was as close as they both knew?
“No, I can—”

“If you are really so intent on avoiding Batman, you should not be found limping towards Gotham alongside the road to his home.”

“…thanks, Alfred. I’m sorry.”

“You can stop apologizing for saving a child.”

“Oh yeah? ‘Teach me how I should forget to think,’” Jason challenged, because it felt less useless. Alfred gave him a Look and went to call the car. Whatever, Jason thought, that was a good quote. Now that he was wearing the brace, walking had become a little less of a chore. He took the elevator up to the manor and went to the front door without attracting Alfred’s attention. The myth that Bruce Wayne wasn’t Batman would really take a hit if the butler knew he was traveling through Wayne Manor just to sit on the front steps. He reached the front entrance with difficulty and sat down to wait for the car.

Damian must have heard him crossing through the house, because he could feel the younger man’s eyes on him from one of the second-story windows. If it was almost four, he would’ve gotten home not too long ago. Jason pulled out his phone and texted the brat to ‘Stop staring at me, demon.’

He didn’t look up to see if Damian had received it, focusing instead on how many feet lay between him and freedom.

His phone chimed. For a second, he thought Damian had actually replied to the jibe. Pulling the mobile out of the duffel bag, he saw first how low the remaining battery was and second, that the text in question was from Tim.

‘B’s on his way home. Come to W.E., studying ship, artifact.’

‘On my way,’ Jason sent back and pushed the phone into his pocket, wondering if he could manage another short nap before the town car came to pick him up. The pounding in his chest reminded him that no, hell no, napping in public while unable to run was not going to be happening. The horizon line remained devoid of any cars heading up and out of Gotham. If they didn’t hurry, he’d still be here when Bruce arrived. No damn thank you.

His phone chimed with another text.

‘Don’t run today or tomorrow,’ Damian had sent.

‘Thanks, Dr. Wayne,’ he replied. ‘Don’t frakking train for hours and screw up your wrist.’

‘I don’t need a doctorate to know Drake’s friends are as stupid as him.’

‘And you have no say in what I do.’

Jason checked his battery again and grimaced.

‘Don’t have the BATtery for this. Take it easy, brat. Grapple lines hate fractured wrists.’

He tucked the phone into his duffel bag and leaned back against the stairs to wait some more. After another ten minutes, a very large suburban pulled over the hill. His immediate thought (after ‘That’s not Bruce’) was ‘I hope that’s not for me.’ True to form, it stopped in front of the front steps.
“Jason Todd?” the driver asked, stepping out of the vehicle and opening the rear door. Jason shouted at his nerves to calm down, Alfred had called this car. The driver took his duffel bag and went to put it in the trunk. Everything was safe, everything about this was normal.

Jason couldn’t hold back the comment: “Wait.”

The driver paused, duffel bag still in hand. Jason just shouted at himself now, because he wasn’t nervous like this, come on Jason; remember, you’re a badass. Somehow, against all odds, that encouragement worked. He rose smoothly from the steps and strode over to take his duffel bag back.

“Thanks, I just like keeping this close at hand,” he told the driver, forcing his stance to remain open and casual with the weight on his dominant leg. He’d done this before at Bruce’s parties, he’d be fine. “We’re headin’ to the sandwich shop on 16th and Lark first, then Wayne Enterprises.”

“Very good, sir.”

The driver didn’t even protest as Jason climbed into the passenger seat beside him. Jason offered to buy him a sandwich as thanks, in addition to a generous tip when the driver said the Wayne family used him for all outside transportation.

“Yeah, but I’m not a Wayne,” Jason replied and handed him a sandwich. “And I don’t think they’d mistake me for one anymore.”
If there’s anything you lack, you know I’ve always got your back

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Something’s Rotten, which is a FANTASTIC musical. And the song is ‘Right Hand Man’.

There was nowhere to split this chapter up and no need to switch point of view so hey, loooong chapter today. It also might be a little rough, character-wise, but everyone means well and I rewrote the ending so it would stop bugging me.

Point of Interest: Since I've started working now, the update schedule will NOT change, but I'm on the west coast, so I've been updating mid/late M-W-Fr for me. If updates are a little later, it just means I'm uploading on the actual date (T-Th-Sa) rather than the day before. :P

And oh my God, commenters are way too nice... thank you all for interacting with this fic. <3 I'm really glad you like it.

Knowing someone counted on him to make things better tended to make Tim feel stressed. This was no less true when it was Jason Todd depending on Tim Drake.

Even though Tim rarely met an obstacle he couldn’t think his way out of or fight his way out of, the expectant looks Jason kept shooting his way made him feel like the Red Hood had put all his eggs in this basket. Jason didn’t trust people to do things for him. Somehow Tim had bypassed that rule, without even meaning to.

Jason shoved up in civilian clothes and carrying a duffel bag at the parking garage of Wayne Enterprises. After they met up, Tim took him back to the hanger bay, explaining as he did that they would be investigating the ship and studying proximity reactions between the artifact and the ship. Jason hummed accommodatingly and followed Tim, limping but concealing it with a Robin’s usual grace. Tim didn’t say anything about it.

The ship in question sat alone in the hanger bay, like a unicorn in its own private wood. The explosives team had refused to let anyone get within 300 feet of it and notations about ‘no flammable substances!’ were propped on signs all around it. The subject of all this furniture rearranging didn’t seem to command this level of attention, being not much longer than a large RV and about as tall. The explosives team’s report said it lacked any kind of stealth or cloaking mode than the team could find, so its dark gray exterior would only help it blend into dark skies. Just to make sure Jason didn’t look at the ship, say ‘boring,’ and take off, Tim had gotten Project Muninn out of the containment room, using the code they usually used to deem items safe or approved for transport.

Ah, the beauty of full access to all Wayne Enterprises’ areas. Bruce would revoke it, naturally, as soon as this weekend was over, but until then, Tim could get out all the toys.

“Ground rule,” Jason said upon seeing the artifact sitting in its containment box, along with several pairs of thick gloves sitting on top of the clear surface. “Neither of us hits anybody with that thing for any reason.”
“Agreed.” Tim put on a pair of the gloves and handed Jason another pair. “And this is definitely the wrong time to decide you don’t like me again.”

“That would be assuming I like you now.”

“Bull. Damian acted weirdly nice all last night and most of today. You must’ve said something about,” Tim waved a hand vaguely. “Feelings.”

“We might’ve talked.” Jason’s expression got cagey. “Would you start you detecting on the ship already? I get enough of ‘did you talk to the Bats’ from Roy. Well, I did anyway.”

Tim handed him the artifact’s containment box and approached the ship, scanning it for heat signatures and schematics, as he was sure the explosives team had a dozen times. Nothing came up as a threat. He motioned Jason to move forward with the box. This was, technically, the stupidest possible way to test interactions between advanced magical or scientific items but, hell, they’d already done human tests.

“You try to call Roy?” Tim asked Jason, putting a hand on the ship’s smooth metal side. The scanner told him there should be a door signature here. Ah, there. Hydraulics inside the ship shifted and the door glided up, vanishing into the ship itself. Hydraulics were… surprisingly primitive for an advanced alien ship and it pinged something familiar in the back of Tim’s mind. He’d seen this design before, somewhere – overseas? At least a couple of years ago, okay; why couldn’t he investigate it then? He could’ve been in civilian gear, of course, but he would’ve reported the sighting to Batman for further analysis, unless that hadn’t been an option… hm.

Tim filed away the technological familiarity for later, half-listening to Jason’s reply and half-scouting for anything clumsily left behind by an alien like a ‘Visit sunny Alpha Centauri!’ pamphlet or ‘A Tourist’s Guide to Tamaran.’

“He didn’t pick up,” Jason said. “Roy kinda gets in a bad way when me and Starfire aren’t around… Dick might not remember to check in on him, since it was a long time ago that they were in… their youth group.”

“I’ll remind him,” Tim said.

Jason said nothing for a long minute and Tim didn’t push. During the silence, Tim managed to get the control panel open by and scanned the nightmarishly-complicated mass of circuitry. Again, that twitching of familiarity. The explosives team had left a note on the exterior, stating in fancy terms that they were sure it wasn’t going to explode if they fired up the alien equivalent of the engine. Tim was sorely tempted to do just that.

“Jay, any reactions from the artifact?” he called back out of the ship.

“Nope, aside from wondering if I left the gas on when I left your apartment.”

“Mn. Can you remove the artifact and—hang on.” Tim got out of the ship again and proceeded to remove the artifact from its box and then perform the tests he was thinking of. He’d been excited to get inside the ship and instead he should have been checking how the artifact interacted with it. When he wound up to whack it with the artifact however, Jason’s eyes went wide.

“Shit, Replacement, thought you said the explosives team was assigned to this!”

“We’ve had it for weeks. I’m pretty sure it’s about as likely to blow up as you are.” Still, Tim lowered the angle and tapped the artifact against the ship’s surface. Nothing. “Go stand at the edge of the room.”
Jason looked to the edge of the room, then at Tim. “You go.”

“Ugh.” Tim shoved the artifact, explained that they were testing to see if he still remembered it from more than 30 feet away, and strode off. Nothing happened. He didn’t forget the ship existed, which meant a) the effect didn’t work on inanimate objects, even those the artifact was previously affiliated with and b) he could start the engine.

Jason didn’t appreciate the idea.

“No,” he told Tim, delayed by having to replace the artifact safely in the containment box. Meanwhile, Tim climbed into the ship and settled in at the console. “Timmy—frak, FRAX, no, you little ass!”

The ship rocked a little to the side. Tim twisted to see what the hell was happening. Jason had leapt onboard, landing heavily on his bad knee, and was now rolling around, cursing.

“I’m just turning it on. You’re going to hurt yourself, idiot.”

Jason turned the cursing and his fury from his knee to Tim. “You are the one FRAKKING person who knows who I am! Could you not do potentially lethal things?!?”

“I know what I’m doing!”

“It’s an alien ship!” Jason pushed himself up off the spaceship’s floor.

“It’s Russian!” Tim came to the realization at the same time as the words left his mouth. Back when Bruce was lost in time, when Dick and Damian had shut him out of being—no, don’t think about that part of it. Anyway, it wasn’t Russian, not originally.

“I need to call someone.” Tim already had the number pulled up in his wrist communicator, only to realize there was no signal in the ship. He climbed over Jason and back into the hanger bay.

“Looks alien to me,” Jason commented, pushing himself up to sit at the ship’s open entrance. “You calling Kori?”

“It is alien, but it’s not owned by an alien and it’s not the same, his is bigger.”

Jason made a requisite ‘that’s what she said’ joke and Tim threw his duffel bag at him. Meanwhile the phone on the other end began ringing. If it was 5:30 in Gotham, it would be almost 12:30 in Moscow time… but he didn’t think Leonid slept much.

“You know you could just have an Apple watch like everyone else, Replacement.”

“Shut up,” Tim murmured.

“[Hello Timothy,]” A Russian voice, thick with sleep, answered the phone. Tim winced.

“[Hi Leonid],” he replied in the same language.

The speaker switched to English. “What do you need?”

No point in arguing that he didn’t need anything, or pretending his Russian wasn’t as rusty as it was. “Did you lose a spaceflight prototype recently?”

The other man’s voice now changed to flat steel. “It entered the Americas?”
“It is yours, then?” Tim knew better than to agree immediately. With the original version of this ship, the Russian state protector could detect every bullet fired in Moscow; if they had lost a prototype, they might have meant to lose a prototype. All of this was explaining the presence of agents Brokaw and Lieve, the extended turnaround time for the explosives squad.

“It is at Wayne Enterprises?” Leonid asked.

“Can you describe the lost item?” Tim said, turning to survey the ship as if looking at a jacket in the lost-and-found. Jason snorted, still sitting on the lip of the entrance and leaning back on his hands.

“I will be there momentarily,” Leonid said. Tim stiffened, looking in alarm at the hanger bay doors.

“There’s no need to rush—Leonid? Red Star?”

He’d hung up. Tim rubbed at his face, mentally reviewing most of the curses Jason had shared a few moments ago.

“Hey. Timmers. As usual, you forget I don’t know all your friends and you’re getting lost in your big brain,” Jason said. “So, maybe you can put what you figured out into, what does the demon call it, ‘moron’s terms’?”

“Leonid Kovar,” Tim said. “Russian superman. Goes by Red Star when he’s in the States. Russia appointed him its state protector and he flies around in a ship that hovers over Moscow.”

“A ship like this.” Jason slapped the ship’s floor like a used car salesman. Tim sighed and nodded.

“Source of his original powers. This looks like a back-engineering project, and a pretty big one. My contacts had been saying his ship wasn’t capable of spaceflight anymore, after the crash and the damage. This one would be. But he never would have crashed a prototype in Seward. That’s clumsy, that’s war-inciting. Kovar can be… A pompous ass? “Overconfident, but he’s smarter than that.”

“And now he’s coming here, based on you looking all frantic at the doors. How hard is he to take in a fight?”

“He can control fire, Jason. You use guns. And we’re in a hanger bay.”

“You tell me that, but you don’t remind me it’d be an international incident if I killed him. That’s progress!”

Why had he brought this idiot again? Oh, right, because he wanted to make sure Jason wasn’t injured and trapped at Wayne Manor. A mission of mercy and he was getting hazed for it. Tim ran the numbers for the last-known top speed Red Star could fly and waved Jason out of the ship. Jason kept quiet, which was good because Tim could feel the frustration sweeping over him. Leonid would take the ship, they would have zero leads, and— he found himself being tugged to the floor. Jason had sat down quite suddenly on the epoxy flooring and tugged Tim to a sitting position next to him. Tim scooted away automatically. Even further once Jason started pulling sandwiches out of the duffel bag.

“I’ve filled my quota of family meals for the week, thanks,” Tim replied.

“That excuse doesn’t work if you haven’t eaten since.”

When Jason shoved a somewhat battered but fresh sandwich at him, Tim took it. Not for the first time, he wondered how Jason knew things like his favorite kind of sandwich. It made sense that Tim
knew everything about his brothers, that was his whole point, but sometimes Jason would know things only Alfred should know.

“Are we expecting a fight?” Jason asked, taking a bite of his own sandwich.

“Aren’t we always?”

Jason nodded and Tim tried to convince himself that a turkey on rye sounded appetizing. He could smell the honey mustard and toasted bread from inside the paper wrapping; what the hell was wrong with him? He didn’t even want to unwrap it. “So maybe the ship has nothing to do with the aliens,” he murmured to himself. “Maybe there aren’t aliens, just some Russians who probably hitchhiked their way back to Anchorage or froze to death… but then there’s the artifact…” He stared at Project Muninn, safe in its containment box. Definitely alien; it had a purpose, worked predictably, and couldn’t be used as a money-making tool. After all, it seemed species-specific. How the hell would you make money, other than from the person who wanted to be remembered? And how did you make everyone remember them again?

“Remember, we said no one was hitting anyone with that thing again,” Jason said warily, watching Tim’s expression. “I don’t want to find out if the second time affects a closer range, or makes it permanent, or… yeah, frak no.”

“I’ve done a lot of tests on mice, it doesn’t work that way,” Tim replied, focus a mile away. “But no, I wasn’t thinking of hitting you with it again.”

“Hoo hoo, demon brat’s gonna kill you for experimenting on animals,” Jason chuckled, finishing his sandwich with customary speed. He then collected the duffel bag and Tim’s rewrapped sandwich. “Mind killing the cameras by the bathroom for me?”

Tim did so absentely, only realizing what the Red Hood meant to do after Jason had walked off. Crap. The last thing he needed was gunfire in here. He attempted to kill the hanger bay cameras as well, just in case, and got an ‘access denied’ popup. He tried again, using a different method, and found them locked. Ugh. He pushed himself to his feet to go hack a console. Instead, he managed not to flinch at the sight of two glowing red eyes in the corner, near the hanger bay’s exit.

“Leo, I would have come out and let you in if you called.”

The Russian superman didn’t even look over his shoulder. “I let myself in. How did you get the ship, Timothy?”

“I thought maybe you could explain,” Tim replied. At least he didn’t have to fight to keep the anger out of his voice anymore. Sure, he would’ve preferred to do this in Red Robin gear, but that would just antagonize Leonid. “Why is it in the Americas? You haven’t even said yet that it is Russian property.”

Leonid’s red eyes narrowed. “It is Russian property.”

“Then why is it here?”

“It was stolen.” Leonid’s tone could have rivaled Freeze on his worst day. Tim blinked in surprise. Leonid could fly, and control fire, and had superhuman strength, plus the semi-psychic ship, even if it couldn’t fly. The thief would have had to be incredibly sneaky and fast beyond belief.

“That’s… unexpected. Did—do you know what they look like?”

“It is none of your business.” Leonid drew himself up to tower over Tim. Really wasn’t necessary to
straighten; Tim knew better than anyone that it wasn’t hard to tower over him. Damian would too, eventually.

“So you didn’t even see them,” Tim said, which took the wind out of Leonid’s posturing better than any height difference could.

“You border on offense, Timothy. Though I don’t know why I am surprised.”

“You aren’t usually delayed in catching intruders or your countrymen. They would have to escape the country in seconds. And it’s been weeks that we’ve had the ship, which means you stopped looking.”

Leonid looked like he had begun to consider punching Tim into the wall and carrying the ship away like a cartoon character. “The thieves also possessed the powers of flight and strength. One of them was found murdered— an alien, of some variety, who had been killed over Bratsk. Until the security tapes were reviewed, I was not aware there was a second thief, only that the first was dead and the ship was missing.” Tim waited, as patiently as possible as Leonid seemed to fight back rage and embarrassment at once.

“You… remembered one, but not the other?” Tim asked. It matched up with the studies they kept doing; if one of the individuals was a member of a different species, maybe it didn’t work the same way. It would explain why only the mice were affected.

“Gone from memory.” Leonid’s voice lowered. “You will not speak of this to anyone.”

“I won’t. The same thing has happened to one of my brothers,” Tim said.

“I see.” Leonid knew better than to ask ‘which one?’ “Your father adopts many of you.”

“He definitely does that. You mentioned security tapes.” Tim tried to lead the conversation back to something that would help them. “Would you be willing to share them, so we can get a look at the criminals?”

“No,” Leonid said.

“I understand. A description, then? In exchange for the ship?”

“Agreed.”

Tim nodded. He could try to finagle his way out of the agreement in a minute, once he knew what they were dealing with.

“The thief still living is a woman,” Leonid said. “5’4, young, 120 in American pounds. Her hair is pink and she appears to have heterochromia. She is heavily scarred and wears the face of a dead man.”

The description didn’t ring any bells for Tim, though he hadn’t expected it to. The memory erasure got more annoying the more people it affected.

“The dead thief is a demon,” Leonid continued, eyes on the ship. “Over seven feet tall, yellow eyes, bald. Two horns curving upwards, a foot in length. Two tusks around the mouth, three inches at minimum, curving inwards. He wore the uniform of the Sinestro Corps.”

That would be their Yellow Lantern. But why was their Yellow Lantern dead?
“Thanks, Leonid.” Tim was already entering the descriptions in a text to Barbara on his wrist communicator, asking her to look up matching descriptions. “Now, if we can just work out something for the ship, because, ah, if you just grab it, the feds here will think we arranged to have it stolen and I can’t get the cameras to shut off in here.” He made to move past Leonid’s massive frame and reach the console.

However, Leonid had only focused on one part of that sentence and snatched Tim’s arm. “‘We’, Timothy? The plural form? Who is ‘we’?”

“The… brother everybody forgot. He’s a Bat, he has discretion.” Tim looked down at the arm meaningfully. “I’m a civilian here. I can’t be seen fighting.”

“You said this information would stay between us. I am disappointed in you,” Leonid replied, but dropped Tim’s arm all the same. “Do you know where the woman I described is?”

“No. Do you know why they were bringing the ship to Alaska or why they’d drop a memory-erasing artifact?”

“No.”

“Hey, Replacement, you good?”

Tim twisted to see Jason standing in the doorway, one hand in the duffel bag and doubtless wrapped around a gun. At least Jason hadn’t decided to charge in as the Red Hood and burn up half the hanger bay in a gunfight.

“You must be the brother. Swear to say nothing of what you heard,” Leonid ordered.

Jason lifted an eyebrow; when he wasn’t wearing the helmet, he could be terrible about expressions, Tim remembered now. And he tended to say things that maybe villains could misinterpret under the hood, but never without it.

 “[Sure thing, comrade,]” Jason said, in better Russian than Tim’s. “[Not as if you’re trespassing on American soil or something.]”

Oh shit, Tim thought. Leonid’s eyes started to glow a deeper red, his fists clenching and unclenching as he stepped forward.

 “[How do I know you did not hire these thieves?]” he asked Jason, not bellowing yet, but certainly closer to it than to a reasonable discussion about culpability.

 “[We didn’t hire them!]” Tim went back to Russian too, just in case it helped. He also forced himself to remain calm, seeing visions of the hanger bay flat-out exploding. “[We’re trying to figure it out too. We don’t want a fight. I’ll open the hanger doors and you can take it.]”

Leonid glanced at Jason, who was in turn glancing at Tim as if to ask ‘really? No fighting?’ The Russian protector then returned his attention to Tim.

 “Timothy, I appreciate your friendship, insofar as you are capable of it, but I am not being shot at by this clown.”

Before Jason could snap ‘CLOWN?’, Leonid grabbed Tim’s arm again, tightening his grip to the point where Tim couldn’t believably escape it without training. The pair glided upwards until Leonid could dump Tim unceremoniously on one of the hanger bay’s high rafters, far above where ‘Tim Drake, civilian teenager,’ could descend in line of sight of the cameras. Frak. Tim inched for the wall
along the metal rafter, hoping the drop down to the stack of shipping crates in the corner wasn’t as far as it looked. Now who’s making things needlessly complicated, Red Star? Damnit. This was revenge for the Unternet incident back in Moscow, he just knew it.

After dealing with Tim, Leonid dove for Red Hood, who wouldn’t know if Leonid was bulletproof or not, so he didn’t fire. As a result, Leonid slammed into him, driving the vigilante backwards until they hit the wall and Jason’s knee gave out. Once Jason was out of commission, Leonid strode back over to the control panel, making no effort to hide his face from the cameras, and opened the hanger bay doors manually. Tim managed to get back to the ground (he was going to have to answer so many questions from the security team) just in time to see the prototype spacecraft vanish into the distance. Jason got to his feet, swearing a quiet blue streak until he had moved enough to lean against the wall for support.

“Okay,” Tim said with a sigh. “So that’s dealt with.”

“Is he bulletproof? Could I have shot him? Because I did not need to get slammed into a wall.”

“It’s a hanger bay, Jason. Bullets are bad.” Tim ran a hand through his hair, looking after the vanishing ship. He was about to start speaking again when he heard the pinging of his wrist communicator with messages from Barbara. Jason noticed his new distraction and looked up from where he was experimentally putting weight on his knee.

“Any joy?” Jason asked.

“Yeah. Both thieves are in our database.” Tim shot off a thank you and politely begged for her to delete the last fifteen minutes of security footage from the hanger bay. Or the last two hours, to be on the safe side.

“I guess it’s not surprising,” Tim continued, half to himself. “We don’t have that many people in the database with pink hair or heterochromia. Or who wear a dead guy’s face. Ugh.”

“Well, I hope it’s not that face from when the Joker cut his off and then pretended he cut all ours off,” Jason said. “Shittiest weekend in history.”

“But…?”

“I died on a weekday,” Jason said proudly. “So who are our lucky contestants anyway? I assume Barbara is fixing your little security camera issue.”

‘The dead ‘demon’ is DevilDog, an established Yellow Lantern. The woman is Duela Dent, claims to be the daughter of… an unlikely number of people. Team affiliations include the Outlaws, Suicide Squad, and the Teen Titans. I don’t remember anyone ever mentioning her. She mostly calls herself the Joker’s Daughter and… yeah, you’re not gonna like her face.”

Tim gestured to call up the photo Barbara had sent which, even by the Bats’ standards, was unsettling. The girl in the photo had sewed the Joker’s face over her own and appeared thrilled at her appearance. Jason shook his head after staring at it a moment.

“The Outlaws’ roster changes all the time, but I would remember that level of crazy submitting an application.”

‘Thanks again, Oracle,’ Tim sent off. ‘That helps.’

‘Great. Just so you know, B is also looking into Duela, since he fought her the other night. Group up with him. I’m working on the cameras in the hanger bay, cafeteria, bathrooms, and the hallway
‘Got it.’ Tim relayed the message to Jason, along with his customary complaint that Batman told his partners nothing, 99% of the time.

“Yeah, and I’m still not in the mood to meet up with B,” Jason said when Tim had finished ranting. “I’m going to go find the bathroom, if O is erasing the cameras and you aren’t inviting Lobo over or something.”

“Go for it,” Tim replied. As soon as the older man had left, Tim pulled up another program on his communicator. Much like the app Jason had installed on the Batcomputer to track logged-in hours, this app tracked the locations of all the Bats on a global scale. As he’d suspected, Bruce had seen the disagreement on the security cameras and was on his way. Whether or not to tell Jason, that was the question.

Tim put off answering it until he had replaced and secured Project Muninn where it was supposed to be, Jason on his heels. While he had a minute, he printed off the majority of the research he’d completed on the Project and shoved it at Jason.

“We’ve got some time here, now that the ship’s gone, and I want to make use of it. I’ll eat my sandwich and you can study this list of rules I’ve put together for the artifact. Maybe you’ll see something I missed,” Tim said, holding out the paper he’d put together last night after compiling the dossier. Sleep was for other people. Jason took it without suspicion, shrugging lightly.

Good Lord, how had Tim gotten himself into this trusting mess? Jason never took orders.

The pair of Robins headed for the W.E. cafeteria on the second floor. Along with the ban on animal testing, Damian had insisted the cafeteria carry as much vegetarian food as possible, so jerky was out of the question. Jason shuffled a few quarters into the vending machine and returned with a bag of cheesy chips. Tim still had no appetite so the sandwich sat, waiting and unwrapped in front of him, and watched Jason, who kept trying to shove chips at Tim as he read.

“How was your morning?” he asked, distracting Jason momentarily from wiping off his fingers to avoid getting cheese powder all over the research. The Red Hood’s duffel bag was tucked under the table, close at hand but not in the way.

“How was your morning?” he asked, distracting Jason momentarily from wiping off his fingers to avoid getting cheese powder all over the research. The Red Hood’s duffel bag was tucked under the table, close at hand but not in the way.

“How was your morning?”

“Fine. Alfred was there. The brat told me not to walk on the knee.”

“Couldn’t get at the computer?”

“Didn’t try.” Jason turned his attention to the chips and the list again, looking tired. “Just want to get this done and don’t think B’s research’ll be much help.”

Tim forced himself to take one of the chips, swallowing it along with the reply that he had also contributed to the research on the Batcomputer. Jason probably didn’t want to spend any more time in the Cave than he had to.

“What did you do for experiments, exactly?” Jason asked, skimming the document headings. “You phrased it in so much researchy bullshit, I can’t tell.” Many people forgot it when reporting his reputation as a marksman and murderer, but the second Robin had been trained in forensics, chemistry, and biology as they all had and was probably second to Tim on actually liking the subjects.

“It’s under ‘Methodology.’ The ‘subjects’ are mice and the ‘exposure’ is bopping them on the head with the artifact.” There were too many things to add to that document now. Every time Tim and
Hannah had discovered something, it had been one more sticky note on the hellscape that was the research reports. Tim wasn’t even sure that something as important as the exposure being species-specific had made it on there.

“Do you have any… memory, of Duela? At all?” he asked Jason.

“I didn’t hire her to steal it, if that’s what you’re implying,” Jason said, looking up sharply from the document.

“Not saying that. She’s originally from Gotham. Her experience includes the Outlaws.” Tim had been phrasing things carefully and this would be no exception. “You’re pretty familiar with that roster.”

“Anyone calling themselves the Joker’s Daughter wouldn’t be welcome on the Outlaws,” Jason said, frowning back down at the research document. “Specially not someone wearing that face.”

“You tend to judge people based on who they are in person. When in your right mind.”

“You remember her?”

“No. But if she was in the Outlaws for any length of time, you must have seen something redeemable in her. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Jason said nothing.

“Good, then we can assume she has more of a moral compass than the Joker. And,” Tim checked his wrist communicator and saw Bruce’s dot had entered the Wayne Enterprises building. “I have something to tell you.”

All of Jason’s alarm tells seemed to go off at once, but his tone remained even. “I’m pretty sure I know what it is.”

Though neither of them sat with their back to the door (and thus could be surprised), Tim had a sneaking suspicion that Jason somehow already knew Bruce had entered the building.

“I watched him read the entire dossier this morning,” Tim said. “He’s not going to do anything irrational. He’s here because of the fight on the cameras, which you knew I was trying to bring down.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you were going to do anything “irrational” either.”

Jason stood and Tim had been around the second Robin to know what he looked like what his mind was working faster than his body could handle. The best thing about Jason was that if you said something convincing before he made up his mind, he was more likely to do it.

So the next few words came out in a rush: “I haven’t. Because I’m rational and I know that working with Bruce, rather than against or around him, is better. And because you are feeling rational, you’re going to sit down and wait and we’re all going to be rational together.”

Jason sat. Tim felt glad he was already sitting, because someone could have knocked him over with a feather. Jason had sat back down at a cafeteria table and was controlling his breathing, even after being told Bruce was on his way.

“Damn it, Replacement,” the older man hissed.
“It’s good for you.”

“So’s a root canal, but you don’t see me going around giving them to people.” Jason took another breath and skimmed the rest of the document through half-lidded eyes. “‘Doesn’t work on people within a 30-foot proximity to the ‘victim’. ‘Works on animate sentients, not plants.’ Boy, bet that was an exciting two hours of plants not recognizing each other, huh? ‘Causes forgetting or blurring of the ‘victim’s’ memory, not erasure of existence. Global scale,’ you’re welcome for verifying that. ‘The effect has existed more than two weeks and appears to be permanent.’ Frakking joy, thanks for that. ‘It is not a necessary part of the ship’s function.’ Good, since, y’know, your friend Leo just flew off with it.”

“It’s a work in progress.” Tim didn’t take offense at the scathing review. Project Muninn had made significant progress from what they knew originally and knowing it was now affiliated with at least one Lantern? It hadn’t been as fast as he would have liked, but there were complications; secret identities to manage, the fact the whole family was damn paranoid, Jason being legally dead, and, of course, the fact that the remaining thief appeared to be… not a pinnacle of stability, to put it kindly.

“So you don’t want to just break it in half?” Jason asked.

Tim rolled his eyes. “Since we can’t come back from that, no, I don’t think so.”

“Then ignore Bruce and take your work home,” Jason suggested. “God knows you’ve probably got more potential explosives in your room than I’ve got in my bunker.”

“You have a bunker?”

“I’m a criminal, of course I have a bunker. Also, remind me how you think this thing’s accomplishing the magical people-disappearing-act anyway?”

“Haven’t had a chance to do a deep dive yet, but I think it has something to do with fading the molecules of your body on an existence-wide scale. Not that that makes any sense. It seems to be very specific to ‘junk DNA’ or, the stuff that makes you specifically you and human about your DNA.”

“So?”

“So, if someone’s DNA is radically different, like, the Manhunter or Starfire or maybe even a full Atlantean…”

“So they might—crap.” Jason twisted to look at the door, sensing something seconds before Tim did. Some part of Tim was relieved by it; keeping Jason from bolting out of Bruce’s territory before the man got here took too much energy. If Tim wasn’t waiting and keeping Jason waiting, he would have found a corner to fall asleep in by now. He glanced to the door, since Jason had ducked his head and pretended to read again, and saw Bruce.

“Hiya, boss,” Tim said. Bruce had come in a two-piece steel gray Armani suit and patent leather Salvatore Ferragamo shoes, as if certain that the Red Hood wouldn’t pick a fight in W.E. offices. Tim wondered what the Knight was trying to achieve with this display. Respect or intimidation? Jason appeared to be wondering the same thing, rising to face off with the CEO.

“I came along to see how Tim was getting along with our new employee,” Bruce said, effortlessly playing the part of Wayne Enterprises’ CEO. “Bruce Wayne.”

Jason looked down at the extended hand, baffled beyond words. To Tim’s relief, he finally shook it.
“Uh…Tason Jodd.”

“You’ll forgive me if I mess that up and call you Jason, I hope,” the CEO said with a bright smile. Tim knew that smile, it was the ‘playing it up for the cameras’ smile. Jason still seemed to be stuttering through words.

“Uh, sure, sir. I’m just the janitor.”

“Well.” Bruce looked in the direction of the hanger bay, releasing Jason’s hand. “I saw from the cameras that you and my son had some trouble with an intruder.”

“The Red Star doesn’t leave a lot of room for argument,” Tim said. Bruce hummed thoughtfully so Tim continued: “Can we take our conversation a little more private? It seems like someone with an important piece of yellow jewelry is running around.”

“Of course, I’d love to have you come home and get some rest,” Bruce cheered, circling the table to clap a friendly hand on Tim’s shoulder. Tim saw it coming but couldn’t avoid the gesture before it impacted his shoulder and, by extension, his injured ribs. Bruce winced an apology. “Sorry, chum, forgot about your gymnastics accident with Dick. Mr. Jodd, have you eaten?”

“Yeah.” Jason said and took a miniscule step towards the door. “And since it’s late and everyone’s gone home, ‘sir,’ I’m heading out. You have a good night.”

It wasn’t much of an evasion, Tim thought, but the man it was directed at was only half-listening to Jason anyway. Someone, probably Oracle, had been talking in Bruce’s nearly-invisible comm. She apparently gave him news about something, because the older man’s whole demeanor changed. He took two steps forward and gripped Jason’s wrist to stop him from moving any further away.

“The HELL you—” Jason broke the grip immediately and moved out of range. “Don’t fucking touch—”

“The cameras are looping,” Bruce said, looking with faint confusion at the other man. “Hood, you should come back to the Manor with Tim and me. We have a tentative location on the Yellow Lantern, Duela Dent.”

“Were you going to tell me that you were chasing a Yellow Lantern?” Tim asked, knowing that he wouldn’t get a straight answer under the circumstances. Bruce looked at him, then back to Jason, trying and failing to focus on both of them.

“I didn’t want you working alone,” he replied, pushing one hand in the fancy suit jacket’s pocket. She’s dangerous. It’s safer if we work together, and with the Red Hood—”

“Yeah, no thanks, old man,” Jason interrupted.

Bruce stopped fiddling with a loose piece of string in his pocket. “We’re trying to address this for you, Todd.”

“I want to know Dent’s location, but there’s no way I’m going to be able to work with you to catch her,” Jason said. Somewhere in between when Bruce had caught his wrist and when he’d finished with Barbara, the Red Hood had snatched his duffel bag from beneath the cafeteria table and now stood nearest the door. Crap, Tim thought. He’s not just a flight risk, he’s already gone.

Bruce’s eyes narrowed, taking in the situation and why a Bat would willingly remove himself from the field. “How serious is your injury?”
“It’s not that.”

“Red Robin said you weren’t killing.” The tone of suspicion drifted towards Tim, who had already guessed why Jason wouldn’t want to work with them.

“I’m not. But I use guns and when I work, I’ll be firing in close vicinity to Bats,” Jason told Bruce, his voice tight with stress. He refused to speak as though they weren’t being heard, even if his cover had already been 'blown'. “We had to train for weeks to get that right, so Nightwing wouldn’t flip into the line of fire or ‘Batman’ wouldn’t punch someone I was fighting and put their head at an angle where their knee used to be. Red Robin’s the only Bat I could work with safely right now.”

“And it wasn’t as if they've worked together much anyway,” Tim said, picking up Jason's method of speaking about the Bats as someone else. “Before this artifact, they worked together about six months ago on the Ravenger cases.”

Oracle must have been rattling off a few more facts in Bruce’s ear, because now Bruce wasn’t listening to Tim either. When Oracle had finished, he nodded at the two of them.

“We have four potential locations which could be serving as safehouse regions for the Lantern. Hood, if you can keep yourself under control, there is no need to send a chaperone with you.”

“Gee, thanks,” Jason said, scooting a little closer to the door.

“You’re heading to Aparo Park.” Bruce held out a scrap of paper that had printed out from his phone’s tiny printer. Jason eyed him suspiciously before snatching it out of the older man’s hand, like a bird snapping at a seed. Bruce still looked confused, as if he didn’t understand what he’d done to garner this kind of reaction. Then again, Tim reflected, this is the guy who thought punching out Dick’s tooth was an appropriate way to discuss the Court of Owls’ involvement in his childhood. He still sometimes got late night phone calls from Dick about that Bruce-handling-tense-situations moment.

“I’ll let Red Robin know the Surh Complex is a possible location,” Bruce continued. "Batman should be in Monolith Square, if I can get a hold of Commissioner Gordon to let him know, and Nightwing and Robin could take Robinson Park. I’ve been hearing reports that Robin was injured but it doesn't sound like he ever stays off their patrol.”

“Pretty sure Nightwing would like to call in the big guns,” Jason said. "Supes is his damn favorite person.”

“Says the guy who adopted a Superman clone,” Tim muttered.

“Biz would come in handy right now so don’t bash my parenting instincts,” Jason shot back without animosity. “Bruce, where do the cameras come back on?”

“Why?”

Jason looked at Bruce evenly, fury buried in his eyes. “I’m leaving, like I said. I’ll see you when Duela is located. But I’m not spending another minute here.”

Bruce seemed about to protest but nodded instead. “The entire east side of the building is currently looping. Make your way to the parking garage and head south. The cameras will be offline at least another five minutes.”

Stabilizing his footing, Jason nodded. “Then happy hunting. Let’s hope it’s over soon.”
I'm not afraid of anyone, not a soul alive can get behind this wall

Chapter Notes

Yes, Tim definitely gave Bruce a hell of a lecture about grabbing people just because you don’t want them to leave.

Warning, I suppose, for Damian thinking about his death. Which, after double-checking, was even worse than being vertically-stabbed. (Thank you, Frozen, for my default thought regarding the word ‘impaled’, which ISN’T FUNNY, OLAF.)

Chapter title is from Songs For a New World’s ‘I’m Not Afraid Of Anything’. It might be a bit rough, I wanted to read Batman and Robin Eternal vol. 2 again to get a sense of fear reactions in general, but I ran out of time with the move.

It’s still Tuesday here, but my new apartment doesn’t have internet until Saturday, so… coffeeshop wifi! Thank you to everyone who interacts with this ever-growing saga and I will be back in another coffeeshop sometime on Thursday. :)

If there was a better view of the city than from a gargoyle, Jason didn’t want to know about it. Particularly from a gargoyle overlooking Aparo Park, where streetlights gleamed some ways below and the trees cloaked some couples who had decided to find some intimacy. Ah, Gotham. The lights over the reflecting pool barely penetrated the water’s darkness, thick with algae because the mayor couldn’t be bothered to keep it clean. There had been a couple of attempted muggings already tonight, which the Red Hood stopped. Finally, people started to get the picture that pissing this new ‘Bat’ off was a bad idea.

Tim’s comment about Bizarro hadn’t stopped rattling around his mind, even though that had been hours before. He missed Bizarro, but he couldn’t muster up the courage to text him – Bizarro wasn’t much of a texter – or God forbid, call and get a ‘wait, who are you?’ response. If he thought missing people, it became missing all the Bats and Birds (except Tim), missing Artemis, Roy, Starfire, Ducra, Isabel, even Talia. Even if Talia didn’t care about him as anything other than a piece she could put into play, she’d brought him back; the mind, not the body.

He’d be damned if the artifact was going to take everything away again.

Peering down at the park from his perch, half-hanging from the gargoyle, he wondered again if Bruce had intentionally assigned him the back end of nowhere. He couldn’t even see the other locations from here. If he got into trouble, it’d take whoever was available at least twenty minutes to get here and vice versa. He had resolved not to need anyone’s help but still got anxious when he thought about Damian’s wrist and Tim’s ribs. He shouldn’t be worrying; they could take care of themselves. He still found himself moving closer and closer to the edge of the park via rooftops.

No Yellow Lantern wandered the park below anyway. It was times like these he wished Oracle hadn’t shut down the comm channels as soon as she found them. Though he didn’t often talk to the Bats, it was depressing to hear only static when he turned it on and hell, he should’ve remembered to tell them to turn it back on. Tim’s, at least.

He leapt to the next rooftop, thinking he could work his way downtown. They wouldn’t want him to
stay in a dead zone, right?

See, if he had had comms, he would have been able to make a hell of a joke out of that. Instead, he made his way south in silence.

#

“There’s only one thing that makes less sense than Bat-Man, and that’s Bat-Man and ROBIN.”

This fearsome woman would not stop chortling! Damian dropped and swept his leg to try and trip her up, doing as much as he could with limited use of his wrist. The Yellow Lantern floated infuriatingly out of his range, grinning behind her decomposing mask. Behind it, her gaze was intense and interested, as if being surrounded by so much death improved her focus. Damian did not like this woman.

Not only did she wear the Joker’s face, she wore a suit of clown clothing that would have made Nightwing’s fashion choices look tame. She wore a long green cape, despite her Yellow Lantern power ring, long purple gloves and legging boots, and a battered red and yellow skirt with bells on it. What little other clothing she wore was only enough for decency and shrouded in shadow as she glided around the rooftop where they fought.

She had been annoying enough that Damian almost regretted talking his way onto patrol, which was saying something.

“I’m trying to find the Big Bat,” she continued. “And instead, I get Robins 1.0 and 3.0. What’s the matter, he onto 4.0 already?”

“Batman is not needed to deal with you,” Damian snapped, subtly scanning the building behind her for a sign of Nightwing. Grayson admitted earlier in their patrol that he didn’t know how to subdue a Yellow Lantern but hey, he was blue and charming and Damian shouldn’t be tackling anybody with that wrist, so they’d ‘figure this out’.

Tt. ‘Figure it out.’ His exact words. It remained a miracle Grayson had survived this long.

“You sure?” The woman used the yellow ring to construct a massive yellow figure in an open cloak and full helmet with bat ears and a circular vent where its mouth would be. The figure’s sword was dripping with something. “I mean, you apparently couldn’t deal with THIS guy.”

“You can’t know that,” Damian said. The words felt too quiet in his throat. He wished Grayson would hurry up and attack this Lantern woman. She made the figure of the Heretic take a step forward and it didn’t matter that the thing was bright yellow and thus obviously fake. It was easily eight feet tall and he knew she could make it larger. Her image of the Heretic could be as large as it needed to when making Damian feel small.

“All Arkham knows your cause of death, bat.” The woman giggled, the sound dying off as Damian stared at her, hoping to glare her into submission. She lowered herself to stand on the rooftop, hunching a little like an angry cat as the Heretic motioned to do the same.

“We may have gotten off on the wrong foot,” she breathed. “I’m Duela.” The serious façade cracked into actual bloodlust. “And I like a good fight just as much as you.”

She didn’t seem like the patient type, so when Damian darted at her, bypassing the Heretic, she sent the construct lunging towards him without hesitation. It moved faster, faster than Damian could even knock it off-course, and slammed into his side.
Damian vaulted out of the way of the following sword, wishing again that he had just gone with Batman or not gone out at all with this fractured wrist. The whole point of Yellow Lanterns was to stimulate and control you through fear. The Heretic was part of that, obviously. Only a fool would let it control him.

“Tt,” he spat and said in a louder voice: “You say you like a fight. Using a construct, an absent second Lantern somewhere that you probably mean to pull out of darkness? You enjoy cheat codes and weakness.”

“What second…? Oh. The devil. So hard to get people to help when you’ve already murdered them,” the Lantern sing-songed. As if he’d summoned her attention, she took a few gliding steps closer and it was glaringly obvious that she was untrained. A berserker without the muscle; a knife-fighter, when she didn’t have that damnable ring. “The devil came here to kickstart a war, wanted a human ride-along. Thought I was enough like pops to help, but stupid him, he threatened to drop me in the drink when he was done with me. Guess I scared him—well. Our partnership dissolved. Like his body, somewhere in the Bering.” She grinned, the motion a sharp, angry one that the Heretic construct didn’t mirror. “That’s not even my favorite murder though. They’re a little like favorite years. They come, they go, they end in screams... and Christmas, very important, your Christmases.”

Damian wished he had his katana. “Then, if we are speaking of Christmases, it will be a great pleasure to add a Power Ring to Batman’s trophy room.”

Instead of responding, the Joker’s Daughter drove the Heretic at him again, the construct’s sword narrowly missing his chest as Damian retreated, looking for an opening even if it went against every piece of video game knowledge he’d ever learned (‘Kill necromancers before their constructs, Damian! Obviously!’ Jon had shouted quite a few times). Damn Grayson, what was taking so long?

As if the acrobat had heard him, Nightwing dropped on Duela’s head from the shadows of the rooftop landing’s door. Damian smirked.

“HA!” she cried in delight as she fell and the smirk vanished, the sound sending spikes of fear down Damian’s back—which made no earthly sense. Aside from the stitched-on face she was just a lunatic. She wasn’t frightening. Perhaps he’d been speaking to her too long? Perhaps that was one of the mistakes you could make with a Lantern. He’d fought so few, if any, he couldn’t be sure.

Damian took a few steps back, intending to run to Grayson’s aid, when Duela flipped her wrist at the Heretic construct. Her only effort to fight Nightwing was to shove a hand at his face, despite his having pinned her to the ground and attempting to get a hand over her eyes.

The Heretic construct blipped out of existence. Damian forced himself to ignore the strategy (whatever it was) and help Grayson.

That was the plan anyway.

Instead, he found himself suspended in mid-air, inside a yellow haze that was more like impenetrable mist than gelatin. Even the Batarangs couldn’t cut him out of it. Not again, not trapped again in less than 24 hours! He touched one of the incendiaries tucked in his belt, which Batman may or may not have known about, and glanced around at the haze. If it was flammable, he would successfully immolate the haze… but also, maybe, himself.

He looked up from this thought when he heard Nightwing grunt unhappily. Duela had encased both of Nightwing’s arms with a yellow cement construct attached to the roof. She motioned towards the haze and Damian felt it moving, pushing his arm up as if it held a sword. He looked and saw that the
haze surrounding him was holding a sword. The haze was the construct, the construct surrounded him… and it was walking towards Nightwing.

As Nightwing tried to pull himself free (and Damian did the same), Duela motioned the construct closer, levelling the sword. Nightwing spotted the weapon first, then the construct, then finally Damian, arched in the same posture simply due to their proximity. Beneath the domino, his eyes went wide.

Duela rose into the air, well out of their range even if they weren’t restrained, as the construct drew to stand over Nightwing.

“Bats against bats against bats,” she said, her voice distant and amused but more like hearing a joke in another room than at the mess she’d created. “If Dad had done this years ago, he wouldn’t even be locked up.”

“Lantern!” Damian shouted, even as Nightwing made alarmed faces (he couldn’t use his arms) that the younger Robin should stay silent. “Or should I say COWARD?”

“I said I was looking for the Bat and you wouldn’t play,” she said, back to lucidity. Her face was deathly serious underneath the dead texture of the Joker’s face. “Did you find a quarter for the machine?”

“What do you want with Batman?!”

She appeared to have taken it into her head that the construct still needed to be bigger. If she decided to drop him, Damian could still roll and come mostly unscathed from a fall of this height, but he didn’t enjoy the thought. The sword had tripled in length. He felt the construct take a step backwards, preparing the sword for a swift downward strike at Nightwing.

It was the ring controlling it, Grayson knew it was the ring controlling; it didn’t matter and Damian couldn’t breathe. The Joker’s Daughter looked at him speculatively. Apparently finding an insufficient amount of fear, she dropped him out of the construct. Thirty feet loomed between Damian and the ground, so he shot the grapnel at the nearest chimney and let it yank him away. His wrist screamed and he almost did as well, landing harder than he’d meant to and skidding until he hit the barrier at the edge of the roof. He switched hands, the bad hand trembling badly, and flung himself back towards the pair.

Duela grinned fiercely and turned the surface where he’d meant to land into yellow spike constructs. Watching his trajectories and anticipating them with spikes, she followed him around the roof. At least she was leaving Grayson alone, he thought… then she started herding him back towards where Nightwing was trapped. The Heretic construct had vanished but by now she had demonstrated that she could bring it back whenever she pleased.

“This rescue’s going real well, kid,” Grayson said as Damian dropped next to him, cradling his bad wrist.

“I wouldn’t talk. You’re the only reason it’s become a rescue. Be… sides…”

They both stared up at the returned Heretic construct. It had been different, seeing it from looking down rather than looking up. The fear returned to Damian like the last moments of a horror movie. Last time Damian had been shot full of arrows, this wasn’t that time, obviously, but it was also half of the problem because he remembered being shot, dozens of times, and then impaled. If she had pulled the Heretic out of his head, she could pull the arrows and—

“Did you not see me running just now??” Damian hissed back. “It’s not effective!”

“Run away, not to me then.” Nightwing pulled at his bonds, though neither of them believed it would make any difference. “I don’t think she’ll kill me, so you find B.”

The order didn’t do anything to quell the fear that had taken hold of Damian and he shook his head, knowing even as he did so that it was the wrong move. Nightwing’s eyebrows knit together for a moment in sympathy but, before it took root, it turned into anger.

“That’s an order, Robin, not a suggestion.”


Her voice grounded Damian. It wasn’t his mother and it wasn’t the Heretic. He snagged one of Nightwing’s escrimas with his good hand and whirled to pitch it at Duella.

Regrettably, this was also when Drake made his entrance.

“Who cares about Batman when you got m—holy SHIT!”

Red Robin had been about to strike the Yellow Lantern in the small of the back, using the force coming off of his grappling line. Instead, Drake had to throw himself out of alignment to miss the escrima stick and crashed into Duella’s lower back with his knees. The resulting pain disrupted Duella’s control over her power ring as she fell and the Heretic vanished, the construct enveloping Nightwing’s body vanished, and the feeling of oppressive fear in Damian’s gut became less overwhelming. He panted, leaning forward on the rooftop to brace himself even as he knew there was no time to do so.

Having bowled Duella over and covered her eyes, Red Robin now struggled to wrestle her ring-bearing arm behind her, pulling out some kind of blue twine from his belt.

“Duela Dent, you are—” Drake stopped speaking when the Yellow Lantern tried to bash her head back to break his nose. Drake hadn’t been close enough for the tactic to work. He leaned back all the same and let her flop forward back onto the roof when she couldn’t hit him. He grasped her wrist to try to encircle it in the twine.

“If you are done fooling around—”

The power ring flared yellow as Duella attempted to elbow the vigilante away from the pinned position. She wasn’t successful but as Damian got to his feet, he noted that Red Robin had gone silent and stopped moving. Whatever the blue twine was, it was not around the Lantern’s wrist yet.

Drake’s cowled figure wavered slightly, murmuring something like ‘no, don’t—Robin, don’t—!’

Damian meant to storm over to the pair of them, possibly knock some sense into Drake, but couldn’t move his feet. The fear was returning. Nothing to be scared of; the Heretic was gone, the cement was gone, and still the terror like a wild animal seeking shelter. Nightwing seemed to be in much the same state, putting his newly-freed hands to his head. Nothing Damian could do about that, even if he could move. Fear began to turn to straight rage, too late.

The Yellow Lantern shoved Drake off of her, grabbed the blue twine out of his unresisting hands, then dropped it like metal left too long in the sun, hissing in pain. She kicked Drake in the ribs; he groaned but didn’t otherwise respond. Everything seemed to be happening on mute to Damian. He might as well be miles away, angry and impotent. Duella rose into the air, looking at the three of them
as if they were children. Damian remembered enough of himself to be damn offended at it.

Then she flew away.

Sound rushed back in. Damian found himself sitting, heart pounding faster than it ever had while training with his mother. Nightwing sat in the same state and Red Robin sat motionless. He’d pushed himself up from the rooftop, an arm wrapped around his chest, and hunched in on himself.

“The t-twine worked,” Drake said, throat constricted.

“You didn’t.” Damian said, because it was absolutely true. This maniac had gotten the best of Red Robin while he was winning! Drake didn’t protest the comment. Instead he was definitely trying not to look at Damian at all.

“C-consider it a t-test run,” he said. “Stronger than Crane’s fear g-gas, not as omniscient a-as a g-god. Just a scary-as-hell Lantern wearing the Joker’s face.”

“Calm down, Robin,” Nightwing told Damian. “How’s your wrist, after that run?”

“Bruised,” Damian lied. “If Drake were a little earlier, perhaps I would be able to patrol normally in four weeks, rather than an additional six. Tt.”

Grayson looked with muted concern at Drake at the mention of his name. “Thanks for the save, Red Robin. You good?” Drake averted his gaze and waved away the concern, so Dick continued: “Anyone see which way she went?”

“Northwest,” Damian said, not waiting for another stammered reply from Drake. “Are there no Blue Lanterns we can bring along if Red Robin cannot perform?”

“Brat, you are this close to ‘Red Robin’ taking your only piece of helpful equipment and heading home,” Drake replied, having found his nerve again. “That blue twine, if I could’ve gotten it around her arm or wrist, would’ve short-circuited the power ring. Not in an electrocution way, just cut off all power so we’re only dealing with a villain, not a Lantern.” He glanced down at the twine. “Guess she knew that too.”

“Where the hell’d you find a Blue Lantern, baby bird?” Nightwing asked.

“Long conversations with aliens working on a new Blue Corps,” Drake said. “Been a bit distracted by a family issue.”

“You mean the Red Hood,” Damian said, catching on. Grayson looked from one of them to the other.

“Nobody tells me anything,” Nightwing decided. He walked over to the edge of the rooftop, pretending to pout. “Guess I’ll go find B, let him know we found our Yellow. You wanna apologize to Red Robin for being a brat, Robin?”

“I’m sorry your incompetence was on public display,” Damian told Red Robin. Drake threw his hands in the air in exasperation and headed after Nightwing.

“Why do you try?” Drake called after the acrobat. Damian could hear the smile in Grayson’s voice as he replied, the shout warbling while they grappled through the buildings.

“Cause one of these days, you’re gonna get along!”
The Bats never patrolled in one tight group, even when Nightwing was in town, so it surprised Batman when all three of his sons came bounding out of nowhere towards his area of town. They settled around his current perch on the Monolith Building, not giving his spot away but it would be obvious to anyone looking up that the Bats and Birds were having a meeting. Far below, Spoiler was breaking up an attempted kidnapping outside of one of the bars. Batman had paused here in case she missed the third man with the suitcase and the gun. And… she just kicked him in the groin. Spoiler could handle her own. He turned his attention to the boys.

“Why didn’t you use the comms?” he asked into his own.

“Yellow Lanterns have a bit of a mind-altering fear chemical,” Nightwing said. “No one felt chatty.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah. Also, we shouldn’t be approaching her with less than everyone, in case things go south.” Nightwing said it casually, as if noting the weather, but Batman tensed up slightly, shifting to get a better grip on his perch.

“They went south with you?” Batman asked.

“You realize how threatening it sounds when you say that in the dark-and-serious voice? Yeah, things went south with us and the Double R’s got an answer to it so long as we can find Joker’s Daughter again.”

“You’ve had no word from Hood?” Robin asked Batman, with a glance at Nightwing. Batman had had to give his oldest son a very brief overview of their additional party member, but hadn’t gotten to explaining the ‘additional son’ angle. Dick would probably have the same reaction as his youngest: ‘good Lord, B, stop adopting kids.’

“He doesn’t have a comm,” Batman began to say before realizing that the Red Hood would more than likely have had a communicator in his helmet at one point. A glance at Red Robin confirmed this and he opened a channel to Oracle, who was running their communications tonight. “Oracle, will you reopen the line to Hood’s helmet? We would’ve disconnected it fourteen days ago.”

Seconds later, the line was open. Seconds He didn’t know a more impressive tech guru than Oracle (though her skills were seconded close by Tim’s).

“Thank you,” he told her. Then: “Red Hood?”

“Oh hi. Nice of you to call.” The vigilante sounded distracted and Batman didn’t like it. With how antsy Jason Todd had been earlier in the night, suddenly not caring about Batman calling didn’t make sense.

“Any sign of the Yellow Lantern?” Batman asked.

“You could say that.”

“What’s happening?”

“Well,” the Red Hood cleared his throat. “I think I was her fourth vigilante tonight and she’s a little frustrated since she’s not finding you. So, she tried to kick the shit out of me and I dropped her off a roof.”
“Hood, she can fly.”

“Yeah, I remembered. After. So, we’ve been talking and I think you showing up would probably prevent more, uh, Robins getting their asses kicked around Gotham. I’m at the top of the old Stonbell Chocolates place.”

“We’re on our way.”

The Robins’ faces were collectively dark as Batman severed the connection.

Robin spoke first. “Well, that is certainly a trap.”

“We’re going anyway.” Batman glanced down at the concluded fight below and visually tracked the triumphant figure in purple who was grappling away. “Red Robin, should Spoiler…?”

“No. If we’re all on this, I want her to be keeping an eye out on the rest of the area,” Tim replied. “People shouldn’t be getting mugged and worse because we needed to step away for a minute.”

Nodding in agreement, Batman dropped off his perch, heading for the Batmobile. Nightwing followed him with questions about the Red Hood, leaving the two youngest to trail behind. Damian glanced over at Red Robin, assessing Drake’s masked face.

“What?” Drake asked, sounding more exhausted than irritated. At least he’d stopped holding his ribs.

“What did the Lantern make you think?” Damian asked. Red Robin’s expression didn’t change beneath the mask but his analysis of the question played across his face before he landed on a bitter smirk.

“Aw, you do care. Thanks but no, brat. You’re not getting blackmail on a plate.”

“You have already seen me experience the same,” Damian said. “I was only thinking to even the scale.”

Drake landed in the alley, heading for where he must have left his cycle. “I like the scale just how it is.”

Damian gritted his teeth and climbed onto his own cycle. Normally he would be grappling between buildings after an encounter with this fear-based Lantern, but the wrist ached from the fight with the Lantern. Any more pressure and it might truly break and he would be laid up even longer. Even so, he could see the Batmobile’s bulk ahead of him, gliding through dark city streets towards whatever was happening with the Red Hood. He wouldn’t be left behind. Damian started the cycle, biting his lip and cursing this ‘Jason Todd’ mentally for the trembling of his wrist. If the man he didn’t remember got in trouble this often, perhaps he wasn’t worth keeping around.

That dark thought brought him back to his words to Drake earlier. Technically, the entire argument had been unfair, which was more Drake’s specialty than Damian’s. No different from Drake, Damian hadn’t done anything to stop Duela from escaping, despite being unhampered by anything except fear. And yet Drake had avoided pointing that out when Damian attacked him. Red Robin could not have missed the towering form of the Heretic, couldn’t have missed what it meant to Damian, not with that analytical mind. The more Damian didn’t know what Drake feared enough to shut down, the angrier he got. If he couldn’t redeem himself in combat for the misplaced, hypocritical arguments, he would need to do something drastic.

Like apologize.
It took them fifteen minutes to collect at the base of the building where Red Hood had self-reported. There were no constructs visible from the ground, though a large collection of rubble had collected and some bashing up of the building was visible. Nothing out of the ordinary for the Red Hood, Batman supposed. His sons had struggled with the Lantern and if Hood had also struggled… he mostly hoped they would find the Lantern ALIVE.

The Bats approached in two sets: Batman and Red Robin in one team, approaching from the front, and Nightwing circling around the rear rooftops. All of them had filled him in on how their attacks had gone little more than an hour before, so Batman had taken precautions. Robin stayed on his cycle below just in case things went south (literally and metaphorically) and he could give high-speed chase. The youngest Bat made sure they knew how angry he was about this responsibility via the open comm channel. He only shut up when Jason Todd whispered: “Demon, even I don’t want you up here.”

The Yellow Lantern sat on one of the roof’s ledges, the macabre face turning to Batman as he landed on the roof. The Red Hood sat just under the edge of the roof’s ledge, a good ten feet away from Duela. Batman studied the young man who was supposed to be his son for any new injuries since they had seen each other hours before. Nothing obvious. Duela also looked to be in good health. He knew he shouldn’t have assumed the Red Hood would shoot his attacker… still, it was a thought and Red Robin’s report had described an individual who had spent time on both sides of the line of sanity.

“I’m here,” Batman said, hearing Red Robin climb over the rooftop ledge some ways to his left. If Tim said this ‘blue twine’ plan would work this time, Batman would put faith in it. If it didn’t, everything would come down to mental strength and willpower not to be undone by this Lantern.

“Bat!” Duela said with a swell of excitement, rising from her perch. “Y’know, I wanted to tell you on the crane, but you seemed so busy: you are taller than everyone said you’d be! Not as buff though. You might want to keep that in mind. Get that notion of you having a dad bod out of the way.” She glanced at Red Robin, then at the Red Hood, then spun a little to the greater area. “Can’t say as I blame you though, that may be a lot of birthday cakes.”

“What do you want, Dent?” Batman asked.

“Oh, I don’t go by that,” she said, sighing through the dead skin. “Duela. Or Joker’s Daughter. Probably Joker’s Daughter, to you.”
“And who is that?”

She seemed more lucid than his boys had described but she shifted from one feeling to another with the unpredictability of Selina crossing rooftops. Still, her head tilted a little to the side in puzzlement. “Your replacement. Obviously.”

The Red Hood ran a hand over his helmet in exasperation. “She wants to be the scariest person in Gotham. And I told you, you can’t call yourself the replacement,” he instructed her.

She ignored him, grinning and back on her track. “I’m ‘to strike new fear into the heart of Gotham, endless shine of dark fear’s light, something something.’ It rhymes, they said.”

“Gotham isn’t looking for any new heroes,” Batman said.

The Red Hood prepared to say something, taking a breath, and Duela looked over at him sharply. He noted the warning look and stood, a little unsteadily. As far as Bruce could tell, this action was just to be obstinate.

“Like I said, he won’t step down,” the Red Hood told Duela. “He’s been protecting the city a sight longer than you, even if you do have the abilities. Lots of people have had abilities. You’ll notice that they’re not here.”

“Fine,” Duela said. “But don’t interrupt my monologues!”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Or comedy bits.”

“You let me know when some are coming up.”

Duela returned her attention to Batman with a smile. “I do fear. You do fear. We all do fear for a living. You think we’d work together, but we’re not about to, you know why? Because you’re not about fear anymore, not really. You have a family, a house, a pretty life.”

“I told you, the family’s kinda gross…” the Red Hood interrupted.

“Not according to anyone who’s met the Waynes,” Duela replied. The Red Hood’s expression was invisible beneath the helmet so Bruce had to read the younger man’s surprise in his body language. One thing was for sure, the Red Hood hadn’t told her their identities.

“Why them?” the Red Hood said, with a calm worthy of Alfred.

“Because I think I worked with one once, it’s a little foggy. But you can’t work with a Bat and not know where they park the Batmobile.”

Since encountering her, Batman had reviewed Dent’s known history, which was probably more than the Red Hood had been able to do in the few minutes he’d had with Tim after they requested the information from Oracle. He knew that Jason couldn’t be blamed for her suspecting their names. But the helmeted figure looked back at him, body expressing pure fear now. Whatever their relationship was like, the younger man didn’t trust him much.

There was no way to reassure Hood that he’d done nothing wrong without tipping his hand to Duela that she was right about their identities. Instead, Batman took a step forward, spotting Red Robin getting into position behind Duela and Red Hood at the far side of the roof. His detective son had the unique ability to disappear from notice when he wanted and it would be useful now.
“Duela, you are not welcome in Gotham as an independent or accompanied vigilante, regardless of your intentions,” Batman told her. Perhaps this could end without a fight. Duela shook her head, the death mask shaking a half-second slower than the face beneath it.

“Stop me then.” Duela looked over at the Red Hood, her eyes bright as she concentrated. Noticing her stare, the Red Hood’s posture registered confusion, mild alarm. Then, he barked out a laugh of realization, the helmet making the sound tinny and thin.

“Oh… so, for the past hour… that’s been you, trying to do something to me?” he asked Duela, residual laughter still in his voice. She looked confused and annoyed, nodding slowly.

“Yeah, I spent a hell of a long time with the League of Assassins.” The Red Hood took a sudden step towards the Yellow Lantern. “Mind games don’t work nearly as well as they should on me,” he said and hooked her throat with the crook of his elbow, bringing her quickly to the ground. Once in a crouch, he had little control over his knee and had to readjust positioning. Duela tried to lunge upward and he pinned her to keep her from knocking him halfway across the roof.

“Replacement, PLAN!” he shouted, almost falling over Duela as she sent yellow spike constructs flying past him, the movements getting more and more accurate as they struggled.

Red Robin skidded to the ground beside the Red Hood, getting the twine in hand just as Duela got one hand free and pressed it against the gap in body armor at the Hood’s neck. It took only a moment for her to conjure a garrote construct. However, since she had so nicely extended her arm, Red Robin tied the twine around her right wrist. The construct flickered and vanished. The Red Hood shifted hurriedly off the woman, going through a sort of grounding ritual of fingers, wrists, neck, as Red Robin started tying her up.


“Came, didn’t you?” Hood replied, getting unsteadily to his feet with a hand to the now-bare collar of his uniform. “That big brain of yours’d never come out here without a plan. Whatever the frak that piece ‘a thread is.”

“The non-suicidal option.”

Hood turned to go and froze, finding himself helmet to cowl with Batman. Batman hadn’t actually intended to get this close, but the younger man had turned quickly from his conversation with Red Robin and… here they were. Hood jerked his chin up a little to look Batman in the white lenses of the cowls.

“I didn’t tell her anything,” Red Hood said, a sneer lurking behind the words.

“I believe you.”

The answer threw the Red Hood off-balance. He glanced over his shoulder at Duela and Red Robin instead, appearing to note their proximity to each other and dislike it, but not enough to separate them. In the background of the activity, Nightwing grappled over the wall, carrying Robin piggyback (Robin was, of course, complaining mightily that he had scaled buildings with far worse injuries). Batman breathed a sigh of relief that there had been no need for either of them.

Out of his peripheral, he saw the Red Hood move to go and, instead of grabbing his shoulder, Batman stepped into his path. This didn’t end much better than grabbing him; the Red Hood took several steps backward and his fists moved to a tense low position in front of his hips. If there was going to be a fight, Hood wouldn’t be unprepared.
“Hood,” Batman said, trying not to sound accusatory.

“B.”

“Thank you for helping Robin yesterday.” Hood’s breathing quickened slightly at the words. “I should have said it sooner. We will get this mess sorted out.”

“Uh huh.” The Red Hood’s tone didn’t sound certain and he had looked over to Duela and Red Robin again. Duela was trying to strike up a conversation with Tim and failing. “Yeah, or there’ll be a bigger crisis that you have to go deal with.”

“We still haven’t addressed the memory issue,” Batman said, watching Red Robin listen to something Duela was saying in a low voice. He frowned.

“Don’t think she’s going to be very talkative anymore, now she knows you’re not playing.” The Red Hood assessed Batman out of the corner of his eye, then pretended to relax, stretching in an exaggerated manner. Batman noted again how many things Jason Todd did to distract himself from thinking about tension. If Red Robin wasn’t flirting with danger quite so closely and hadn’t just waved off his brothers to return to their patrol, he might have been able to focus on the Red Hood’s coping mechanisms. But he had and Batman couldn’t pay appropriate attention to both of them.

“So,” Red Hood continued, his eyes on Red Robin. “Since you got her in custody and I know you guys are the only beat cops who aren’t going to beat her up when she’s in custody, you can try to learn more and I can go get off this knee.”

“That would be a good idea.” Batman gave the Red Hood another once-over, unsure what would actually lower his defenses at this point. “And stop opening the stitches in your arm. I’m pretty sure I don’t have to be your father to tell you that.”

He didn’t like how much his concern baffled the Red Hood or how the younger man looked back at Red Robin and Duela to avoid eye contact with Batman. Or how, suddenly, his breathing changed.

“Shit.”

The guns came out of their holsters and before Batman could stop him, the Red Hood approached Red Robin from behind, guns drawn.

#

Tim got tired of telling people he wasn’t stupid. Quite frankly, to have to tell people this many times was insulting. He knew not to believe traitorous promises, mythical monologues, showy evil schemes, or Ra’s Al Ghul (pretty much at all). He hadn’t believed in Jason’s sanity until several years ago; he hadn’t believed in Damian’s humanity for an equally long time. Both could still be a toss-up depending on the day. He wasn’t the kind of person to wander into the surgery center in Fallout 4 to get some facial reconstruction done in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. So, talking to Duela practically erased itself from the list of things he planned to do.

Something didn’t seem right, though.

The blue twine bound the wrist with the ring on it. Tim hadn’t taken the ring off because some rings had built-in defense mechanisms; it could well shock him. Or that was what he had heard, anyway. Hadn’t he taken it off earlier? Foggy. Some voice way back in his mind reminded him of the sandwich he hadn’t eaten back at Wayne Enterprises. Yeah, thanks brain, big help.

“Chasing me all over the city, kid?” Duela asked, eyes peering fiercely at him from beneath the death
mask. While the blue twine bound her wrist, Tim had made sure regular twine bound her arms behind her back and her ankles together. Explaining this to the police already seemed like it would be interesting. Tim said nothing in answer to her question. Only Robins had to rise to the level of villain banter; Red Robins and above could ignore the chatting. At least…


“If you have an urgent request, we don’t need to be in a conversation,” Tim replied.

“I do. Lean close. I’ll tell you what it is.”

“No thanks, I like my ears and facial skin where they are.”

“Fine then.” She yawned elaborately. “It’s about the red one.”

“So, me?” Tim gestured at his very red costume.

“What is it with you Bats and the color schemes? The other red one. The forgotten one, not the little one that you want dead and definitely not you. You’re just Dick’s replacement.”

Dick and Damian were standing only a few feet away, so of course they heard. Fortunately, every Bat was trained not to respond to their names while in costume, mostly via a stupid rhyme Dick had made up as Robin: ‘wearing a domino? Who are you, I dunno’. Nightwing didn’t react in this case either, instead ignoring the comment to straighten and look at Damian.

“She’s going to the League, right?”

“Certainly. A Yellow Lantern cannot be allowed to stay in Gotham,” Damian replied, eyeing the woman, who patted Tim’s arm to get his attention again. Tim wasn’t expecting the contact and flinched, damnit, and Damian saw.

“Jumpy little bird,” Duela cooed. “Lean over here and I’ll tell you a secret about the red one.”

“I’m not leaning anywhere towards you,” Tim said. “Tell me this way or not at all, I’ve got plenty of other sources. Also, I don’t want Robin dead.”

“Yeah, ya do. And, just so you can focus on that, I told him how to cure it,” Duela said, nodding in Jason’s direction. “It’s not all that hard.”

“Yet I see you haven’t fixed it for yourself,” Tim replied and deadpanned: “It involves sanity, doesn’t it?”

“Strong memories, actually.” Duela grinned. “Want to know the rest?”

“Not that badly.” Tim glanced up at the lingering figures of Nightwing and Robin. “Don’t you two have muggers to apprehend?”

“I suppose there might be better things we could do,” Nightwing said, looking down at Robin, who for once looked reluctant to go swinging across the city. “Come on Robin, let’s go find some people to save.”

“Tt. You just want to punch someone,” Damian replied. Tim studied the kid’s wrist in his peripheral while pretending all his attention was fixed on Duela. Damian’s wrist wasn’t trembling, but his breathing and way of holding it were modulated. He should have been benched by now. Tim would be.
“Yeah, so do you, you’ve got your punching face on and everything,” Dick said. He winked at Tim and Tim hoped this meant he knew about the wrist.

“This is just my face, Nightwing,” Damian replied.

“I know! It’s so sad. You’d think I’dve taught you better.”

“What could you possibly teach me that Batman could not?”

Still bickering, the two headed for the ground so Damian could reclaim his cycle. There wouldn’t be much ‘detectiving’ going on tonight, Tim reflected, but Nightwing would keep Robin from getting into too much trouble in his condition. He glanced back down at Duela, who dragged her twin faces into a harsh smile.

“Getting us some privacy, RR?” Her tone had changed from warm to jagged edges almost as soon as the pair were gone. At least that was familiar, Tim felt much more comfortable around people who swore and threatened him. The world made sense that way. And hey, it usually meant they gave a damn what he thought.

“Sure,” he said. “Now it’s just you, me, the Red Hood, and the guy you’re trying to put out of a job. What did you want to be Batman for anyway?”

“Well, first, because what’s more fun than scaring a scarer?” Duela chuckled. “The Bat’s cocky. He has Dad to drag him down of course, but Dad’s been in prison for a while and there’s Scarecrow, but once you catch up with a Crane, it’s not hard to wring its neck.”

Tim didn’t react visibly. “And did you catch up with Crane?”

She looked at him in mock-indignity, though it was hard to tell what was ‘mock’ under that mask. “The Bat didn’t tell you? No. I broke its legs so it won’t be stalking through any miry bogs for a while. Which leaves me free to do a Bat’s job.”

“That doesn’t seem to be working out.” Tim glanced at the twine. The reassuring blue band shone brightly around her wrist. At least, he thought that until he saw the yellow strands creeping between the blue.

“You know what’s funny about people who don’t think they’re going to die and think you’re dumb as rocks? They tell you everything. The devil did and boy, he hated Blue Lanterns.” The twine frayed and snapped across her wrist. “Which taught me that you need a Blue ring to do any damage. It stings, but this is a bracelet, baby bird. Do your research.”

Bruce and Jason hadn’t noticed the devolving situation. Tim started to rise, only to feel Duela grip his arm, nails digging past the armor and into his skin (some kind of claw construct?). She held him in the awkward crouched position, where if he moved too quickly he’d overbalance and she’d have the upper hand.

“Seriously, you can’t deal with me yourself either? When do I find a useful Bat?” She chuckled. “The red one wants to shoot me. Been there, done that, ruined a t-shirt.”

Tim quieted because yes, Jason would probably shoot her and then they’d both be on the hook for calming the shitstorm that Bruce would create about it. He also quieted because he could feel her moving clumsily around his mind. He wasn’t sure when he’d let his guard down and she’d gotten in. Again. It was much harder to oust somebody from inside your mind than to keep them out in the first place.
“You told me you didn’t want Robin dead, that’s when,” she said, sensing the drift of his fears. “And before that, you were worried about me knowing Dick. What for? The Richard Grayson I knew was always good at taking care of himself.”

Tim grasped her wrist clamped onto his arm and moved it roughly away, feeling something give under his grip. She laughed as he dropped her newly-fractured wrist in horror.

“I knew someone in the Bats had to be ugly like me,” she snickered, seeming to shimmer with yellow for a second. “Just thought it’d be the littlest Robin, not the nerd.”

Tim opened his mouth then shut it, unable to think of what to say. Bruce and Jason’s conversation stilled; both of them were probably watching him fail at this too. Fury fogged into his mind. He wasn’t Jason, to be overcome by a clown; he wasn’t Damian to be paralyzed with fear; he was the smart one, Tim Drake, the one with the vision.

‘The unhealthy one, the reject one, the one even Nightwing didn’t even want to get to know.’

Wait, had Duela just said that or had he thought it? She was saying something, so it must be that, so… how did she know? Some of the records put her on the Titans roster but that would mean Dick had told the Titans what he hadn’t even told Tim.

‘Stop,’ his mind whispered, ‘what is she doing? Why is this relevant? Why are we spiraling?’

Another part said: ‘Why haven’t we gotten rid of her yet?’

Still another part was murmuring something like: ‘I’m tired. I’m hungry. Someone should be helping, I shouldn’t be doing this on my own. She’s going to get loose again; if Nightwing and Robin can’t keep her down, why should I?’

And she already knows us, somehow, she knows us. His mind raced on. Damian constantly accused him of betraying the Bats and here Duela was spouting information she had no right to know, shimmering yellow and tattling all this to whoever would listen. Had he done this? Had Tim doomed them? She knew Dick; this wasn’t some telepath from nowhere maybe knowing their names. She knew Dick, and Tim had known Dick and put everyone’s identities together just from that. Maybe she could do the same. Or maybe had Damian—had Damian told her something? To frame Tim?

Fear gripped him, churning his empty stomach and narrowing his vision. Finally, he recognized the technique. This untrained, barely functional Yellow Lantern was trying to push him into going after Damian. He could trace that much in her mental nudging, knowing that if she could send him on a righteous-filled quest to kill the youngest Bird he already feared, the Batfamily would take off after their rogue Robin without giving her a second thought. And she was right, they would. She didn’t anticipate that he would push past the fear and find the only real solution to the problem of her knowing Dick’s identity. One that would be easy to complete.

Bruce wasn’t going to forgive him for it though.

All he heard outside of his mind raging was an urgent “RED!” in Jason’s voice through one ear. Desperate laughter filled the other.

Tim came back to himself and felt his hand around someone’s shirt, holding up a fair bit of weight. He swallowed, sensing himself at the edge of the roof. He opened one eye, steeling himself to check on what (or who) he might be holding up. The Yellow Lantern laughed, because he had torn the ring off her hand, leaving her powerless, and now held her over the edge of the rooftop by her shirt. Free of her bonds and soon free of this mortal coil. He glanced down and saw that, of course, he was
holding her over the rubble from earlier. Certain death on jagged building materials! Good job, Tim! Nice research.

“Going to kill me, Boy Blunder? Bats won’t think much of that!” Duela shouted, looking with glee down at the rubble. “You wanna be my Robin?”

Which made Tim want to drop her all the more. He could almost hear Jason cringe at the unintended mimicry of words the Red Hood had said to Tim, a long time ago.

“C’mon Red,” Jason murmured, sounding closer than Tim expected him to be but not so close he would startle the younger man. Red Robin didn’t turn his attention away from the giggling Duela, so Jason continued: “You don’t gotta follow the family trend and try to kill a clown.”

“She’ll know who we are,” Tim replied, quietly enough that the Lantern shouldn’t be able to hear.

“You don’t get to drop people for shit like that,” Jason said, louder and sounding angry. “At least make Bruce kill Joker first. I want this in chronological order of hatred.”

“And Harley?” Against his better judgment, Tim was becoming curious. Curiosity was holding the fear that had become near-murder at bay.

“I’m pretty sure she helped kill me, but I’ve had to swear off most of my vengeance killing, so she’s up for grabs.”

Tim finally looked back at Jason, only to find the Red Hood had both guns trained on Duela, so that he would have a clean shot even if Tim let go. Upon Tim noticing him, the Red Hood shifted his position to be even closer to the potential victim.

“What—what the hell are you doing?” Tim asked.

“Hey, if anyone asks after you drop her, this was MY kill.” Jason glanced at Duela. “Don’t worry, two-face, I’m good at this. Got lots of practice in the Outlaws.”

It all felt a bit ridiculous now to Tim. “You’re not shooting her. And I’m not giving her back the ring.”

“Hell, I’d shoot YOU if that was the case. You only woke up when you grabbed it off her hand.”

“Oh, wait!” Duela cried. “Pull me up, pull me up. I thought of something.”

Tim didn’t move and the Lantern’s tone turned lethal: “If you’re not going to kill me, you don’t got any power left, bird guy. I can kill the hell out of you from here.”

After a moment’s glance at Batman, Tim tugged her up. She braced her far-too-lean body against the wall of the roof with one arm, looking at the Red Hood with an appraising expression.

“Did you shoot me?” she asked.

“Right now? No. Earlier? I don’t remember,” Jason said evenly, shifting his stance to holster one gun and keep the other trained on her. “But if we both got hit with that memory stick thing, which I’m guessing you did too, that’d make sense.”

“I got erased. But it didn’t work on the devil.” She sounded saner now, more practical about the situation. Jason tilted his head a little to the side. He kept Tim in the helmet’s line of sight, which was more than a little annoying to Red Robin, who began to feel as if he were under constant ‘big
brotherly’ surveillance. Still, the Red Hood’s next question was directed at Duela.

“And why’d you want to be erased, aside from the Russian spaceship antics?” Jason asked her. “Bad first date? Laid off? Didn’t want the Joker to run a paternity test?”

“None of your damn business,” Duela replied. “Part of it was that I got shot in Gotham.”

“Part of the ol’ toilet bowl’s charm,” Jason answered, paying more attention to Tim than to the conversation. “Usually the whiners don’t stick around.”

Without warning, the Yellow Lantern pulled down a corner of her shirt sleeve to almost-indecent levels to expose a gunshot wound, probably a couple years old and badly healed. “You seem like you’d recognize your own work.”

The Red Hood’s helmet remained expressionless, but its owner sounded a little nervous as he edged away from Batman, who now loomed over his shoulder.

“Uh, yeah, looks like my handiwork,” Jason said. “But I don’t remember shooting you. I do know that if I meant to kill you, you’d be dead.”

“If you shot me for fun, you’d be dead,” Duela replied. “Whoever you are.”

“Red Hood, you shot this woman?” That was Bruce. Of course it was Bruce.

Jason opened his mouth, probably to protest that Tim had been about to drop her off the roof, and then shut it again. “I don’t know. Probably. Red’s reports do put me on the Outlaws with her but I don’t know why I was running around with anybody called the Joker’s Daughter. Does that sound like—oh, wait, you wouldn’t even know.”

“Well,” Duela said, looking at the poorly-healed gunshot wound and swinging from one emotion to another again. “It looks like you fired me.”

She laughed uproariously. Jason edged further away from Bruce, stopping only when he caught sight of Tim.

“Red, give B the ring. You look like shit just holding it.”

“At least mine’s remediable,” Tim shot back. Still, he handed the yellow power ring to Bruce even as Duela complained and tried to summon it back to her hand like a Jedi with a lightsaber.

Of course Bruce had a particular box for the ring and could hold and put it in a pocket without adverse effects. Exhaustion crept over Tim the moment the ring was neutralized in whatever blocking container device Bruce had. Each thought the woman had put in his head, the crunch of her wrist (God, she’d need medical treatment!), the feel of holding her over the edge of the roof like a doll about to drop… it could’ve been anyone. Thank God there had been no one else up here he could hope to overpower. The bleak vision she’d put in his head lingered like a noxious scent in the air. He didn’t want Damian dead, no matter what she said. None of them wanted anything like that for any of the others.

“Hey. Replacement.”

And the problem still remained that she knew who Dick was and if she knew Dick, what then? This was the second person in under a week who could have learned their identities and what the hell could he do with this information? Nothing. Nothing nothing nothing.
Jason flicked his forehead, having moved in front of him while Tim wasn’t paying attention. Tim grabbed the Red Hood’s gloved wrist to shove it out of the way. The memory of Duela’s hand in his grip, seconds before he crushed it, flashed into his mind and he flinched, dropping Jason’s arm. Then, he stumbled backwards a few steps, breathing fast. Close to hyperventilating, which wasn’t doing his ribs any favors. Tim sank back against the roof ledge and focused on calming said breathing. Thank God Damian really wasn’t here.

“Red—Red? Frakking frak frak.” Jason put a hand on Tim’s shoulder, which wasn’t fantastic but it brought Tim back to himself long enough to snap “I’m fine, I’m fine!” and shrug the hand off.

“B, I think he’s good for the night. You can get the Lantern somewhere?” Red Hood called to the cowled figure who was restoring Duela’s bonds while she made ineffectual grabs for the box somewhere in his cape. Batman nodded, then glanced at Tim, who felt his cheeks burn with shame. That was the look Batman gave Robins when they were falling short of his standards. Demoted. Failing. Again.

“I’m fine,” he snapped at Jason for what was going to be the final time. “Like I said, no one deserves to get mugged because we all decided to go chase a clown. Again.” Tim looked at Bruce. “I am fine and perfectly capable of continuing my patrol.”

Batman looked the faintest bit surprised at that statement but nodded. “You know your limits, Red Robin. Red Hood, would you—”

“Oh, believe me, he’s not gettin’ out of my sight.”
There's a moment I'm forgetting, where you tell me you see me

Chapter Notes

I know – this is almost late. It’s been weeks since I had a less than thousand-word buffer and the last chapter changed some of what would happen next. Good God, I did not plan for anybody to go on patrol after that! We’ll figure it out. Some of it is already falling into place in this chapter.

Wow, okay, it deleted half my comments (which was mostly babbling about how much I love Dick Grayson's role in the Batfam), cool, here's the most important one! chapter title is from Fun Home's 'Telephone Wire'. Because, while the sentiment is different, God that song is gorgeous.

As always and most important, thank you for reading and for interacting in whatever way you choose to. <3

Following Tim on patrol felt like the times Jason followed a woman who didn’t know she was heading down a bad alley. Jason was all too aware, during those times, that he looked like someone who WOULD attack her, so when she was inevitably attacked, he would get in, subdue the attackers, and get out without waiting for thanks. Or, more likely, pepper spray. Because he looked like a scary, scary dude.

Fortunately, that meant that most people tonight were avoiding Red Robin, who was stopping attacks with efficiency but a bit too much care, and Red Hood, who had been painstakingly reestablishing his reputation by following Red Robin and upping the brutality quotient to something generally seen in John Wick movies. Jason had seen more than a few people tonight that Red Robin had left a little too unscathed, given their intentions, and was more than happy to lend a hand in kicking ass. It was what he did and he was damn good at it.

When Jason finally caught up with Tim, around 5am and limping more than usual (thanks again, Damian), Tim had stopped and was looking off introspectively at the oncoming hints of sunrise. Not that anyone could see much of it over Gotham; the sky lit up a lighter shade of gray and that was something.

“Y’know,” Jason panted. “Red, anytime you wanna (breath) step up the beatings, I’m frak(breathe)-frakking down to (breath) take a backseat.”

Tim looked back at him, expression at once guilty and lost and mildly annoyed. Jason straightened, using the new posture to draw deeper breaths.

“I didn’t need backup.” Tim shifted his stance to better ignore Jason. “Clearly, I’m fine.”

“Nightwing’dve already sent you to bed,” Jason said, relishing the double-contraction. “Just remember that later. I’m the lenient brother. I want that in writing if you plan to pitch a shitfit.”

“Nightwing asked me to wait here, so you apparently aren’t doing as fantastic as job as you think,” Tim replied and squinted at the sunrise. “Or most of the baddies are heading to bed. That could be it.”
“’Baddies’?” Jason asked, taking a seat on their current rooftop because his knee wasn’t going to hold up much longer. Hell, he wasn’t entirely sure he could get off the roof at this point. “Are you five?”

“Nightwing called them that on the comm,” Tim replied, annoyed that he had used the word, probably without his mind’s permission. Red Robin got cranky about things like that. “I’m tired.”

“Now there’s a rare admission. Almost as rare as whatever frakking happened on the rooftop that you haven’t explained.” Jason started to massage the pain out of his knee, which ached the moment he touched it. Too bad, this is the regime for the next, frak, good while. He swallowed the whimper that built in the back of his throat at the thought. He couldn’t even express the pain, because Tim was right there and the last thing Tim needed was someone else’s discomfort to focus on. When Jason finally glanced up, Red Robin’s frown had only deepened. Might as well reassure him, Jason thought.

“Easy, Replacement, that wasn’t a demand that you spill what happened. I’m not gonna tell Nightwing on you.”

“Thanks,” Tim said quietly. “I don’t want to have to explain this to Damian.”

“Whatever. Sir, Replacement, before you frakking fall.”

Tim did, much to Jason’s relief. The kid was a quarter his size and thinner than he ought to be, which reminded Jason abruptly of his mental promise made when he’d been trapped in the rubble.

“Red.”

“I’m not laying down on this roof or on your lap.”

Jason made a face. “Wasn’t asking. Just wanted to tell you we’re going to that bakery in Blud. Not today but we’re going.”

Tim grunted. “Why.”

Answering ‘because you’re so skinny that when things explode I think you’ll snap in half” wasn’t exactly an appropriate answer. Neither was ‘let’s spend some time together’ because that was Dick’s domain. Jason felt shit at these relationships he had to heal and even if the one with Tim was mostly healed, asking him out to a bakery to spend time together was awkward. Why did women get to do this so easy? He should’ve talked to Spoiler, she’d know what Tim liked.

“’Cause you’re helpin’ me and I’ve gotta do somethin’ for you,” Jason said resolutely.

“I just want to work.” Despite his claim that he wasn’t going to lay down on the roof, Tim flopped back, his hands laced behind his head. “I don’t need food to do that. You don’t have to do anything for me but wait.”

“Hey, when people are doing shit for me, I want to help. Usually, that’s food. Works for Roy, not that you’re Roy, and works for Wing and Biz and sometimes even Penny-One. I’m causing a problem for you. Gotta top off the balance somehow.” It surprised Jason to find that the words coming out of his mouth were more true than false. It must’ve surprised Tim as well because he twisted to look quizzically at Jason.

“You’re part of the… Bats, Hood,” Tim said, as if remembering they were still on patrol and he couldn’t say ‘family’. “You should be remembered. Do I really have to say this? If it were B, he’d be devoting days to this. Weeks.”
“So’re you.”

“So? You’d try to pay back B for shit like this?”

“Yeah, if he didn’t already have more resources than God had making the planet.”

They shared a chuckle for a minute, then Tim checked the horizon again, looking for Nightwing and Robin no doubt.

“If not food,” Jason began, pulling off the helmet so he was just wearing the domino. “Tell me what you need.” It was Tim’s turn to make a face and Jason protested: “Come on! Trusting me at this point is really that bad?”

Wow, so that was the trick. Tim obliged, considering the offer for more than a minute.

“Four hours a week of piano, without interruption,” he decided. Since there was no piano at his Gotham apartment, Jason could only assume he meant the manor piano.

“You’d go?” Jason asked. “If I set it up?”

“Yes.”

“Couldn’t have asked for me to reopen Happy Rice or something simple like that.”

“No.”

“Done. Though we’re still going to the Blud bakery ‘Wing likes, and you’re going to Hamilton with Spoiler and—” a thought occurred to him. “I’ve promised you a lot in the last few days.”

“People do that,” Tim said, sounding sleepy. “I think it’s the five-shot coffees. They think something’s wrong.”

“And what do you tell them?”

“I told the Titans I was on the caffeine diet. That didn’t work out well. I told the W.E. staff that I ate small meals. They didn’t see me ever do it, so no dice there, and Batman’s been considering my application to just have food injected intravenously.”

“…like a coma patient.”

“Like someone who, like Alexander Hamilton, is nonstop.” Tim might say that, but his voice was getting more and more distant with every passing second.

“Yeah, but for you there is no ‘after the war’,” Jason said. “You better hope ‘Wing is coming, because I can’t carry you off of this roof if you’re too sleepy.” Even if he didn’t want Tim to worry, Tim should be aware of his limitations. Right now, Jason was limited to getting one person and one person alone off the roof. Thank God, his comm crackled and he put the helmet back on to better access the communicators, missing whatever Tim said about his being ‘too sleepy’.

“Almost there!” Nightwing said, sounding a little stressed. “Then maybe you can fill me in on when we’ll be partnering up again if Robin needs a break. Or rather, he has a break and needs a break.”

Robin’s voice, irritated, almost interrupted Nightwing. “It is not broken, Nightwing! Wrists are naturally this flexible!”

Dick hummed happily. “That means he punched somebody and hurt it worse.”
“Just like an Al Ghul,” Jason replied without thinking about it.


“According to B, I saved yours!” Jason replied but – quietly, mindful of his surroundings. “Be careful when you two show up, okay? A miracle is happening.”

“T—Red Robin is asleep?” Dick asked excitedly.

“Yeah, so don’t frakking wake him up. I can’t get him off the roof or I’d bring him down myself.”

“Right – B mentioned that you’re injured, Red Hood?” Dick asked. Astonishing, Jason reflected; Dick hadn’t ‘known’ Red Hood longer than a day and already he sounded like Dick Grayson, Worried Older Sibling to the World.

“Old injury,” Jason lied.

“Tt. ‘Old.’ He injured himself yesterday and has been impaired ever since,” Damian said, spoiling what little remnant of dignity Jason had.

“The demon kicked it after it was injured,” Jason added.

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry, Red Hood, he—he really is trying to be better about that.” Holy crap, Dick sounded panicked. Before thinking about it (hell, maybe he was as tired as Tim), Jason interrupted the flood of apologies.

“No, I know, it wasn’t—it wasn’t a bad move. Not my preferred choice, but it did what he needed it to.” Otherwise, Jason probably would have kept moving around and both of them would be dead in the rubble of the building. A twisted knee was a small price to pay for survival.

“That’s good to hear?” Dick said quietly through the comms – and audible behind Jason. The Red Hood severed the comm channel and turned, spotting the blue-suited vigilante as he landed noiselessly on the roof behind Jason. Robin was only seconds behind Dick, looking with immediate distaste as Red Robin’s sleeping form. Tim had fallen asleep curled up facing the other way, otherwise he never would have missed their arrival. Nightwing’s mouth made a downward curve as he looked at Tim’s form.

“Maaan,” he said quietly. “Kid’s getting too big to carry off the roof.”

“They can’t stay eight running around with their cameras and going to the circus forever,” Jason quipped.

Nightwing looked over at him wearing a strange expression, unsure what to say in this instance to a helmeted man who appeared to know too much about his brother.

Damian sighed long-sufferingly and explained for Dick’s benefit: “We have all forgotten him, due to some alien artifact. He was an adopted son of Batman and played the role of the second Robin for a time. Red Robin remembers him, but that is not relevant at this—”

Too late, Dick’s face had lit up. He threw himself at Red Hood, forgetting the other’s injury in his excitement. Both of them fell to the rooftop as Jason’s bad knee tried and failed to bear the weight of two, fully-armored vigilantes.

“FRAK, WHY?!” Jason groaned.
The exclamation woke Tim up; Jason saw his whole body flinch. Waking up to an ally’s shout and then Damian peering at your face judgmentally wasn’t the most reassuring thing to wake up to. Red Robin got to his feet far faster than Jason, breathing coming in alarmed little bursts.

“Hood?” Tim said, moving away from Damian out of instinct.

“Here,” Jason groaned, shoving at Nightwing’s face. The older man gave up fairly easily, grinning until he realized Jason was actually in pain.

“Sorry, sorry. I just thought if we all forgot you and, geez, if you were my direct replacement? We must’ve been so close! Why does Red remember you? I won’t even bother asking why B didn’t tell me.”

Jason didn’t bother to correct the other’s assumption that they were close. “Red was in the minimum proximity when it happened. What I need from you is to make sure T—frak, Red Robin gets home all right. What did you want him for?”

The look on Nightwing’s face was obvious guilt, the older man’s gaze directed at Jason’s feet. The Red Hood could put two and two together when it came to things like this.

“You wanted to make sure, in person, that I hadn’t done anything to him,” Jason said. “I can understand that. As you can see, I’ve done nothing but stalk him all night on B’s orders. But you need to get him home.”

“What about you?” Nightwing looked up at him from the studying of his shoes. “Were you living at the manor, or—”

“On my own. Haven’t lived there in a long time,” Jason replied sharply.

“But we shut down all his safehouses,” Tim said, approaching their conversation with no hint of sleep in his voice. “So he’s been staying at my Gotham apartment.”

“And in the Cave last night. Admit it, Red Robin, he is functionally homeless,” Damian cut in, sounding annoyed.

“I am not homeless,” Jason shot back, feeling himself overreact at the term. People who were homeless had less money, less confidence, less support, had often burned their bridges. His bridges had just… forgotten him, crumbled upon themselves when they had been tentative to start with. “I am perfectly capable of finding a hotel if the Replacement didn’t want me dirtying up his place.”

“Just come to the Cave,” Nightwing suggested, shifting his weight to his back foot. ‘Cave,’ not the ‘manor,’ since they were still in public.

“B won’t be a big fan of that,” Jason replied.

“What? Why? Have you asked him?”

“No, but—”

“Then why the hell not?” Nightwing replied and the anger and stress of earlier crept into his voice. “We have spare beds. You probably know we have spare beds. Do you have a bed there? Red Robin, does he—”

“Yeah, he does,” Tim chimed in.
“B and I don’t get along,” Jason said, glad that Dick couldn’t see his eyes darting down and away from Nightwing’s gaze. He had trained the head tilt impulse out of himself and it was so safe in the helmet, where no one could analyze his expressions to death like, say, the Replacement would.

“Are you trying to kill him?” Nightwing asked, the blue eyes in his translucent domino lenses flat and unassuming.

“Oh, not for a couple years.” He’d been startled into honesty.

“Then you’re coming home,” Dick decided. “You probably have a room and everything, you moron. B can go sit in his stupidly big room if he has a problem with it.”

Dick had an inimitable skill that he would deny if Jason ever mentioned it: Dick could cease giving a shit what Bruce thought at any time. Even when Jason had been addled in the Lazarus Pit for God’s sake, he couldn’t stop caring what Bruce thought but Dick had been able to go off and be Nightwing and not give a single damn.

“Okay,” Jason conceded. “But I can’t swing there from here.”

“Batman was on 63rd and Finnegan when we passed him. Supes was picking up the Lantern,” Nightwing replied and murmured something to Oracle before continuing to speak to Jason: “I’m sure I can get you a ride.”

Jason went pale beneath the helmet. Sleeping over at the manor with a family that didn’t remember was one thing, the manor was frakking huge. Riding with Bruce? Entirely different frakking story. He began shaking his head.

“He already saw me point a gun at someone tonight, ‘Wing. I’m better off walking. Seriously. I’ll walk.”

“Too late,” the asshole replied. “Besides, you’ll have to see each other over breakfast tomorrow, might as well get it over with.” He eyed Jason’s knee. “How are you getting off the building?”

Before Dick could decide anything else for him, Jason swung a leg over the side of the roof, hooked the grapnel as an anchor, and started rappelling down the side of the building. If any Bat had a problem with it, he would be too far away to hear the complaint.

The Batmobile slunk around the corner long before he wanted to see it, as if it’d been waiting for him to be within five feet of the ground, able to carefully reclaim his grapnel and limp towards the formerly-empty street. He stood there after it pulled up, fighting himself as to whether to open the door or walk away, pretend he had anywhere else to go. But Tim would probably lock his apartment. Besides, Jason’s knee felt like it was on fire and if he hadn’t had the phone-a-Bat taxi, he was sure he’d be changing clothes and calling an overpriced taxi to get anywhere. Until Barbara unlocked his deeper bank accounts (or he got a civilian job), this was life.

Jason got in on the passenger side, where a Robin would typically sit, and tried to ignore the familiarity of their positions. Batman must have been doing the same thing because he didn’t say anything for at least three minutes. And when he did…

“Is Tim all right?” Bruce asked.

‘Ooh, first names,’ was Jason’s first reaction. He wondered how Bruce would react if he said ‘Dick’s taking him home’ or anything equally identifying. He took the simpler route.

“Yeah, he was actually napping until the demon showed up.”
“Injuries?”

“I’m not your tattletale. He’s fine.”

Batman shook his head, the corners of his mouth turning down in faint regret. “He says he’s fine every time someone asks. I don’t think you would believe it any more than me.”

“That’s fine, the only people we have to fool are non-Bats,” Jason replied. “And I think Tim would like to be able to fool the Titans and Dam—Robin.”

“I know you know them, Jason.”

Jason’s breath caught in his throat. He knew all the escape hatches to the Batmobile, but if Batman had a dossier, he would know that Jason knew them, would’ve locked them down.

Batman must have noticed his sudden stiffness. “And it’s okay that you know them. It’s better if you know your… family is on your side. Red Robin hasn’t shared much but he did mention that Project Muninn is extraterrestrial and the ship is Russian.” He sounded a little annoyed. “And that it’s gone. However, Duela and the telepath Bluetooth will be delivered to the Watchtower for analysis as to how much they know about our identities. We are currently tracking down Phenom’s father, Louis Collier, who bankrolled the Chaos Pact’s enhancements and Bluetooth’s sister, Marisa Hodgins.”

“I don’t think Project Muninn has anything to do with the Chaos Pact,” Jason muttered. “Or with anything, other than a clusterfrak of an accident. Tim’s helping me, so you can get back to dispensing justice. You don’t gotta worry, I’m not gonna tell anyone who anyone is.”

“It’s not necessary that you do everything alone.”

“I’m not killing people and I know you don’t know me, but when I’m not killing people, we only talk when there’s some kind of all-hands-on-deck situation. That’s our relationship, open and shut and we’re both pretty happy with it shut.”

“What if I’m not happy with that?” Bruce asked, never taking his eyes off the road. Jason couldn’t remember the last time he took a breath so he forced himself to exhale, inhale.

“You’re happy with it, don’t question what worked.” Jason felt himself sneer.

“This is an all-hands-on-deck situation that is dependent on our working together with you so no, I don’t consider a relationship where you are shut off from everyone but Tim to be ‘working’, ” Bruce said evenly. “I don’t want to overlook something. I don’t want you to run. I want you to get some sleep and know that someone will help you with this.”

Jason felt his shoulders twitching, antsy with the new drift of this conversation. “Sleep, sure. But you don’t know what you’re demanding. You only ever give me permission to operate out of your sight and out of your city, B, and hell, you might be right to stop me from working in Gotham. I’m not gonna take more than I’m given just because you’ve all forgotten me. I’m not a thief.”

“I have faith that you’ll only ever be my son,” Bruce said. The car accelerated and though it wasn’t raining, Jason felt like he was hydroplaning. Gliding, adrift and uncertain, into unknown territory.
Tell me it’s not true, say I only dreamed it

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from the Blood Brothers song ‘Tell Me It’s Not True’

BatCat are getting married on Steve Roger’s birthday. And if you use the ‘First Vengeance’ birthday of 1918, it’s exactly 100 years on their wedding day since he was born! …I don’t know what Tom King is trying to do, but I’m enjoying it. Also, the comic with Nightwing vs. Hush is gorgeous. That’s all.

Thank you, as always, for interacting with the fic and for being patient when the chapter is practically late like today. ;D Also... Damian isn’t exactly being nice to Tim, but he knows that Tim knows he’s running himself into the ground and still does it. That can be frustrating to watch even when you don’t like the person as such. Ramble done, there should be more Jason next chapter when I get this train BACK ON TRACK.

Nightwing waited until the Batmobile had disappeared around the street corner before turning to Red Robin and Robin. Damian noted that the stress from before had returned; Grayson remained irritated that he had been kept out of this mess with the Red Hood. Telling him that he shouldn’t be wouldn’t help. Grayson was already angry enough about his punching a ‘baddie’ and nearly falling over from the pain. However, now that they had found Drake and sent off the Red Hood, Grayson could be angry with Drake. Good.

“Red Robin, you’re awake enough to get back to your cycle?” Grayson asked.

“Yeah, I’ll go pick it up,” Red Robin said, managing to make the task sound like it somehow wasn’t his job. Though many things Drake did came across as weak, Damian could tell that shaking off the dredges of the nap was harder than usual. Sleep remained a rare occurrence for him and when it hit, it hit hard.

“I will accompany him,” Damian announced, figuring they were better safe than sorry. “His frail constitution may not make the drive.”

Grayson held up a hand as Red Robin began protesting the declaration with more than his usual vigor.

“Please, Red?” Grayson said. “I need to check on something on the other side of the city, then I’ll be heading back too. I don’t trust you not to get home, but Robin going with you will ease my mind.”

Drake still looked uncommonly stubborn. “Please?”

“He means ‘please be less of an idiot,’ Red Robin, in case you are overlooking the subtleties,” Damian said. “It is not as if we have to share a cycle.”

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“He means ‘please be less of an idiot,’ Red Robin, in case you are overlooking the subtleties,” Damian said. “It is not as if we have to share a cycle.”

“Fine,” Drake finally muttered, sounding sullen and childish. Grayson had once told Damian that whenever Tim was upset, he called Grayson to talk it out. Ergo, any distress – and this was Drake in distress – would make Tim more conversational even if all other interpersonal gestures (eye contact, good posture, etc.) were out of the question. So were good manners: Red Robin didn’t even make sure Damian was ready before he swung off the roof in the direction of his cycle, leaving Damian
with only seconds to get down the building and follow him on the cycle.

So what if Drake wanted to put as much distance between them as possible? Damian had been assigned as safeguard to Red Robin, who had become too tired to pay attention to what he was doing.

Also known as the perfect time to ask questions Damian knew Drake wouldn’t ordinarily answer.

#

After recovering Drake’s cycle, Red Robin took off towards the long road home without a word to Damian. Still, only a minute of lag time stretched between them before Damian caught up, his cycle racing alongside Drake’s on the main drag of Gotham’s City Hall District. His wrist reminded him, repeatedly, that he shouldn’t be doing anything with it, and he ignored the dull ache creeping into his shoulder. There would be time to recuperate later, probably. Damian waited, watching for opportunities, until they were roaring along on the freeway back toward Wayne Manor, far from the scope of Grayson’s possible interferences. It wouldn’t be hard to speak to each other; Gordon had programmed the cycles to automatically connect their users’ communicators and open private channels whenever they were in a six-hundred-foot proximity. Better than trying to do it one-handed and the connection could still be severed via a verbal key phrase.

“Red Robin,” Damian said.

“What, demon.”

The beauty of this type of conversation was that each word went exactly where it was supposed to; there was no escape but to hear it. Even better than that, there were no facial expressions to deal with, only intonation and content and the length of silences. Damian could happily converse with almost anyone this way, except Father and Grayson, whose expressions were too important to miss. Regrettably, it also meant his words to Drake had to be chosen carefully.

“Your planning tonight has been subpar,” Damian said. Red Robin’s entire posture tensed up, the motorcycle helmet lowering down towards his shoulders as if he planned to shoot forward, out of range and out of sight.

“Really? That’s why you came?” Red Robin shot back. The venom in his voice was muted – the kind of quiet frustration Batman would get from a lead turning up dead or a woman choosing to walk out of the emergency room and right back to her abuser. Frustration that wanted better, wanted something other than what was and knew it wasn’t going to work. Red Robin didn’t zoom away though. That was a start.

“No. I came because you almost fell asleep on a roof. You were trained better.”

“Pretty sure you fell asleep on a few roofs when you started, brat.”

“Exactly. When I started. You have been compromised since our first encounter with the Yellow Lantern tonight. Even you aren’t moronic enough to take physical action against an overpowered assailant.” Damian felt his nose crinkle at the thought of having to say this, but it was necessary to the pretense. “Nightwing said you talk about these… feelings… to him, but your anxiety has not resolved, so I assume you have not spoken to him, or to Red Hood, or anyone else to restore yourself to full function.”

“And if I haven’t talked to them, why the hell would I talk to you?” Red Robin asked, bringing his cycle to a halt at a stoplight. His face remained invisible under the motorcycle helmet. He didn’t even
Because you are useless like this,” the younger Robin said. “I refuse to watch you mope about the Cave for days while you put off talking to someone and resolving whatever your problem is this time.”

Now the helmet turned to him, staring so long that they almost missed the first green light. Both of them had to speed up to make it through and the sudden twisting motion made Damian’s wrist ache. Much more of this and his ability to navigate would be shot.

“Tt. Are you readying a response?” Damian said as they sped through the intersection and entered the long road that would take them out of the city.

“Just didn’t realize my moping was so blatant.”

“It is blatantly obvious that you are ignoring my question,” Damian replied. “You know that Grayson will only hound it out of you.”

Instead of replying, Drake suddenly steered his bike for the nearest exit, barreling down into the night. Damian followed at a slower pace, wrist progressively reminding him how long the night had been. Did they really need to navigate a dark residential area without cause, just so Drake could—he spotted Red Robin’s cycle turning into the parking lot of a brightly-lit coffeeshop.

“This is not an answer to sleep-deprivation,” Damian growled into his comm.

“This place is open around the clock and we’ve got thirty minutes to go to get back to the Cave,” Drake replied. “You’re free to go.”

Damian parked his cycle and strode in after Red Robin, reflecting that Drake must have been here before to know that it was continuously open. It was also a diversion on the path back to the manor, which always had coffee brewing, meaning that Drake came here to avoid going home. The girl behind the counter smiled easily as they walked in. Whether she thought they were cosplayers or vigilantes, she didn’t care. The smell of donuts filled the air while signs outside and over the counter proclaimed this location as ‘Java Posh.’ Drake quietly ordered some donuts and an iced drink with three shots that made the girl sympathetically say ‘yikes.’ Leaving Damian to pick up the order, Drake headed for the bathroom.

His mistake.

Damian walked back up to the counter, smiled at the girl, and slid a $20 bill across the countertop. “My older brother drinks way too much coffee and needs some sleep. Can you make it decaf?”

The girl didn’t look too sure about his act, but she took the twenty and, as far as Damian could tell, used decaf in each of the shots. By the time Drake came back from the bathroom, she was just setting the modified drink on the counter, next to the bag of donuts. After collecting both coffee and donuts, Drake handed the donuts directly to Damian and headed for the door.

“You can’t drive one-handed,” Damian said.

“I modified the stabilizers and GPS.” Drake swung a leg over the bike. “It’s practically a horse finding its way home at this point.”

“Great, then I won’t have to wait for you.” Damian fired up his cycle, storing the donuts in the rear storage container. His wrist bent a little as he did so, eliciting a hiss through his teeth. It wasn’t a tremor anymore, or even a wobble; it was getting to the point where he couldn’t gesture, much less
drive a motorcycle. Damn the Lantern. Damn Jason Todd.

“Are you going to make it home?” Drake asked, leaning against his cycle and sipping the coffee, despite his statement that he could make the cycle drive him home autonomously.

“Of course,” Damian replied, through gritted teeth.

“Because everyone in this family tends to aggravate their injuries and you just spent tonight fighting, grappling, riding a cycle, and now performing a couple of complex twisting motions.”

“Do you have a point?” Damian moved his hand away from the cycle, glaring at Red Robin’s smug expression. Drake jerked his chin at the cycle’s storage container where the bag of donuts sat.

“Turn off the bike. Eat a donut. We’ll swap bikes.”

“Tt. You are falling asleep and just said you would need your stabilizers to get home. Switching to my bike, even with your scrawny frame, would not improve your chances.” Damian killed the engine all the same. If he couldn’t get Drake, his charge, to leave, he couldn’t either.

“If you hold your damn horses a few more seconds, I’ll finish the coffee, fix your stabilizers too, and then it won’t matter which bike I take.” Given the way Drake followed this statement with chugging the drink, Damian had no doubt that was his intention; even so, there was a reason he’d switched Drake’s drink to decaf.

“Would you like to talk about your encounter with the Yellow Lantern now?” Damian said in the driest tone he could muster. Drake choked on the drink.

“C-c-cute,” he sputtered, moving behind Damian to grab a napkin from the donut bag. “No.”

“…I will allow you to cheat at poker if you tell me.”

“Nice try, I don’t cheat.” Drake fiddled with the controls of Damian’s bike while the younger teen ignored him and opened the bag of donuts instead.

“Tt. Which is why you keep losing,” Damian said. “If you cheat, I will refrain from pointing it out and you may be able to win back some of your money from Nightwing.”

Oh, these donuts were— he hadn’t been listening as Drake ordered them and they had come in the paper bag, so he was only now discovering that this place sold rose pistachio donuts, which were a bit sweeter than he usually preferred but it meant Drake stopping off here was premeditated. One didn’t just stumble upon places with Middle Eastern donuts. Damian swallowed hard around a bite as he realized Drake might have found this place a long time ago and they never became friends, so Drake never told him about it. Researching other people was the kind of thing Drake did, even when it was as stupid as donuts.

“Pretty sure Jas—Red Hood has most of my money,” Drake replied, attaching some kind of port to the dashboard of Damian’s cycle. The GPS flashed green as it synced up with the device. “He used to play his hands close to the vest until Nightwing won most of it, then they’d duke it out. Winner took the money, loser bought snacks the following week.”

“Then we will reclaim it from him as well. I will assist and we will split the proceeds.” Damian took another bite of donut. He didn’t want to tell Drake that this was his new favorite place. He didn’t want Drake to do anything else right or nice tonight, actually.

Drake finished fiddling with the dashboard. “There, you should be good to get home with minimal
handlebar adjustments if you’re sure you don’t want to take mine. The device amplifies your movements so… take it slow.”

“I thought we were having a discussion,” Damian said, brushing pieces of ground pistachio off his fingers. His wrist twitched unhappily.

“Hypotheticals.” Drake swung a leg over his cycle and tossed the empty coffee container into the recyclables bin some twenty feet away. “Anyway, what she did had nothing to do with what actually happened, so it doesn’t matter. Nobody died.”

“But someone did die in your experience.” Damian wasn’t going to let this go, not when he’d gotten this far.

Red Robin frowned, rubbing a hand over his masked eyes. “It’s none of your business. You’ll take it wrong anyway.”

“So it was something to do with myself.” There were only a number of things that would make Drake this uncomfortable that involved him. “Fantasizing about my death?”

Well, that was neither good or nice.


“History begs to differ. I was the starring name on your one-time hit list.”

“Not—not to kill you and look, at the time I thought I had to consider things like that.” Drake was becoming audibly agitated, as if he hadn’t considered that Damian would remember that. Unusual, Damian thought. The hit list was certainly a memorable occurrence for Damian.

“Then get to the point. What did the Lantern do?” he demanded, while Drake was still unaware that coffee wasn’t coursing through his feeble system and wouldn’t keep him alert enough to say things he didn’t mean to. Drake was a creature of precision and, when he couldn’t be, he was predictable. So, Red Robin slammed the motorcycle helmet back on, making his expression harder to read and ensuring that he would only be audible through comms. Which meant he was panicking, trying to decide the right thing to say to get Damian to leave him alone. Appropriately-caffeinated Drake would have told him to piss off already.

“She confused me for a minute, that’s all,” Drake said. “Convinced me that I failed. That she killed Nightwing using you, the way she meant to, and then while I was pinning her, that you couldn’t stand what you’d done and you were defenseless and she just— shoved you off the roof. Like you’d swat someone away from… I didn’t move fast enough and you still—” Drake stopped making eye contact altogether. Saying nothing would prompt Drake to say more, so Damian said nothing. Drake bit the inside of his lip and glared down at his coffee cup. A resolute expression still clung to his face, the shadows beneath his eyes dark.

“You shouted for me,” Drake said, voice little more than a whisper. “I was supposed to save you.”

“Tt.”

As if realizing who he was standing in front of, Drake’s typical demeanor reemerged. His expression went neutral and tone disconnected, like he was reading a report to Wayne Enterprises’ board of directors.

“Yeah. Stupid, sure. But I’ve seen B through several dead Robins. Each one drives him a little closer to madness and murder. Nightwing and I can’t hold that off forever and if Nightwing died and you
died, it’d be just me.” His voice became strained with fear again and Drake snarled at his own weakness. His next sentence sounded too controlled to be reflecting whatever was truly going through his head. “It would’ve been on my damn watch too. His golden child and his blood son dead because of me. So, yeah, it was hard to shake off, for a moment.”

Damian tilted his head to the side, listening for any lies in the other’s voice and finding none.

“This ‘Red Hood’ would not help, if it actually happened?”

“He and Batman are on the outs more often than the ins and Jason loses his head a bit when people die. Besides… he’d never help me get B back.” Drake closed his eyes for a long moment. Damian couldn’t tell if it was the decaf/failed coffee run catching up to him or another wave of angst.

“You switched my coffee, didn’t you?” Drake said, the words barely a question.

“You do not require coffee at this hour. Anyway, there is no part of the Lantern killing Nightwing and myself that would be your doing,” Damian said. “Your failure, perhaps, but not your doing.”

“Yeah, rationality, great, that thing nobody feels around Yellow Lanterns. But realistically, if I stood by and you two got killed, that’d put an end to my being allowed to be in this family.” Drake caught himself. “God, I need coffee if I’m telling you crap like that.”

Drake started up Damian’s cycle instead, the GPS making a happy chirping noise as it began communicating with the new stabilizers. “You got what you wanted. Big surprise. I’m going home. Just push the green GPS to start, the device will automatically start configuring.”

Damian got on the cycle and hit the button, eliciting more happy chirping noises. Obnoxious, and very Drake. When it finished and he eased the cycle forward, the bike practically jumped out of his hands. He braked, it bucked.

“Obviously, you should focus entirely on your driving,” Drake said via their comm channel. “And no more of it until the wrist is in better shape.”

“Did you turn on your chauffeur pilot? It’s not like you can be trusted to drive either,” Damian shot back, already tired of making micro-adjustments to the cycle’s navigation. His wrist cooperated, however, and he wouldn’t crash.

“Already running,” Drake replied.

A corner of Damian’s nose crinkled up in a sneer, guaranteed to get under Drake’s skin. “Then first one home is the best of the Robins.”

He quickly left Red Robin behind, with the module attached to the dash which made even a mild acceleration into a lunge.

Damian wished the vision had been addressed immediately after the encounter by someone like Nightwing, rather than letting it fester in Drake’s neurotic mind until Damian had to deal with it. He had thought their conversation would end with angry shouting and blows and he might not even emerge with the blackmail he was looking for. If he hadn’t changed Drake’s order to decaf, they might still be fighting now. Emotions were Grayson’s territory and Damian couldn’t wait to yield back the small portion he had tried to corral.

However, he technically now had leverage over Drake. Tricky to get, always worth the effort. And he hadn’t needed to apologize for the unfair insult on the first rooftop to get it. Another part of him whispered that he wasn’t going to bring this conversation up again. If it had been Damian the
Lantern grabbed, pulled his fear from his mind, he might well have seen his entire family lying around him, dead at his hand. At least Drake felt guilty for things he couldn’t control.

Drake probably wasn’t even hurrying to get home, Damian reflected. Though the other cycle followed a mile behind Damian’s, the gate would still be open when Drake finally arrived. Someone would be waiting for both of them. It was Drake’s job to convince himself of that, not Damian’s.
No matter what we are, we are a family

He felt thrilled to have a new brother, Dick told himself. The new brother was older than Tim, a more fight-inclined than Damian but with a few more social graces, and it was always good to have a new brother. He told himself this again and again as he watched Batman, still in the cowl, watching the Red Hood, who struggled to get out of the Batmobile and now leaned heavily against it. The Marlon Brando impersonation might have worked, if not for all of the Red Hood’s weight being braced on one leg, something which hadn’t escaped the Batman’s notice.

Batman took a step towards the Red Hood and the younger man’s head snapped up. If Dick hadn’t figured out from Jason’s comments earlier that they didn’t get along, the reaction alone would have clued him in. Plus, both were still wearing their respective headgear. Bruce pulled his cowl off to look more approachable; the Red Hood did not.

“You shouldn’t have gone out if the knee was this bad—” Bruce began but the Red Hood was having none of it.

“Excuse you, I’ve seen almost every member of this family go out on patrol stabbed. Tim lost his spleen and went up against Ra’s not a week later.”

“An emergency situation,” Bruce replied, tightening his grip on the cowl in his hands. “And Red Robin had access to medical care, both there and here.”

“Stabbed. And went up again Ra’s Al Ghul.”

Both vigilantes seemed to think they had the upper hand in the argument. With a sigh, Bruce went to change, probably thinking there was no point in arguing with someone who repeated their argument’s highlights when faced with superior logic. The Red Hood, on the other hand, didn’t seem to want to win the argument so much as wanting Batman to leave the room.

That’s what Dick had to infer anyway, because the minute Bruce left, Jason slid down the side of the Batmobile, breath strained with effort, and fumbled to get his pantleg high enough that he could remove the knee brace. Dick supposed he should be grateful that the younger man kept his pants on.

Dick approached and, when Jason didn’t warn him off, he knelt next to the Red Hood to unbuckle the brace, which meant Jason could stop straining his knee to get at the buckles. The Red Hood grunted his thanks and finally pulled off the helmet.

“Doesn’t that thing get hot?” Dick asked, struggling not to react at seeing his ‘brother’s’ face for the first time. The Red Hood—Jason, he reminded himself—looked like sleep was something that happened to other people. This exhausted look was underscored by his hair, which was a shaggy
mess. Alfred would’ve never put up with them running around looking this untidy, which only emphasized that the Red Hood didn’t have much time for Bats and their demands.

“Yeah, but I figure not getting poisoned, blinded, or drowned easily makes up for it.” Jason yawned and moved to pull himself to his feet. “You and the kids split up?”

“Yeah, I had to check on something across town.”

“Surprised B let you do that on your own.” The knee brace in one hand, Jason limped towards the elevator. Then, pausing: “How far behind you were they?”

“Not far.” Dick had checked on their locations via the Batcomputer a few minutes ago and saw them on their way, vitals stable. They must have just had a detour or an argument or both. “And I wasn’t alone. Black Bat is visiting for a couple days and needed some help. Do you know Black Bat…?”

Taking this as a cue, the Batman’s daughter walked out of the shadows. She took in Dick and Jason’s relative positions and the distant sound of Bruce washing off the night’s patrol and moved gracefully over to assess this new person.

“Hiya Cass.” Jason smiled with slightly more ease at Cass, then eyed Dick. “No way she needed your help with anything on patrol.”

Cass touched his hair (which must’ve been gross, because it was sweaty from the helmet), and visually inspected his injured knee.

“Apartment building hostage situation,” Dick replied. “Adding backup reduces the risk of collateral damage.”

Dick knew better than to think Cass had been in any real danger from a run-of-the-mill hostage situation resolution, but it had given him the chance to make sure she spent the night at home and fill her in (as much as he knew) about Jason. Cass didn’t get along terribly well with the comms, as she preferred reading body language, and he’d wanted to get this done right.

With the pause in conversation, Cass had upgraded her inspection to lightly touching Jason’s injured knee and then, seeing the brace in his hand, twisting her mouth in displeasure. She straightened, turning the frown to Jason’s face. He looked mildly guilty.

“I wore it for hours, sis.” Jason gently pushed her fingers away, taking another unsteady step towards the elevator.

Cass’s dark eyes flickered over her shoulder to find Dick. He shrugged one shoulder. She knew about as much as he did and she knew that he didn’t know any more than he’d told her. Ahh, Bat-family communication styles. Nobody ever missed them.

“Hello,” Cass said, finally returning Jason’s original greeting. The Red Hood nodded, having finally gotten far enough to brace himself on the desk, near where Dick sat.

“You couldn’t have told all of us about this memory thing when it happened?” Dick asked him.

“It wasn’t supposed to take this long,” Jason said. “Nobody but baby bird was supposed to be involved, then he dragged B in and now it’s a whole Bat mission thing.” The Red Hood glanced back at the entrance to the Cave, keeping a lookout for the returning Robins. “We barely see each other in the best of times, Dick. Mostly emergencies.”

“That’s… weird,” Dick said. Jason didn’t seem to hear.
“And with luck, Timmers’ll figure this out and I won’t have to be…” The younger man seemed to struggle with words, finding too many that he didn’t like. “Here. Won’t have to be here, much longer.”

“Thanks a lot.” Dick closed out of the case files he had been wrapping up on the computer and looked over at the stubborn kid who was apparently his brother. The Red Hood looked a little annoyed Dick had closed out of the files, so Dick didn’t log out quite yet. “Did you need something?”

“Need you to lock down my bike in Gotham,” the Red Hood muttered. “It’s unit RH0427.”

Simple enough. Dick pulled up their tracking program and shut down the hefty motorcycle as well as turning on its camouflage mode.

“I’m a little surprised you have that lock-down tech on one of your bikes,” Dick said.

“I didn’t know I did.” Jason pushed himself off the desk with a grunt of exertion. “You always gotta be suspicious when Batman announces your Christmas presents. Anyway, I’m findin’ my bedroom, Goldie. Make sure the youngsters get in okay. Keep ’em safe.”

Cass had been watching them wordlessly throughout the conversation and slipped after the Red Hood on quiet feet. Whether to shadow him or assist him, Dick wasn’t sure.

“Sure thing,” Dick said as the two vanished into the elevator. Jason’s order to make sure the kids stayed safe, casual as it was, sent fear through him: had he forgotten at some point? Had he failed to keep someone safe? What had he—

Red Robin came screeching into the Cave’s garage as if winning a race. He pulled off his helmet and scanned the room warily. “Robin’s not back yet?”

“He was following you, right?”

Tim’s grin grew. “Yeah. Following me.” He moved towards the showers, even as Dick cleared his throat.

“Ah, baby bird, can we talk about the Red Hood?”

“Yeah.” Tim seemed thrown by the question when he shouldn’t have been, the grin melting away. “He didn’t… do anything, right?”

“No, no, I just don’t know anything about him really. B said to work with him tonight and to dial back on the gymnastics so I didn’t get shot, but other than that…”

Tim threw another glance at the entrance and then took a breath. “Yeah, so, as Damian… advertised, Jason’s our brother.”

“And we’re not close,” Dick filled in.

“No. He died when he was fifteen. The Joker killed him. Ra’s brought him back.”

“That is a thing I’d remember.”

“He only ever deals with it through terrible jokes, so now you’ll recognize how much he actually brings it up.” Tim sighed. “He’s been holding up well with this memory thing, but it’s stretching past the acceptable mark for weird shit. So, if you feel the need to push, don’t push.”
“How are you holding up?” Dick asked and the question wasn’t just because it sounded like a nice
turnaround. Tim held himself tightly, breath shallower than it should be. Like a kid with a cold in
class, hoping that Nightwing wouldn’t notice the difference.

“I’m okay, Dick,” Tim replied. “The Lantern said she told him what the cure to this was. After that
gets figured out, I swear, I’ll catch up on sleep.”

“What, after he’s cured?” Dick asked incredulously. “I know you. I’ll find you down here at God-
knows-what-hour, dragging yourself through the muck about this. I don’t wanna do that.”

Tim knew when he was defeated. “Fine. I’ll take a nap. The demon shouldn’t be much longer, we
just had to have a… talk. Which you don’t need to ask him about.” He pointed definitively at Dick
even as he started taking steps away. “No asking him. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Got it, got it,” Dick replied, monitoring his younger brother as Tim veered for the changing area just
as Bruce walked out. The two didn’t speak to each other, though Bruce took a seat by the
Batcomputer to wait for his youngest to return. Damian roared in only a few seconds later and true to
his word, Dick didn’t push.

Which was not to say Damian didn’t immediately tell him on their way back up to the manor.

#

Jason couldn’t help the feeling of relief that washed over him when he heard Tim’s bedroom door
shut, and then Damian’s bedroom door shut from his listening post at the end of the hallway. Once
Cass had dropped him off at what he told her was his bedroom, she hadn’t checked to make sure he
went to bed, so he’d slipped to the end of the hallway to wait for the Robins. It felt… creepy, sure,
but the damn rooms were practically soundproof (nightmares, much?) and it would be much creepier
to open their bedroom doors and check on them in an hour… and problematic if Tim didn’t go to
sleep. Jason got to his feet, breathing a little unsteadily with the exertion.

Both boys were safe, both were home. Whatever they decided to do, Jason, at least, could go to
sleep.

Or so he told himself as he reentered his bedroom, laid down, and pretended sleep was something
that wasn’t as evasive as the end of a rainbow. One night at Wayne Manor was acceptable, even to a
brain as panicky as his. One night could be an accident, a weekend trip, a temporary injury that he
wouldn’t want to deal with at home.

Two days, unplanned, even if one was in the Cave and primarily spent unconscious, was like a
growing ball of terror deep in his stomach, which doubled at the thought that only one person in this
giant house remembered him. If he became dependent on the manor, even expected that he could
come back to it one night without facing inquiry or being turned away, he was on a dark road headed
south.

Jokers waited around every corner when a kid threw their lot in with Bruce. Jokers, Riddlers, Cats,
and Penguins, and none of them would Jason be allowed to kill. Despite curling up under the rich
red comforter, positioned so he could see the door and both the room’s windows, he felt on edge.
Bruce continued pretending that Jason could actually be his son, even going so far as to let him sleep
in his ‘own’ room. That wasn’t the Bruce Jason knew, not by a long shot.

So thinking, Jason dragged the comforter off the bed, wrapped up in it, and sat against the far wall,
one gun drawn and pointed at the floor. He didn’t want to shoot anyone in the manor. Even if Bruce
 barged in after fifteen minutes to drag him to Arkham, he didn’t want to shoot Bruce. Taze, maybe,
but he didn’t want to overplay his hand with the suit.

Having the gun drawn meant business; it felt real and stable in his hand. That probably made him extremely American, but he was scared of what could happen, so frak stereotypes. Breathe, just breathe.

Don’t think about ambushes. Just sleep. Whether he trusts you or not, Bruce won’t let anyone else into the manor to take you. Tim would help you. Dick would help you… maybe. You’re safe, you’re safe.

He had been keeping it together in the face of memory erasure too long though. He’d been doing so well, and his own fucking PTSD decided to remind him right now that the whole situation – from the moment no one had known him but Tim to this moment in his room – was scary as hell.

Duela had told him the ‘cure,’ fine, maybe, but if he couldn’t manage it, if he broke or ran before accomplishing the goal, he would stay trapped like this. The odds were built against him, a wall of brick and mortar and Bruce’s low, low expectations.

He felt himself begin to hyperventilate and instinctively called up the memory of every breathing technique Ducra had ever taught him, every reprimand about panicking and control that Talia had flung at him. Breathe. Breathe. After a couple of minutes, his knee’s complaints could no longer be ignored without putting himself into a deeper trance than he was comfortable with. He climbed back up onto the bed and still couldn’t find solace there, feeling like an imposter in what had once been his home.

After another hour of fidgeting, Jason sat on the bed, wearing his undershirt and work pants, but feeling more naked than ever. One gun trained on the door’s base, the foot of his good leg braced on the floor in case he needed to leap towards the window.

A long night, to say the least.
Breakfast when Jason spent the night at the manor could go one of two ways, in Tim’s experience. Jason would spend the entire time snapping at Bruce, trying to continue whatever argument they’d begun the night before. Alternately, he would spend the entire time eating, maybe answering questions if they were posed, and then helping Alfred with the dishes.

If he hadn’t spent the night at the manor but showed up at breakfast, all bets were off. He might show up to help cook breakfast for them (to Alfred’s perpetual surprise), or to happily consume whatever had been prepared while heaping compliments on the chef, or simply look annoyed that they were eating and start talking business, sneaking bacon into his pockets the whole time. Tim remembered one instance where Jason and he had a coffee-drinking competition. It didn’t end well for either of them, but it really didn’t end well for Jason. And then of course there were the times the Red Hood spent the night at the manor but was too injured to come to breakfast. That usually meant bed-bound and none of them were that, this morning.

Tim didn’t know which ‘breakfast-Jason’ to expect today. He was still waking up, fighting the morning exhaustion with coffee and dry toast, as the clock pushed eleven.

The federal agents had called around nine to demand to know why there had been sightings of the ‘alien’ ship over the Atlantic Ocean. For the past two hours, Bruce’s calm, rumbling voice had emanated from the adjacent study as he conducted a conference call with the federal agents and W.E. lawyers to announce that the ship had been ‘stolen’ the day before. He’d asked Tim to avoid joining the conversation, as he was going to claim that Tim (like everyone else) had been taking the agency-wide Mental Health Day. The break-in (break-out?) hadn’t garnered much media attention so far, since the ship had been quietly acquired and had left in equal stealth.

Still no Jason.

Even Dick had stumbled out of his room fifteen minutes ago, clad in an aged Wayne Enterprises t-shirt and loose pants. The acrobat fumbled cereal out of the cabinet and into a bowl before plopping at the table across from Tim and Tim’s third cup of coffee.

“Have you seen Damian?” Tim asked, since Dick had been up near the bedrooms more recently. Usually Damian was up by now too, feeding his animals and harassing Tim.

“Training? After last night?” Tim shook his head. “Kid isn’t human, I’ve always said it.”

“Tim.” Dick’s voice was a mild reprimand and the intentional gentleness of it set Tim’s nerves on edge.

“What.” Tim forced his voice to be clinical, unemotional. Sometimes that made Dick back off. Not this time.

“Our little brother,” Dick began, emphasizing the relationship. “Told me about last night. Because he said, and I quote: ‘Drake’s function is still impaired and will remain impaired if you,’ meaning me, ‘do not address it.’” Dick lifted an eyebrow, which would have been a serious gesture if not for the spoonful of sugary marshmallow puffs halfway to his mouth. “Sound about right?”

“Eat your cereal.” Tim stood, glad to hear the sound of Bruce wrapping up his phone call. Bruce and Dick could talk for hours; he just had to get out of the room before Bruce returned. “The demon doesn’t have any right or need to be telling people things, especially things I asked you not to ask about.”

“It’s not just things, Tim.” Casting a reluctant look at the cereal, which was sure to get soggy in his absence, Dick stood and took a step towards Tim, who took a corresponding step backwards.

“Even B gets upset about that kind of stuff. He knows how real it feels, how it’s like time dilation and a nightmare at once.” Dick ran a hand through his bed-headed hair. “He doesn’t get verbally upset like Damian, but he stays closer for a week or a month’s patrol after it. It’s like – a separation anxiety, like a reminder than it could happen to any one of us, at any time. That it has, in Damian’s case.”

“But Bruce functions,” Tim shot back. “He functions and he trained me, therefore I can function through this. Damian doesn’t need to tell you that I—” His internal monologue took over from there, completing the runaway train of a sentence only in his mind: *that I see it when I try to fall asleep, like every death I’ve caused or failed to prevent.*

Dick looked at him as though he could hear the thoughts.

“Timmy… how can I help you with this?”

“Thank you,” Tim said, because everyone in this dysfunctional family needed to know when they were doing The Right Thing. “But it’s fine.”

He could hear Damian approaching the kitchen which meant this conversation with Dick was over. The brat might know everything, but that didn’t mean Tim had to behave like he did. Tim filled the coffee cup again, sat down and opened his laptop. There were still work documents due on Monday, assuming the feds didn’t find out he’d been present and pull him into the investigation. Peripheral to his sightline, Damian opened the refrigerator door. Despite Dick’s encouragement that Damian should pick cereal, the younger teen grabbed some Greek yogurt and fruit while Cass, who had entered silently behind him, chose the cereal. Dick grinned, happy to have found a convert, and made small talk as such.

“Where is Red Hood?” Damian asked, setting his food down as far as possible from Tim and as close to Dick as possible. Damian now sported a cast on the wrist and his movements were stiff. Even with the modifications Tim had made to the bike, their nighttime activities had taken a toll.

“Not up yet,” Dick said.
“Tt. I assumed you would want to follow up on the Lantern’s cure immediately.”

Tim blinked in surprise, glancing up from the laptop. He hadn’t thought Damian was paying attention. “Yeah, but if he can sleep, he should sleep.”

“No one needs to sleep past eleven, Drake.” Damian pushed himself back from the table and headed for the door. “Is he always this lazy?”

“I’m right here, babybat,” Dick said with mock-hurt.

“You are up. The Red Hood is not. Besides, I have yet to discover that he is employed as anything other than a hooligan.”

Without prompting, Cass set down the milk for her cereal and followed Damian out of the room. Damn the morning, Tim thought wearily. Between Dick’s touchy-feely questions and Bruce’s stressful phone conversations that he had almost been able to overhear – come to think of it, where was Bruce?

Tim’s brain began to catch up with what was happening and he almost fell out of his chair. “Shit.”

“What’s up?” Dick had been trying to make the most of his cereal but now pushed it away. There would always be more cereal. Tim had already thrown himself out the door and hurried for the stairs and the bedrooms upstairs. Stupid Tim, stupid, he thought, taking the stairs two at a time. Damian would wake Jason up aggressively, he didn’t know better; It was too much to hope that Damian would think about what little he knew of Jason’s history and what infinitesimal knowledge the demon probably had about PTSD. The League wouldn’t allow people with severe, untreated PTSD to remain in their ranks. Except, apparently, for Jason, but that was a special case. Ra’s and Talia certainly wouldn’t teach the child how to wake up someone suffering from it without setting them off. Damian might recognize that the bedroom had been soundproofed, but all of their rooms were soundproofed.

He rounded the corner and spotted Damian in the doorway, Cass’s hand pushing him back, placing her body between Damian and the room. Damian held his injured arm at an awkward angle. He was clearly more in pain than he had been in the kitchen, movements before.

Tim took careful steps forward, catching Cass’s eye. Her gaze narrowed and her head shook ever so slightly to forbid him from entering the room. Tim moved forward anyway until he stood just beside her, both of them in front of Damian. The youngest Bat fumed but did nothing reckless.

Namely because inside the room, positioned in the corner, Jason held a handgun pointed at the doorway. His breath came in tight, fast shudders, eyes spun out and wide.

Tim positioned his body away from Jason, making himself a slightly narrower target, and could hear Cass and Damian move out of the way. Next steps – Jason would have to speak first. Prove he was awake and that speaking wouldn’t startle him into firing. His finger wasn’t even on the trigger, hand clenched so tight around the barrel that the whole weapon wavered in a way it didn’t when he was conscious and thinking about the shot.

A minute passed. Two minutes.

Someone’s cell phone went off.

Jason flinched violently and then – blinked. Lowered the gun. Stared at his hand as if it had been acting on its own. He looked up at Tim and reality hit.
“S-shit. Tim. Did I… did I shoot anyone?”

“Finger wasn’t even on the trigger,” Tim said automatically. Jason stared at the lowered gun a few more seconds, then put it on the ground and slumped back against the wall. After a moment, he braced his forehead on his palms.

“Hell. I shoved Damian, didn’t I?”

“I was a few minutes behind, but I’m guessing so.” He could hear Cass and Damian returning to the doorway, audible mostly because Damian tsked loudly.

“How hard?” Jason asked, still without moving.

“Might have flexed his wrist to catch himself, nothing major,” Tim replied. Again, judging by the tsking from the doorway, Damian didn’t agree with Tim’s assessment but didn’t want to say ‘no, it hurts’ in front of Cass. Or anyone.

“I’m so sorry,” Jason said, clearly enough to be heard from the doorway where Damian and Cass stood. He didn’t elaborate with excuses, not in matters like these. Excuses were for when a request was unreasonable or he simply didn’t want to do something. In cases like these, sometimes Tim made the excuse for him.

“You didn’t sleep,” Tim said, stating it as a fact rather than a question. Jason shook his head and Tim could see the spiraling train of thought Red Hood was already on.

“Sleep doesn’t frakking matter, Bruce is going to kill me. Gimme a minute and I’ll go, Replacement,” His palms twisted to claw the back of his head, deep enough to take skin along with remorse. “I’m sorry.”

“No one has said anything about leaving. You gotta get me piano time, remember? Let me talk to them.”

“I shouldn’t be here at all, Replacement,” Jason snapped, lowering his hands. “I should’ve never—”

“I still need to know whatever Duela told you,” Tim interrupted. “So if you’re about to say you shouldn’t’ve come, you’re wrong, because I’m still going to fix this.”

“You can’t fix everything, Tim.” Jason said, sounding like he had pushed through the guilt to the only other emotion he seemed to feel: anger. “Here is the end of the line.”

“No. You’re not leaving like this.” Tim knew how much it would sound like a threat to Jason, but the Red Hood wasn’t going to leave the manor like this. He’d never come back.

Jason began lacing up his boots, scowling at them to avoid looking at Tim. He didn’t reply. The gun went back into the duffel bag, like a bad memory. Behind them, Tim heard Dick approach the doorway and if Dick had come to investigate, it would only be seconds before Bruce was here, making things worse. Batman had a fundamental opposition to being left out of anything happening in his household.

“At least talk it over with me in the Cave first,” Tim said, wondering if he could appeal to Jason’s sense of research. The older Robin obviously and viscerally regretted what he had just done but running would mean Jason had to deal with Gotham, without his safehouses, bank accounts, or the assistance of any of his contacts. “You know leaving right now is a bad idea.”

“He thinks he can leave after that?” Damian demanded from the doorway and yeah, the demon brat
was pissed. Probably mostly in pain but pissed overall.

“I need to have a private conversation with the Red Hood,” Bruce said, suddenly looming from the doorway.

Tim swallowed hard even as Jason flinched. The Red Hood made it to his feet, duffel bag already in hand, but fortunately without withdrawing the gun from where he had stowed it. Progress, that was progress wasn’t it? Jason still wasn’t speaking though.

“Bruce, it’s—” Tim began.

“A private conversation, Tim.”

Tim’s heart sank, so he tried to keep his voice hopeful. “Just about surrendering the weapons, right?”

“Like frak I’m handing off the guns,” Jason snapped. The argument sounded more like a force of habit than actual opposition.

“Red Hood, I have been very, very lenient, but you have pointed a gun at my son. At one of my sons,” Bruce corrected himself. “I cannot allow you to be armed under my roof.”

“Then I’ll leave your roof!” Jason snarled, taking a step forward. It should have been menacing. It wasn’t because, while Jason held his ground, the knee bent like a slowly collapsing column no one had the funding to repair. Bruce made a slightly Damian-ish sound of exasperation and didn’t move, even as the Red Hood shifted his weight to consider the window as a form of exit.

Tim found himself playing mediator – or life-saver, if Jason was seriously thinking about going for the window.

“Jason, you have a knife on you, right?” he asked.

“Why?” Jason’s answer was as good as a yes.

“Just, give the guns to Bruce and if anyone comes too close or makes you uncomfortable, you’ll have the knife,” Tim explained. Jason didn’t look sure about the plan.

“And if he doesn’t give my guns back, Replacement?”

“Then I’ll buy you new guns,” Tim responded. “Swear to God.”

Reluctantly, Jason set the two guns on the bed before finding a third derringer in his pocket. This last weapon went a lot more reluctantly and once the guns were out of the way, Jason immediately moved his knife from a ‘passive’ position to ‘hellfire if you touch anyone I love’ position. He just needed… sleep, Tim reflected. God, the man looked more tired over the past few days than he had been in the last six months.

Once divested of guns, Jason apologized to Damian, again, and to Cass for scaring them. Bruce glowered throughout this procedure before ordering Tim out of the room. Jason made no move to ask him to stay and the resulting lecture (from what Tim could hear in the hall) was conducted quietly. Dick paced the hall, unaware of what had gone on, exactly, but worried about Damian, who kept proclaiming that he didn’t need to be worried about. That the Red Hood’s history meant that this had only been a matter of time in happening. That Bruce would be better off believing the ruthless behavior described in Tim’s dossier. Tim cringed and waited for the lecture to end, hoping the demon’s complaints weren’t audible inside the mostly-soundproofed room.
When Bruce finally emerged from the lecture, he headed for the stairs, pausing momentarily when he noticed Tim waiting in the hall. The Batman’s muted expression suggested that maybe he shouldn’t have been allowed to lecture anyone after being on the phone for two hours with federal agents and lawyers.

“We’ve come to an agreement,” Bruce said. “Get what you need from him and one of his Gotham safehouses can be opened. He’s clearly not comfortable here.”

“Or you could teach your son to do a better job of waking people up,” Tim replied. Bruce’s expression didn’t change at the dig.

“It’s not Damian’s fault,” Jason said, having made it to the doorway. He didn’t look much better than Bruce, but more at-ease for having the duffel bag in one hand. “Anyway. Let’s do this, Replacement.”

Tim motioned for Jason to follow him, explaining that it would be better to meet in the Cave. Jason followed him without complaint.

So long as Bruce wasn’t coming, Tim suspected Jason would follow him a lot of places.
On your way you are not alone, there are those who still know

Chapter Notes

Thank you, as always and ever, for your interaction with this fic and joining me on this *cough* ever-growing journey. I really do appreciate the comments, as ya’ll are much better at making comments than I am, being a life-long member of the ‘freaking out about saying something wrong’ club. You are awesome.

Chapter title is from ‘Those You’ve Known’ in Spring Awakening and, like basically everything, it’s out of context here, but it is a beautiful, beautiful song to bring the sadness of that musical full circle.

3/19 Edits: Okay! Finally! The edits I actually need to be making! THANK YOU to everyone who mentioned that there were continuity errors. I’ve found a lot of them during this rewrite and hells yeah, we’re gonna fix it. Right now. Right here. Yikes.

Their ‘debriefing’ would take place in the Cave.

Jason had expected, that just… not this quickly, not minutes after he had shoved and threatened to shoot two of the Batman’s children. Add Dick and he could’ve been threatening all three of Bruce’s favorites. Instead, the Bat had let him off with a lecture (not even a lecture + beating) and let Tim take him to the Cave, and not to lock him up in a holding cell. Maybe it was because Tim, Cass and Damian were there, and they hadn’t been homicidally mad, and Bruce was using them as kind of a barometer of proportionate reactions. If they had been angry or panicked, there’d probably have been a fight.

As it was, things just felt like they were moving too quickly; his heart remained lodged in his throat as he struggled to deescalate from the confrontation and lecture upstairs. Tim had just told him to come down here and so he had.

That thought sent off anger triggers against the idea of being suggestible, that what Tim had asked, he had done without thinking about it. Having descended into the claustrophobic dark Cave, second thoughts now roared through his mind. It wasn’t like the Replacement would notice; Tim, already knee-deep in his research on the Batcomputer, hadn’t turned around to speak to him. Jason’s shoulder blades spasmed with the tension. All the breathing techniques in the world weren’t working.

“Heading to the bathroom, baby bird,” Jason managed, just before picking up on someone’s entry into the Cave. Ignore it, he told himself. Get to the bathroom. Safer there, harder to kick you out from there. He forced himself to move nonchalantly to the single yet ADA-accessible room, locking the door and crouching under the towels. God, he wanted to go home. He didn’t have a ‘home,’ he reminded himself, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have a concept of somewhere he would be finally, desperately safe, and no one could decide he shouldn’t be there or try to wake him up unexpectedly.

The door handle rattled a little as someone tried it. He stopped breathing.

The person left almost as soon as it became apparent it was locked; he could hear their footsteps moving away, not waiting for the door to open. Breathe. Breathe. Probably just Tim, ready for him
to start… whatever it was they were doing down here. He closed his eyes, pushing all the panicked thoughts away, particularly the ones concerning his coming down here without question on an order and what he might have to be ready for. Bruce could’ve let Tim bring him down here just so Jason would be easier to subdue and take to the police or to Arkham. Jason had no way of knowing.

Better to focus on peaceful things. The bathroom had been nicely decorated. Alfred’s touch, trying to ignore the fact that they would get blood all over these towels after a bad patrol or that Damian still enjoyed not aiming while doing his business, as if he were trying to mark his territory all over again. Still, sea-green towels and a deep sink with a cylinder horizontal faucet that gave the appearance of a river, even the luxurious shower hidden behind a half-wall, all of them made the bathroom feel like a home’s washroom rather than a gymnasium stall. Jason drew up his knees to his chest, reflecting that he would get up any second now. He should get up any second now. Distantly, he could hear footsteps wandering around outside, back in the main room.

Guilt stirred its head again. Tim had better things to do than wait around all morning for Jason to get his head on straight. The Replacement hadn’t even asked for the knife back and Jason had run off and locked himself in the bathroom… people were bound to get ideas. Jason shuddered and pushed himself to his feet painfully, unlocking the door.

Dick stood right there, practically in the doorway. Well, somebody had been worried.

“Is Tim ready for me?” Jason tried to move around Dick.

“Are you okay?” Dick asked instead of answering. One corner of Jason’s nose and mouth pulled up in a sneer.

“Fine, Goldie, and you?”

“Trying to help,” Dick said with one of those hopeless smiles that made him so infuriatingly pitiable. “At least two of my brothers are upset and the third one Cass is working with, so it’s been a long morning.”

Jason’s teeth clenched. “Not my intent.”

“I get the feeling it’s not in-character for you to apologize, so don’t do it on my account,” Dick said, serious for once in his damn life. “Tell me what I can do, instead.”

This wasn’t a thing anyone could fix. “You can leave me alone.” Jason pushed past the acrobat, stumbling only a little as he returned to the main room. “Replacement, ready when you are.”

“Why does he call you ‘Replacement’?” Dick asked, meandering in after Jason. Tim shrugged one shoulder, wrist computer already keyed up to take notes and/or record their debriefing.

“I replaced him as Robin,” Tim said, attention on the mini-computer. “He didn’t like that. Still calls me it when I’m pissing him off.”

“Or as a term of monumental endearment,” Jason pointed out but then, thinking about it, shook his head. “Nah, it is when I’m mad at you. Sorry, kid.”

“And yet I prefer it to ‘kid’,” Tim said dryly. “Sit down.”

Jason did, purposefully taking the computer chair that Tim probably would have sank into, given another minute. The teen ignored this slight, preparing to start taking notes on a small, wireless keyboard instead.
“What did she say about the memories?”

It had been a damn long time since Jason last had to give a formal case-relevant report to any of the Bats. Sarcastic reports, reports that were censored or cut-short, sure. Nothing that mattered.

“Yeah.” Jason focused his gaze up and to the left, activating all the powers of recall he had. “So, she found me on the building, post-having found you guys. We brawled for a few, took turns throwing each other off the roof, and she got the better of me, for a bit. She started saying shit like she should know all the Bats, and who the hell was I. You’d said she was in the Outlaws, so I asked her if she knew who they were. She knew Arsenal’s name.” That had been a dark moment, having a Yellow Lantern sitting on his chest, having just kicked his ass, and explaining in graphic detail that she didn’t like his best friend very much. His best friend who wasn’t nearly as good at hand to hand or magical combat, no matter how good he was at archery.

“Should we warn him?” Tim asked.

“No, she didn’t have any kind of real plans. She couldn’t remember why or when she was in the Outlaws even, just that Arsenal was there. She didn’t even think to connect that bullet wound in her shoulder with me until later, like you saw. She could’ve, shit.” Realization dawned. “She could’ve thought he shot her.”

“She definitely knows that’s not true now,” Tim said, adjusting one of the volume controls on the recorder. “Did you ask about the artifact?”

“It wasn’t hers. She said her partner, the actual Yellow Lantern, brought it along with him. It’s originally a tool for exile, stolen from an intergalactic court.” Jason snorted. “Yeah, I know how that sounds. Anyway, when he knew he wanted a human partner for his plans, he hit her with it. She said he was some sort of android assassin, or at least semi-robotic, so he needed a native. Someone who knew where things were. I don’t know why he didn’t have that information before he came. Could’ve been freelancing.”

Abandoning the fiddly controls, Tim pulled up Project Muninn’s synced research file with Wayne Enterprises’ file and began adding in information as Jason spoke. In the background of the screen, several pictures of a scepter sticking straight out of the mud flickered by.

“And why would she want to take over from Batman?” Tim asked.

“I think she honestly wants the job. She’d like to be the Joker, but he’s, y’know, a psychopath and she needs this somehow. Or thinks she does. I think she’ll kill everyone to get to it, but she’s not a mastermind like Ra’s or Bane.” Jason bit back the words ‘she’s not me, she doesn’t care about Gotham’. “She’s a Gotham native but I don’t think she could name all the bridges without repeating a few.”

“All she really has to do is be able to name all the Bats,” Tim said. “How did she know about Dick?”

“Damned if I know.” Jason glanced back at the (surprisingly-quiet) oldest Robin. “And I doubt she rings any bells with you.”

Dick shook his head. “Whatever this memory thing is, it works. I don’t know her.”

“Then let’s talk about how to cure it,” Tim said, finishing up his most recent notes with a clack-clack of the keys. “Jason?”

“Keep in mind, she only told me because she guessed I was a Bat, so some of this intel may be biased or faulty,” Jason said. “And she only knew because the Lantern started regretting how little
fear she would be able to sow if no one could remember her.” It didn’t sound plausible to his own ears, so Jason could only imagine how it sounded to the super nerd Robin.

“And?” Tim asked.

“And she didn’t know all the science, but she thought it worked on the same molecular-rearrangement premise you thought and affects members of the same species.” Jason took a breath. “So, I plan on calling Biz, and Kori, and any other aliens ASAP… but that doesn’t help cure it. The victim, ugh, ‘the victim’ has to verbally exchange one memory and receive one memory from at least five other non-remembering people of the same species. All intentional and shit. Once five people have done this memory exchange thing, something clicks and everybody remembers. Because frakking magic.”

Tim’s frown looked like it was going to permanently etch itself into his face. “Did she explain anything else about how it worked?”

“No. She lost it after telling me that much. At first, she was saying that I would have a strong memory of her because of this and that she would remember me, and we could be each other’s ‘first step.’ Then I mentioned I had some other people I should talk to first, seeing as she was standing on my chest we might not be great memories for each other, and she kind of got distracted.”

She’d stared at her own booted foot for a while, started to laugh hysterically, and ended up sing-songing ‘poor little red sheep, all alone, bloody little red sheep, can’t go—’ until he tried to throw her off the roof.

Dick wandered out of the dark of the Cave and pushed a glass of water at him. Jason took it in surprise. “They out of vodka back there, champ?”

“Bruce doesn’t drink.”

“Yeah, but I figured you knew where my stash—shit, I packed it up in the move.” Jason let his head tilt back, laughing now with regret. “I’d tell you we should go out for drinks, but conversation might be a little stilted with you not remembering me.”

“I’m pretty good at conversation,” Dick replied. Meanwhile, the poor Replacement looked like he was having a conniption.

“Jason, did she say what made it work? Or quantify anything other than ‘strong memories’?”

“Yeah, like I said, it’s the molecule thing, calibrated to the dominant lifeform. Thank God they didn’t misidentify that as cars, right?”

Tim sighed heavily. “I know you know more chemistry than that.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw Dick put a hand on Tim’s shoulder and murmur ‘play nice … not a criminal …’ With that said, Dick headed towards the exercise area, probably to swing around on ropes or some shit. For once, Jason wished he could join him. Tim spoke again, gentler this time, as if the water glass in Jason’s hands had reminded him to be human about this.

“Okay,” Tim said. “Sorry. Can you repeat everything about the cure again, for my notes?”

Jason told him again, listing as much as he could remember. Five strong memories, five different people. They couldn’t be of him as a passerby or even a single memory of him as a stranger who had saved them from a crisis; the memories had to be of him, built up by some knowledge of who he was. He also had to have a strong memory of them, who they were as a person. The whole thing
made him want to bury his head in his hands with how stupid magical requirements were.

“So, you couldn’t just save some people as Red Hood?” Tim asked.

“That’d be great, but it has to be a strong connection with me as an actual person, not an… icon or some shit. Have to have an actual conversation and learn about each other. Like,” Jason stumbled on the idea as he said it. “Like Damian and me in that office building.”

Tim had already turned on the comms: “Damian, get down here.”

“Drake, I have other things to do today than nearly get shot at,” Damian said, voice shrill over the intercom. Tim didn’t glance at Jason.

“It’s important. About the cure.”

“I will be down before I leave. Do not let this take long, Drake,” Damian warned and the intercom clicked off.

Tim sighed heavily. “What do we do if it doesn’t work?”

“Well, I planned to break into Justice League headquarters and find Duela and—I don’t frakking know, Tim!” Jason snapped, not getting out of the computer chair only because he didn’t think his knee would hold him. Tim frowned, looking weary.

“Sorry. Didn’t think.”

“That is the norm for you, Drake,” Damian said loudly, striding off of the elevator. Jason felt astonished: the brat had actually hurried. “Now why do you need me? Other than all the obvious reasons.”

“Tell Jason you remember the incident at the warehouse,” Tim said automatically. “We’re… trying something out.”

“Tt. Has he forgotten now?” Damian replied with an appraising glance at Jason. “I had assumed it would be more significant.”

“Part of the cure. Please?”

Damian hesitated and Jason could see the battle waging internally. It was so rare that Tim said ‘please’ that the whole situation probably threw the kid off balance.

“Fine,” Damian said finally and turned to Jason, shooting a derogatory look at the chair Jason still reclined in. “I recall our encounter in which you shared your obnoxiously-sweaty helmet with me in the rubble of a collapsed building, from which I then rescued your far-too-dense form.”

“And I remember your tiny ass putting a crowbar in my apartment and waiting so when I came home, you could try to kick the shit out of me while I was blindsided,” Jason replied.

“Only because you are so easily manipulated by items, Todd,” Damian said, then seemed to catch the words in his throat as they rang with recognition. “Todd.”

“You’ve all had some memory interruptions,” Tim said, as Damian repeated the name. The youngest Wayne turned a fierce glare on Tim, snarl pulling at his face.

“Father will not stand for you using me first, rather than himself.”
“Bruce doesn’t have any strong memories of Jason yet. You do. Besides we need about four other people, Bruce will… probably be one of them.”

“And how do you purpose to create strong memories? You cannot throw every member of the family in a collapsing building with Todd. He probably set the explosives.” Damian lodged himself on the side of the computer desk, narrowed eyes glaring at Tim and now just ignoring Jason. Regained memories couldn’t improve all things.

“We’ll test it on… well, Bruce or Alfred’d be best, next up. They’ve both spent the most time with you?” Tim asked, looking at Jason, who half-shrugged.

“I suppose? I doubt a Shakespeare battle with Alfred or a tense conversation with B count as ‘strong memories.’”

"I am still struggling to believe you managed to make me remember you in less than a month," Damian said irritably. "Your one moment of significance, enjoy it."

"Thanks, brat," Jason said.

“Come on, we can try the memory thing with Bruce. What could it hurt?” Tim moved for the stairs, expecting Jason to follow him. Instead, Jason limped for the elevator, ignoring all of the remaining downstairs Robins. Something in his gut sang that this attempt with Bruce would end badly, that only disappointment lay this way, but he ignored it. If he listened to everything saying ‘this is stupid,’ he never would’ve clawed his way out of his grave.

“HOLD THE ELEVATOR!” Dick bellowed and, jerking forward, Jason did, mostly because the frakking acrobat had sounded like someone was about to die if not. Instead, Dick strode in, pushed the second-floor button with a merry air, and grinned at Jason.

“If nobody’s gonna tell me anything, I’ll have to be where the action is!” Dick said. Jason grunted, bracing his body weight against the hand bar. The acrobat had been doing a harder workout than usual and Jason could smell him, like he hadn’t even cooled down.

“Frak, big bird, I could’ve made Timmy wait until you took a shower,” Jason muttered. The elevator chimed at its destination. Instead of taking offense, Dick darted out of the elevator, heading to the right. Jason groaned as he exited the elevator and saw what the older man was coming back with.

“I don’t need—”

“Crutches!” Dick pushed one under his arm all the same. “Well, crutch, more like, but it’s easier than watching you hobble around.”

“I’m not hobb—“

“Do you know how many steps are between us and wherever Bruce is, right now? Cause I last saw him upstairs, so, at least 70 horizontal steps and a staircase between us and him.” Fortunately, Dick wasn’t being an ass about the information but the reality of it felt like a smack on the back of the head. Jason leaned his weight on the crutch, finally feeling the resounding pressure move off his knee.

“…thanks.”

“See? See, that could be a frakking memory—frakking? What is it you say?”

“Fucking.”
Dick groaned. “Are you always like this?”

“I am, and we get along great because of it.” That made Dick shut up for a minute and they headed for the staircase, while Jason wondered why they had an elevator from the basement, but no second-floor capabilities. Ah, secret identities.

“It could be a strong memory,” Dick said finally.

“It could. Don’t know much about them myself.” Jason concentrated on moving, on getting ever closer to that damn staircase.

“But we’re all strong memories for you,” Dick said.

“Being a Bat was the best thing that could’ve happened to me,” Jason said, surprised that he even let the words out of his mouth. “So yeah. But we’re not there yet for strong memories and if this doesn’t work, which I don’t think it will, I just want to go ho—back to Tim’s apartment,” he corrected himself. “I’d like to get the chance to actually sleep there rather than run out after Lanterns.”

“You don’t have a home…?”

“I have lots of safe houses, Dickie. Buckets of houses.”

“But you just go from safe house to safe house. You don’t—”

“Look, I don’t need pity to be your strong memory, thanks.” Jason put his good foot at the base of the steps and thought about what was going to happen next. “Y’know what, make him frakking come down here if we’re gonna do this. Tim’s probably already talked him half into the idea and he’s frakking able-bodied.” He sat down on the step. “I’ll be right here.”

Dick left him there, thank God, and by the time they’d all come back, he had drifted off.
And I realize in an instant that I've known you all along

Chapter Notes

I’m using If/Then’s ‘Hey Kid’ as a chapter title. I... recommend it. For so many reasons, but most of them being it’s about fatherhood and it’s just so joyful and… yes. If/Then’s ‘Hey Kid’.

AND you’re all fantastic. Thank you for reading/commenting/interacting in whatever way you like.

3/19 edits: So many inconsistencies! So many. Much fix! Total consist!

Whatever potential solution his eldest son was bouncing from foot to foot about, insisting that he come downstairs immediately, Bruce didn’t think it was going to work. Tim caught up with him as he headed downstairs and gave Bruce an overview of what little they knew about the cure. This didn’t improve his opinion, but he could see now that the Red Hood sat at the bottom of the stairs, napping. It must be worth a shot to him. After the lecture, Bruce didn’t want to seem disinterested, lest the child run.

And, as he’d said the night before, he didn’t want Jason fleeing before they could address the issue.

“Jason,” Bruce said, sitting down next to the boy on the stairs. It was hard not to think of Jason in a detached way, as the ‘Red Hood,’ since the boy had gone to bed in the gear and wore it now, like a safety blanket. It had to be desperately uncomfortable and the idea was rattling around Bruce’s mind that it might be the only way Jason felt safe in the manor. The Red Hood didn’t wake up, head pressed against the railing and one leg stretched out, the other curled under it.

“Jason,” Bruce repeated. Don’t get louder in tone, don’t shift position too much.

The runners on the stairs needed replacing, he noted from his current vantage point. Decades of Alfred’s many treks up and down for laundry, plus Dick practicing (reckless and forbidden) flips off the banister, and Damian and Jon tearing up and down them had taken their toll. Alfred’s many treks also reminded Bruce that they had always meant to install a laundry upstairs. Time slipped away so fast when children were involved and he hadn’t been one with time for ‘home improvement.’ Neither were his sons… the ones that he knew anyway. Tim had made it sound like Jason did damn near everything to help people, from roof work to breaking up sex rings. Installing a few laundry machines was well within his scope of familiarity. The double-edged sword of that, Bruce knew, was that taking on so many tasks meant that a person could avoid sleep almost indefinitely.

Jason stirred and opened one eye to look at him. Bruce touched his shoulder, just long enough that the Red Hood knew he wasn’t a dream or here to attack him. The gesture used to help Dick, at least.

“Old man,” Jason said, affirming his recognition. “I’m here about that safehouse being reopened.”

“Hi.” Bruce removed his hand. “I believe Dick said you had found a solution? After that, yes, you can go.”

Jason nodded tightly, stretching out his shoulders and shifting position in preparation to stand—then
thought better of the movement. He inched a little closer to the banister. Bruce, sensing a pattern, moved further away on the step.

“Where’s the rest of ‘em?” Jason asked, having relaxed enough to glance up the stairs.

“Right here.” Dick stepped out from behind the base of the staircase, Damian and Tim appearing at the top. Cass had opted out of the encounter to go help Alfred with laundry, even implying that they didn’t all need to be here either. Dick had, of course, insisted on staying, and Tim thought it would be helpful to have Damian stay, with Tim himself present as someone who knew Jason.

“Cause you got a little anxious last time,” Dick explained.

“Right. Sorry.” Jason replied.

Tim took a seat a couple of steps up from the pair. Damian flipped over the banister to rejoin Dick, both wandering over to where Bruce and Jason sat. The Red Hood seemed a little more fidgety than before, now that all the Bats had converged on the location.

“You all gotta be here?” Jason asked. Damian sighed.

“Tt. Are you going to be precious about this, Todd? Just swap memories so Father can stop treating you like a pariah he doesn’t know and get back to treating you like the Wayne pariah.”

“Hey, coming from him, that’s practically a birthday card,” Dick said.

“I’m finding Alfred,” Jason said, using the banister and his own irritation as leverage to stand. “God knows he’s the only one I like in this dumb house.”

The Red Hood’s knee buckled dangerously as he tried to step away from the banister and put weight on it. Damian snorted a laugh. Before the pair could get into a fight that they would both lose, Bruce spoke.

“You’re deflecting, Red Hood, and… please sit. If you want to find Alfred, we certainly can, but avoiding this conversation will not resolve it.”

Jason sat down stiffly again on the stairs. He didn’t look at Bruce. “You’re not going to have a strong memory of me, B, not unless you really enjoyed giving that lecture. That’s okay. If I’d forgotten you, we’d never’d frakking seen each other again.”

Bruce held off on any responses, other than: “Are you ready to do this now?”

“Are you?” Jason sighed heavily. “I do this now, you ease up on the safehouse immediately. Within the hour.”

“Done.”

“Kay.” Jason took a breath, closing his eyes and focusing on memories. It bothered Bruce more than a little that the younger man didn’t want to make any kind of eye contact. “I remember the night you stayed home with me and watched stupid, stupid television while I was sick. I was too frakking scrawny to go on patrol with even a cold, at first.” Jason appeared to remember that he was surrounded by his siblings and snarled to himself at saying all of this. “It’d been years since my mom was together enough to do that with me.” This last statement came out too quiet to be heard by Dick or Damian – Bruce himself almost missed it.

“Jason, I’m so—”
“Just get this over with. I don’t want to hear anything but ‘I remember’ out of you.”

“What if your attitude affects the outcome?” Dick asked, calling the entire group’s attention over to where he lounged on the far side of the banister. “Self-fulfilling prophesies and all that.”

“If I had any amount of control over this, Goldie, believe me, I’d be using it,” Jason shot back. Bruce’s oldest rolled with the aggression, as he always seemed to, smiling kindly at its source.

“B’s trying,” Dick said. And Bruce was trying, racking his brain for any sort of memory in the past 48 hours that made Jason’s behavior different from an informant or a criminal (because Batman met a lot of people who acted like Jason and some of them weren’t even Evil). Jason had saved Damian, of course, but Bruce hadn’t been present; second-hand memories or idealizations of a person based on a story wouldn’t count. Something real, something tangible…

“B, y’know, it helps morale if you come up with something in less than half an hour,” Dick murmured, as nicely as he could. The Red Hood, on the other hand, didn’t look surprised or irritated, just accepting.

“Before Tim told us about your situation, you were helping us, anonymously,” Bruce began, determined to get this right. “You showed up on Amusement Mile. It must have been a bad night.” From the fierce expression on Jason’s face, ‘bad’ had been an understatement. “But you came out and provided an assist—”

“’Assist,’ frakking ‘assist,’ you were strapped to a THROWING BLOCK—”

“With my utility belt,” Bruce felt obligated to note.

“And your arms stretched open like that statue in Rio de Janeiro, the hell an ‘assist,’ I practically carried you out.”

“On our way,” Bruce continued, ignoring the new version of the story, which hadn’t been that bad compared to other things he had done. “Four more goons showed up and you couldn’t do much with me over your shoulder. You made to shoot one in the head, looked at me, and adjusted your aim. You shot each in the kneecap or the shoulder, precise shots, muttering the whole time.”

Jason considered this. “I’d made up a chant. ‘Kneecaps, kneecaps, Bruce is right there.’”

“’Hate this, hate this,’ and you cursed, ‘nightmare,’” Bruce agreed, almost able to sense his oldest child’s grin. “But whatever the reason, you weren’t killing the goons, out of respect for me. And, of course, you knew my name, which was concerning in its own right. You went out of your way to keep people alive. So, when I realized the Red Hood had saved Damian… I knew I had to take you seriously. I don’t know you right now, Jason Todd, but I would like to remember you again.”

The memories were just there, suddenly and without warning, like a bookshelf in a hallway that he’d forgotten was there. All the emotions he felt about his son, slotting themselves into place in his mind. He could now hear Damian growing confused at his lack of verbal response.

“It was instantaneous for me, Father. You don’t remember… anything?” Damian asked.

“Hi, Jason,” Bruce said warmly. The younger man’s eyes went wide, then a little damp as he ducked his head and lifted a hand to cover his face.

“Cool,” Jason managed to say. “Another one down. God, B, this is going to kill me.”

“Not unless you throw yourself under another building,” Bruce said, only half-joking. “Which you
should avoid. I think even Dick would agree.”

“The bonding, Bruce!” Dick retorted. “Think of the BONDING.”

“I’m thinking more of physical therapy and how you get when you have to do it,” Bruce replied. “Much less how Jay gets.”

The Red Hood still hadn’t looked up from where he’d ducked his head, voice sounding strained and joyful. “Ah, Goldie doesn’t need a near-death experience to get a strong memory. This one time, he had to run out of a supermarket because he saw a girl who had asked to take a photo of his ass while he was on patrol.” Jason grinned. “Six MONTHS before.”

Not to be outdone, Dick began: “I seem to remember you telling us Timmy was asleep like you were going to add it to Alfred’s scrapbooks so who exactly is obsessed with making strong memories of the family?”

There was nothing… odd, about the statement, Bruce thought, it was probably true, but he was suddenly unable to remember what they had been discussing. Memories, right, but had they already done the Red Hood’s memory transfer? Or… oh no.

Jason’s head jerked up, sensing a tacit threat in the silence. Bruce looked at Damian, who confirmed his suspicions with a curt nod. Damnit. Damnit. He got to his feet to face Tim, who was rapidly putting the information together from the sudden silence to Bruce’s cold manner.

“What happened?” Jason asked, looking from one to the other. If I gave him another minute, Bruce thought, he’ll figure it out himself. Damnit.

“It reverted, didn’t it, Tim,” Bruce asked.

His detective child looked horrified for a half-second then tamped the emotion down, turning clinical. “You lost the memories, just now?”

“Yes.” Bruce looked at the young man sitting next to him and yes, he remembered that this was supposed to be one of his sons, remembered their interactions over the past few days, but anything interpersonal, like history or feelings, had vanished. The Red Hood’s expression had gone worryingly numb about the loss of memory; he leaned forward and watched the floor with half-lidded eyes.

When Bruce glanced over at his eldest however, Dick looked like Bruce had expected Jason to look. Dick looked like hell.

“Dick, what is it?”

“I said ‘I remember,’ just joking around, but Jason also said a memory, so that’s the thing? I broke the chain because the memory wasn’t strong enough?” Dick bit the inside of his lip, eyebrows knit together. “I wasn’t thinking about it like that… I...”

“Yeah, it bounced back and took everyone with it,” Tim replied, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s okay, Dick. We’ll get it… so long as we don’t have to find new damn people. And Bruce, you agreed to release one of his safehouses, before all this started, so I’d get on the phone with Babs.”

Tim leaned back, looking at Jason sitting in front of him, and nudged between the older boy’s shoulder blades with his foot.

“Hey. Okay, so it was a bad idea to try it this early,” Tim said, trying not to sound like a mass of regret, before looking up at Bruce with sharp eyes. “What do you remember?”
“Everything that’s happened over the past few days. No more than that.”

“You don’t need to like… re-read the dossier I gave you or something. You don’t wonder why he’s here, in the manor, or who he is.”

Bruce shook his head. Thankfully, this seemed to relieve Tim’s guilt.

“Okay. So we’re not at ground zero, we’re just further back than we were;’ Tim murmured, half to himself, and nudged the Red Hood’s back again. “Jason. Just try the call and refrain again with B.”

Despite the mock ‘kick,’ Bruce noted his detective son’s voice had gone quiet and encouraging.

“Don’t be an idiot, Drake, the first time was challenging enough.” Damian strode over and plopped himself on the marble floor in front of Jason’s hunched figure. Bruce fought the urge to snatch his son back from the Red Hood. The feelings lessened somewhat when his youngest leaned forward and, without sneering, repeated a memory.

Jason murmured something, too low to be heard. It must have been different from their first exchange, because Damian looked extremely surprised – then, familiar. Bruce’s youngest rolled back to his feet.

“See?” Damian asked the room at large. “Now, Todd can take as long as he wants working up the courage to speak to Father again. I am hosting a Titans meeting in forty minutes and I do not have any more time for family drama. Grayson, stop crying.”


“Todd was right in saying that you would not require much effort to form a strong memory,” Damian replied. “However, I have more important things to do today than wait for one.”

“Yeah, yeah, you mentioned, just go,” Tim said, waving a dismissive hand.

Bruce’s youngest ignored this slight, striding out of the room to meet up with (really?) the Titans. Or, more likely, “Titan” Jon visiting from Metropolis and the two would spend all day playing Cheese Vikings and Damian would come back full of junk food. Ah well, thought Bruce, the boy has friends.

Jason took the opportunity to push himself to his feet with the help of the crutch. “Okay, you said you’d reopen one of the safehouses.”

“You don’t want to… try again?” Bruce asked, feeling uncomfortably hopeful. The Red Hood shook his head.

“Damian can take forgetting me off and on and won’t give a shit, really. You… I don’t like messing with your mind and I don’t like…”

“Me knowing who you are and then not.”

“Yeah. That.” Now Jason looked uncomfortable. “Just wanna go to the safehouse.”

“I’ll get Alfred—”

“No.” Slowly, the Red Hood’s voice was regaining its confidence. “No, I’ll get the rest of my gear and then take a taxi or a town car or whatever you guys get. I just want to go, without chaperones.”

Bruce couldn’t argue with this, imagining he would be the same in a similar situation. “All right.
I’m… sorry.”

He wasn’t sure why he was apologizing but the Red Hood seemed to accept it all the same.

“It’s okay. I’ll be downstairs if anyone needs me.” Downstairs meaning, of course, the Cave. The Red Hood headed off, pausing when he got to the doorway of the room, looking back at Bruce.

“Thanks,” Jason said awkwardly. “For… this.”

“Anytime!” Dick was the first to call back cheerfully. Bruce just felt himself nod, unsure what else to say, if anything. Despite the lecture, despite the dangers that the Red Hood carried with him, it was his SON and yet Jason felt he had to thank them for this. As if he were a guest and not a resident.

“B?” Dick said, noticing his silent gloom a little more than usual. “You good?”

“Just… disappointed.”
Heyyy, it's 2:30am on a Sunday! Why's it late? ...partially because I worked on a different writing project all afternoon, then went to the Incredibles, and the morning was pretty much a wash. Ah well. I am sorry it's late, but I'm happy with how it came out. :)

Half an hour was just spent trying to find an appropriate chapter title and I WISH I was kidding... chapter title is from Catch Me if You Can's 'Goodbye'.

And, you're all awesome, thank you for interacting with this fic. Imma go sleep now. :D Have a lovely Sunday.

Dick had come down to the Cave to let Jason know the car had arrived and found his younger ‘brother’ half-asleep at the computer. While half-asleep wasn’t asleep-asleep, Dick moved some of the coffee mugs off to a bin, clattering them just enough to cause Jason to blink to consciousness. At the first clink of porcelain, he had dropped the straps of the duffel bag held loosely in his fingertips, which ‘thudded’ when it hit the floor and woke him up further. As jarring calisthenics went, these were low-grade, Dick decided. Once Jason had straightened, Dick poked him in the shoulder.

“Did your noisy ass want something?” Jason asked.

“Car’s ready around front,” Dick replied. “You got everything?”

“Yeah.” Jason got to his feet, grabbing the crutch as he did so, and remained silent for the entire trip up to the car, eyes focused firmly on the floor. Dick hummed to himself, thinking of how angry the ‘Red Hood’ was going to be once he saw who was driving. But Jason didn’t ask any clarifying questions, just leaned the crutch by the manor’s front door and headed to the town car’s passenger side door. Dick hesitated for a second, thinking about grabbing the crutch, then decided there were probably limits to how much aggravation Jason would accept.

Instead, Dick got in on the driver’s side. His copilot groaned.

“I will never understand how a bunch of solitary BATS fail to understand that I want to be alone,” Jason muttered.

“Because bonding,” Dick said, turning the key to bring the sleek car to life. “Though, in this case, it’s more Bruce wanted me to make sure the guards really go away. He sold you being a pretty solid, manipulative threat.”

“Ooh, manipulative, I hardly ever get to be that one.” Jason eyed Dick suspiciously. Dick was coming to realize he did everything suspiciously. “You’re leaving, after that?”

“Obviously someone doesn’t want me up for coffee,” Dick quipped. “And it is ‘up,’ right? Six floors, no elevator?”

“Damn Tim and all his research. Yeah, Dick, it’s a hike.” Jason leaned his head against the window.

“Finally! A chance to go hiking with family!”
“Thought Spyral would have cured all your hiking needs, Spy Boy.”

“That wasn’t family.”

“Neither am I, so you don’t gotta pretend.” Now Jason was almost pushing his head against the car window, as if trying to get away from Dick. The older man fell silent for a moment, trying to think up a suitable response… and trying to resist the urge to hit the button to open the passenger side window. The result would be hilarious right up until Jason recovered himself and punched him.

“I’m sorry,” Dick began, feeling it was appropriate. Jason’s snort suggested it wasn’t.

“Not your fault, Goldie. It’s better for us to know.”

“But…”

“But what? You wanted to have something to say, like you always do, and so you found something.” Now Jason sounded bitter. Crap.

“That’s not fair,” Dick said, because hell, it wasn’t. He had wanted to say something to bond with the man who had replaced him as Robin and if it was the wrong thing, how the hell had he been supposed to know?

“I know,” Jason replied, voice quieter now. “Sorry. Frakking frustrated.”

‘Then why are you leaving?’ was what Dick wanted to say but he swallowed the urge and said instead: “I’m sorry it’s taking so long. What did Tim say it was, two weeks?”

“18 days. More than half a month.”

“Did B contact Zatanna?”

“He didn’t know until yesterday. And I don’t wanna do anything that might lose me Tim, too.” Jason tilted his head down a little to glance at the dashboard. “Goldie, you’re speeding.”

“What? Oh.” Dick eased off the gas pedal, which had nudged closer to the ground the more involved he got in the conversation. “Guess it wouldn’t be great if we got pulled over.”

“Yeah, B could’ve had a long-standing ‘arrest-on-sight’ order he’s forgotten about.”

“He wouldn’t do that!” Dick couldn’t help but protest in favor of his mentor. Sure, Bruce had done some shitty parenting, but—

“He tried to slit my throat when I came back from the dead, ‘bro,’ which makes me not put a lot past him.”

Dick didn’t know how to respond, other than suspecting Jason was leaving some parts out of the story. “You don’t have to show off.”

“Show off… what?”

“That you know more about me, about the family, about us. I’d remember if I could. I hope that however we got along, you’d know that. This isn’t a contest of who cares about the other person more.”

Since Dick was making an effort not to speed now, he didn’t glance over to see if his statement garnered any reaction. Nothing audible, as far as he could tell, which was good. If Jason got angry,
he didn’t think he’d be in doubt about it. He didn’t expect the grumpy silence to last until he got to the safehouse, but it did; Jason pulled himself out of the car the minute Dick parked. With no crutch and Jason avoiding eye contact, Dick didn’t feel he could do anything to help, so they went into the apartment building. It was one of half a dozen similar buildings; slatted exteriors and a couple of broken windows on the lower floors. The scent of years of pot and cat urine assaulted them as soon as he stepped in through the door Jason was holding. Anyone who’d served as Robin would have endured worse, but to live here? There were circus scents, familiar and homey for Dick, and then there were foreign, untenable scents.

“Come on, princess,” Jason said, heading for the stairs. “The smell’s not going anywhere.”

“I just think we could’ve come through the window,” Dick said, coughing slightly as he followed the other man. “I could carry you, all in all it’d be easier.”

‘Cleaner’ was what he really meant. They continued hiking up the stairs, which at least had a window on every landing, and the smell grew a little fainter with each staircase. Jason was flagging, noticeable only to another Robin, and Dick began to think of himself as a ‘spotter,’ rather than a guest. If Jason’s knee gave out, Dick would be there to keep him from going down a flight of stairs or two. Reaching the sixth floor felt like arriving at the summit of a mountain.

“Just curious, Jason,” Dick said, breath even but controlled. Even as Nightwing, running up eighty stairs at a time wasn’t particularly called for. “They put you on the sixth floor or did you ask for it?”

“Easy window entry. Only one on the block not owned by the mob. Well. When I moved in, the mob owned the other ones. Now they mostly own broken teeth and shattered collarbones.” Jason chuckled.

“I see. Bold of you to assume you’ll always be able to get in the window.”

“I don’t anticipate getting stuck in exploding buil… never mind.” Jason rounded the corner of the landing and headed slowly for the corridor, waving Dick along behind him. “All right, get these bozos gone, if that’s what B sent you to do.”

Two men in excellent suits stood at what Dick assumed was the door to Jason’s apartment. He walked up with a friendly smile and a checkbook in hand.

“Hey guys, Dick Grayson. Dunno if you’ve already heard from your superiors, but we’re going to cut the contract short. I’ve been authorized to make it up to you. Eight hundred each sound about right?” It wasn’t as high as he could go, leaving room for them to insist on more. Which the one on the left, with indoor sunglasses and a hand too close to his holster, looked like he was going to.

“We were gonna get ten grand for the full job,” the security guard said. “Only worked a couple weeks. Anyway, the guy’s supposed to come back and we take him in. Real menace to society.”

Dick heard Jason snort from where he had sat down against the wall by the stairs. Thankfully, the perpendicular angle of the corridor hid him from the guards. Dick smiled at the security men.

“Two grand then.” That was 2,000 dollars, tax-free, just for leaving a job early. The talker nodded with only a glance at his partner to make sure he was all right with this. Then, they both took their checks, verified their exit on their company’s online app, and left. The whole encounter took twenty minutes. It felt like an hour to Dick. He couldn’t imagine how long it felt to Jason.

Come to think of it – had Jason even eaten anything that morning? There’d been no breakfast, and then the Cave, and then the memory adventure and leaving the Cave… if he didn’t pay attention, he
was going to have another Tim on his hands.

“Jason, you have eggs?” he called while Jason limped towards the door with the key.

“Don’t pretend you can cook, Goldie, I’ve put out your fires before.”

“Okay, I give up, why do you keep calling me Goldie?”

“Golden child.” Jason pushed open the door and tossed the duffel bag down a dingy short hallway.

“As in, Bruce’s.”

“Hmph, untrue.” Nightwing followed him into the apartment and made a beeline for the tidy but tiny kitchen. “Well, do people ever deliver up here? Breakfast food in particular?”

“Depends on the tip.” Jason collapsed onto a nice-looking couch, face-first. Dick moved out of the kitchen to shut the front door and lock it, visually scanning the room. The kitchen was bigger than the living room, though neither was very large. A tiny bedroom lay to the left of the door, presumably attached to the only bathroom.

Dick opened the fridge, moving quietly to avoid attracting attention to what he was doing. Several craft beers, an abundance of vegetables, no protein except eggs, and a Tupperware or two full of unidentifiable leftovers. He got the feeling that Jason would be hesitant to throw out food, but fastidious about a clean fridge, so the leftovers had probably gone bad while Jason was in trouble with the Bats. He wasn’t sure if that was the full ‘eighteen days’ Jason had mentioned or some shorter period of time. Either way, he put them in a plastic bag, resolving to take the unopened containers down and throw them away. So, Jason needed to go to the grocery store and he couldn’t descend the stairs quickly for at least a couple of days…

Dick realized suddenly that by asking for this particular safehouse (probably one he’d deemed ‘compromised’ already), the Red Hood may have inadvertently trapped himself in it until his knee healed.

“You’re kind of low on food,” Dick said. A grunt came from the couch. “How do you usually shop for groceries? Do you keep a list?”

“Mentally. I think about what I want to eat for the week, then I buy the ingredients. Like a human.”

“I don’t want you going—”

“Down the stairs on this knee, Damian, I KNOW.”

“Here.” Dick crossed the space between the kitchen and the living room (which wasn’t far) and pushed his phone at Jason, who took it blearily.

“What’s this?”

“Make your list, just add it all to the app and I’ll go pick it up,” Dick said, heading into the bedroom to see if he could find the bathroom. “Don’t worry about the money, it’s a family account and B should be paying for locking you out of your apartment for weeks.”

“’s not my apartment.”

When Dick came out of the bathroom, having found it clean and in much better condition than his own, the phone lay unmoved on the couch arm. Jason had leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

“Uh… you’re done?” Dick asked. Jason didn’t respond.
“Can I make the list for you?” Dick said, picking up the phone and sitting down on the arm of the far end of the couch. He had a different view of Jason’s face from this angle. The younger man's expression looked like a combination of all the things Dick had been expecting him to feel: physical pain, sadness, stress, frustration, rage, and guilt. Or shame, those two were hard to tell apart without a discussion. And he was trying to hide all of it from Dick and, if Jason was any kind of Robin, he’d know he was failing. Noticing Nightwing’s stare, Jason leaned forward and latched his hands behind his head, hiding his face. Nightwing could understand that feeling.

Diverting his attention to the window, Dick ran through what he had said with Tim in these situations, what he said to the Run-Offs, what had ever helped anyone sitting by themselves, staring at the ceiling or the floor or the wall, and unable to move forward. It didn’t help knowing that the Red Hood’s arsenal was probably somewhere in the apartment (though not ‘Arsenal’) and Jason would be able to replace the guns that Bruce had confiscated at the manor.

“How you doing?” Dick asked, once a little more time had slipped by.

“Please go away.”

“Not until I know you’re not going to starve to death.” Dick pulled up the app again, reflecting that maybe he could just bulk-order cereal and milk and leave it at that…

“I can’t make the list.” Jason’s words sounded as if they were being dug out of a deep pit.

“I can make it.”

“I can’t tell you what to put on it.” Jason’s fingers dug a little deeper into the back of his scalp. “I can’t think of what I buy, I can’t think of recipes, I don’t want to eat, I just…"

“Jason. There are frozen vegetables, butter, and non-expired eggs in your refrigerator. Even if you—if we can’t make a list today, you won’t starve. I’ll come back tomorrow, or Tim will come over, or I’ll make Damian, but I’m not sending Alfred up your shitty stairs.” Dick felt like he had won, just a little, when Jason’s mouth twitched at the curse word. “I do recommend you shower and sleep. I do recommend that you call Supes if you need help, because he will be here faster than anyone else with those stairs. It’s okay.”

Jason didn’t straighten up from his position, however it hadn’t grown more constricted, so Dick had to assume he was making progress. He stood from the couch arm, tucking his phone into his pocket.

“You do have Supes’ number, right?”

A curt nod.

“Remember to explain how you got it. All right. I’m pretty sure I parked in a resident-designated spot, so I’m going to head back down before I’m towed.”

Another nod, as if they were strangers concluding a business deal. A barista and an unfamiliar customer.

“Do you want me to stay?” Dick knew better than to ask ‘are you going to be all right’ because none of the people he’d seen behave this way would define themselves as ‘all right’ at the best or worst of times.

Jason shook his head. “No. Thanks, Dick. G’night.”

Dick ignored the inaccuracy (it was only one in the afternoon) and unlocked the door. It felt cheap
and wrong to be walking out as Jason sat on the couch, motionless, but staying when he was so clearly unwanted felt worse. Besides, all Jason had wanted was privacy. Who knew what that looked like in real life?

He did add a couple of boxes of sugary cereal and milk to the pre-list he’d created. It couldn’t make anything worse.
You must admit we're not what people call "laid back"

Chapter Notes

The chapter title is from ‘One Normal Night’ in The Addams Family musical.

This chapter is shorter... well, namely because I started doing a plot thing with Dick and now I need to be sure what it is I'm saying. I would like to have it up by tomorrow evening, but it might actually be Thursday's update. So, lean on Thursday for the next, longer update.

In closing, you’re all terrific, thank you for reading/commenting/kudos’ing/bookmarking/just enjoying it. I'm going to sleep.

Of course Todd kept the blinds drawn. From a Bat’s perspective, it made perfect sense, but it also made it impossible to tell if this was the right window. Not that Damian thought he had it wrong; Drake was just right there and would be highly amused if Damian somehow misidentified the window to the Red Hood’s apartment. Damian could remember quite as much as Drake could about Todd, thank you very much. The question of the window’s authenticity resolved itself when the blinds were ripped upward and Damian squinted in the sudden bright light from the apartment.

“Damn, brat,” Jason said, pushing the screenless window open so Damian could climb in, dripping rain on the carpet beneath. “I’m shocked you sneak up on anybody when you’re clambering around on people’s windows.”

“Tt. Only ‘clambering’ because you are too lazy to go down and fetch your own food.” Damian slid off the heavy backpack he was wearing and dropped it with a wet ‘thump.’ At Todd’s affronted expression, Damian gestured at the window.

“Red Robin has the eggs. I have only the disproportionate amount of meats you seem to need and a bizarre surplus of surgery cereal.”

“Well, thanks.” Todd gathered up the backpack. “I appreciate the patrol diversion. You guys would be way too well-dressed, comin’ up here in daylight.”

“As if I could not be undercover enough to fool apartment-dwelling scum,” Damian muttered.

“Okay, A),” Jason began, stepping back to let Drake swing in the window and shutting it behind him to keep the rain out. The blinds came down unevenly. “I’m apartment-dwelling scum, so’s Tim, and your precious Grayson, and you will eventually do the same, once dear old dad kicks you out to build character. B) People noticed when I showed up with Dick the other week, they’d sure as hell notice if two rich kids showed up to talk to me. And, before you say it, C) Even if you didn’t look like rich kids, there are some good people in this building, however few, and I’d be having some conversations with them about who I was to you, why you were meeting at my house, etcetera. I don’t need those kinds of implications.”

“You do not suspect that purchasing the penthouse suite indicates that you make too much money to reside in this neighborhood?”
Todd dropped his voice down to the city’s guttering, barely-interpretable accent: “I can talk like I don’t, and no one knows I own the place or sees me come and go, so keep your mouth shut, kid.”

“Tt. You could have just stayed at the manor or found a hotel, Todd. As usual, you are making things unnecessarily complicated and requiring we participate in multiple idiotic grocery trips for you.” Damian moved the backpack from the living room floor to the kitchen floor and began unpacking it, half-heartedly guessing where most of the items might go. He could hear Todd greet Drake, who asked after his health immediately. Todd sounded… well, ‘unnecessarily complicated’ was a good way to describe Todd in total. He was putting on a good show about his health and Drake wasn’t buying it, just like he hadn’t bought Damian’s earlier emphatic claim that his wrist was healed enough to use a grappling gun.

It had been five days (or six if you counted the date of injury), and Damian spent most of it with his injured wrist immobilized. His unnatural birth, post-death enhancements, and youth meant that basic functionality could be restored quickly when he let an injury rest. The result baffled Father and Pennyworth and infuriated his siblings, who would often be laid up with injuries longer than Damian would – proving once more his superiority as the blood son.

So, Damian had ignored Drake’s complaints and scaled the Todd’s apartment building. He was used to far worse anyway.

Drake turned his concern to Todd.

“You wouldn’t open the door for days, Jason.” Drake sounded far more upset than there was any need to be, especially given their family’s history of evasive maneuvers and behavior. So Grayson had stood outside the door for a few minutes. Jason had texted the man and said he didn’t want any visitors, that he was fine, and had access to take-out ordering mechanisms. Damian couldn’t count the number of times he’d wanted to do the same. However, the cycle repeated for a week, which was a little long to believe that anyone was healthily eating takeout. True to form, the paperwork and maps strewn around Todd’s apartment indicated he had been working on a case, rather than eating much of anything.

“I was staying off the knee, and I made the frakking list today, didn’t I?” Todd replied, moving to the kitchen to avoid Drake’s accusations. The knee brace did improve his movements dramatically, Damian reflected. If he kept it on, however unlikely, the second Robin might even be able to assist in a patrol. If they needed an against-the-rules homicide or something.

“Yeah, and what a list,” Drake said. “You put ammo at the bottom.”

“I was running low. Dick said it was the family list.” Todd picked up one of the bags of flour and stored it in a cabinet. Oh, so that was where cooking supplies went. So what, Todd would find the sugar and vegetable oil and vanilla extract in a week or two, probably.

“How are you running low on ammunition if you’re stuck here?” Drake wanted to know. Todd ignored him.

“Bruce assigned us to come, that’s how much you irritated him, Todd,” Damian said, crumbling several of the bags into a ball for recycling. “I do not appreciate being sent on nursemaid errands in the midst of patrol, so I had better not discover you are faking.”

Todd didn’t reply to this either, shelving the container of milk, then the replacement eggs, and then glaring at the stack of cereal. There was a lot of cereal, for some reason. Todd shoved it all on top of the fridge as if angry at it for existing. The only thing left on the counter was a bottle of low-grade painkillers. Todd lifted an eyebrow and picked up the bottle, shaking it so the pills inside rattled.
“Really? You think I’m gonna cave to some knee pain?”

“Dick thought—” Drake began, but the crackle of both of their comms interrupted him. Todd, not wearing any of his usual gear, looked from one to the other in silent questioning.

‘Red Robin, Robin, we could use you at Old Gotham. Hostage situation with more than ten goons,” Oracle said.

“Batman isn’t closer?” Drake asked, already heading for the window.

“It’s a distraction the real villain mentioned to get Batman to stop his pursuit. Batman didn’t take it. Don’t stop for ice cream or anything on the way, boys, one word from the baddie and this whole thing could fall apart. Damnit Nightwing, ‘villain,’ one word from the villain.”

“On our way,” Drake replied.

Damian leapt out the window as he fired the grappling gun, an action he had been specifically told not to do by everyone except Grayson (who had taught him) and he enjoyed it all the more for that. The feeling of almost falling then being yanked to safety via a decision he had made seconds before was incredibly fun – and gave Drake a heart attack. Not that Red Robin would say anything; his breath would just catch over the open comm channel and that predictable reaction was enough.

They hadn’t spoken much the past few week, aside from typical bickering. Drake didn’t bring up the rooftop vision, or their donut break, so neither did Damian. If they had stayed at Todd’s apartment longer, he might have brought it up, but Todd had been leery of pissing Damian off, after the incident with the gun. Again, Damian had endured much worse, even from Todd himself.

They were nearly across town when the comms crackled, dimly heard under the sound of the bucketing rain.

‘Nightwing’s gone dark,’ Oracle said.

“In Bludhaven?” Drake asked, landing with slippery difficulty on one of the rooftops they were zipping past. Damian landed on the following building’s ledge, water dripping off his hood and falling dozens of feet to the street below. The view almost made up for the singing pain of his wrist at his positioning, so he fidgeted, taking the weight off of it. He could feel Drake watching him.

“He was following up on something for the BPD and turned around to help, in case I couldn’t reach you. The connection went silent five minutes ago.”

Five minutes was their call time, when someone had to go investigate. Notably, it didn’t apply when someone said ‘I’m turning off my comm,’ whether expected or unexpected, and vanished into the night. That wasn’t usually Grayson’s habit.

“I’ll go,” Damian began to say, when a flash of brown and red whipped by them, literally hollering “NOPE!” through the open comm channel. Drake groaned and Damian could see Red Robin’s shoulders slump with irritated exhaustion.


“Hey, I’ll find Goldie, you take care of hostages and keep Robin from snapping his wrist in half. Whatever the golden boy is doing, it’s bound to be airborne or ranged and hostages mean groundwork for you two. I’ll find a nice rooftop and help Nightwing take care of baddies. Like always.”
The Red Hood hadn’t even slowed down to deliver this monologue, probably because if he did, they’d stop him. Damian could still tell from the soaked movement of his knee that he was wearing the brace. That would help. Grayson might have been able to catch up with Todd, but neither Damian or Drake were large enough to knock the Red Hood off mission without intending to cause injury.

‘Is that the Red Hood?’ Oracle asked, though she doubtless already had a visual on the Red Hood in her street cameras. ‘Isn’t he benched?’

“Yes,” Damian replied before Drake could launch into a story and delay them further. “And his appearance aligns with the invitation to Thursday dinner so you can find out all about him.”

The youngest Wayne leapt off the building, swinging faster now towards where Oracle had said the action was clustered. He could almost see it from here, a series of bright strobes, hazy against the misty sky. Almost taunting Batman.

‘It's not a... pancake dinner like last time, right?’ Oracle asked, after initiating a brief set of clicks that indicated no one from the Cave was listening in.

“No, proper dinner,” Drake replied. “There’s even rumors of lamb and some vegetarian thing for the demon.”

‘Good.’ She reopened the main line so if Alfred were listening, he could hear. ‘Sounds like a plan. Just hurry, Batman’s – shots fired at Newmarket and WayneCorp Way, gunner moving west, cameras dark on Blacknell Park—’

They moved.
Dick tried not to let Bruce or Alfred know why he didn’t want to get stuck in Gotham after seven at night. His typical excuses included traffic on the bridges, being late for his own patrol, procrastination (‘but I haven’t been to the grocery store in two weeks so, I should do that tonight’), or the not-so-pretense that his siblings’ arguments made him uncomfortable enough to leave.

The truth was that if he stayed in the city later than seven o’clock, he would get pulled into Batman’s patrol. The old man would see his tracker blinking at a coffeeshop, or coming out of one of the BPD trainings they outsourced to Gotham, and ‘invite’ Dick to suit up. Dick didn’t have the wherewithal to say no, sometimes.

Especially after a mandated training, where his fellow Blud cops exchanged sexual or graphic jokes about what they had done in a sample situation and how they ‘knew so much better now, no, definitely this time, I’ve got it, I definitely understand bribery/sexual harassment/extortion/excessive force this time’. Nothing changed. And Dick got lumped in with them, based solely on proximity. By the time they all got out of the trainings, some part of him was too angry not to go kick ass with Batman.

Today was a mandated gunwork refresher course. In other words, Dick felt he had spent the last eleven hours being the antithesis of Batman and looked forward to being Nightwing for a few hours, free of the responsibility of managing a gun and all its implications. His car dashboard read 7:05 when he glanced over and spotted the semi in the rearview bearing down on his tiny Nissan, halfway across the Robert Kane Memorial Bridge.

The car never made it to 7:06.

The bridge stood tall enough to ignore anything that happened beneath its massive arches. The cars passing across it, however, had plastered themselves to the side and were creeping past the wreckage of the semi/Nissan mashup against one of the abutments. Dick hung halfway up the same abutment, glad of the rain and early darkness that had allowed him to scramble up the structure without anyone recognizing him. The rain had made the roads slippery and the whole environment darker than it usually was.

He took deep breaths and climbed a little lower, looking for the driver of the semi. Wrecking cars
was always a trouble move, but the real tragedy of Dick’s situation was that he’d chosen to drive his own car this morning, rather than one of the police department’s. The insurance company would pay out when the accident made the news, featuring a dark-night, bucketing-rain situation, but Dick would have to explain how he’d remained unscathed by an accident that looked like it had killed the semi driver immediately…

“Hey O, I’m on Robert Kane, running into a little trouble.” At least he had the domino and his communicator on hand. Seconds later, Barbara had pulled up the cameras on the far sides of the bridge. She whistled.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked.

“Yeah, but I’m not in gear. Just a real athletic cop right now.” He could imagine her smile. “I’m going to look for the driver. Send the cops, please?”

Odds were, the whole mess was connected to Batman’s fight with whoever the villain of the day was. ‘Catastrophe’ or ‘TraffiKKK’ or something villainy and lame like that. See, the after-seven crowd in Gotham sucked.

The driver of the semi approached the Nissan, but Dick didn’t move from his position on the abutment. Semi drivers didn’t generally carry guns of that caliber or wear suits that looked like Zsasz had recommended the tailor. When the semi driver couldn’t find him, he went running for a suspiciously-idling second car, outside the dense cluster of rubberneckers and stopped traffic. Bingo. Dick dropped from the abutment to the roof of his Nissan, grabbed the emergency kit, and leapt from car roof to car roof, crossing the roadside until he landed in an intentionally-heavy ‘THUD’ on the idling car’s roof. The goons screamed.

Just for that moment, Dick wished he had a scary cape. Or, of course, Bruce as backup would be handy.

Dick leaned to the side of the car, hearing the usual clicking of a gun when goons were about to fire ‘ingeniously’ at the ceiling, and waited until they had to reload to toss an smoke grenade from the emergency kit into the car. The goons bolted into the street, swearing and panicking. It took seconds to clunk an escrima stick in the back of their heads. If anyone asked, he’d say it was a truncheon. Down they went, landing with ‘plashes’ on the wet road. On a crowded bridge like this, it would take a while for GCPD to get through, whether they came from the clear side or the blocked side. Figuring he had at least a few seconds, Dick frisked and tied up the attackers before removing his BPD badge and other identifying items, securing the domino in place, and kitting up.

Not fully Nightwing, not fully Richard Grayson, it’s…

‘Graywing’. He could get on board with that. ‘Gray(k)night’ sounded derivative, and ‘Wingson’ – well, if Robins weren’t Robins, ‘Wingsons’ would have been a good second try.

“Thanks a lot, asshole!” Someone yelled out their car window.

The unwelcome moniker drew him back to the problem of the accident, which effectively blocked all traffic off and on this side of the bridge. Though the semi wasn’t carrying cargo and the road was slick, Dick was fairly certain he couldn’t push it anywhere. As he’d explained to Batman, this was why it would be nice to be Superman. Just shove the damn semi with a shoulder like a linebacker until it moved out of the way.

Instead Dick returned to the safety of the abutments, removed the emergency kit’s grappling gun, and began swinging across the bridge to the far end, where he could already see headlights moving
backwards. If no one could go forward, the people in both oncoming lanes of the bridge would be trying to go backwards or cutting into the other two lanes to go forwards. That kind of thinking led to worse accidents, especially in the rain and the dark and growing feelings of impatience. Countering that, people respected vigilantes and he so rarely got to play traffic cop as an actual cop. And definitely not as Nightwing. In case Babs could see him through the security cameras he was nearing, he waved.

‘Good Lord, Nightwing, what are you doing?’ Babs asked.

“It’s Graywing, actually. One night only. Half Nightwing, half—”

‘I get it, I get it.’

Batman didn’t approve of traffic copping while on patrol, didn’t think it was a good use of his or the Robins’ time. Cars were driven by reasonably law-abiding civilians who didn’t want trouble or expense, Batman thought, with very little evidence to support it. Therefore, cars could wait for the police who invariably followed in the Bats’ wake, Batman reasoned. Nightwing staying to conduct traffic meant a thief or a sexual predator or a mugger might have the time they needed to complete their crime. When he was Robin, Dick had accepted that traffic direction fell to the police and that was okay, he didn’t know how to do it anyway.

But now, for all their other faults, the Bludhaven PD had drilled traffic safety into him and he was gonna direct some cars in the rain like, as Tim sometimes said, ‘a boss’.

By the time he got to the back of the bridge, a minor collision was already blocking most lanes. The drivers, an angry 30-something man who had left his F-150’s driver side door hanging open and an angry 20-something woman who had turned on her ‘yields’, which strobed the arguing pair with sporadic flashing yellow lights, accompanied by the regular chiming of the man’s ‘door open’ warning. Nightwing leapt off the abutment he clung to and landed in front of the pair, splashing them only a little.

“Hiya!”

They both looked surprised, though not as horrified as people usually were when Batman dropped out of the sky at them.

Dick pulled out one of the LED flashlights from his uniform and held it over all of their heads because, while there were streetlights, they were high up and impersonal. Not great for identifying the crazy masked guy who just jumped down next to you in the dark.

“I’m gonna ask you both to pull off to the side so we can get everybody moving,” Nightwing said, unclicking the flashlight once they realized he wasn’t going to rob them. “And then I’m gonna ask you to stay in your vehicles so you don’t get in a fight while I’m working.”

“No,” the woman (he was going to call her ‘Ms. Yields’) said quickly. “He rammed my car while he was trying to get out and the engine could be messed up.” She then glared over at the man, who Dick was going to call ‘Mr. F-150’.

“I’m not moving my car anywhere until I get your insurance information, lady!” Mr. F-150 shot back.

“Ma’am, we can push your car out of the way—” Dick began, but Ms. Yields wasn’t having it.

“And break it worse?”
“It’s not a spinal cord injury,” Dick said. From what he could hear and see, both vehicles were fine and these people were just overreacting. “But okay, I’ll just conduct traffic around you.”

You wanna stay? Fine. Watch this.

He began waving rows of cars on through, using two LED flashlights as ground-based semaphore. The pair took the hint and moved back to their cars, which they moved to the sides of the road. While it was great they stopped arguing, they weren’t leaving or exchanging insurance information. But Dick’s attention was entirely on semaphoring cars off the bridge. Red and blue lights gathered on the far side and, in about thirty more cars, he would have stop waving anybody off because they would need the closest cars as witnesses. That was going to suck; all these people wanted to get home.

“Yo pigBlud!” someone yelled, probably seeing just the silhouette of his uniform in the darkness. It wasn’t the first person to yell out their car window tonight but it sounded like the most aggressive. He tensed, signing with the sticks for the car to keep moving. It inched along and he analyzed escape trajectories – only to hear suppressed gunfire from another car, further along in the litany of darkened cars on a darkened bridge.

“They just shot out the security cameras,” came Oracle’s concerned voice.

The attack from behind forestalled any motion Dick might have made to reply.

Mr. F-150’s fist came crashing against the side of his head, effectively shattering the comm at just the right angle to knock it out. Dick spun and blocked the next blow with one of the emergency escrima sticks. Since this was Gotham, no one would be getting get out of their car to help him. The ‘pigBlud’ shouter had driven off into the rainy night, probably having completed their orders to distract him.

“The lady had some questions, kid,” Mr. F-150 said steadily, layering the blows as if he were laying a new roof.

“I’ve seen better interview techniques,” Dick replied, ducking under the man’s guard when he paused. Wrestling Mr. F-150 to the ground with one escrima stick under his neck, starving him of air, reminded him that he didn’t like fighting close quarters like this. If he were mid-air, he could have already knocked the man out.

Wait, so if Mr. F-150 was helping her, she was probably—

Hitting him in the head with a tire iron.

Compared to Mr. F-150’s punch, Ms. Yields’ attack was lacking in impact; Nightwing kept his hold on the man. Still, being hit in the head again wasn’t pleasant and he hissed in pain. His comm crackled urgently, probably Babs trying to tell him something.

“Why are you doing this?” he yelled, to either of the attackers. Probably Ms. Yields; Mr. F-150 was flagging.

“Because you don’t seem to have an office phone,” Ms. Yields replied, circling to his front to go after his ribs. Her mistake. He let go of the man, grabbed the tire iron and pitched it far enough away that she wouldn’t be getting it back. That glance up to throw it was enough to show him that the bridge was clear of cars. Damnit.

Meanwhile, Ms. Yields had moved out of reach, keeping an eye on Mr. F-150. Feeling the man slip into unconsciousness, Nightwing released him and stood, squinting in the tapering-off rain to get a
good look at his second assailant.

“Funny, I’m pretty sure you could get in touch with anyone down at the police station,” he said. “But
if you want to begin your pre-interview now…”

“Where is my brother?” Ms. Yields snapped.

“No problem, we’ll find him, I’m misplacing mine all the time.” Nightwing took a step towards her.
She in turn took a step back.

“You don’t look so good,” she told him.

“Really? Guess I’ll have to cut back on the cereal.” He stopped advancing, watching the woman.
“What does any of this have to do with the traffic on the bridge?”

“If we had just gone after Dick Grayson, he would’ve slipped away,” Ms. Yields replied. “I had to
make sure you’d stay.”

Again, knowing his name didn’t mean anything like ‘oh my God who told you?!’ should come out
of his mouth.

“Well, I’m here now and you’re both getting a free ride to the police station,” Dick said, mentally
reviewing damage control. He wore a domino, used escrima, it didn’t mean he was Nightwing but to
Gotham’s jaded population, there probably wasn’t another explanation. However, he was wearing
parts of a Bludhaven cop uniform, sans insignia. Ohhhh, Graywing had to be retired immediately.
Yesterday, in fact.

“The Yellow Lantern told me your name, if you’re wondering,” Ms. Yields said, removing a small
plastic box from her loose purse (which, good Lord, she’d been wearing her purse the whole time?).
“I’m Bluetooth’s sister, Marisa Hodgins.”

“Wow, you could use some training in the secret identity department,” Dick replied on auto-pilot.
Bruce hadn’t been wrapping him in on a lot of this stuff, so ‘Bluetooth’ meant nothing to him.

“My brother, Wendell is a telepath. You Bats arrested him, not long ago, and took him to some
vigilante Guantanamo.”

“Whoa, okay, I think I would know about a private Guantanamo.” Careful, careful. “But I don’t
even know Bluetooth. Only that he needs to use a nontrademarked name, I mean… really. If the Bats
named themselves Razr and LG, I’d have to have words with them.”

“They’re being kept in cells in some place called the ‘Watchtower.’ Ms. Hodgins looked up and met
his gaze head on. “You’re going to tell me where that is. You can’t just kidnap people like this.”

How the hell was she talking to anyone on the Watchtower?

“I’m sorry if your brother is being held there,” Dick said, still leaning heavily on the auto-pilot
portion of his responses. “I’m sure whoever has him will let him go when it’s safe.”

“Safe? They’re waiting for it to be ‘safe’ when neither of them know who you precious Bats are.
You took my brother and now you’re sitting there, telling me that until some mind-erasing shit takes
place, I can’t get him back!”

Wait, what? Damnit Bruce. Why did Dick always get stuck with these people? Why did he always
get stuck with the people who were making some damn good points and he had to play devil’s
advocate for their argument and his own mind?

“I’m sorry. I’ll see what I can do.”

“That’s what she said you’d say.” And there was the box, uplifted and her finger ready to jab at the red button Nightwing recognized immediately. “You asked what this had to do with the bridge? Everything. Specifically eight individual packages of C4 across the length of—”

“Nope.” Dick pitched one of the escrima sticks at her knee. Ms. Hodgins fell, dropping the bridge detonator, which he grabbed out of the air before it touched the ground.

“How could you—” she began.

“Fine, I’m a Bat, and yeah, Batman does drills with this stuff,” Nightwing said (R.I.P. Graywing). Regrettably, Batman didn’t cover what to do when you had two assailants who would be up again in a minute and a trigger-sensitive detonator for a bridge in one hand.

Mr. F-150 had a gun. Of course he did. The man had pushed himself to his feet while Nightwing acquired the detonator and was wet with rain, as they all were.

“It didn’t work, Karl,” Ms. Hodgins said from where she crouched with her knee injury.

“So I see,” Mr. F-150 replied, not glancing away from his target. “Did we expect him to be helpful?”

Dick kept quiet, analyzing trajectories to kick the gun out of the man’s hand without bumping the detonator in his own hand.

“Not really,” Ms. Hodgins said with disappointment. “There are two others, without going after the Bat himself, and both of them are younger. Better hostages than this guy.”

“Then you really haven’t met Robin.” Nightwing roundhouse-kicked the man, his grip on the detonator very careful and light, and grabbed the fallen gun with the other hand. But now both of his hands were occupied and Ms. Hodgins looked like she had backup plans upon backup plans.

His comm crackled with static again, Babs trying to boost the signal to a badly-damaged device.

‘If […] incoming […] known,’ Babs said through his comm, startling him momentarily.

“Thanks,” he said, before remembering his speaker was still turned off. Even if the comm had been intact, she wouldn’t have heard the lie anyway. What good was ‘incoming’?

“Who’s that?” Ms. Hodgins demanded. “Karl, I thought you were taking care of his radio!”

“Must be a durable thing if it made it through.” Karl pulled out another gun because of course, he had another, smaller one tucked in his pants. “But since the Bats hate guns, it won’t be around for long.”

“Hate doesn’t mean we can’t use them,” Dick said, aiming the weapon he held at the man’s knee and letting the rest of the day’s training take over. That was when Ms. Hodgins chose to leap at him, clinging to his torso and clawing the comm out of his ear. It was a good thing for her she’d gone for that and not the mask.

Her intent to de-communicate him was distracted as a car pulled up, raining gunfire.

“Ah, my ride’s here.”
“Then they can join you in your jail cell,” Nightwing managed, finally detaching Ms. Hodgins from his torso and flipping her to land on the ground, the detonator still in one hand so he had to use one entire arm. Karl had already run for the getaway car, abandoning his companion/possible employer.

Ms. Hodgins tried to knee him in the groin to get free, but Nightwing learned to avoid cheap shots like that years ago. She glared up at him and he tried to keep an eye on both her and the car, which wasn’t leaving. It was the same vehicle where the person had yelled at him earlier, before this whole mess started.

“Wing!” someone shouted. His head jerked up, away from the car and Ms. Hodgins, especially as two shots rang out in the quiet, rainy night. The vehicle sunk down, bullets in its tires, and the occupants clambered out, beginning to run away from the gun-wielding maniac shooting at them. The Red Hood landed heavily on the hood of the car as he dropped off a grappling line, shouting something.

It took Nightwing a minute to realize the shouting was at him.

“Nightwing, do you need those guys?!”

“One of them, but not urgent!”

“What’s he look like?” The Red Hood lined up a shot after the fleeing group and Dick felt his frustration spike. Between the attackers, and the detonator, and the gun within arm’s reach, he was struggling to prioritize.

“Don’t SHOOT him, I’ll catch him later!”

“Can do.” The Red Hood lowered the gun and glanced over at him, hardly shifting his position on the car roof. It would be too dark for any of the fleeing occupants to get a clean shot at him. “You know you’ve got blood all over the side of your head?”

“Yeah, there was a tire iron, how are you at defusing bombs?”

“Pro,” the Red Hood said with easy confidence. “Bridge?”

Dick nodded and handed over the detonator. “Ten of them. Are you sure you can—”

“Please, if I weren’t tied up, I could’ve defused the bomb that killed me.” Jason took the detonator and assessed it with a wry grin before grappling towards the bridge, singing to himself: “Hello, C4, my old friend, I’ve come to defuse you again.”

Now relieved of the C4 responsibility, Dick could tie Ms. Hodgins up and maybe they’d got out of the pouring rain sometime soon. It could take the Red Hood more than a couple of hours to safely defuse the bombs, depending on the complexity. Maybe Dick would have to go join him under the bridge.

Dick gingerly touched the side of his head, feeling the blood the Red Hood had mentioned. It washed off in the rain. Good, he wouldn’t have to explain to anyone that a woman with a tire iron had gotten the jump on him.

A tire-iron wielding woman who had a direct line into the Justice League Watchtower. Supes should know. He pulled out his comm and began doing what Babs had taught them as ‘field repairs’. Before long, it was crackling quietly to itself and he could turn the speaker back on.

“O?” he asked.
“Nightwing, good, the Red Hood said he had found you.”

“Comm’s pretty beat up, sorry. I have a ‘Marisa Hodgins’ here, who is apparently has a brother named either Wendell Hodgins or ‘Bluetooth’ being held by the Justice League. Can you send some cops to the far side for a pick-up?”

“On their way, ETA sixteen minutes. It takes a good thirty minutes taking the New Trigate out to where you are. And Dad’s not thrilled about you conducting all the witness cars away, just a heads-up.”

“I’m not over the moon either.” Dick glanced in the direction of the bridge where the Red Hood had disappeared as Oracle filled him in on how the Batman situation had played out (he was fine, as usual). After a few minutes of debriefing on either side, Dick asked: “What did you say their ETA was?”

“Eight now. What’s happening?”

“Going after the Red Hood. Maybe I’m just being a control freak, but I don’t like just one person handling all the bombs they were saying they’d attached to the bridge.”

“I’ve got a lock on your position, so go now, I’ll tell them where you were.”

“Thanks, O.”

“Just avoid getting blown up, “Graywing”.”
For one brief moment in this cold and careless day, we'll take a glass together

Chapter Notes

Yikes. Apparently I should’ve started my ‘two days a week’ update schedule LAST week, because Saturday’s update is terribly late! I’m sorry. In the future, Saturday will NOT be an update day, it will only be Tuesdays and Thursdays. And hopefully the quality of the writing will go up when I’m less panicked about getting it posted. Cause that’s become a thing. :) I will, after I finish, be going back and fixing some of the terrible continuity errors that are driving me nuts, but if I do it now, we’ll never move forward.

I apologize for the bomb defusing if it is inaccurate, I’m not learning a lot from online tutorials on defusing remote devices. Also, some people of legal age go to a bar in this chapter. I don’t always know how old the Bats are? But since Jason goes to a bar with Artemis in the Rebirth run, I’m gonna go with ‘of legal age.’

Chapter title is from 'We'll Take a Glass Together' in 'Grand Hotel'.

I should update again before the fourth, but I hope you all have a wonderful beginning to your weeks and thank you for interacting with this ever-growing beastie. And now, sleep! yay sleep!

“In the rain where I climb, creaking, into the arches, bombs were – beeping,” Jason continued as he approached the fourth explosive, feeling in an oddly good mood about the rhyme. It could be attributed to the bombs because, while they technically constituted a traumatic event, turning them off saved lives. When they weren’t turned off, they were an imminent death threat. Both ideas suited Jason right now.

He went silent, as C4 demanded, and got to work. Maybe this wouldn’t take so long, he thought. The first two had gone quickly, as if built by a DIY manual off the internet.

Then Goldie came swinging over. Somewhere, probably in the wreckage of his car, Dick had found another Nightwing suit; Jason wouldn’t have admitted in a thousand years that this was a relief.

Jason would’ve waved the older vigilante off, but his range of motion was limited by the closeness of the bomb and his occupation with it. The grappling line was acting as a rappel, hooked securely to one of the guardrails while Jason worked on the bombs attached to the underside of the bridge, feeling a bit like Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel.

“Don’t need help, ‘Wing, go find a kitten to save or something,” Jason told the other vigilante, keeping his voice low.

“I’m avoiding the Commissioner,” Dick said, flipping so he perched on the edge of one of the abutment ledges, some ways below where Jason worked. The Red Hood let out a long angry hiss of air when the asshole didn’t move along. This started Dick talking.

“The woman said she’s been in contact with her brother, who’s in the Watchtower.”
“Goldie, between the rain and the movement and the collection of bombs, I don’t need any disturbances. Go home.”

“How can I help?”

Jason said nothing, because C4 was notoriously cranky about things happening around it, but he could sense Dick out of his peripheral now, his lean form working on where Jason vaguely remembered another of the bombs being located. Too close for comfort, far too close.

“How did she get in contact with anyone here?” Dick continued. “Bluetooth and the Lantern should be in separate cells and I’ve always gotten the impression the Justice League members stationed up there tried to move people along as quickly as possible. Ms. Hodgins was calling it Guantanamo.”

Jason had been defusing bombs too long to just whirl and shout at Nightwing to shut up. He gritted his teeth and finally succeeded in removing the blasting cap from the third unit.

“Goldie,” he said over the comm, barely breathing the word because while the current bomb was inert, there were still several more in his proximity.

“Red Hood.”

“There’s six left, then we can talk. Just please go—” he was interrupted by the distinct sound of a bullet pinging off his armor. What the hell. Pressing himself against the underside of the bridge (which thank God, this specific part didn’t have any more bombs on it), he glanced down at the water below.

A boat had stopped more or less under the bridge and lights sighted up at him, fancy night vision attachments to rifles, likely shooting at the bombs and inadvertently hitting him. More bullets pinged off Jason’s armor. He couldn’t ignore it – sooner or later one would hit in the same place twice, or find a place between plates, or just aim for his neck or shoulder and shoot until he fell.

“Boat,” he said, almost breathed.

“On it.” Dick had become all business in the blink of an eye, starting to descend almost invisibly between the bridge girders. “Are you good to—”

“Six more, south-southwest, my right, back corner of each section. And I have to climb back up on the bridge to get there.” Jason adjusted his grip, ready to pull himself back up onto the topside surface to run to the next segment.


Jason hauled himself onto the bridge, detached the grapnel, ran fifty feet to the next segment (knee screaming), and did the entire process in reverse, hopefully before the damn emergency vehicles at the far end spotted him. He could hear Dick grunting with exertion as he took on the boat-based goons. How the hell were all these people getting here so fast? People didn’t just have ‘access’ to boats at the drop of a hat.

Well, Tim had mentioned that Bluetooth’s family had paid for his and Phenom’s implants, which didn’t come cheap. Maybe his sister had access to even more of the family funding.

He would ask Dick, but for the next half hour to two hours, he’d be defusing bombs and Jason didn’t want to use comms during that. He’d be fast; still, when it came to things strapped to the underside of a major bridge, you couldn’t be too careful.
“Okay buddy!” A new voice yelled from the topside of the bridge, above where he had just come down. Jason flattened himself against the underside, cursing internally. “Your hook’s up here kid, no point in hiding. We saw you go under. Come on up and we’ll have a chat.”

Jason twisted to get a look at the bomb some ways to his left. He didn’t want to shout. He also couldn’t let the cop stand up there yelling at him. Damnit, Tim was going to have a frakking fit when he heard about this. Jason pulled himself up again so he was hanging on the far side of the rail – anchored to his grappling hook, but he could still see the alarm on the cop’s face.

“Hey,” the cop said slowly. Jason heard the click of half a dozen safeties going off. “You wanna come over here and take off the helmet, kid?”

“There’s six more bombs, under the bridge,” Jason said, enunciating every word to prevent any chance of misunderstanding. “I didn’t place them. I’m defusing them. Nightwing will back me up on this, but I need all of you off the bridge in case I frak it up.”

‘Hood, what’s going on?’ Dick asked through his comm. ‘Also, I now have a boat.’

“You can arrest me the second I walk off the bridge,” Jason continued, not replying to Dick’s question. He had no intention of walking off the bridge, so technically this wasn’t lying. “I need to defuse the bombs. I’ll fight you, if I have to.”

It felt strange to be so compromising with the cops, telling them what he planned to do before he even did it. The cop’s eyebrows were knit together with concern, both for her team and for him. That was weird, seeing the mixed concern and knowing he was part of it.

“You’re gonna be okay?” she asked.

“I’ve done four,” he replied and pulled himself onto the bridge, slid his backpack off and removed the four bricks very, very carefully. The cop’s eyes rounded with fear and he took a few steps back from her to demonstrate he didn’t want to be anywhere near the line of cops.

“I’m going to put them right here,” he said, setting them down on the road. “You can send a bomb squad, anything, but remember that I’m going to be under the bridge, and I don’t have that serious of a death wish with six more of these to get rid of.”

She didn’t move and he sidestepped back towards his hook, yanking it once to test its strength, and then dropping out of sight. Overhead, he could hear cars moving off the bridge, orders being shouted, and the night going quiet. Nightwing eventually grappled his way to the top of the bridge and perched on a ledge, watching Jason finish defusing one, then the other bomb. By that time, Jason had become soaked with his own sweat and more than a little exhausted. When he pulled himself over the side of the bridge, returning to topside, the first thing he saw was his untouched line of C4 bricks.

Understandably, the cop hadn’t wanted to address the crisis while he was still under the bridge.

He placed the other six at appropriate distances in the line. Maybe the cops would realize he had rendered them safe when he didn’t stack them all on top of each other to make one massive ‘boom’. He didn’t know, it was a little late and he was a little tired to be thinking about how the cops might perceive ten C4 bricks, regardless of how he stacked them.

“How you doing, Red Hood?” Nightwing asked. Jason shrugged one shoulder, thinking that he’d like nothing more than to get rid of the body armor and fall into bed.

“I could drink.”
Naturally, they had had to go over the side of the bridge and swing away, rather than walking off to find ‘drink’ (and food, Nightwing had insisted), but neither of them were incapable. The people on the boat had been terrible shots, according to Dick, and his only inconvenience was that one thug had managed to knock him in the water. Meanwhile, the Red Hood’s body armor had a few more bullet dents than before. Dick got the feeling he was high enough in Jason’s esteem to experience the ‘terrible jokes’ about his death that Tim had mentioned.

Jason led the way to where they both kept a change of civilian clothes and then Nightwing called a cab and directed it to a pub that Bruce hated. Namely because Bruce only liked burgers you could eat with a fork and knife and the people here didn’t tolerate things like that. But as they walked up to its wooden doors, he got the feeling Jason didn’t like it either.

“God, Dick, I’ve told you about this place. It’s a cop bar,” Jason noted within seconds of arriving.

“What? And no, you haven’t.”

“Yes, I have, you’ve just forgotten, just like I forgot the damn name when you told the cabbie. Damnit. This is a cop bar that wants to pretend it’s an Irish pub.” Jason sighed heavily. “But if the kitchen is open, I’m actually too tired to care. If anyone asks who we are, you’re a Bludhaven cop and I’m a tourist from California.”

“No one’s going to notice us—”

“Cop. Bar.” Jason then turned to the barkeeper, who leaned forward to hear him. “Hey, is your kitchen still open?” A nod from the barkeeper. “Great, I’ll have the ribs, the nacho things, whatever your IPA on draft is and onion rings. And my friend will have your pork tacos with the sour cream on the side.”

“How would you know…” Dick began. Jason shrugged a shoulder, leaning away from the bar.

“They don’t have sugary cereal, you only like burgers from BatBurger, and the seafood’s a bad idea, since they’re actually proud of getting it out of Gotham Harbor and washing most of the pollution off.”

The barkeeper set the beer on the counter and Jason took it, glancing around for somewhere to sit before sitting down at the bar. Dick remained standing, looking reluctantly at the rest of the establishment. He understood the risks of discussing private things at a table where they could be overheard, but the bar here was…

“I need to know more about the Watchtower,” Jason said, ignoring or not noticing Dick’s discomfort.

“Can’t we sit at a booth?” Dick asked.

“Why?”

“Women buy me a lot of drinks when I sit at the bar,” Dick said quietly. It should be fun, most guys would find it fun, but he didn’t drink much at all, didn’t want the drinks, and felt terrible when he left them untouched all night (which was what usually happened).

“Really? I’ll drink them,” Jason said with amusement. He still hadn’t moved from the bar.

“You underestimate how much Fireball women send me.”
“Fine, if you’re gonna be whiny about it.” Jason flagged down the barkeeper again and flashed a grin. “My friend’s worried he’s too pretty for the bar. You don’t have any ‘misplaced’ men’s wedding rings back there we could borrow, do you?”

It was Gotham. The lost and found could have served as capital for a jewelry store. For once, Dick didn’t feel like he should feel guilty if someone sent him a drink; anyone who sent an unsolicited drink to a non-drinking, uninterested married man should know better. By the time they were done making sure Dick looked ‘taken,’ Jason had finished his beer and was getting down to business.

“So, in the Dungeons and Dragons campaign that is our life, Bluetooth is a telepath relocated to the Watchtower imperial prison.”

Okay, Dick thought, why didn’t we think of talking about our nightlife as a Dungeons and Dragons campaign decades ago?

“Okay,” Dick replied, adapting slowly to the new phraseology. “And now the long-lost sister of the telepath is talking to the wizard who wants to rule the empire of ‘Gogh-Tham’ but we don’t know how.”

“The telepath could be working with the wizard to pull that off. The wizard isn’t great at it, and our technomage didn’t get the impression the telepath was that experienced either. Together, they might be somethin’,” Jason said. Dick hoped the food would arrive soon, even as Jason ordered another beer. Pork tacos were sounding better and better.

“I’d think the prison would be better about monitoring that,” Dick said slowly. “They’ve dealt with more important people than an inexperienced wizard and a low-level telepath.”

“They underestimate people,” Jason said. “They could have put them in close proximity, let them talk during processing, even housed ‘em together since both know about Bats and the prison guards thought it would tell them how much they knew.”

The food arrived, which put a break in the discussion of the issues at hand. The next few minutes were silent as they dealt with post-patrol hunger.

“So,” Jason said, trying one of the onion rings and finding them acceptable. “The telepath and the wizard are working together. We don’t know how often, only that one of them is able to locate and talk to his sister. Who is now mad at the adventurers for locking him away. It’s only a matter of time until the telepath gets released, but apparently the sister’s family has gobs of money and wants it to happen now.”

“So the adventurers need to get to the Watch… prison and cut off communication between the wizard and telepath,” Dick confirmed.

“The prison could probably do that on their own.”

“Have we ever let them do their jobs?” Dick asked, half-rhetorically. He had already keyed in a text to Superman, so he was listening with half an ear to Jason. The incident with Phenom and Bluetooth had been mostly a Bat operation, still Jason seemed to feel responsible for this mess with the Yellow Lantern and involved in the mess with Phenom and Bluetooth. For the first time, Dick gestured to the barkeeper.

“Can we get several boxes?”

“I’m not even half done! What the hell?” Jason protested, as the barkeeper handed several boxes over the counter. Dick began putting the food into the containers before realizing he was nowhere
near Bludhaven or a fridge. Damnit.

“Jason, do you want…?”

“Yes, I want the leftovers, but where the hell are we going that I can’t eat them here?”

Dick didn’t respond. He finished packing the food, putting sixty dollars under one of the glasses and making sure the barkeeper saw it, and headed outside, a reluctant, limping Jason on his heels.

“I know you don’t remember, but this isn’t how our dynamic works, Goldie,” Jason said, stopping and putting all his weight on his good leg. “And I’m not up for a 5k right now.”

In response, Dick headed for the alley where they had picked up their civilian clothes, pulling the Nightwing suit back on. Jason grumpily followed him into the shadows and shoved the body armor and helmet back on.

“For this we leave dinner? Is there a kitten stuck in a tree, ‘Wing?”

“No, I just realized we needed someone else in the conversation,” Dick said, waiting until Jason moved slowly out of the shadows. The younger man stretched his bad leg a little, seeming to have downgraded it from ‘pain’ to ‘discomfort.’ He’d probably put the brace back on.

“My itinerary after dinner involved going to sleep, ‘wing, I’m not interested in much else.”

“Our company won’t be long.”

With a whoosh of red and blue, the person Dick had been waiting for showed up. Dick grinned, glad he had already changed into Nightwing. As a civilian he couldn’t show much outward recognition of the metahuman, but most of the tristate area knew Superman and Nightwing were friends.

“Superman!”

“Nightwing,” the metahuman greeted with a smile. “It’s been quite some time since you called me for assistance.”

“Special case,” Nightwing said, glancing over his shoulder. “Ah, have you already heard about, or met—”

“Superman,” Jason greeted, sounding more than a little irritable about having to go through ‘introductions’ again.

“Red Hood,” Superman replied.

“Oh, so B got you up to speed, then,” Nightwing said, feeling a little relieved that he wouldn’t have to explain the intricacies of the situation – but Superman’s expression went puzzled.

“No – on what?”

“On… Red Hood?”

“Oh, that.” Superman glanced with concern at Jason, seemed to fight himself for a moment, then said: “I realize our relationship has never been an easy one, but it is, as always, good to see you alive and well, for your father’s sake.”

Jason seemed to stop breathing for a minute. He pulled off the helmet, his eyes narrow with suspicion beneath the remaining domino and stammered a few unintelligible words before managing:
“You know me, honor roll?”

“I—yes,” Superman said. “Batman asked me not to approach you when I first heard, but... yes, my memory has not been affected the way it seems other memories have. He hypothesized it was due to my non-human origin.”

“Frak,” Jason breathed and sat down heavily on the curb. “He already checked it out.”

“I wasn’t even aware you had been forgotten until encountering Batman to pick up the Lantern.” Superman landed on the slick surface of the road, shimmering with rain. “He said you were handling it well and there was no need for me to intrude.”

“Always nice of him to decide what I need.” Jason took a deep breath but didn’t stand from the curb. “And did you consider what you remember, since you remember everything, about me and Bruce’s relationship and whether or not that would be a reason to tell me?”

Dick felt suspicion growing with every passing second, looking at Superman.

“Batman asked me not to say anything,” Superman replied without evasion. “There was concern it would muddy your progress with the family if you overcame your hesitation and tried to find other aliens to see if they remembered you. He instructed Red Robin to stop sharing his progress on... ‘Project Muninn’? as well, since he was discovering more evidence that alien forms would not be affected by the molecular shift.”

“Great, now he dragged in Tim,” Jason said. “I could’ve been working with Biz, or Kori, and instead he wanted me to stay here and work with them. Fucking control mechanisms. And fucking speciesist!”

“Batman was... concerned. That you would run, primarily. You had just risked your life trying to save Robin and risked your chances of reconciling with Batman to stop Red Robin from murdering someone. It seemed a very real possibility you would bolt at the closest opportunity if it became apparent that you could return to your team, or former team, in order to build up enough time to be remembered by humans. It was Batman’s analysis that you were not making healthy choices.” Superman went for the usual smile. Dick could have told him, miles in advance, that it wasn’t going to work. “You know how worried he gets when he feels his family is falling apart. He felt running from your family would solve nothing.”

“Thanks for helping, boy scout.” Jason didn’t get up. His snarl conveyed everything.” All we actually needed to talk about was your space prison, so let’s frakking focus on that from here on out.”
I need a little less pressure and a little more time

Chapter Notes

Chapter Title is from 'A Little More Homework' from the musical '13'.

I'll be updating the former chapter in a minute with some better verbage. I don't get tomorrow off, so I've still gotten dragged down by that 'deadline upload' demon.

Have a happy Fourth and thank you for interacting with this ever-growing fic. :) And now, update/sleep.

After saving all the hostages and saving Batman, and making sure the cops knew what was up, Tim stumbled home. Damian went home with Batman, of course, because favored son, while Tim took the grappling gun back to his cycle, yawning before he even got onto the freeway,

What day was dawning? Sunday? No. Tuesday. Tuesday was coming up over the horizon and Tim didn’t want to see any more of its stupid sunny face. He snuck into the Cave just after four a.m., dead on his feet. He took his cellphone off its charger and swiped away half a dozen angry texts from Jason about 'sharing his research no matter what Bruce frakking said' (great, someone had told him). The teenager peeled off the uniform, and clad in an undershirt and shorts, stumbled upstairs.

Oh God, he probably had a test today. He couldn’t remember what in, but he was pretty sure this Tuesday was the one circled repeatedly on his calendar. The manor stood hushed at this hour; even the birds outside seemed to understand that singing wasn’t a good idea before nine a.m. for weary Bats, including animal-loving Damian. Tim yawned one final time, pushed open the door to his room with his shoulder, and fell into bed.

Sleep went to plan for approximately three minutes and seventeen seconds.

Then, the phone buzzed so loudly on his nightstand Tim shouted himself awake, sure that a half dozen goons had followed him home and had already killed everyo—oh. The phone. He flopped back in the bed, ignoring Damian’s audible ‘Shut UP, Drake!’ in favor of opening his text messages. It was Dick.

‘Hey, kid’

‘Dick why its so damn early’ Tim texted back.

‘Jay got mad at B.’

‘Mmmmmnothing new’

‘really mad’

‘Why’

A thought made its way across Tim’s sleep-deprived mind and he pushed himself to a sitting position, hitting the call button immediately. Dick barely got through the ‘hel’ of his ‘hello’ before Tim was speaking, still slurring in half-sleep.
“N, are you okay? Sometimes Jayson has’a lotta of trouble direct’ his anger at the right person, so if you’re injured—”

“No, I’m fine!” Dick said over his protests. “He just knows what would bother B the most.”

“A massacre,” Tim stated, only half-joking as he came to wakefulness. “But seriously, is someone dead?”

Hearing someone ‘tt’, he looked up to see Damian standing at the side of his bed, only a foot away. He flinched away, scared to hell for the second time in two minutes. Damian was never allowed to get that close without his noticing and… dammit, this was why he didn’t sleep.

“Is Grayson well?” Damian asked, ignoring Tim’s reaction. Tim shrugged one shoulder, scooting farther away.

“Hey, ‘Grayson’, the kid wants to know if you’re okay.”

“Yeah! Absolutely, put me on speaker. B sent a car over to replace my bashed-up one and it’s got that nifty phone-to-car thing. We’re headed home.”

“NO,” came a correction from the background, somewhat muddied with car noise as Tim changed the phone mode to speaker and settled it down on the bed. The new position also allowed Damian to move away from standing at Tim’s bedside. “We’re heading to my home and then you head to yours. We went over this.”

“Is there a point?” Tim interrupted before Jason and Dick’s car ride could devolve into an inevitable argument.

“Ah… yeah. We swapped memories.”

“What does that matter?” Damian scowled, irritated to have been woken up for such a trivial event. “So Grayson remembers Todd.”

“You know how B feels about the Red Hood. Think he’s going to enjoy moving further and further down the shortlist of people helping Jason feel like part of the family again?” Tim asked.

“You’re underestimating Father as usual, Drake. He will not care about this event.”

“Guys,” Dick said over the phone. “So, the other reason I’m calling is the Watchtower. Supes filled us in.”

“What about it?” Tim asked.

Dick quickly filled him and Damian in on events that had transpired since they split up and what the pair wanted to do: mainly go to the Watchtower and work with Bluetooth, aka Wendell Hodgins, to determine how to convince him or safely stop him working with the Lantern. And maybe find out how the memory erasure process was going, since it had been over 48 hours and the Watchtower typically had a better turnaround process.

By the conclusion of the debriefing, Damian’s gaze had gone flat with anger. The idea of making a deal with Bluetooth probably didn’t trigger what little empathy the kid had on hand, Tim decided.

“I don’t think both of you should do that,” Tim said. “Superman could stop them from communicating and I’m not sure why you didn’t just tell him that last night. Dick could find a reason to talk to Marisa at the station, if he can avoid being recognized as…”
“Graywing,” Dick replied happily.

“Of course you are,” Tim groaned. “And I can’t imagine Jason or Damian want to go to the Watchtower to talk to someone who dropped a building on them. So, I’ll go talk to him, convince him that partnering up with the Lantern will only hurt him in the long run, see what kind of deal we can make.”

“You probably aren’t the most disconnected, baby bird,” Jason said, sounding bemused.

“I am arguably the most mentally healthy and human person available to talk to him and I’m not talking to her,” Tim replied, feeling the words ring false, but what were they going to do? The Justice League members on staff right now at the Watchtower, which would probably be at least Wonder Woman, Cyborg, and eventually J’onn (who they were waiting on to come back from offworld to help with memory erasure). None of them were Gotham natives and both Duela and Wendell seemed to be. As Bruce kept repeating, this was a Gotham problem, needing Gotham solutions.

“We told him we’d had a run-in with Marisa and Bruce said they’d moved past her,” Dick said, the reception crackling a little as he entered a bad service area – probably Jason’s apartment building. “Now they’re trying to track down the doctor who did the enhancements for Bluetooth and Phenom, so he can safely remove them from Wendell. Since Duela’s presenting as homicidal, they’re assessing how to hand her off to the GCPD, once her memories of the Bats are gone.”

“And that’s it for me kids,” Jason said. “Call me if you need me.” – and there was the sound of a car door opening and slamming shut.

“Duela’s issues might be deeper than we can easily go,” Tim said, trying not to glance up at Damian. “And I have a feeling her being a Yellow Lantern is going to make containing her even more difficult, so let’s set that aside and focus on Wendell. He shouldn’t be working with her, he’s probably realizing that, and I can talk him out of it.”

“Hm.”

Tim could feel that neither of the two vigilantes on the other end of the phone liked the idea. God, why couldn’t he just be working—wait. “Shit. Is today the third?”

“Um… yes?” Dick said, thrown by the sudden change in subject. Tim abandoned the phone on the bed, leaning down to grab his laptop on the floor next to the bed.

“The third is my Differential Equations exam, due by six a.m.”


“Because it was technically due on the second, but I was out all of Monday, so we’re stuck with now, because my teacher has his alarm set for 7:15 and checks his tests first thing.” He shooed Damian away with one hand. “Out, I’ve gotta knock this out.”

“You are going to do an advanced mathematics course in an hour, Drake? You almost fell off the bed,” Damian said, moving by what seemed like inches to the door.

“Yes, so don’t eat all the breakfast.” Once he’d shoved Damian out the door and turned on the tiny coffeepot that Alfred didn’t know he had, Tim slumped down on the bed again, book in his lap.

“Well,” Dick said, a thin voice still on the line. “Guess I’ll talk to you later.”

“I’m going to the Watchtower, Dick. Wendell messed up, but his friend died for it. I can talk him into
a better situation than Duela’s, before he gets mixed up with her.”

“We’ll… talk about this later, baby bird.”

Tim hung up the phone and got to work, only falling asleep three times during the hour-long deadline. The third time he woke up, a cup of coffee was waiting – despite his having forgotten to prep the mini-coffeemaker before turning it on.

Turns out even Damian could take pity on people from time to time.
I'm an accident waiting to happen, a mishap about to ensue

Chapter Notes

Holy siiiiiiit this is late. But better, for all that it's late? I got to think through how it would work. I'm sorry though.

Chapter title is from 'Accident Waiting to Happen' in 'A Drowsy Chaperone.' I'm, heh, trying to only use ONE song, from any musical (so it's not 99.9% Dear Evan Hansen and .1% Spring Awakening), and damn if that isn't getting tricky as we get into these later chapters.

Oh, so, note on powers, because I stupidly put everyone on the Watchtower:

J'onn is out of town. (J'onn's gamut of powers is at the scale of 'why try anything? I mean REALLY WHY."

Superman's super-hearing works when he a) is in close proximity or b) listening for it.

THANK YOU as ever for putting up with me being late and interacting with this fic.

And now, sleep, I think. If I fall off the wagon of updating on Tuesday (which given that it's 10pm on Sunday, is very possible)... rest assured that I'll come back. My guilt probably won't leave me alone for long.

“Sometimes, I think Dick thinks I’m Damian. Or Bruce thinks I’m Damian,” Tim said, breaking the mostly-silent, three-hour-long trip to the Watchtower. Jason tilted his head to glance at Tim; one eyebrow quirked up in amusement. The elevator put them a bit closer together than they would voluntarily stand, so neither moved much.

“You saying you feel replaceable, Replacement? Forgotten as having a distinct identity?”

“No, I’m saying they sent along a damn chaperone.” Tim sighed.

“Well, yes, I have been damned, but it didn’t take.” Jason took entirely too much pleasure in this.

“Everything while Bruce was dead, everything with the Titans and being Red Robin, and I’m still on the leash for working on my own.”

“You could think of me as a ride-along.” Jason suggested as the elevator came to a stop with a ‘bing’. “Showing me how to interrogate a subject like a good Robin, y’know, without killing them”

The elevator doors opened to a waiting Superman, whose eyebrows jumped as he heard the last part of the sentence.

“He’s kidding,” Tim was quick to say, nudging his ‘chaperone’ out of the elevator and past the Kryptonian. He had only been to the Satellite Watchtower two or three times but knew it to be divided into two decks: the containment cells and medical bay on the lower levels, conference rooms and quarters on the upper levels.

“How are the guests?” Tim continued.

“Quite well,” Superman replied. “Nightwing said you wanted to speak to Wendell?”
“Yup,” Jason responded. “And we’re good to go without a chaperone.”

“I’m only making sure.” Superman was frowning slightly at Tim. “Nightwing has been in charge of most of this encounter.” Which probably suggested that Batman didn’t know, which he didn’t, but that didn’t matter; Tim was more than capable of handling this interview solo. “And Nightwing mentioned your incident with the Yellow Lantern.”

Tim glared at Jason, who scowled back at him. “What, you think I told Dick to run around sharing your breakdowns, Replacement? Control your damn brother!”

“Trying to. Constantly.” Tim switched his attention back to Superman and smiled fiercely. “We’ll be quite safe. We’re only here to see Wendell and, unless they’re in cells directly across from or next to each other, Duela won’t come up. Besides, without a ring and in custody, how dangerous is she?”

Superman seemed about to say something but dismissed it, looking at Jason instead. The Red Hood was in full gear except for the helmet, while Tim had tried to dress as much like a civilian as possible: a domino, T-shirt, jeans, boots and the collapsible bo. He wasn’t recognizable but he probably looked more ‘human’ than anyone else at the Watchtower. Superman glanced from Jason to Tim.

“Just keep the ‘humor’ to a minimum, all right?” Superman asked. “No one was expecting the Red Hood and no one will know who he is.”

“Story of my life,” Jason said under his breath and waved a placating hand to Superman anyway. “Can do, no death jokes.”

“Let’s not reach for the stars here,” Tim said, trying to lighten what was quickly becoming a tense mood. “Superman, you want to remind me which way the cells are from here?”

In actuality he knew, could have gotten anywhere from the bridge to the nearest bathrooms from here, but it stopped Superman from reminding Jason how unexpected and unwelcome he was.

“Oh course. I’ll take you there.” Superman started down the hallway to the living quarters (it would actually be faster to go via the science lab, but Tim didn’t correct him) and launched into a Good Cop Guide to Interviewing at the same time. Tim bit the inside of his cheek, refusing to remind Superman that he knew all of this. Damnit, Jason probably knew all of this and he’d never even been to the Watchtower, but they had both learned from Batman, who damn well made sure they knew how to interview. As it was, the older man pulled at his jacket collar, whistling a little.

“Did not expect it to be this warm.”

“Maybe if you’d dressed like a normal person it wouldn’t be,” Tim replied, mentally going over the questions he planned to ask Wendell. He could feel Jason looking at him. Neither of them were paying attention to Superman’s verbal Guide.

“What, and get shot, stabbed, or gut-punched?” Jason replied.

“You really think that’s going to happen? They’re in cells! We’re only talking to one of them!” Tim whispered. “This isn’t Arkham.”

“No, it’s SPACE-Arkham,” Jason replied, not whispering but pretty quiet. “And she calls herself the Joker’s Daughter. If you think nothing’s going to go wrong on this trip—well, just look at how you dressed for it, you are gonna be damn well surprised.”

“She’s alone up here,” Tim said, giving up on whispering as they began climbing a stairwell after Superman, who simply flew up the stairs to the next level. “No friends, unless you count Wendell
which we don’t, and no resources. Her ring’s under lock and key.”

“You notice how no one has said she doesn’t have her ring?”

“You’re an idiot.” Tim hauled himself out of the stairwell and saw Superman down the hall, stopped at the giant window of a cell. Inside, Wendell sat sullenly on a cot in the corner of the room. A pile of books along with a half-finished meal had been piled by inside of the door. It didn’t instill a lot of confidence when they walked up and he scowled, but it did reinforce for Tim that Wendell was younger than he appeared. The blue skin and pupilless eyes combined to make him look ethereal and similar to Doctor Manhattan, while he couldn’t be much older than Tim.

“Do you have an interview room?” Tim asked Superman.

“Yes, just a moment.” Superman waited for Jason to join them before reaching over and pushing a button to the side of the cell. To the Robins’ surprise, a second forcefield blinked on inside the cell, while the original barrier in front of them blinked off. This effectively divided the cell into half, though the chairs remained on their side of the cell and Wendell still had access to the bed, another four feet of intervening space, and a private restroom chamber. It was a less oppressive environment than most of the police stations Tim had been in, and less harsh than Batman’s. It remained to be seen whether or not this setup got results.

Superman motioned them forward and, with some hesitation, they did. Jason swore when Superman took a step back, pushed a button, and the original cell wall blinked back on between them and the main corridor.

“Hey, boy scout, what’s the big—”

“It’s a privacy wall, Red Hood,” Superman said, realizing that it seemed like he had just imprisoned the two Bats in a partition of the cell. “There’s a door release to your left.”

Jason tested this release. His mood eased a little when it opened, so Superman continued.

“It only works when the front partition is up between you and the occupant. That front partition doesn’t come down unless someone approves it from outside the cell altogether. It’s fail-safed. If you need anything at all, just call. I’ll hear.”

“Fine,” Jason agreed. His expression suggested that Jason wanted to say more, but Jason didn’t, turning his attention to Wendell until Superman took the hint and left. Wendell watched them from his position on the bed, unblinking. His legs were drawn up to his chest, making him look not even half as big as he had appeared when fighting Damian and Tim. The malevolent demeanor had vanished as well. Being arrested and imprisoned on an alien satellite could do that to people.

“Hi, Wendell,” Tim said, trying to sound approachable. “I’m Red Robin. We met back at the office building, when you were fighting Robin?”

“The brother,” Wendell said with recognition but not warmth. “And I’m Bluetooth.”

Tim paused for a moment before asking: “Do you want me to call you Bluetooth or Wendell?”

“I’m Bluetooth. Half of the Chaos Pact.”

“You’re… all of Chaos Pact now,” Tim said. “Did they already tell you?”

“Yeah, somewhere through the millionth ‘whose names do you know?’ interrogation, I picked up on the fact that nobody got Jared out of that building.” The telepath glared at Jason. “No thanks to him,
obviously. At least Damian tried.”

“Were you working for Duela on that job?” Tim asked, trying not to flinch at the mention of Damian’s name.

“Yeah. She wanted a distraction for the rest of the Bats and said the names could get us money.” Wendell paused, analyzing them both. “That’s why you and the mercenary are here? To stop me from telling her? Makes sense, but you’re late.”

“We’re here because we already knew you’d been working with her. And that either she, or you, are in contact with your sister, Marisa,” Tim said. He’d determined before coming that he wasn’t going to be derailed by the names issue until it became relevant.

“Marisa?” Wendell’s eyes widened in surprise, though the visual effect was just a widening of pale blue against blue skin. “Is she okay? What happened?”

“Did you know she and Duela were talking? Wasn’t she using your power to do it?” Tim asked, instead of replying.

Wendell said nothing, though his eyes narrowed.

“Mentally talking to someone a planet away has to take a lot of energy for both of you, especially since you’re doing all the work,” Tim said, taking a slightly different tack. “Why would Duela want Marisa in particular to work with her?”

“Marisa’s afraid for me so she’ll do a lot of things,” Wendell said, sounding sullen about it. “You still didn’t say if she’s okay.”

“One of the Bats is talking to her at the police station,” Tim replied. “She’s safe. But you have to know Duela is dangerous – more dangerous than you and Jared were, even without her Lantern ring. Why are you working together?”

“I’m not stupid. I know she’s dangerous,” Wendell muttered. “I just don’t have that great a control over the implant when they’re trying to get in my head for your precious names. Or her, when she’s trying to get in my head.”

“She shouldn’t have any powers without her ring,” Tim reminded him. “She can’t do anything to you.”

“Yeah.” Wendell crossed his arms over his legs, the blue of his hands almost blending into the blue of his pants. “Without her ring.”

Next to Tim, Jason shifted his weight and glanced at Red Robin out of the corner of his eye.

“You know what, baby bird, maybe I should go check on our friend,” Jason murmured. Tim bit back a curse at his impatient chaperone.

“Just wait a minute,” he whispered to Jason, then spoke louder to Wendell. “Are you saying she does have her ring? Do you still have to be in its proximity for it to work?”

Wendell looked down at his hands and if his skin wasn’t blue, Tim would guess he was blushing. “I dunno, now. Marisa thought it was a stupid idea to get the implants when I had to be touching somebody for it to work, but who cares what she thinks? Right?”

Tim changed tactics again. “What does Duela want Marisa to do?”
“To get us out of here!” Wendell shouted at the cell partition. “You think I don’t know they’re trying to take the memories out of my head and take the implant away? And that, hell, they don’t have experience doing much of either? God…” He dropped his head into his hands. “Phenom and I were gonna be the top. Him with the brawn, me with the brains. Being badasses, he said. We were going to be something. Someones. And now he’s dead, and she’s in my brain, and—”

“Hey. We’re here to help,” Tim said, forcing himself to stay gentle, stay understanding, even though the mental picture of this (currently miserable) telepath with his hand on Damian’s head ran through his mind. Wendell might want to downplay himself when he was in this position, but no one had forced him to drag information out of Damian’s head. The teenager had voluntarily done dangerous and impulsive things while working with Phenom. That was probably who he had to be. If he continued working with Duela, he’d get worse.

“Does she have her ring?” Tim repeated.

“Yeah, obviously she has her ring.” Wendell looked at Tim as if he were an absolute moron, then stood from the cot for the first time and walked over to the partition. “You didn’t know that?” A short laugh burst out of him. “They don’t trust you as far as they can throw you!”

“The idea that they would be that stupid didn’t occur to me,” Tim said, maintaining an even tone to cloak his internal seething. He glanced up at his chaperone, only to find Jason already looking back to check for Superman. Good, Tim would happily lay into the Kryptonian right now for giving a psychopath back her weapon of mass destruction.

“Red Hood, maybe you should go check on Duela,” he suggested. Jason looked down at him in mild surprise, then at Wendell.

“Yo. Bluetooth,” he said. “What’s their reasoning for letting her keep the ring?”

“Training, I guess?” Wendell shrugged. “The Green Lantern wanted to see if she had to go to training on some planet or something. But it didn’t, uh, yank her away from here, or anything, and then they were having trouble getting her to give it back, so they just left it with her, and some kind of Blue Lantern power dampener. They did a lot of shouting about it when she first came in. Apparently there are a lot of rules for Lanterns.”

Tim felt like dropping his face into his hand. Justice League vs. U.S. legality always seemed to go phenomenally backwards. What’s more, he hoped they weren’t using his prototype for the power dampener. He’d made recommendations, not a finished product, and it wasn’t designed to be used on a consistent basis yet.

“Leaving the planet doesn’t mean you didn’t commit a crime,” Tim said, dragging himself back to the problem at hand. “Being an untrained Lantern doesn’t give anyone a pass.”

“And dressing up as a bat night after night doesn’t mean it’s not illegal,” Wendell countered. “Not that he’s going to be doing that long. She’s going to go back to Gotham and take over for the Bat. Says she’ll hunt down everyone she can find... Dick Grayson, Damian Wayne, other names she keeps close…” He closed his eyes for a second, whether with regret or irritation, Tim couldn’t tell. “Be the scariest thing in Gotham.”

Jason had moved towards the release at the edge of the cell but hesitated at this statement and spoke quietly to Tim: “Blue’s bein’ real chatty.”

“Could be the truth,” Tim suggested.
“Mm. Like I said, I’m thinkin’ this is gonna go south. You gonna be good if I’m gone, baby bird?”

“God, don’t call me that.” Tim shoved the gun Jason tried to hand him away. “I’ll be fine, there’s a cell and everything.”

“Good, because I’m really not in the mood for mind control shenanigans today.” The Red Hood relented, re-holstering the weapon, before triggering the cell release and heading for the other cells. Bluetooth didn’t make any sign of interest in the other’s departure.

“So,” Tim began. “Tell me what would make you stop working with Duela.”

Bluetooth looked unimpressed by the offer. “I’ve never seen Bats negotiate with criminals and you’re the goody two shoes one. Not the favorite, not the blood, and not the best. You’re not going to offer me anything.”

“Interesting theory.” Tim shifted his weight; all of Jason’s paranoia was starting to get to him. “But if you don’t work with me, nothing changes. You go to the police once you’re back on Earth, thanks to the ‘collapsing-a-building’ and assault charges. I wouldn’t hold your breath on Duela getting Marisa to free you, since your sister has money, but no idea how to direct it. She spent a lot of it hiring people to attack Nightwing and it didn’t work out.”

“Unless the plan was to get you here,” Wendell suggested, moving to stand next to the partition for the first time. “Marisa might get me out eventually, sure, but you’re the smart one, Tim, so you’re right: it’s not likely. And my implant is a little like a muscle; the more I use it, the better it gets and the harder it is for them to peel it away without killing me. ‘specially when they don’t know its history. So they can’t send me back. Maybe they’ll never send me back. I love my sister, but she can’t fight the Justice League.”

“Wendell,” Tim said, seeing the other man flinch at the sound of his given name. “Chaos Pact was a partnership between you and Jared. If he’s gone, you don’t have to press on with it and you don’t have to work with Duela. He’d want better things from his memory.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not around to provide feedback.” Bluetooth closed his eyes as if listening to something, then smiled slowly. Tim extended the bo, taking a preparatory step backwards, even though there was no visible way for Wendell to escape.

“Okay, Tim,” Wendell continued. “Since your mercenary said he didn’t want to deal with mind control right now—”

“You could try, I’ve had some prep time,” Tim replied, ready to be angry as hell. It wouldn’t take much.

“I was about to say I’m not going to.” Bluetooth motioned behind Tim. “Just mind the energy beams.”

The partition in front of Tim blipped out of existence, coinciding with a moving pillar of yellow slamming him against the far wall of the cell, knocking him past Wendell, who smiled tightly. If Tim twisted, he could still see Duela, floating at the entrance to the cell. She smiled back at him, her eyes too wide and sleepless for comfort.

“High schooler,” she greeted.

“Superman, we could use your help,” Tim said immediately. Duela giggled in that semi-demented way people with too little sleep did.
“This ring’s better than a Home Depot gift card, Timmy, I soundproofed the walls. We’ll have a nice quiet walk back to the ship and you won’t dangle me off any buildings at all.” Suddenly, her tone was sharp and brittle as if the memory had just reappeared in her mind. “You little shit.”

“Where’s the Red Hood?” Tim demanded.

“He’s got nothing to do with what we’ll be doing,” Duela replied as Bluetooth joined her at the cell’s entrance. The telepath immediately leaned to peer down the hallway, which was outside Tim’s line of sight.

“Thanks for this, chum,” Duela said to Bluetooth in a mockery of warmth. “Knew you could get somebody up here with a ship.”

“You’re never going to make it through the hanger bay.” Tim felt the pressure from the energy beam lift. He used the far wall as a launch point to leap back into the hallway, before Duela could trap him in the cell or something. “Hood!”

“He’s outside my cell,” Duela said, gliding after Tim as he tore down the hallway. If he thought he had any chance of winning a fight with a Lantern, he wouldn’t be running. He didn’t, so he had to sell her on taunting him, rather than stopping him.

“I thought about torturing him, really sell the ugly, but we’re on a timetable and his nose was bleeding pretty bad,” Duela continued, veering around the corner after Tim. Cells flew past and he began to think about what he was going to do if he just… arrived at an unconscious Red Hood. It certainly wouldn’t help either of them. “He’s terrible about protecting his face when he doesn’t have that helmet on.” She laughed and, when a Joker laughed, they laughed for everyone to hear, soundproofing or no. “Arsenal told me he kept a tally and one year, Red Hood shattered twenty-six helmets!”

“You know who he is.” Tim stopped and turned on his heel. “Why do you know who he is?”

“I said I wouldn’t kill you if he swapped memories with me,” Duela said brightly, hovering some feet above Tim. “You know, he’s pretty pissed at you not dressing warmly enough for the weather.”

“There’s no weather in space,” Tim said. If only having the last word was a fair trade to losing a battle with a Yellow Lantern. Despite Tim going on the offensive and efforts with the bo, within a minute she had slammed him into another wall hard enough to stun and constructed a cage of spikes around him. This was just not his damn day.

“Plus,” she continued, grabbing his wrist and yanking it up behind his back as she pulled him to a standing position. “Jason thinks there’s good in me. Always did, until he shot me. Now, I think we were heading to the hanger bay.”

Tim wavered, pretending the stun was worse than it was while he got ready to free himself. What it had affected was his ‘banter center,’ so he couldn’t think of anything to say to distract her. Thankfully, he didn’t have to.

A bullet came from down the hall, flitting against Duela’s thigh. She pulled Tim in front of her instinctually.

“Bluetooth,” she murmured. “Go.”

Wendell strode past them and towards Jason in what looked like suicidal confidence. The Red Hood stood about forty feet down the hall, gun pointed at Duela and trying to get a clear shot around Tim. Wendell reached out a hand to do some magical thing. He didn’t know Jason, Tim realized, he didn’t
realize mental manipulation didn’t work.

But, whatever it was, it made Jason pull the trigger.

The explosion in the enclosed space echoed even louder than the first time, following on its aftereffects. Duela had whirled to drag Tim towards the door as soon as they heard the snap of the safety, and she’d stopped. Gasping in surprise and pain, she crouched forward, hand going to the new wound in her left side.

“Shit,” came Jason’s breathless exclamation from down the hall.

“That’s a kill shot,” Tim began, sinking next to the Lantern.

“S-shit, no, not if we hurry,” The Red Hood approached the scene swiftly, Blood covered his face from what must’ve been a hell of a punch. Jason slid down next to Duela and nudged Tim away to support Wendell, whose arm had been grazed by the bullet that took down Duela. The telepath clutched his arm and groaned, unaccustomed to being shot though the wound was shallow enough for stitches, not surgery. Tim handcuffed his good arm to a support bar in the hallway, instructing him to keep pressure on the wound, and turned back to Jason. Beneath the blood, the Red Hood’s face was pale.

“Go find one of the healers,” Jason ordered.

“And leave you alone down here…?”

“They’re shot, I’ll handle it, hurry.”

Tim did, leaving the bloody scene to run upstairs. He knew how the scene would look, particularly to a bunch of League members who wouldn’t know Jason and to Superman who did. They would have to phrase this carefully, so Jason didn’t end up handed over to the Gotham PD and/or the nearest intergalactic tribunal. He realized with a start that he hadn’t thought to ask Jason what had startled him badly enough to fire a surprise shot.

There would be time enough for that later. All he needed to hope right now was that Batman wouldn’t be needed at the Watchtower today.
If you feel a sense of coalition, then you never really stand alone

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Sunday in the Park with George’s ‘Putting it Together’. I can do it, I’ll get to the end with this single-musical-song thing! (and we’ll fade out on Spamalot or Oklahoma something, it’ll be a kicker.)

As always, thanks for reading and commenting and just for enjoying this fic. <3 And I’m happy that it’s on time for once!

Clark had been deep in a conversation with Diana about the social complexities of human wedding rituals when Tim opened the door. Red Robin’s heart rate had been audibly elevated while he was coming down the hall but true to form, Tim was outwardly composed.

“Can either of you heal individuals other than yourselves?” Tim demanded, catching sight of them.

“Ah, no,” Diana said, rising from her seat. “What’s happened?”

“Anyone else here? Anyone who can?”

Instead of answering, Clark listened to the sounds downstairs, which were suddenly much more audible than they had been minutes before. One sluggish heartbeat, two panicked ones, and a murmured stream of epithets.

“Someone’s injured,” Clark said, grabbing the sterilized kit from underneath the counter where they sat. There were more kits in the Watchtower than there were in the Batcave and sometimes Clark felt a little guilty about that. Not now. “Is the Red Hood still armed?”

“He’s—” Tim stopped the sentence, realizing why Clark might be asking. While he looked for a better response, Clark reflected that Tim should have come in uniform. While the Red Hood had come fully armed to an environment with ample room for stress and dramatic reactions, Red Robin had decided on a T-shirt and jeans. Clark had originally thought Red Hood was overprepared, now it appeared the issue lay with their other visitor.

“Yes, he’s armed and he’s stable,” Tim said, sounding angry. “He’s not going to hurt anyone else. He didn’t mean to hurt them.”

“Both of them are injured?” Clark asked. Maybe he needed another kit.

“I’m done talking. If you’re not coming, I’ll go help them.” Tim headed for the door and Clark caught his shoulder.

“I’ll go. You stay here and call your father.”

“You’re kidding.” Tim seemed almost lost for words and ended up shoving the hand away and snatching the kit from Clark. “What good would Batman be?”

The former Robin ran for the door. Diana followed him, glancing with perplexity back at Clark.
“Who is Red Hood?”

“Another Bat.” Clark hurried after her, keeping an ear on the noises from downstairs, the fact that one of the three heartbeats was spiking with terror. The sluggish heartbeat kept slowing.

“I was pretty sure we knew all the Bats.” Diana kicked the door open and held it for him, looking down the hallway where Tim had gone. The small cluster of Bats and prisoners were grouped only several feet away. Less blood than Clark had expected — wonderful — but still a concern. The sluggish heartbeat was Duela’s.

The Red Hood cradled Duela, which Clark quickly realized was a necessary position to apply pressure on both her entry and exit wounds. Clark felt a surge of relief that there was an exit wound; at least they wouldn’t have to dig the bullet out, but felt alarmed at the amount of blood. The Red Hood was often covered in blood, true, but right now it soaked his jacket, gloves and pants. And his face — someone had punched him hard enough to shatter the helmet, which must have been abandoned somewhere. Wendell had been handcuffed to one of the anti-gravity bars embedded in the walls and sat with one arm in the air, not uncomfortably strained.

Tim took over for Jason in applying pressure to the wound. Since Red Robin wasn’t in full gear, Jason supplied him with more of the clean, absorbent material he’d been using to keep the blood in her body. Diana ‘hmm’ed as Tim opened up the kit to sanitize and begin investigating the wound.

“There is no need to do surgery here,” she reminded Tim, keeping one eye on Jason. “We have a fully equipped medical bay.”

“We might have to, if Supes is more preoccupied with calling Batman,” Tim replied, removing the covering bandage to take a look. “Good job with the pressure, Jason.”

Jason grunted and moved away, leaning back against the wall. Slumping, Clark noticed, but didn’t mention it aloud.

Tim replaced the bandage and looked up at Diana, about to say something, when Clark walked back into the room. He’d used his super-speed to fetch a medical cot, taking only seconds from the time Diana had mentioned the medical bay. He could see the younger man’s face set, as if he were going to be stubborn about this and Clark used his speed to move the Lantern onto the cot before anyone could protest.

“Superman, I—” Tim began.

“We may not have healers, but we certainly have better medical technology than a steel floor,” Diana said. Clark wheeled the unconscious Lantern out of the room, using his super-hearing to continue listening to the conversation.

“Beats a rooftop. Or a Lazarus Pit,” the Red Hood said and Clark heard another grunt as the Red Hood used an antigravity bar (probably) to pull himself up.

“Put Wendell back in a cell and let’s go. We’ve gotta make sure Superman doesn’t…” Tim trailed off, as if thinking better of the sentence. “Doesn’t forget to take off her ring.”

Clark did so now, reflecting that he was never going to tell Tim he had needed the reminder. Duela stirred a little in her sleep. After a moment Clark could hear footsteps following him: one pair angry and sure, the other tired, Diana keeping pace with the tired footsteps as they exchanged introductions. Well, sort of.

“You use guns,” she told the Red Hood. “I have understood that Batman hates guns.”
“Yeah, I grew up on the streets of Gotham. Guns were a little more useful than obscure Filipino fighting sticks.”

“I can appreciate such a viewpoint.”

None of the people trailing after Clark’s wheeled progress said anything for a moment until Diana finally introduced herself. “Diana of Themyscira.”

“Todd of Gotham.”

“Why did you fire at her?”

Clark didn’t hear why the Red Hood had attacked, because at that moment they arrived at the medical bay. It was the work of a moment to transition Duela to the master robot that did most of the Justice League’s medical tasks, then to turn to the former Robins as the robot began scanning and sanitizing the wounds. Clark motioned the pair out of the room.

“Di, can you stay with the Lantern?” he said, herding the two increasingly confused Bats.

She had already picked up on his intent. “Sure.”

He got them out into the hall and closed the door before Tim verbally protested: “He’s not going to shoot anyone!”

“You told me that before you even arrived, and here we are,” Clark replied. Honestly, sometimes it was like talking to Jon. Tim must have noticed the trend, or at least the perception of the trend, and took a calming breath.

“I can explain myself, Replacement. God, no wonder you and Damian don’t get along,” Jason said, before Tim could speak for him. The Red Hood had snuck another sanitation wipe out of the kit and was wiping the blood off his face and using what little clean area was left for his body armor. “Kid’s implants shorted. Must be all that non-work you’re doing to get them out.”

At their blank looks, he elaborated: “I’m pretty resistant to mental… stuff, so he must’ve taken a running start, or Duela was ‘helping’. I don’t think his implant could handle the stress… it shorted his brain. Frakking hurt. It’s surprising he’s even standing.”

“And then you shot him?” Clark clarified.

“I grazed him to make it stop. She… moved.” Jason’s body language turned evasive but it was hard to tell whether that was from guilt at hitting her or dishonesty because he’d meant to.

“You’re an expert marksman. I find it hard to believe you would miss,” Clark said, hoping to push him just a little further into the truth.

“I’ll have you know I frak up a lot. Ask Bruce.”

“I intend to. You injured two humans in custody, one near death. I’m obligated to report it to a human authority.” Seeing Jason’s alarmed look, Clark raised an eyebrow. “You are always quoting chapter and verse of justice for humans. Does it not apply to you?”

“I’m also a bad guy, it’s kind of what we do.” Jason glanced darkly in the direction of the cells. “But once Bluetooth’s stitched up, I think you should talk to him about the brain short. If Duela can spur that on, in any way, he wouldn’t be acting of his own free will. He knows you want her to go to training. Coulda felt he couldn’t tell you she was doing it.”
“Duly noted. Red Robin, if you wouldn’t mind stitching Wendell up?”

“Thanks,” Jason interrupted. “But we’re actually leaving.”

Clark felt a sigh coming on. “No, you’re not. You’ll vanish into the wind and then the Justice League will look responsible.’

“I missed the lecture where I was responsible for the damn Justice League. Timmy?” The Red Hood looked at the younger Robin expectantly. “You remember a lecture?”

“Lecture? Guess my invite got lost in the mail.”

The Red Hood grinned as if this were an inside joke. “I’m sure B just wanted it to go through the proper channels of Dick, Damian, Cass, Duke, and then you. Then me and then Stephanie. Y’know, gotta keep the chain of command clear.” He then turned his attention to Clark and the jovial tone vanished. “Until she’s in the clear. Then we’re leaving.”

“Red Hood—”

“If I’ve seriously injured her,” Jason swallowed hard, as if having trouble convincing himself of the words. “It’s no different than what the Bats do.”

“She wasn’t attacking you,” Clark reminded him.

“She had! She would’ve! She had Tim and I can fucking guarantee that she wouldn’t have thought twice about shooting him in the head once he wasn’t useful.”

“Excuse you, I would’ve taken over the ship,” Tim interjected. The Red Hood looked down at him, angrier than Tim looked like he had expected.

“No, you wouldn’t have, ‘cause they already threw you over once. If she had the telepath boosted and trying to get at you, like she just did me? You’d be dead. Or brain-fried. And I’d be stuck back here like every other Bat trying to hold up rules that don’t work.” Jason stalked over and sat on the floor against the wall, apparently determined to make good on his promise to stay until she was in the clear.

“Okay…” Tim said, moving to remove another first aid kit from where it hung on the wall. “I guess I’ll go stitch up Wendell, then.”

“You think you can keep it together?” Jason asked, looking up sharply at Tim, who frowned back at him.

“Try not to shoot anybody,” Tim told the Red Hood and headed downstairs. The Red Hood didn’t make eye contact with Clark, sitting with legs crossed and eyes closed as if meditating. Every once in a while, he would open an eye to glance at the door of the medical bay.

“Tell me when she’s out?” he finally asked Clark, voice distant with concentration.

“Absolutely,” Clark said.

“Good.”

Clark waited a few minutes to see if there would be anything else from the Red Hood. When there wasn’t, he headed upstairs to do a few time-sensitive tasks that would have to take place before Duela stabilized.
Like locking down the hanger bay and making a call to Bruce.
And we will come back home

Chapter Notes

It’s late, and I’m sorry. Housing fell apart and had to be put back together for SDCC next week. Yay, stress and emotional exhaustion! (not so much).

Chapter title is from the Greatest Showman’s ‘From now on’ which I realllly recommend with Ramin Karimloo. :D

Annnnnnd thank you all for being awesome and reading and kudosing and commenting and interacting in whatever way you choose to. <3

Jason had perfected meditating while with the All-Caste, namely because Ducra would have taken his head off for anything less. He didn’t get to do it much around Artemis and Bizarro. Artemis understood but Bizarro struggled with concepts like ‘we’ve been playing catch for two hours, I’m tired,’ much less ‘I’m going to sit here unmoving for four hours while I independently accelerate my healing.’

So, having perfected meditating, Jason knew on a fundamental level the minute Tim came back from downstairs and sat down next to him, entering his own meditative state. Or, so Jason thought. Over the period of the next half hour, the other Robin’s breathing went from meditative and even breaths to deep and steady ones. Rhythmic even. What would Bruce say about falling asleep while meditating? Jason smiled to himself, though he knew nothing would show on his face. He existed on a quieter plane in this state, somewhere he could smile at Tim’s tiredness rather than being overwhelmed by the Watchtower environment and his own recent actions.

An hour slipped by. Tim woke up and seemed to think that Jason hadn’t caught on to his falling asleep, so then they were both meditating. Until Tim fell asleep again.

Not for the first time, Jason wondered if Tim had just been dragging himself through days (and nights) to try and help. Probably, that was very much the Bat way. It made him want to add another dozen things to the list of ‘things to pay Tim back for’.

Another hour. Jason was paying close attention to the beeping of the machines behind the closed door (and Tim was sleeping), so he heard the shuttle dock in the hanger. If he hadn’t been straining to hear the machines, he wouldn’t have. The Watchtower communication system, clandestinely placed at the end of each hallway, chimed and confirmed his suspicion: someone had landed and he had a pretty good idea of who.

Coming out of meditation too fast was a bit like getting the bends and Jason was accustomed to the typical reactions by now. He nudged Tim, hard enough that the younger man almost overbalanced to the other side and came back swinging at Jason’s face.

Jason grabbed the fist and shoved it back at Tim. “Someone’s here. You gotta go.”

“Is it Bruce?” Tim flew to his feet, glancing over at the still chiming communications system.

“Probably. I just need you to check on Duela, then you can get out of here. I’ll find another exit.”
“Like hell I’m running.” Tim keyed in the entry code to the medical bay’s door – which technically he shouldn’t know but that had never stopped him before. “You piss me off but that’s no reason to leave you trapped in the Watchtower with Batman.”

“And like hell I need you thrown under a bus with me,” Jason replied. He was on his feet. Against the urging of every muscle in his body, he wanted to see Duela, to know if she’d be okay. No, she wasn’t his favorite person, still…

Jason lingered in the doorway while Tim got the door open and ran through Duela’s vitals on the computer screen. The screen itself squawked unhappily with whatever Tim was doing, but the kid had stopped the screen from shutting down or sending an actual alarm through.

“So?” Jason asked.

“Odds are that she’ll be okay,” Tim said, highlighting a line of code green with a tap of his finger. “They got her in here fast enough and you miraculously didn’t hit anything important with the shot. At least, nothing it doesn’t look like you’ve already hit before.”

“Scar tissue doesn’t heal well.” Jason couldn’t escape the idea that she would just die on the table.

Tim leaned forward, blinking away sleep to get a better look at the screen. “Well, it looks like you might have missed enough of it that the wounds were fresh, far enough that there wasn’t too much disruption to the organs…”

“So she’s out of the woods?”

“Not completely. Close enough that it looks like she’ll come out of the woods.” Tim turned away from the screen. “Come on, we should go.”

Jason looked at the unconscious woman again, plugged into half a dozen machines and tubes. Now that he knew she was stabilizing, all he could think of was how impossible it would be to get out. Every move they made could be scrutinized. There were clandestine cameras in the higher points of the room and, of course, Superman’s super-hearing™ somewhere on the Watchtower. And now Bruce.

“Okay, Red,” Jason said, wondering if his ‘let’s escape’ message was going to come across okay. “I think it’s time you and I met up with Batman.” He winked. It didn’t work, Tim looked appalled.

“…you sure about that, Hood?”

“No, I mean we should hurry down to the hanger bay to say hi. If the hanger bay happens to be unlocked, of course.”

Tim turned to the medical readout and began typing, not explaining what he was doing but, based on context, Jason got the feeling Tim had gotten the message. As far as Jason could tell, someone had failed to deny the medical bot privileges to the rest of the Watchtower and Tim was exploiting the loophole to coordinate their escape. After two nerve-wracking minutes of watching for Batman and waiting for Tim, the kid perma-locked the screen and rushed past Jason out the door. Neither spoke, moving swiftly towards the hanger bay. Both hoping Bruce was gone by now.

He’d probably come as Batman, Jason reminded himself. Batarangs and disappointed lower-half of face for his wayward sons.

Tim used his newly-created access code to activate the elevator, which took them down to the hanger bay. Jason had demanded they take the stairs but they couldn’t find them in under a minute so,
elevator it was. The whole ride down, he was waiting for the power to be cut, for the elevator to start
going up again taking them back to a waiting Superman, Diana and Batman. The Trinity of pissed.

Nothing of the kind happened.

When the doors opened and Jason saw their original craft still sitting where they had left it, he felt he
could breathe a little. Sure, Bruce’s craft sat right next to it, but he didn’t seem to be around to catch
them. Jason motioned Tim to get in, keeping one eye on the Batship (Batcraft?). His lower angle
made him the first to see when Damian leapt out of the Batship, katana in hand. Frak, the kid’s wrist
must be feeling better.

“Shooting prisoners and then running away, Todd?” the brat demanded, outfitted in full Robin
costume. “That’s a recent low.”

“I try.” Jason hoped that the kid hadn’t noticed Tim in their craft, prepping for takeoff. “It was only
the one prisoner though. Didn’t you do a whole Year of Blood thing?”

“I’ve atoned for that,” Damian snapped. “I fail to see you making recompense. So,” he moved the
katana to on-point. “Perhaps you should pay yours in blood.”

“Wow, very badass. You think that one up on the way over?” God, he didn’t want to shoot anyone
else today and going hand-to-hand with a katana (even if its user still had an injured wrist) was a
terrible idea. Ah well, not the first time. Though he could summon the All-Blades, this wasn’t really
a righteous battle and Damian was ten. Or… about ten. Was the kid fourteen? Jason dismissed these
thoughts and raised his fists.

“Tt. I should’ve known you’d make a childish choice.”

“Robin!” Batman made his appearance before they could start the fight, striding out of the elevator
and looking cooler than Jason imagined he and Tim had when they did the same thing minutes
earlier. Damian looked guilty. Jason figured out why just as the kid hid the expression.

“HA! You weren’t even supposed to have the katana!”

“Shut up, Todd!”

“Robin, put the sword away,” Batman said, never breaking eye contact with Jason. “I need to speak
to the Red Hood.”

Oh crap. He was back to criminal status. “Can I call you back? I’ve got something going on right
now.”

“You shot an unarmed woman in Watchtower custody. Will you accept the charges?”

Phone puns. Who said the Bat didn’t have a sense of humor? Jason snarled. “Unarmed? They let her
have the ring. It’s no damn wonder she broke out and she would have killed your second-best son if
I hadn’t fraking helped. She’s alive so I’m not feeling guilty about this.” The words were nice.
Nicer if they were true. Batman didn’t need to know that.

“Tt,” Damian snorted. “You are hardly his second-best son—”

“I was talking about Red Robin, ankle-biter.”

That shut Damian up. Jason returned his attention to Batman, who was moving around to cut Jason
off from the escape route to their craft.
“I didn’t meant to shoot her, if that makes you feel better,” Jason said, taking a couple of steps backward to stop Batman’s progress. “And I get that I’m not invited to Thursday dinner anymore, but I can’t unshoot her and I’m not playing your law-and-order game for that maniac. None of you know her, or what she does. Even Harley Quinn hates her, okay? They’re obsessed with the same frakkling clown and Harley’s tried to kill her!”

“You would’ve killed her,” Batman said. He’d stopped his approach. The conversation didn’t seem to be ending anytime soon however and Jason wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“Yeah, she didn’t deserve to get shot,” he said steadily. “And I’m never going to convince you I didn’t mean to shoot her,” Jason said. “I know that. And if I had meant to, I’d never convince you it was the right thing to do. But I’m not one of your rogues gallery.”

“Neither are many of the people I apprehend every night, Red Hood. But if you don’t mean to shoot people, and you do anyway, you shouldn’t have a gun.”

“Try and take it then, Bats,” Jason drew one out of the left holster, reflecting that if everyone had been too distracted to take it earlier, that was their problem. Literally; at this range, any shot would be a sure thing. Batman just looked at it, his mouth turning down. Not because he feared the weapon in any way. Jason knew this expression of well-worn disappointment far too well, felt it push at the rage bubbling inside him.

“Batman,” Diana said. Her voice sounded like a knife through the tension of the room, cutting through with clarity and clear head. At least, that was how it felt to Jason; Batman didn’t look away from him, even at the sound of her voice. Jason glanced carefully to the side and found the Amazon standing at the door to the previously-unfindable stairs.

“Diana,” Batman said.

“He came up here to keep Red Robin safe,” she said. Batman made a noncommittal sound.

“No one should be kept safe at the expense of shooting an innocent.”

“The angling of the shot shouldn’t have gone more than a millimeter into Wendell’s arm. Duela moved. If she hadn’t, the bullet would have gone into an insulated wall, designed for exactly that kind of event.” She looked at Jason. “You told Kal-El that it was a short in Wendell’s implants.”

“Yeah.” Maybe this would be okay, Jason hoped.

“He transferred that pain to you?”

“Well, he was tryin’.” Jason’s private suspicion was that Duela had meant to push Wendell too far. After all, if she made it off the Watchtower, she wouldn’t need him. Or Tim.

“You took a gamble,” Diana observed. “That your aim would be true despite the pain.”

“I’ve gambled on my aim a lot.” He liked Diana. A lot; no secrets about that. “And Wendell’s fine, isn’t he? Some stitches for resisting arrest during an attempted escape. That’s a normal tradeoff in Gotham, if not a gracious one.” Jason took a step backwards, almost within range of their escape vehicle. Diana seemed to be on his side, her gaze turning to Batman.

“It is not ideal,” she said. “But under the circumstances, house arrest might be better than keeping him in the Watchtower.”

Batman didn’t give the idea a moment’s thought. “He doesn’t need special treatment. I understand it
isn’t a League matter, but you do have jurisdiction on any crime that happens here. You certainly don’t need to take my… ‘relationship’ into account.”

“It’s not special treatment,” Diana said firmly. “We can heal Duela here, but until it is determined if she wants to attempt to prosecute him for her injuries, there is no point in his staying. And you two appear to have unfinished business, which you are avoiding. At the current time, it would be better for everyone if he were disarmed and put under house arrest for at least two months. You will be relied upon to know where to find him.”

“Ha.” Jason coughed when everyone looked at him. “Yeah, just thinking of our nightlife.”

Perhaps they will let you patrol with them,” Diana said. He couldn’t tell if she was joking or not and she returned her attention to Batman. “But he will not be staying in the Watchtower.”

“… you realize that as a part of the League, I could bring charges against him myself,” Batman said. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees. Diana turned a frigid smile on the Bat.

“Do you want to do that, Batman? Do you really?”

“…no, he can stay at the manor. Red Hood, thank them for—”

“Thank you,” Jason said quickly, because there would be nothing easier than escaping house arrest at frakking Wayne Manor and keeping his head down. “I appreciate not having to stay here. Gorgeous and all but…”

“You are welcome.” Diana looked back to Batman. “I’m going to follow up on the patient. As your son has already unlocked the hanger bay doors, you can show yourselves out. Try to cause less trouble next time.”

Jason made to climb into the cockpit with Tim, but Batman caught his shoulder, pushing him lightly towards the Batcraft instead. With his free hand, he motioned for Damian to go with Tim.

“You ride with me, Red Hood. And I’ll need your weapons. All of them.”

Jason handed over everything, relieved that he at least still had the taser in his chest insignia. Yeah, not great, but it would do until he could steal his guns back. Still, riding with Bruce? It was going to be a long flight back. The comm built into the Batcraft’s dashboard transmitted Tim’s voice almost as soon as they were out in open space.

“Don’t forget, B, we have family dinner scheduled tonight. ‘Wing’s on his way.”

Batman didn’t groan (because the all-menacing Batman didn’t do that kind of thing) but Jason could almost hear his internal sigh.

“Can’t we… cancel, Red Robin?”

‘Penny-One’s making lamb and vegetarian fattoush so no, I think he’d take it poorly if we bowed out now.’

Batman did sigh now. “Confirmed, Red Robin. Thank you for the reminder.”

‘Anytime.’
You're alone and you're scared, But the banquet's all prepared

Batman flew them home in stony disappointed silence, as if he were bringing the Red Hood to the police station, rather than flying back him to the Manor.

It was after 4:00 in the afternoon when they reentered the Cave and it occurred to Jason that it was still light outside. Batman had ventured out in the daytime just to come get them. Was that flattering or depressing? He wasn’t sure.

He still wasn’t sure why the lecture he had been expecting hadn’t come. Were Jason not wearing full gear including long-sleeves, he would have dug his fingernails into his arm simply to release some of the pressure in the confined cockpit. Then he’d wondered if Dick, age eight, had ever farted in the cockpit to do (more or less) the same thing. Hey, eight year old boys, right? All the Robins that followed had either been older or too mature, Jason himself included of course.

Batman landed the Batcraft and headed off to de-cowl without a word to Jason who felt… superfluous. How far was Batman going to take this ‘prisoner’ thing? When was the anklet going to come out? Tim and Damian’s craft sat cold, along with Dick’s bike, and none of them had hung around the Cave. Jason took a seat at the Batcomputer, wishing he still had one of his helmets here.

What was Batman going to do with him?

The de-cowled vigilante strode out of the changing area and looked surprised to see him.

“We rode home together, old man, don’t tell me you forgot,” Jason couldn’t help snarking. Bruce’s eyebrows lifted.

“Get changed for dinner. Dick should have some clothes.”

“I’m…” Jason bit back the inquiry – ‘I’m invited?’ –and headed back to find one of Dick’s random piles of clothes. They wouldn’t even be eating until seven or some stupid hour, so he wasn’t in a hurry, but he was relieved he wouldn’t have to sit in blood-splattered body armor and a million-degree jacket and leather pants for hours. He touched his nose gingerly at the thought. While it hurt from her punch, he hadn’t had to set it from being broken.

His first pick for a change of clothes wouldn’t have been a knit blue sweater and skinny jeans (skinny SKINNY jeans, Night, what the hell), but they mostly fit, despite the feeling that bending over wouldn’t be a good idea. Bruce had left the Cave by the time he finished, so Jason made his

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the lateness, all! I left for SDCC super-early last Wednesday, and meant to update the chapter but failed to take into account that our super-last-minute housing wouldn’t have wifi.

As always, you're awesome for reading/commenting/kudosing/bookmarking, thanks for trucking along with me. <3

Chapter title is from the Beauty and the Beast musical, 'Be Our Guest' and I'm not sorry. XD
way upstairs to find people with slightly more readable emotional responses.

Dick burst out laughing as he walked into the kitchen, which wasn’t what’d been thinking of.

“Oh my God, Jay…” The acrobat clutched the countertop for support.

“You own these skinny nightmares, Dick, it’s not my fault they’re the only thing downstairs aside from cowls.”

“You look like—”

“I don’t want to hear what I look like. Do you have any other pants? Maybe some for humans?”

Laughing all the way, Dick, the jerk, took off for his bedroom. This left Jason with the kitchen’s other occupants: Alfred and a sullen, de-katanaed Damian sitting on the counter, Alfred the cat in his lap.

“Sorry ‘bout the fight, brat,” Jason said in a warning shot of amends.

“Tt. I’m sorry I didn’t get to kick your ass.”

“Language, Master Damian,” Alfred warned.

“We must speak to a peasant like Todd in a manner which he understands,” Damian replied to the (human) Alfred while stroking the cat version with his good hand. The brace was back on his bad wrist and Jason hoped he’d gotten a lecture out of the katana incident.

“Alf, I don’t know what they told you, but I didn’t mean to shoot anyone. Tim said she’d be okay,” Jason said, partially to avoid snapping at Damian and partially because the butler could be thinking anything about him. “And… Bruce took all my guns so, uh, dinner should be quiet.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” But the butler didn’t turn from the magnificent potato side dish he was seasoning. Being in the kitchen without being useful felt wrong, so Jason meandered out of there, wondering if there was any way he could escape house arrest before dinner. Too late, Dick tossed a pair of black slacks down the stairs.

“Why the hell do you keep slacks here?” Jason asked, catching them.

“Portrait-sittings,” Dick replied smugly. “And they’re technically too big for me, so they’ll probably fit you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

They did fit better. Thank God, maybe Jason could sit down for more than five minutes without losing all feeling in the lower half of his body. Avoiding Damian and Tim’s spats was the other half of that battle though, second only to avoiding Bruce. When Jason opened the bathroom door where he’d been changing and heard his youngest brothers getting in a shouting match to the left, he veered right. Maybe he could find Cass. Someone even remotely chill.

He found Cass and Babs on the den’s couch, watching a rerun of Friends, which he was pretty sure was a show Babs didn’t like. Controversial opinion, so she never said anything, and they both knew Cass adored it. Something about the actors or the dialogue; they said things as if they meant them, so she could deal with the incongruity of acting for the length of an episode. Jason took a seat on the
floor to watch with them, a respectful distance away.

The kids wouldn’t bring the fight in here, Bruce avoided TV except on special occasions, and if Dick showed up, he’d just snuggle into the girls (and leave Jason the frak alone).

Ever the commissioner’s daughter, Babs’ gaze snapped to him when he sat, probably visually checking him for weapons. Finding none, she settled back into watching the show. Cass looked a little concerned, probably sensing his discomfort with the events of earlier that day, but said and signed nothing.

When one episode ended, another began, and the girls let it. Jason stayed where he was. If he was lucky, maybe the Bats would think he’d already tried to sneak out and they’d all leave, then he’d actually sneak out. Three episodes in, Dick poked his head into the den.

“Dinner’s in fifteen minutes.”

“Can’t,” Jason tried. “I’ve got a thing, over in Gotham. Next week for sure.”

“God, is that how you lie? That’s terrible.” Tim had been passing the den and leaned in as well. “Really, I could give you some pointers.”

“Thanks, I don’t need advice from a high school senior who gets in fights with his ten-year-old brother.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s thirteen.”

“That help you justify it to yourself, Timmers? What the hell were you arguing about?”

“Same thing we argued about on the way here. He’s pissed that you’re here. And that I’m here, for that matter. Grayson’s allowed to visit.” Tim sounded more bitter than he had the past few days. Huh, Jason had thought they were getting along (aside from the shouting match, but they didn’t do much but shout at each other).

“You sure he doesn’t think I’m a threat to you?” Jason asked, almost before he had thought through the question. Tim’s eyebrows lifted.

“I’m pretty sure he’d offer to help you kill me, Jay. I think we all know that.”

Dick ruffled Tim’s hair, which made the younger man scowl and duck away. Babs was leaning on her elbows on the couch arm, Cass leaning back to look around her.

“Are you a threat?” Babs asked.

“Probably.” Too late, he remembered that it wasn’t going to be taken as a joke. Well, it wasn’t, was it? Even so. “But not to Tim, or any of you guys, at the moment. It’s more if everyone but Harley Quinn forgot who you were, Babs, you’d feel pretty tooth and nail at everybody.”

“Am I Harley Quinn in this scenario?” Tim asked as Babs mulled this idea over. “I’m not Harley Quinn.”

“Sssh, Harley. I’m making a point,” Jason replied.
“I see your point.” Barbara looked thoughtful, reaching over Cass to grab the remote and click off the TV before extending a hand to Jason. “Barbara Gordon.”

“Red Hood.”

“And dinner is now,” Dick said, clearly relieved Jason had passed Barbara’s first test.

And now for the one that involved everyone sitting around a dinner table. Yay.

#

Contrary to what his sons thought, or often regrettably said, Bruce didn’t adopt every orphan he encountered, just as Damian was not allowed to adopt every untended animal he came across. He didn’t forget his sons’ names (aside from the current exception); he didn’t force them to become soldiers in his mission. He did have a sense of humor, thank you, children, and he didn’t love any of them any more or any less than the others.

In family dinners like this however, the dynamic became immediately clear what they thought of him and how they thought he thought of them. Bruce was at the end of the table, facing the door. Dick sat closest to him on his left side, next to Barbara, and Damian sat on the right hand side (which he had perpetually claimed and drawn blood for in the past, not that Bruce had encouraged either behavior). Next to Damian sat Cass, as the perennial peacemaker, then the Red Hood and, directly across from Jason and next to Barbara, sat Tim, deeply engrossed in his tablet. His two sons who wanted the least to do with him had managed to get seats the farthest away.

Was this normal?

Not that Bruce felt in any mood to talk to the child he would have to be taking care of for two months. He wondered, again, if Diana was going to insist. There had to be better places for the Red Hood, in jail if he couldn’t keep his nose clean or maybe an institution. Not Arkham if it was so ridden with trauma for the Red Hood but…

After several minutes of looking distinctly uncomfortable as Babs struck up a conversation with Cass about Friends, the Red Hood slipped one of the knives off the table. His touch had been so light, Bruce wouldn’t have seen the action if he wasn’t looking for something like it. He wasn’t sure where the knife went after the Red Hood took it, but Jason Todd seemed to lose a little of the tension screaming through his body.

Damian had been drawn into the conversation about the TV show and was learning about the perils of having a nudist living next door when Alfred brought out the lamb. The Red Hood stood immediately, moving for the kitchen door. Bruce rose and the Red Hood paused, confusion flickering briefly over his expression.

“Where are you going?” Bruce asked.

“Helping with the side dishes.”

“Sit down. Tim will help, if Alfred requires any assistance.”

The Red Hood seemed about to fight him on the issue before glancing at Tim. Seeing the teen’s brief shake of the head, Jason Todd dragged the seat out and sat down again.

“I can manage quite well,” Alfred said, having set down the lamb and waiting until the drama had passed to return to the kitchen. “Though I appreciate the offer.”
A smile ghosted across the Red Hood’s face. Bruce realized it was the first actual smile, not tinged with anger or pride, that he’d seen since the Red Hood and he exchanged memories, days ago. He could recognize the rarity, not exactly being a sunbeam himself, but wondered if there had been no cause whatsoever for Jason Todd to smile over the past few days. If Tim’s account was to be believed, the only reason the Red Hood wouldn’t want Duela to die was because he wanted to preserve a relationship with Bruce. Alfred unloaded the side dishes from a sidecar designed for the purpose and took his dinner into the kitchen. Bruce knew to invite the butler to eat with them was an insult to his profession, but he still had to choke back the words. Particularly because tonight, Alfred staying would have been a much-needed buffer between him and the family. The Red Hood’s gaze followed Alfred as if he would also like to escape the meal.

“Damian, did you pick up all your schoolwork?” Bruce asked, hoping he could both ease into conversation and that his youngest had been on top of his academic responsibilities. Damian had insisted on staying home from school ‘in case something went wrong’ at the Watchtower. True to form, something had.

“Of course,” Damian replied. “Todd’s homicidal urges are hardly cause for lapsing in my studies.”

“Jealous?” Red Hood said unkindly.

“What is there to be jealous of? Your decision to turn the Watchtower into a spaghetti western or your lack of understanding that guns in space are as stupid as you?”

“There’s always height for starters, shrimp.”

“All the better to terrorize a space station with?”

“Better than terrorizing entire households of your siblings.”

“Uh, B? Wanna stop them?” Dick asked quietly, gaze on the bickering pair. Cass was looking at the head of the table as if asking the same question, along with a ‘really? You’re just going to sit there?’

“How long do they usually fight?” Bruce asked in an equally quiet tone.

“It’s Damian, the record’s never been established. Days. Weeks.”

“Do I…” Bruce knew he could say whatever he wanted to get their attention but he didn’t know how he communicated with the Red Hood and didn’t want to do something that antagonized the boy to do something with that knife…

Dick, thank God, saw his consternation through his placid expression. “Yeah, B, you call all of us ‘boys’ or ‘kids’ or whatever. You may not know him, but he’s gonna react better if you treat him like us. Well, more carefully than that, but still. Like one of your kids.”

Bruce nodded once and addressed his squabbling children, who had somehow pulled Tim into the argument as well.

“Boys!”

All three shut up at the sound of the Batman voice. Damian immediately gestured at the Red Hood, taking a breath for a complaint. Before he could get it out, Bruce gestured at the table.

“Dinner is served. I don’t want to hear one more antagonizing remark,” Bruce said.

Naturally, the Red Hood then murmured something just below his range of hearing. Tim snorted a
laugh. Damian bristled, leaning forward to look around Cass.

“What was that, Todd?” Damian demanded.

“Hood, do you want to eat in the kitchen?” Bruce asked wearily. The younger man looked up with an eager expression.

“Oh God yes.”

“Jay. Dames.” Dick didn’t even look up from where he was tucking into the food. “If you guys don’t shut up, me, Babs, ‘n Cass’ll eat all the food and I’ll take all the leftovers to Duke and Stephanie.”

“Two fine heroes who wouldn’t talk through grub,” Barbara agreed, taking another scoop of butternut squash. “Particularly Alfred’s.”

The Red Hood stopped arguing at that, ignoring even Damian as the teen tried to get a rise out of him. The table eventually fell silent except for the sounds of eating. Bruce wanted to believe they’d found a kind of peace, but his traitorous mind kept going back to the stolen knife, somewhere on the Red Hood’s person. As if his ‘son’ couldn’t be comfortable without a weapon. The habit had probably come from the streets of Gotham or the danger of vigilantism. Even so, Bruce would have to confiscate the knife or lock the Red Hood in his room tonight, one or the other.

Neither idea gave him much hope that he wouldn’t push the Red Hood even further away.

He’d wanted to push him as far away as possible when he arrived at the Watchtower and it had taken several hours for his anger to burn away, revealing the Red Hood as a panicked young man who had, unfortunately, had guns at his disposal. Bruce had reread the major points of Tim’s dossier as if he could drill them into his mind. He’d tried to think of how to convince the Red Hood that Bruce remembering was better than this hellish limbo where Bruce had to convince himself over and over that Jason was someone who could be trusted. They could discuss it over after-dinner coffee, before patrol, he’d finally decided. It didn’t have to be a major event involving closed doors or agendas. Just return the knife.

Remind me who you are.
And we'll go from there

Here’s me, hoping I’m not contradicting myself (edit, and have already caught said thing once). I’m sorry this is late... it’s been a kinda shitty weekend.

Chapter title is from the Anastasia musical’s song ‘We’ll Go From There.’

As always, you guys are the best. Thanks for hanging in there.

Bruce’s ‘we need to talk’ demeanor could be seen from space, Jason decided. More obvious than Roy’s long-standing crush on Kori. More awkward than a first date with Black Mask.

Tim lingered too, badly pretending to ignore the conversation Bruce had been waiting to have until after dessert was served and the after-dinner coffee sat cooling in mugs at the table. Jason suspected Tim didn’t plan on going anywhere until he finished off his coffee. Great. At least Damian had vanished with Dick and Barbara and Cass had volunteered to take leftovers to Duke and Stephanie. Just Batman, Jason, and Tim. Jason had resigned himself to its inevitability.

“Red Hood,” Bruce began. This was it, here came the ankle bracelet.

Jason steeled himself and gave Bruce an almost feral smile. “Bruce.”

“I remember you. For today’s... incident, and the events prior.” The statement sounded like Bruce wanted it to be poignant.

Jason’s smile tightened. “Oh? That’s great, B, glad you got that off your chest.”

“You know that isn’t what I meant. I want us to be on even footing, Hood.”

“Oh, we have never been on equal footing.” He pretended to look around the room. “So, ankle bracelet or are you just hand-cuffing me to the table leg for the next few months? Fair warning, neither’s gonna work great. I’ve been known to chew off limbs.”

“We are not having this conversation without your cooperation,” Bruce replied, pinching the bridge of his nose in an early, probably calculated, show of weariness. “And no one is chewing their limbs off.”

“Why would you need my cooperation? Starting now, huh? Just talk at me, B. It’s what you do anyway!” Why did he feel upset? He could tell from Tim’s sidelong glance that his tone had crossed over into aggressive, which was annoying because what he thought really didn’t matter. Bruce would do whatever he’d decided ages ago to do and Jason would endure whatever that was until he broke out. Maybe that was why. He didn’t have many conversations with Bruce where guilt still shaded his memory.

“I know you took a knife from the table,” Bruce said, looking up to make eye contact. “I’d like it returned.”

“You giving me anything in exchange?”
“Well, you did just eat a free dinner here.”

“Weapon-wise, Bruce. My guns, tas—knives, anything.” Good God, he kept forgetting Bruce didn’t know about the taser, if Tim hadn’t put it in his report. The taser was only good every once in a while, once the shock factor was gone and he had to wait for the assailant to forget about it. Bruce didn’t sigh, still wearing the face that suggested he’d like to.

“We discussed this before you left last time. No weapons.”

“It’s not my fault your brat wakes people up like a drill sergeant,” Jason said. It would make more sense to cave on the memory point than to hold out for all his battles, but the idea made something in him recoil. Who he was wasn’t important, Bruce just wanted more control over the situation. “We’re not doing storytime, B, so if you had a second point, go for it.”

Bruce gestured. “The knife, then.”

Jason tossed the knife onto the table, where it banged loud enough that Tim flinched. Yeah, well that’s what egregious amounts of coffee will do to your nerves, kid. Bruce reached over to retrieve the knife and set it by his own plate.

“Now,” Bruce continued. “Obviously, you can’t be sent anywhere until your legal standing is resolved. Duela will need to stand trial for her own crimes, but she also has a right to justice.”

“If she’s already a Lantern and she plans to go good or something, she could find a Blue Lantern and get healed…” Tim murmured, half to himself and not wanting to interrupt their conversation. He’d pulled out his phone. Could even be looking up Blue Lanterns as they spoke. Sitting on the opposite side of the table as he was, Jason couldn’t see.

“Having an accessible solution doesn’t negate guilt,” Bruce replied, sounding irritated at this second son betrayal.

“We aren’t really thinking like that when we kick the crap out of someone and then call the paramedics. It’s not like that doesn’t happen,” Tim said, never taking his eyes off his phone. “There’s been a least a few fights where they needed medical attention or they’d die.”

“This was not that type of incident. He shot her.”

“Well, with the provisos that he wasn’t going for a fatal shot and I don’t think he meant to hit her, I agree that she was probably planning on killing me. So maybe shooting at her was a proportionate response.”

“Are we going to have a problem, Tim?” Bruce sounded exasperated. Both of them had seen Tim play devil’s advocate a hundred times. And Tim usually won devil’s advocate battles. Honestly, they were probably calling the wrong Robin ‘demon’.

Tim set the phone down on the table and finally made eye contact with Bruce. “You’re acting like he’s going to wait patiently in the Cave until Duela tries to send him to prison for shooting her while she manipulated a telepath into assaulting Jason, oh, and tried to kidnap, probably murder, me. It’s a weak case, especially since she’s going to incriminate herself with evidence backed up by the security recordings… right, and me. And we’re vigilantes, Bruce. If any of us paid the price for our nightlife, we’d all be in prison and the brat would be with CPS. Duela could press charges, but if she comes back here, she’ll be arrested. The people she tied to a crane? The theft of a Russian spaceship prototype? Yeah, no.”

“You gonna expect a kickback for this defense, Replacement?” Jason asked, because it was a damn
good defense and the kid had said frak-all about it earlier.

“I’ll have my assistant fax you my rates,” Tim replied, still glaring at Bruce. “My alternative suggestion is to house Jason here and start that legally alive process you’ve both put off for years. No one will put two and two together since technically neither Jason Todd or Red Hood exist. But, in the meantime, no killing and he patrols his traditional areas.”

“Been thinkin’ about this,” Jason said, impressed.

“As soon as we figured out how Project Muninn could be cured. The days between then and now were spent on school and figuring out what the legal documentation would look like.”

“I could have helped with that,” Bruce interjected.

“We need to make him legally alive, not adopt him,” Tim replied and Jason was willing to bet that rejoinder had been on his mind for a good while too. “It’s going to require that you vacate his death certificate, make a legal showing, and if it’s been less than five years and assuming fifteen-year-old Jason hadn’t been delinquent on child support or racked up massive debt before ‘dying,’ we might be able to pull it off.”

“Good story, Replacement, but I’m over eighteen. I don’t need—"

“Bruce still has all your documentation and is responsible for filing the death certificate for you. You weren’t an emancipated minor and you can’t show up claiming to be yourself.”

“Aka the Huckleberry Finn version,” Jason remarked.

“And I’m having nothing to do with Mark Twain dramatics right now. I’ve just made an appointment with the Hudson County Superior Court, aligning with Bruce’s schedule and your admittedly very open one, Jason, and you’ll be seen as early as Wednesday.”

Jason got to his feet, still feeling uncomfortable with how fast things were moving. “So patrol is fine?”

“You’ll come with me,” Bruce said firmly, with a glance at Tim. The younger man made a face but nodded in agreement.

“It’s not a great idea, for the sake of our relationship with the Justice League, for you to be swinging around town solo,” Tim admitted.

Jason’s teeth clenched together because, while he rarely if ever missed, Duela had moved into the path of a bullet. And Bruce still didn’t even remember him. “Like I said a while ago, I can’t work with Bats. They’ll get shot.”

“Don’t you have blades?” Batman said, which was good; it meant he was at least considering the idea, but…

“Only in the face of absolute evil. So, unless we’re goin’ up against the Joker on a Thursday night, I don’t think they’ll be coming to the party.” Jason shot back. The conversation drained him of energy the longer it dragged on.

“Then you’ll wait another twenty-four hours,” Bruce said in a tone that brooked no argument.

“You’re still moving slowly anyway. After twenty-four, you can have a trial run with Red Robin. We’ll go from there if everything is going well.”
Jason scowled at the thought of being stuck here but didn’t protest.

Tim drank the last of his coffee and spoke as if reading his mind. “You’re only stuck here until you decide somebody knows you well enough to try again with the memories. You’ve got Dick, the brat, and Duela. Get Alfred and B on board and you’re done with this nonsense.”

Or Cass, Jason reflected. Or call Biz and see if he can get Artemis here, or—he looked up, as Bruce had stood, terminating the conversation, and already had his ‘Batman’ game face on for patrol.

“Replacement,” Jason said before Tim could follow suit.

“Gunslinger.” Tim paused in the middle of finishing off the rest of Jason’s untouched coffee.

“Do you have any Suzuki books? The piano ones?”

Tim made a face and set the empty cup back down on the table. “God, why? You have a masochistic desire to play ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’?”

“Do we have them?”

“Pretty sure they’re in the piano bench. That’s not a good way to learn though -- the whole method was only ever supposed to be for violin. There’s no point in teaching it to pianists. You don’t even learn how to read music until years in.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

When Jason looked, the piano books were where Tim had suggested, stacks of the sheet music books that (thank God) he had never had to learn from. Checking on his phone, Jason quickly memorized the correspondence of the notes to the position on the page before replacing the books. After an hour or so of ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’ variations every day when he was home, Damian would outright ask Tim to play an hour at the piano every day.
And sometimes you can feel like times becomes unreal when you're temporarily... lost

Chapter Notes

So... some of you might have already noticed: the chapters are late, rushed, and sometimes inconsistent. And I'm sorry, I want to do justice to this fic (it was simply much, much easier when I was unemployed).

So, chapters will be more infrequent for a while as I determine the right conclusion. Apologies, in advance, for the gap and THANK YOU for your support and continued reading. And now, sleep.

Oh, but the chapter title is from "Temporarily Lost" in Bridges of Madison County.

God, Todd was a nuisance to have around.

Damian had thought their father would kick him out after a day or two or at least make him keep regular hours, but Father had deemed his stability 'inconclusive.' A damn understatement but why did he have to be here?!

It didn’t even appear to inconvenience the older man, who waited until they had headed out for patrol and then left himself. The ‘chaperone’ period had last no more than three days, because Todd was just instructed to ‘keep his head down.’ The cretin would stumble back into the Manor after they had all come back, crashing on the stairs or a couch or (once) the piano bench. When Todd woke up at 4am last night, he started playing those Godawful songs with minimal talent or effort. Drake had been so bleeding frustrated he went down and started a brawl with their would-be pianist.

Fights were simpler to sleep through than ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’ and some other hellish song… daaa duh daaa duh dadadadaaaa duh... –so Damian had managed to fall asleep quickly.

All the better, because Monday had been a testing day. Despite the nocturnal disturbances, the material had been easy and Damian felt good about besting the rest of his classmates as he walked the rest of the way from the bus stop to the manor. He’d gotten off on an earlier stop expressly for that purpose, as walking a spell often felt better than walking immediately back into whatever mess might be unfolding at home.

He entered and could hear nothing from the piano room (maybe Tim had burned the books after last night). He headed for the kitchen, intending to find out if Todd had eaten the last of the clementines. That was another point of frustration: Todd didn’t seem to ever leave during the day, throwing off the balance of leftovers, quiet times, and just presence in the house. Damian didn’t know how Father could even put up with it; Father would walk into a room, Todd would be there, and Father would walk right out again.

As he approached, noise became audible from within the kitchen.

“Young man, get off the counter before you fall in earnest!” Alfred.

“It was just a wobble! And I’m a damn sight better than you being up here old man.” Naturally Todd
had found his way into the place with the clearest audience. Damian pushed the door open, spotting Todd standing on the countertop on tiptoe to peer over the top of the cabinets.

“I’m not seeing it though,” Todd said.

“Don’t lean!” Alfred took a step forward, though what the elderly butler could do for a twenty-year-old built like a linebacker was anyone’s guess. Alfred had to settle for an admonishment instead. “You may do this in your nightlife, but I don’t like watching you jaunt around up there for naught. As I said, I may have thrown it out.”

“Who throws out a pressure cooker? Anyway, we found the lid!”

“Which is rather like finding a single sock, Master Jason.” Alfred finally spotted Damian watching them. “Besides, I suppose it is time for your piano lessons.”

“My what?” The idiot twisted to look and nearly lost his footing. “Oh, hiya brat.”

“Pennyworth, why would you remind him of his penchant for that instrumental torture?” Damian demanded. “Haven’t we suffered enough?”

“Oh?” Todd hopped off the counter sans any sign of a pressure cooker. Damian felt a twinge of irritation at noting that Todd was wearing one of Grayson’s long-abandoned hoodies, navy and ill-suited to jumping on and off counters. “You don’t like my playing?”

“No. Emphatically.” Damian could think of no stronger exhortation. He’d silently agreed with Drake on this count when he went down to settle the problem last night/this morning, though he would never tell Drake such a thing. Todd looked fine anyway, so maybe Damian should take the brawl into his own hands next time.

“You prefer, let’s say, Tim’s playing?” Todd asked languidly. Damian’s eyes narrowed; he knew he was being led into a conversational trap but couldn’t see its point.

“Dying screams are preferable to your noises, cretin. Drake’s playing is sufferable.”

“Sufferable, say, an hour a day, four days out of the week?” Jason nudged. “If you had to choose between his and mine.”

“Considering you cannot play, Drake’s attempts would be preferable.”

“And you wouldn’t bitch about it?”

“Language,” Alfred said and began looking in cupboards again for the missing pressure cooker, ignoring his own suggestion that he had thrown it out. Todd turned away from Damian, though he continued talking.

“So you wouldn’t be weird at Tim for playing, like you were when you first moved in.”

“I am very few things I was when I first moved in,” Damian said proudly and heard Alfred murmur something under his breath to Todd, which made the older Robin grin.

“But you wouldn’t complain? I need a yes or a no and so far you’re just denying you roast people on a daily basis,” Todd asked, half hidden in the cupboard.

“You didn’t explain what benefit I get from agreeing to this. And I don’t complain about Drake’s playing any more than I do other portions of his inferior character.”
“Damnit, you are really the Bat’s kid.” Todd maneuvered himself out of the cabinet and leaned back against it, sitting on the floor and facing Damian. “I’m asking for a little silence and human dignity for the kid you once-upon-a-time tried to kill.”

“Why? I already endure you BOTH as intruders in my father’s home, as well as remarks about being a ‘demon,’ ‘shrimp,’ and other monikers you have PERSISTED in deeming me without my consent or approval.”

Todd seemed to sober a little. “Okay. No names for a month.”

“For EVER!”

“If I promised that, you’d call me every name under the sun just to get a rise out of me and eventually you’d do it on the wrong day and I’d just attack you.”

“Your lack of control is not my problem.”

“It’s gonna be YOUR problem if—”

“Master Jason,” Alfred said, straightening with what looked like a pressure cooker in both hands. From how excited Todd looked, it must be one. “If you do intend to make chili for after patrol, I suggest we begin the prep now.”

Todd pulled off the hoodie, leaving his arms free for movement before he removed an apron from one of the drawers. Alfred smiled faintly, as if surprised Jason knew where they were and quickly covering it up. Scowling, Damian grabbed one of the aprons as well.

“Where is your recipe?” he asked without waiting to see if Todd would ask for help.

“Really, bra—Damian, you don’t have homework or some shit to do?” Todd asked.

“I finished it on the way home. What items do you need?” If Todd had memorized or created some recipe, Damian could at least prepare ingredients. Alfred wasn’t shooing him out of the kitchen and didn’t look about to complain that he shouldn’t be using his wrist.

“Chili powder, for starters. Directly behind you, third shelf, six back.” Todd turned his attention to browning the meat for the dish. “You hoping you can talk me into never calling you names again?”

Damian set the chili powder down on the counter, then moved to grab tomato paste, garlic powder, and several peppers as Todd directed.

“Explain exactly how much Drake’s happiness is worth to you,” Damian sniped back. “Keep in mind I’ve also become tired of being called ‘kid’.”
I’m back! Sorry for the two-month gap... I am still—well, apparently I ‘didn’t use to be like this’, but that’s what moving states and starting a new job and living alone will do to you! Or me. Apparently. Anyhow.

A relevant heads-up about a change I made: Bruce does NOT remember Jason. I changed that, a chapter or two ago, while I was doing my continuity rewrites. I’ll probably mention it again, but that is the most sensitive thing to note. Other than that, I made a lot of continuity corrections, explanations, and changing how some scenes were carried out. Regrettably, this means I have to rewrite bits that I liked, or sometimes remove them altogether, so I’m sorry if anyone’s favorite part is missing now. Rest assured that I miss it/them too and did everything I could to keep things without ruining the flow of the story.

Another relevant heads-up: There’s no fixed update schedule as yet. If I’m going to vanish for a substantial period of time again, I’ll try to give notice, but hopefully there won’t be any more multi-month breaks before this is completed.

Thank you, a thousand times over, for all the comments about what you enjoyed and what could be improved.

The chapter title is ‘Wait For Me’ from Hadestown because two of the musicals I discovered over the break were Hadestown and The Great Comet.

Note: And my entire apartment complex's power just went out at 11:30 at night so ... I can't upload this as I want to. crap. Edit: But as of 1am, it's back!

Damian could haggle like a pro, when he wanted to.

Jason had been ready for the argument from the moment the kid complained about him playing the piano, but there was no certain way to know what Damian was prepared to agree to as part of their bargain. To Jason’s surprise, he hadn’t been nearly as cagey as he would usually be.

“You must ensure that I can patrol by myself, one night a week,” Damian began, once the chili was simmering away.

“I can ensure Bruce’ll be distracted. Can’t swear more than that,” Jason replied.

“Done. And you must make him remember you within one week.”

"That's... that might not be an option, kid-Damian," Jason replied, feeling a chill run down his spine at the idea of forcibly reconciling with Bruce as part of this bargain. Handing over control of the situation that his former father figure had tried to snatch last night felt like conceding. "I could get Alfred or Cass or anybody else on board aside from you, Dick, and Duela. Bruce is... complicated."

"Tt. I did not ask how you felt about Father, I merely made my demand. You will have to do this, Todd. Drake has encouraged you to do the same."
"The Replacement hasn't been telling me a thing," Jason said, but he was almost immediately feeling unsure about the statement. Tim hadn't been pushing him one way or another on the Bruce thing, but Jason had ended up patrolling with Bruce more often than anyone else, ended up being the one left to do the debriefs to Bruce on other nights, or this mess of 'bringing him back to life'. And the Bat had actually been trying to cooperate with everything.

“While he has many flaws, Drake is capable of subtlety,” Damian said.

Cooperation wasn’t what mattered though. Jason wanted to go back to his safehouses and he’d already ended up in a few fights with whichever designated sibling he was supposed to return to the Manor with after patrol. When he thought about it in that context, it did look more and more like Tim had a motivation to push him towards reconciling with Bruce. Too bad, Replacement. No matter how much Bruce smiled (unlikely, more like Dick was beaming at him whenever the acrobat was here), or how much Alfred encouraged him to do things like hunt for a missing slow-cooker to make delicious chili from one of the only recipes his mom had ever taught him, Jason wanted to leave and Bruce was preventing that from happening.

At least there was chili. He shifted to add slightly more garlic to the cooker, the movement unfamiliar and twinging his still mildly-injured knee.

"Do not avoid the question, Todd," Damian said.

“Why should I, when I can just avoid Bruce?”

“That will not be possible. You must make tonight one of the nights that you distract Father."

"I'm more a fan of waiting until the Replacement gets his first piano session in," Jason replied, feeling smug and concerned at the same time. "Drawing Batman's ire without you proving you're good to your word sounds like a lose-win to me and not in my favor."

"I am an Al Ghul and a WAYNE, cretin. I will keep my word." The brat almost quivered with anger and indignance, though Jason was sure he would’ve described himself as ‘imperious’ or something ominous like that.

“Why tonight?’

“Irrelevant."

“Then no.” Jason enjoyed the way Damian fumed, breathing in deeply through his nose. See, the kid hadn’t changed that much over the years. He still got angry and wanted everyone to know it.

“I have an appointment to meet with an individual near the Pinegrove neighborhood,” Damian said irritably.

“Pinegrove—that’s near the Finger River?” Jason ran through his mental map of Gotham and its many winding streets. “B’s not going to appreciate you going to a meet at the river.”

“It’s not the river,” Damian replied, sneering but now with a cap on his irritation. “Besides, you ‘snuck out’ many times for far more trivial reasons.”

“Yeah, but that was to beat up run-of-the-mill creeps, not somebody I told to come meet me at an unfamiliar location and that I’d be wearing a uniform they’d be able to see with the lights off. AND I had a recently fractured wrist that I’m supposed to avoid using.” Pointless to argue, Jason knew that before he said the words, but it had to be said. “…keep your comm on,” he said. “All the time. I don’t care if it’s just me on the channel.”
“You aren’t going to demand to know who I’m meeting?”

"If I need to know, I’ll know." Jason forced a smile. “If something takes six hours to cook, I damn well want everyone here for it.”

Damian looked dubiously at the chili simmering on the counter in the crockpot. Jason couldn’t remember if the kid had ever had chili before - naturally it wouldn't be a staple of middle eastern culture and -- frak, the kid was vegetarian, wasn't he?

"Shit, sorry, Damian. It's been a while since I cooked for the Bats," Jason said, feeling ashamed. Damian shrugged one shoulder though it was clear he was pretending he didn't care.

"Clearly you were engaging in making some meat-infused dish of comfort food. I can find something else to eat."

"Nah, that’s not fair." Jason opened the cupboards, scanning for any ingredients that would make a comparably easy, vegetarian meal. "Giving you a PB&J while everyone else eats a roast isn't fair."

"I'm not sure what you mean but don't worry about food. Tell Father you will be accompanying him on patrol soon. He made mention of leaving early tonight."

"Why?"

"He will probably divulge that information only to those who make themselves a nuisance and insist they be taken along on his patrol."

"Okay, you’re already getting the better end of this deal, no need to rub it in," Jason muttered and headed for the door to the kitchen. Bruce would probably be down in the Cave, having successfully completed their meeting with the Superior Court that morning and now researching and preparing to bring Jason back to life. For the second time, really, which was creepy as hell. No matter how much Jason logically knew that no one would be killing him and bringing him back and killing him and bringing him back, the idea of being brought back sent off all the expected alarm bells.

He strode down the stairs, relishing the fact that he could do that better now than even a few days ago, and approached the Batcomputer. Batman, as always, sat hunched over and staring at the screen, which detailed the case of Patrick Harrison, a case very similar to Jason's. Patrick had drowned in New Jersey bay and was declared legally dead. However, due to some necromancy (everyone was guessing), he had come back as a knockoff Aquaman. That presented some... legal problems: his wife had signed the death certificate (and a restraining order, prior to his death). It was legally necessary to declare him alive, and then dead again ('more dead') after a group of police officers shot him for running at them with the power of a tidal wave behind him. Patrick had gone crazy with his resurrection. It fit the mold, at least.

“Typical dead guy,” Jason said, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Back from the grave and they think they own everything.”

“He abused his wife,” Batman said without particular inflection. “The violent tendencies and psychological damage were in place before he died.”

“Nn.” Bruce, world’s greatest detective, hadn’t shared that tidbit earlier. Jason knew that spousal abuse usually meant attempted child abuse and ol’ Pat had had two kids with his wife and another from a previous relationship. Whatever, he wouldn’t be hurting anyone anymore. “Robin said you were leaving early tonight?”

“It’s getting darker earlier, so I’m heading out just after dark, rather than nine.”
“Well, the kid says he’s stayin’ in, so I’m your chaperone.”

Batman un-hunched from the seat and looked quizzically at the stairs, the first movement he’d made to look even partially in Jason’s direction. “That’s unusual.”

“Kids these days can even get tired of crime-fighting every night,” Jason pointed out. “Especially with school in the morning. Besides, he should be letting the wrist rest up.”

“Hn,” Bruce said, not sounding terribly convinced. Probably because Damian was not the kind of kid who let a night of patrol go by without activity.

"His choice, isn't it?" Jason said, ready to defend his agreement with the brat to the death if he had to.

'I'm not sure why you're covering for him,' said Bruce's body language but it also said ‘I don’t want to argue with you right now.’ Bruce returned his attention to the Batcomputer, avoiding the argument. "Be ready to go by seven, no later. You'll be riding with me."

Eugh. “Fine. Just so you know, you’re going to have to pick up cornbread on the way back then.”

“Cornbread?” Bruce sounded more shocked at the idea of having cornbread than at the thought of going through a grocery store in full gear.

“Yeah, the demon—Damian and I made chili. Should be done after patrol.”

"Damian. Made chili,” the Bat said in surprise.

"Yeah, forgot that the—that Robin was vegan, vegetarian, whatever the kids are calling it these days. Alfred has enough ingredients in the kitchen to save the day though. His repertoire of vegetarian dishes has to be a lot more developed than mine. Artemis ate vegetarian most of the time but she wasn’t a fan of my cooking." She would let him do prep, but the cooking portion was something she preferred to do herself. Jason could understand that.

“Artemis... of Bana-Mighdall?” Batman repeated, for clarification.

The Red Hood realized suddenly that he would have to explain his relationship with Artemis and then how they had gotten to the stage where they were (or weren’t) allowed to cook for each other.

"Yeah,” he said, regretting that he’d brought up the subject and reasonably certain Bruce didn’t care. “One of the Outlaws.”

“You two were… close.”

And there it was, Bats pretending to engage in the conversation, cooperate. Like some frakking kid's show: ‘Let's create a memory!' Yeah, no thanks Dora, I know what you're up to. Jason shrugged, wanting nothing more than to head back upstairs.

“She’s—” Frak, he was not going to try and explain Artemis. “Yeah, close with her, close with Biz, all that mushy team stuff. Let me know if you find out anything from the Harrisons’ story. I’ll see you at seven.”

"Seven," Bruce agreed, after a moment's pause. Jason hurried back upstairs, free for several more hours before he had to meet up with the Batman for their new and improved Team-Up Adventure. He still didn’t know where they were going, which annoyed the part of his mind that considered self-preservation. It couldn't be anything more dangerous than what Damian was up to tonight. Nngeh. He needed a monitor for the kid, since he wasn’t going to have the opportunity to slip away to check up
on Robin if he had to ride along with Bats.

Frak. He should’ve nagged Damian into telling him the appointment location or snuck a peek at the address the brat probably had in his phone -- or asked Tim to do it. Ah, thank God for Timmy.

Jason made a beeline for Tim's room, knowing the younger man would be studying and wearing the most sound-cancelling headphones on the market.

Easy to scare.

#

Seven came around quickly and Jason had to deal with Bruce's (ever-present) displeasure as he reclaimed the guns as part of his usual gear. Getting those back had been several hours' long conversations over the course of the last week while Jason argued that he would use rubber bullets and avoid firefight.

Despite the rubber bullet and non-lethal concessions he’d made, Jason would be shocked if Batman didn't restrict the Red Hood to the car for the entirety of the patrol. If it hadn't been for Batman looking at the guns with cowled disapproval, Jason would have forgotten he was wearing them. They were so much a part of him and under the body armor and the thick pants, he rarely felt the touch of the holsters, only their weight. Like thunder blankets for dogs, he thought.

"So, where we headed?" Jason said, not having to bother with sounding cheerful when he was already wearing the helmet. Everything sounded dull and metallic, which was perfect.

"Out." Batman glided the car out of the Cave and accelerated until the vehicle was roaring back towards Gotham – or it would be if the sleek car made more than a whisper of a noise. It traveled near-silently, because what the hell was the point of the Bat motif if you didn't have a car that traveled as silently as the Batman himself? Jason tried not to think about where Robin might be headed. If the brat didn’t check in every three hours, Jason was going after him, vehicle or no vehicle.

"If anyone asks if you are authorized to work with me, or if you are a new Bat, you will say that you are unaffiliated," Batman said. The funniest part of the entire sentence was that Jason knew he meant it.

"Is that something you think’s gonna come up, B? We’re not registering voters."

"Anyone who doesn’t remember you may ask. Gordon, Spoiler, Signal, even criminals. Red Robin and Robin may have had their own ideas of how to answer when you patrolled together, but your reply, while you are patrolling with me, is that you are unaffiliated with Batman."

"Gotta protect that legacy. Geez, B."

"Legacy, brand, corporation, whatever you want to call it, I do not want people growing confused if you do not demonstrate the same... ideals."

"Ohhh, you're talking about the guns," Jason said, unsurprised by the realization and yet still somehow disappointed. "I’m not gonna kill anybody while I’m on patrol with you. I’m not a maniac."

"I would prefer that you didn’t have the guns when patrolling with me,” the Batman said bluntly. His grip tightened infinitesimally on the steering wheel. “Be aware of yourself and your surroundings."
You be aware of yourself and your surroundings,” Jason shot back, feeling childish. “I've been with the Bat bros for weeks and haven’t shot—” Jason took a deep breath. Damian had asked him to do this, it wasn't like he could just storm off and leave the brat out to dry. "Okay. No, I will not say I'm 'affiliated' with you. I understand that could give the wrong ‘impression.’ If anything were to ‘happen.'"

“Hn,” the Batman said. His body language, while Jason couldn’t read it quite as well as Cass, gave the impression that this was an acceptable response. Good, he didn’t have the stomach for another one. The Batmobile glided into a quiet alley and the Batman deftly powered it down, exiting the vehicle almost noiselessly. The car locked as soon as the Red Hood had opened the door.

“Plan?” Jason asked through their private comm channel. Instead of replying (which was too much to ask) Bruce grappled to the roof. Jason followed a second later.

#

Damian’s appointment hadn't shown up yet.

Linger on a rooftop overlooking the darkened street corner, Robin didn’t know what to make of this behavior or what it might mean for the information they were supposed to exchange. He’d originally lured the doctor out through an underling, explaining that he was frustrated with Batman’s persistent avoidance of acquiring superhuman abilities. His aversion to powers was irrational, Damian had insisted that the underling say, particularly in light of almost all other members of the Justice League. As the only Robin who would one day act as successor to Batman, he had a right to be at an equal level with metas and he requested that this doctor help him do it. From this, he had gleaned a phone number.

When they spoke, the doctor had naturally muddled about and complained about the risks and that ‘he didn’t really do that sort of thing anymore.’ Damian wore him down. He was raised by Talia Al Ghul, son of the Batman, both people who resisted just about every idea he ever suggested. A doctor hesitant to resume his illegal experiments was nothing in comparison. Todd could have worn this man down (though, naturally, Todd’s solution would probably involve more hanging the man over the side of a rooftop or shooting out his car’s tires in a parking garage). And they had arranged to meet. The doctor had suggested this place and Damian was here.

The doctor was not.

He scanned the area for heat signatures again. Nothing. He hadn’t found out the man’s name, despite doing a deep dive of the residents of this area last night. The only conclusion he came to was that the doctor didn’t live here. So, if the doctor didn’t show, and the phone line went dark, he would have to go through this rigamarole again.

Ugh. He’d have to show goodwill. Swinging down the building, he landed near the square and stood, just outside the light of the street lamps. The river gleamed with dirty moonlight and he could see the lights of cars on the bridge some way off. In this quiet, he heard the doctor's approaching footsteps on the concrete long before the man spoke.

“Mister Robin?”

“You’re late.” As Robin turned around, he memorized the man’s features, knowing he’d be searching Gotham General’s records and every private clinic in the city to see if he could recognize this man from staff photos. If the man had any level of intelligence, he would be giving Robin a fake name. He was probably thirty, younger than Damian had expected, and with the kind of pale skin that suggested he rarely saw the sun. His eyes were overlarge, predisposed to staring, and his hair
hung below his ears. He looked like a man who had once been an up-and-comer, then stopped taking care of himself.

“I’m on-call,” the doctor said. “You didn’t give me much chance to decline.”

“I thought the amount of money would be more of an incentive than your day job,” Robin said, deliberately sounding snide about it. So the man was still employed. “Doctor…?”

“Lychee.”

“Lychee,” Robin repeated, ignoring the obviousness of the lie. “Dr. Lychee, I understand that you have some experience in helping individuals with means be all they can be.”

The doctor nodded. “I do. The Bats have been… famously resistant to meta-modifications, however.” He said everything but ‘does Batman know you’re here?’ and that was why his father couldn’t have come.

“I am head of the new generation of Bats,” Robin said, relishing the statement. “I decide the direction of the future and know what would be best to enhance my abilities. And have heard you are a professional with discretion.” He emphasized both words, at the same time thinking what a complete and utter moron he would be if he actually meant what he had just said. Offering to go under the knife of an illegal modifier as a vigilante who knew the identities of all Bats. To get—no, to POSSIBLY get powers? Even Arsenal wouldn’t have suggested something this stupid.

“And what are your thoughts on what the next generation will need?” Dr. Lychee nudged. Robin could almost see the dollar signs in his eyes, imagining the kind of money he could make outfitting all of the known Bats.

“Well,” Robin said, trying to sound like a thirteen-year-old confronted with the idea of superpowers. “I would like to have super strength. Oh, and to read minds. Just those, if there’s a limit.” He smiled as if the doctor would do this out of the goodness of his heart. “Can you tell me about your experience in doing that with anybody?”

“I’d like to talk money first. You said you would provide enough for a cup of coffee, up front.”

Robin handed over a card with approximately two thousand USD loaded on it, knowing he would be pickpocketing it back before the night was out (and certainly before the doctor could cash it out). Lychee checked the balance via an app on his phone, nodded faintly, and returned his attention to Robin.

“So. Telepathy and super strength. I’ve done those modifications, specifically, the implants for the Chaos Pact. Heard of them?”

“You completed the Chaos Pact’s implants?” Robin said, feigning surprise. “That’s incredible.” He pretended to think better of the statement. “I mean – they’re bad people. If you worked with the Bats, you would have to stop working with people who destroy buildings.” Among other things.

“Of course. Regardless of their morality, the Chaos Pact was some of my best work. Though I should mention, the metal skeleton will not stand up under the weight of a falling building. Just in case you were thinking of it.”

“Um, about that, I’d like to learn some more about the safety of the procedures, if that’s all right with you,” Robin said, mindful of his tone at this point. If anything tipped Dr. Lychee off that Damian had given this matter more than thirty minutes thought, he’d run. “What if something goes wrong during the surgery? Or if my body rejects it?”
“Generally, I and my team would make every effort ahead of time to make sure it’s compatible. There is a full refund guarantee if you lose function in any extremities and I have a prosthesis expert on standby.”

“Team’? How many people are involved in the procedure?”

Mr. Lychee shrugged, briefly counting the total on his fingers before replying. “Well, for a complex case like Phenom, who had a metal skeleton installed to replace his paralyzed legs, I had nine to twelve people involved. That is reflected in the fee, of course. If you decide not to install a metal skeleton, there are adrenaline enhancers and pain blockers, which can certainly improve your performance. A metal skeleton like Phenom’s is irreversible.”

“I’ll skip the metal skeleton and do the other things,” Damian said, because even if he wasn’t going through with any of this, the whole idea sounded traumatizing and he didn’t want to hear any more about it. “If I change my mind about something like the telepathy, what can be done to remove the implants?”

“Since they are against the brain, we would shut them down remotely. Much safer than opening up the patient to remove them.”

“Would I be able to turn them back on?”

“Not by yourself.” The doctor eyed him. “If you aren’t sure you want them, don’t get them. You’re very young to be making a decision like this anyway and I don’t want you regretting it.”

“It’s not that. I’m concerned because you just said you retain the ability to turn it on and off.”

Mr. Lychee rolled his overlarge eyes. “I’m not all that interested in whether you can or can’t read minds. I imagine you’re just going to find out what the Batman thinks anyway and when you don’t like it, you’ll come running back here to get them out. That’s my concern.”

Damian shrugged, because who the hell cared what ‘Mr. Lychee’ thought? Someone else apparently did because the doctor’s cellphone began to ring at an obnoxiously loud volume. “That’s work,” Mr. Lychee said. “Be back here two days from now, we’ll talk further.” He began walking away, but not far enough that Damian didn’t hear him say ‘This better be good, Ms. Ducat.”

Ducat. Not a common name, the woman had to be a kind of secretary or assistant; no underling would take that tone with a board director or supervisor. Damian returned to the rooftop and watched the doctor return to his car. Tracking the man across the rooftops posed more of a challenge than anticipated, since they left the neighborhood and headed for the bridge. Damian became prepared to throw a tracking batarang, if it looked like the doctor would head out of Gotham, but the car veered right, just before the bridge.

Mr. Lychee parked the car in front of a contemporary European-style home with a four-car garage. He slicked back his shaggy hair, which didn’t help its appearance, and let himself in. The doctor had left his coat in the car and it was the work of a moment for Damian to open the door (who on earth still left their doors unlocked?!) and remove the card with the cash on it, replacing it with an identical empty card. A $2,000 withdrawal would attract his father’s attention no matter what Todd did to distract him. But, having already checked the balance, the doctor wouldn’t be suspicious in the slightest of this one.

Before preparing to leave, Damian memorized the address of the house. It seemed likely it wasn’t the doctor’s, as he had a key but didn’t park in the garage. At least he could be sure that this was the man who had done the work on Bluetooth and Phenom.
Todd would probably have stormed into the house already and blackmailed Lychee into fixing Bluetooth’s memory, like a master dragging a dog back to its mess. Damian thought a little further out than that – if the doctor could remotely turn the telepathic implants off, it meant the remote probably existed as either a physical device or a computer program. Drake would be able to address that with less time and effort than Damian. He might not even have to visit wherever the doctor actually lived.

Damian opened the comms, reflecting that Drake had planned to be across town tonight, working on a persistent drug ring case. “Red Robin.”

“Robin.” Drake sounded out of breath.

“I need a report pulled on all the female employees named ‘Ducat’ in Gotham’s medical field.”

“Oh, is that all.” Something slammed into a wall on the other end of the line and Drake grunted. “Fine, gim’a minute.”

One minute later, Drake cleared his throat. “So, three medical employees named Ducat.”

“Which one lives at 1391 Lavender Way?”

“One. If you know her address, why are you asking?”

“What is her supervisor’s name?”

“Ah…” Drake mulled over the report as Damian glanced at the house again, half waiting for Dr. ‘Lychee’ to stride out. More sounds of physical activity came from the other end of the phone and Drake cursed to himself. “The supervisor’s name is Gregory Watersted. Lives at 1745 East Sunrise Way. Pretty nice area of town.”

“Excellent.” Damian turned off his speaker without further conversation with Drake; the older teen sounded busy anyway. Since Dr. Watersted hadn’t left Ms. Ducat’s house (and Damian had no intention of interrupting their ‘meeting’), Damian would have to tell Father his identity and suggest next steps for getting the memories out of Bluetooth’s head. Honestly, he was a little surprised it had been this easy to find Watersted, given that the Justice League had been trying to discover his identity for some time. Since they weren’t allowed to work in Gotham, they probably hadn’t accessed the city’s underbelly. Damian opened a private channel to the Red Hood’s helmet.

“I’ve discovered the identity of the doctor who is marketing himself as the designer of the Chaos Pact’s abilities,” Damian began. “I have arranged to meet with him in two days, which should give us time to prepare a full assault. Your current position is closer to his home, so you will need to stop at the address I will send you before you return from patrol—”

Todd’s uneven breathing suggested he was running—which wasn’t a response Damian had anticipated.

“Red Hood, are you listening?”

“That’s great, demon, kind of busy though.”

Damian looked up their location as he spoke, realizing the pair were inside one of the abandoned warehouses down by the yard, though nothing was ever really abandoned in Gotham, it seemed. Red Robin’s signal was there as well. He opened up the comm channel to the entire family, rather than just Todd. “Do you need backup?”
“We’re fine,” Drake interjected. “You should be at home letting the wrist recover anyway.”

“What you would do is relevant, Red Robin.” Damian headed for his cycle. “I’m on my way.”

The sound of a gunshot cracked across the comms. He quickened his pace. “Batman?”

Another crack. Damian fired up the cycle and headed for their destination as he listened to the drama unfold.

“You bastards!” Todd shouted, the helmet doing little to dull the anger in his voice now that he was shouting. “They’re KIDS, you fuckers— what are you doing, frak, B—” A sound like energy crackling, rather than the crack of a gunshot. Batman coughed.


Drake cut in again, which solidified Robin’s lingering suspicion that the teen was on a rooftop. “Batman was trying to forcibly stop Red Hood from running into the building and Hood played the only ace in his deck.”

“The taser?”

“And you boys didn’t feel like warning me?” Batman commented. “Red Robin, check the perimeter. I’m getting Hood before he gets himself shot.”

“I’m getting hostages, thank you very much,” Red Hood replied in a near-whisper, likely inside the building judging by the level of background interference. Damian knew his father well enough to know that Batman refused to reply to such banter from Todd; instead all Batman said was ‘wait for me.’

Damian had no such plans; the minute he arrived, he was going to get Drake off that damn rooftop and head in.
No moon, no wind, nothing to spy things by

Chapter Notes

It’s actually an intentional oversight (for once!). I don’t know if there are any recent instances of Bruce swimming in full gear. I’m aware he almost drowned while he was out with Jason in RHATO, but dunno if that was the car crash or the weight of the suit. Nightwing complains about it being heavy in Battle for the Cowl and the internet thinks it’s between 25 and 50 pounds. So, not a swimsuit. Though apparently all the Robins can swim quite well in gear (‘cept Tim? Haven’t seen Tim swim recently. Or Steph. I can’t imagine Cass being unable to do anything, so there’s that.) Arkham Knight won’t let you swim in the suit (apparently?) so... not-drowning it is.

So, the end of this chapter wouldn’t let itself be written. There’s literally 939 words of unused crap. So, apologies. Still not sure I love this one but it is the best of the bunch.

And now it’s 12:02am and I wake up at 7:30 and I haven’t even edited yet. D:

Edit: It’s now 12:42am. G’night.

Chapter title is from ‘No Moon’ from the Titanic musical (not to be confused with the movie).

Batman didn’t particularly like the shipyards. They were dark by night, Duela had chosen to reveal herself here and the location itself was hard to escape. You could easily get stuck retreating towards the residential housing or, if the target was running around the docks, constantly having to leap over water and make sure your target didn’t fall in and drown.

While Batman was strong enough to swim in the costume, it didn’t make for easy going and he hadn’t had to do it in years. Any water-based missions usually meant he wore a costume closer to Nightwing’s in weight and with necessary items only (shark repellent, rebreather, etc.). He had forgone it this time because the current suit had everything he knew the Red Hood suit wouldn’t have (and/or what he would need to subdue the Red Hood if that was necessary. Either way, the younger man would almost certainly panic if Batman went in the water and didn’t come out.

The building Red Hood had run into was once a ship foundry, multiple level and full of hazards. Delaying following him would get someone killed. Batman slipped into the two-story building noiselessly, keeping to the deep shadows.

The Red Hood and seven children were clustered on the ground floor, which was dusty with age and water stains. The vigilante had had the good sense to usher them under the first-floor overhang, keeping most of them out of sight of the second floor. Which meant that there were still assailants above. The children grouped around the helmeted vigilante like ducklings, the younger ones terrified and the older ones defiant. No one Batman saw looked to be over the age of eleven. One of the oldest, a girl with a plastic barrette in her messy brown hair, glared at him.

“Where were you?!?” she demanded.

Batman approached, keeping out of line of sight for the second floor. “We’re here now,” he said quietly, removing some of the hard candy he kept for missions like this and distributing it to the children. It would also keep them quiet – getting them out the door would be tricky if they were
shouting or speaking loudly.

He didn’t look up, addressing the Red Hood. “I heard shots.”

“Kneecaps,” the Red Hood said in an equally quiet tone. "Their."

“If you had that close an opportunity, you didn’t have to shoot them at all,” Batman said in exasperation. “You don’t know if they’re bleeding out or going into shock up there. How many?”

The Red Hood’s expression wasn’t visible, but his tone indicated how much he had shut down at the comment, plus he stepped closer to Batman so the kids wouldn’t hear. “I made those shots from the first floor, Bat. I’m a damn good shot. And they were firing at the kids from the second floor, just to make sure they wouldn’t talk. So two guys lost their kneecaps. End of story.”

“Red Hood—”

“Sorry, return to story, shouldn’t you be making sure they aren’t dead? Personally, I don’t give a damn but I figured that was important to you.” Red Hood stepped back to comfort his flock of children, who had picked up on the strain and anger in his voice. Batman turned his attention to the second level and the deteriorating roof overhead, where he could see starlight if he squinted. Any men who weren’t shot could easily fire through the holes in the roof, or probably flooring issues in the second floor. If Red Hood had made all those shots from the first floor, there was a good chance more men were lurking on the second floor.

“Take the children outside,” Batman instructed the Red Hood. Jason Todd snorted and addressed HIS next comment to Red Robin over the comm channel.

“Double R, you wanna come in, quietly, and get the kids? There’s more of these assholes and I gotta watch the Bat’s back. And he’s WAITING FOR ME, damnit B, you are waiting,” Hood hissed.

While Red Hood had been distracted by the phone, Batman had begun moving towards the single staircase that led to the second floor. He paused at the other’s statement, surprised that the younger man had noticed him leaving. He turned around, still hidden under the first-floor overhang and its shadows.

“I gave you an order, Red Hood.”

“Pfft, when have those ever mattered to Robins?”

Red Robin walked out of the darkness behind them. “Hi.”

“Where the frak’d you come from?” Red Hood demanded. Red Robin gestured behind them into the darkness.

“I downloaded the blueprints for this building and there’s an emergency exit. Not great, but it’ll work for me to get the kids out.” Red Robin smiled as he looked down at the kids. They nevertheless retreated to remain closer to Red Hood’s reassuring presence. The helmented vigilante patted a couple members of his persistent flock on the head. This did nothing to encourage them to move. He sighed and pulled off his helmet, leaving just the domino to disguise his identity.

“Hey, guys, don’t I look like Red Robin?” he asked. A couple of the children nodded. “It’s cause we’re brothers, even though he’s a skinny little shrimp. But he’s good at getting people out of tight places like this.” A couple more of the children glanced at Red Robin. “And I’m gonna be right behind you. I’m keeping Batman safe. Cause he’s just a big kid too.”
“Red Hood,” Batman growled. “There’s no need for you to stay.”

The girl who had glared at him earlier now glowered up at the Red Hood, even going so far as to stamp her foot, which made him tense and look up at the stairs. No one came down, but it strengthened Batman’s suspicion that Red Hood didn’t know if he had gotten everyone upstairs.

“Clarissa,” said the oldest child, a girl who looked about eleven. “We can’t stay here.”

“I don’t wanna go back to the orphanage!” the nine-year-old, Clarissa, suddenly wailed. “I don’t wanna GO!”

Though Red Robin cringed, Red Hood patted the girl on the head again, speaking in a tone that was neither pitying or offering false reassurance. “Deep breaths and inside voices, kid. Red,” he addressed Red Robin. “Can you get some of ‘em out your super-secret ninja exit?”

The younger children’s eyes went wide at the description of ninjas. The Bats were basically ninjas to them anyway, in cool outfits and sassy attitudes (or ‘does that make us Power Rangers,’ Dick had once wondered aloud during an elementary school rescue). Five of the children willingly followed Red Robin and his pocket light back towards the emergency exit, leaving Clarissa and the oldest girl behind. Red Hood looked up at the staircase again. Batman could see his adrenaline getting into gear – Hood wanted to help the kids but he wanted justice for them as well. Apparently shooting the bad guys in the kneecaps wasn’t quite enough justice.

“Okay, we’ll just give it a minute,” Red Hood said to the girls, nodding to Batman that he could go. The older girl scowled fiercely at the younger, probably desperate to escape the dangerous area and held there only by concern and guilt. Batman didn’t hear more of the conversation, as he headed up the stairs, hidden in the shadows. Upon reaching the second floor, he had a superior vantage point and he could see the blood and hear miserable groans in the air. Nothing that sounded like a death rattle, however. He moved towards the small office in the corner, where a light was lit.

As he pushed open the door, he could hear whispers coming from the other side of a wooden partition originally designed to prevent those in the lobby from seeing the entire office. The light glowed just past the partition and he estimated that the two whisperers were in the corner of the room, crouched close to the floor.

“What can you get him?”

“Got a shot on the girls.”

“Who cares about them? That bastard shot the twins. Bats aren’t even supposed to have guns.”

“Toldja we shouldn’t have tried Gotham.”

As he had thought, it was more than possible to shoot through cracks in the decrepit building’s floor. Batman glanced at the floor-to-ceiling partition, shifted position, and then kicked it hard enough to collapse it over the arguing men. The pair yelped as the piece of heavy plywood crashed down on them, and, as Batman backed away, the rest of the office roof began crashing in, sending a rain of debris into the small space. The men came running out of the building, coughing and waving guns. Far from threatening.

Batman made quick work of them, knowing that Red Hood was probably trying to soothe the girls. Why hadn’t the younger man put his helmet back on, so he would have access to the comms? Batman wanted to order him out of the building now, before one of the villains up here made it down there. Instead, he was stuck disarming as many of them as he could find and there were many more...
than Red Hood had shot.

He thought he had narrowed it down when three more of them lay unconscious on the second floor, in addition to the two Red Hood had shot and the two from the office. Batman had called an ambulance for the two gunshot victims, though the wounds had been precise and they were in no danger of bleeding out.

“I see you took all the fun,” Red Hood said, making his way up the stairs. The younger man had replaced his helmet, thank God, though he was only using the ability to complain. “This is my case, Bats, you could’ve waited.”

“Your case?”

“I thought that’s why you brought me.”

“You don’t have a file open,” Batman said.

“Of course I don’t have a file on your—frak.” Judging by his tone, it seemed like the Red Hood would’ve dropped his head in his hands if they hadn’t been walking through a dangerous environment (and Hood had a gun in one hand). “Never mind. The case led me to Gotham, aka the only reason I was in here for this memory fiasco, and I was trying to finish it up. You had verbally approved me doing it, and when you forgot, I guess you started working it.”

“These are children from Gotham,” Batman replied, mentally cataloging the accents of those who had spoken.

“Yeah. The gang was moving from town to town along the coast. They’re mostly taking rich kids and ransoming them. They’re starting to branch out. Three kids haven’t made it back to their families, despite the ransom being paid.” The Red Hood glanced away and when he spoke again, despite the helmet, his voice was frigid. “No matter who takes them out, I’m gonna be happy they’re gone, but I’d prefer it be me.”

“You didn’t think I would stop them in Gotham? Before all this?”

“They’re not your rogue’s gallery, they’re usually waiting until the rich kid families are out of Gotham to do the kidnapping bit, and they’re hiding out in parts of the city you don’t like. Like the Yards.”

“I have no feelings about the Yards,” Batman said. “They’re no worse than the rest of the city.”

“Right.” Red Hood scanned the shadowy corridor in front of them, probably leading to the back of the building. “I swear to God, if there’s a bomb in here, I’m gonna kill someone.”

“No killing.” Batman took a few steps ahead of the younger man. “And put the guns away.”

“No fun at all,” Red Hood muttered. Batman heard the shuffle-click as the gun went back into the holster. Batman’s calculations had proved correct: stepping in front of Red Hood in a dark hallway increased the risk of getting shot too significantly for the younger man to keep a gun drawn in good conscience.

“If this is your case, who is the boss?” Batman asked over their private comm channel, keeping his voice quiet. He heard the crinkle of leather as Red Hood shrugged.

“Dunno.”
“You’re lying.”

Now Jason Todd’s voice sounded smug. “Well, since we just had that intimate discussion about how you don’t want me talking about killing, I’m gonna lie, aren’t I?"

“The boss, Red Hood.”

“Thoughtful,” Red Hood said, as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. “Not given to monologuing or leaving the room before Mr. Bond is dropped into the shark tank. He’s got resources, ‘cause he’s been up and down both coasts, as well as some international activity. You’d known about him, but hadn’t had any success before I showed up with more information.”

“But you know the gender.”

“I didn’t say I hadn’t met him.” Red Hood moved in front of Batman again, ignoring the older man’s grunt of disapproval. “We went to the same Meetup group.”

“A what?”

“Occasionally normal, or pseudo-normal, intelligent people get lonely and try to make friends who are not the people in their nightlife. I found out he was involved in this one and went to gather information.”

“Nn. Any meta abilities?”

“None that he brought up at a group for Gotham scuba divers.” Red Hood stopped moving; fortunately Batman had been following far enough behind that he didn’t bump into the younger man in the dark. “I know you hate the Yards—”

“I don’t hate the Yards.”

“—but we should check out the docks. It’s suspicious as hell to be a criminal and a scuba diver and not combine the two.”

“You said they were kidnappers branching into trafficking, Red Hood. It’s unlikely he has anything useful underwater.”

“They stick to the coasts and coastal towns, appear and vanish after each crime, and sometimes he has entirely new groups of men working with him. I’m sure the greatest detective in the world or whatever shit Ra’s calls you can put that together.” Before he had even finished the sentence, Red Hood had reached the other end of the corridor they had been exploring and leapt off the staircase railing.

“Be careful,” Batman found himself saying, no longer able to see the younger man.

“Grappling line,” Red Hood replied. “I’m on the roof. Which was not the best idea, cause it’s decaying like hell, so don’t come up.”

“I’m heading for the docks,” Batman replied. “You’ll be able to get down?”

There was a crackle of breakage over the second story where Batman still stood, then the sound of a ‘hup’ overhead – then Red Hood crashed through the ceiling and onto the second floor.

“Yeah,” Red Hood grunted, straightening from where he had landed from his jump. “Again, don’t go up there.”
Batman let the younger man crash ahead towards their destination and followed, giving instructions to Red Robin and Robin to wait for them and watch for incoming traffic. It would take them some time to find this… sigh… this submarine Red Hood expected.

#

The Red Hood appeared to suspect that Batman was dragging his feet about coming to the docks but aside from a few ‘I don’t need you to come, old man’ and ‘I’m not gonna kill him, you don’t need to babysit me’ comments, the younger vigilante hadn’t tried to argue him into leaving.

Following Red Hood’s lead, they made it out to the furthest part of the docks facing away from Gotham. They should get out to the coast more, Batman thought in a rare moment of desire; the boys hardly ever went to the beach and the last ‘trip’ he remembered taking with any member of the family was a fishing trip with Damian, just after the boy had come back from the dead. ‘It would help your cover if you were tan from all these supermodel-filled beach weekends,’ Alfred had said once.

However, for the moment, the closest any of them would get to the coast was this chilly island off Gotham proper, surrounded by the docks. There were no boats exiting the harbor, no sign of a submarine below the waters they faced, and no evidence of a man on the run.

“This was a fool’s errand, Hood,” Batman growled.

“Well, I told you not to come.”

“You seriously expected me to send you out into the docks, alone and at night, after the submarine of a multi-state child abductor and possibly murderer.”

“So? I’ve done worse.” Hood wasn’t given the conversation-becoming-an-argument his full attention, scanning the darkened waves for any sign of an emerging submarine or approaching boat.

“While you were with Bizarro and Artemis. Or Starfire and Arsenal,” Batman replied. “Red Robin’s dossier was very thorough. You don’t work alone anymore.” He said everything except the words ‘you’re more intelligent than that,’ which somehow couldn’t find their way out of his mouth. Nightwing worked alone, and it kept Batman up days (nights he was already up for). Red Robin had worked with the Titans, thank God, and now he often worked with the Bats for patrol. When he was playing for the angels, Red Hood had always had at least Arsenal watching his back.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t,” Red Hood shot back angrily, giving the conversation a bit more of his attention. “They're my friends, not my babysitters and whoever has been telling you that they are is gonna have another think comin’.”

"No one is saying you need a babysitter, Hood," Batman said, internally wondering how the younger man had gone from zero to defensive in a second. No one Batman trained needed a team, most of the time, but it didn't mean that they didn't need backup. "From Red Robin's dossier, I had the impression you often picked fights with larger enemies than you could handle alone."

"He said WHAT?"

"He didn’t—no one is questioning your skills.” God, he just wanted to get the child back to baseline. “You're my son and a Robin, I don’t think—"

“Yeah, no.” Hood's voice was still quiet but getting louder, and they were very close to the water, which could echo the sound of their conversation anywhere. "You don’t remember me as your son, so don’t say shit like you know how good I am at this. You—frak." The helmet jerked to look over at
the water, where the sound of rushing water had become audible. "You're a damn distraction," he whispered.

Batman turned to look as well, noticing the unusual patterns of the waves through the night vision capabilities of the cowl. Moonlight gleamed off railing as the submarine surfaced with surprising quiet for a submerged boat. It wasn’t military grade, more like one of his rogue gallery’s idea of a getaway sub, mashed together in a warehouse somewhere and no safer than using a laundry machine with wheels for the same purpose.

"Submarine. Frakking told you. No boats went by though, right? We would've heard them." Red Hood’s mood had shifted immediately to focus on this new problem. Before Batman could stop him, the helmeted vigilante turned and leapt to the next dock to get a better look at the mouth of the harbor. Batman hadn't seen anything motor powered go by. If the man was as intelligent as Red Hood had thought, he might have gone by in a smaller, man-powered craft.

Red Hood spoke into the comms, rather than yelling across the docks. "B, you wait here, I'm gonna —"

"You’re not going anywhere without backup."

"I'm grappling to the submarine. Have a lot of frakking fun doing that in the suit."

"Hood, be serious."

"I am," the younger man said smartly, aiming the grappling gun. "And I’ll only be a minute. Nothing’s gonna happen. Even if I am hoping for a top-of-the-submarine, Bond-style gun fight."

Batman heard the whiz of the line as Hood fired, and then went gliding over the several dozen feet of water to grapple onto the submarine, at which point he waved smugly from one of the railings. Batman scowled, aiming his own grappling hook. This was a terrible idea. Of course, allowing one of his sons to drown or be beaten to death on a submersible cylinder full of hostiles was a worse idea. Who on earth had taught the boy not to tell people his plans?

"Don’t do it." Red Hood said over comms. “I’m putting tracking beacons on the hull. We can call the Coast Guard after this and have them pick this tin can up."

Batman lowered the hook dubiously, watching the Red Hood move around the sub placing multiple tracking devices, as Batman had taught all of his Robins to do. Red Hood finished the task just in time for someone to open the hatch at the top of the submarine’s tower and shine a flashlight around the base. It took only seconds for the beam to fall on Red Hood, who had tried (admirably) to throw himself in the water before it did.

Since that failed, the younger man scrambled back onto the submarine before the flashlight holder could even get a gun out. Using the edge of the tower and one of its steps, Hood leapt into the air, crashing with precision directly on top of the flashlight holder. The flashlight fell with a whirling splash into the water and Red Hood disappeared into the tower, along with the unfortunate man.

‘This wasn’t how I planned it,’ the helmeted vigilante managed to say over comms before a blow landed. The dialogue after that turned into the banter and grunts of a typical brawl.

Batman shot the grappling line at the railing and leapt onto the submarine’s slick deck. He could think of several dozen reasons, now, why the Red Hood didn’t work alone and most of it had to do with what little survival instinct the younger man must have. Somewhere. Deep down inside.

“Batman?” Red Robin spoke up in his ear.
“Red Robin.”

"It's been an hour and we haven't seen any traffic. Do you want backup? Where ARE you?"

"If you don't hear from me in a half hour, track Red Hood’s recently-placed tracking Beacons," Batman said. Rarely a day went by he wasn't glad he had made the tracking devices everything from waterproof to bulletproof. "We're following up on his submarine suspicion."

Red Robin's sudden concern was nearly audible, though the younger man didn’t say a word aloud. "Got it. We'll patrol the area—"

"Nonsense, Red Robin. You and I will be waiting on the docks." Batman heard his youngest son say. "Whenever Batman and Red Hood emerge, we will be waiting."
like a ship blown from its mooring, by a wind off the sea

Chapter Notes

I should not have put them in a submarine. That’s all. SO MUCH RESEARCH.

Sorry for the delay, all. I am, as always, floored by the positive response and you’re just FANTASTIC PEOPLE and keep me from doing things like focusing all my attention on a Venom fic that I somehow started last week. Because, apparently, I love Eddie and Venom.

10.28 Edit: At 3:30 last night I realized that ‘Frank’ shouldn’t remember Tason Jodd at all, so I fixed it. ‘D No more jokes about Van Heusen shirts.

Thank you all for everything.

The chapter title is ‘For Good’ from Wicked.

The brawl inside the submarine went… better than Batman had expected. Red Hood entered his element in a brawl and the different fighting styles he’d learned over the years were evident in his movements. Batman recognized a few that he had learned, a long, long time ago and never taught to his boys, as they were lethal. Red Hood had picked these styles up on his own, or from other teachers—oh, Talia must have taught him that one, Batman thought, wincing internally as the younger man kicked some goon hard enough that he slammed into the far wall of the corridor. Water started seeping in through this significant new dent, which Hood saw and swore.

Admirably, he didn’t call for Batman’s help. Shooting the remaining goons with rubber bullets and remarkable efficiency, the Red Hood made his way over to the dent and applied some kind of adhesive. Not duct tape, that much Batman could tell, and thank God. Even so…

“Hood, that won’t hold.”

“Course not. Even at depths of 150 feet, we’re talking 66psi and the sub’ll crack like an egg.” Hood applied a little more of the adhesive and ran past Batman towards the bridge. “We’ll just have to stop them before the adhesive wears off… about forty-five minutes from now. We have buckets of time.”

“They’re kidnappers, Hood, they won’t come quietly.” Batman didn’t voice his other assumption: that the sub had already descended while they were fighting and they hadn’t noticed. In which case, 45 minutes could turn into two minutes.

“Hey, I said he was thoughtful. Maybe he knows better than to go up against the Bat in a submarine. You and Nightwing must have escaped from at least a dozen of these back in your day, old man, I’m not worried.” Red Hood opened the door to the bridge before Batman could protest that the submarines he and Dick had escaped from had structural integrity. And that Dick hadn’t been using projectile weapons that worsened said structural integrity and that DICK wouldn’t have smugly dropped himself into a fight on an unsecured submarine while Batman stood on the docks.

A flash grenade went off as soon as the door opened, accompanied by a voice from a darker corner of the bridge: “You must think I’m an absolute moron.”
“You said it, not me,” Red Hood said, circling the periscope in the middle of the room to approach the man. “Did you really think a flash grenade was going to work when we’re both wearing masks, dude? I thought you were smart.”

“Have we met?” the man replied, looking up at Hood without concern. “I never forget an arrogant child, so I’d think I’d remember you.” The submariner wore a navy jacket, possibly getting into the role of submarine captain, but Batman looked past him, at the depth gauges.

“You’ll remember me when I kick your ass,” Red Hood said easily, cloaking some hint of real anger at the comment about children. “Believe me, I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’m looking forward to the immediate aftermath of your attempt.”

Batman had stayed in the shadows of the room to assess their environment, something Red Hood had blatantly ignored doing. Other men should have been manning the controls in the room, judging by the abundance of empty seats, which meant those men were somewhere else. Hood looked around suspiciously, having come to the same realization.

“You got another exit?” Hood demanded.

“I told the men to go belowdecks,” the pseudo-captain said easily, beginning to rise from his chair. Hood shoved him back down, which the man accepted without protest. “They are suspicious about Gotham and don’t want to offend its vigilantes. And, I assume, don’t need to know that these vigilantes can be paid off like any other authority. Now, Mister Batman? Batman? I’d like to refer to you by your preferred name, not whatever people shout at you when you drop off of buildings at them.”

Batman said nothing. He was nearly invisible in this gloom and the Red Hood knew better than to look back and reveal his hiding place.

“Batman, then. You are obviously a man of means. Whatever this child is, he can be easily bought, but for you, I think I will have to stretch instead of stoop. What is it you need, if not money?” The pseudo-captain leaned forward in his seat, since he’d been forbidden from standing, and gazed piercingly at where he thought Batman’s silhouette was. It wasn’t. “I could connect you with some of the best medical professionals, the best women, the best men, the best... well, I have been expanding my business and I think you’ll find that—”

Red Hood had pulled out the gun. Rubber bullets notwithstanding, he shouldn’t be shooting the man at that close a range and Batman took a step forward.

“Hood, that range is too close.”

The pseudo-captain whipped his head around as he leapt to his feet. Not so composed now. Batman rushed forward, taking advantage of the man’s inconvenient position to yank his hands behind his back. After some minor struggling, the pseudo-captain stopped moving.

“Hood, are any children still missing in your case?” Batman demanded.

“Yeah, the three.” Hood looked at the pseudo-captain. “And just FYI, I wasn’t gonna shoot him. I was gonna clock him.”

“Nn.”

“The hatch to belowdecks is three feet to your left,” Hood continued. Batman had spotted it when they entered and shook his head as the Red Hood strode over to it. “I should probably, y’know,
make sure they’re getting along all right down there.”

“Isn’t that what got us in here?” Batman asked, nudging his prisoner towards the control panel.

“As Neil Gaiman once said, ‘whatever it takes to finish things, finish,’” the Red Hood said without a trace of shame as he yanked open the hatch. “And as Doctor Who says, Geronimo!”

The pseudo-captain had the composure not to laugh, as some villains might have, or rant, as others might have. Batman restrained him before turning to the control panel with its hundreds of blinking lights and the depth panels. It had been north of ten years since he had had to pilot a submarine, another sixteen since his training on them. This was a slipshod affair and, even if he had recent experience, he wasn’t sure this was a good idea. He wished Red Robin were here. His tech genius son would have been steering the sub from his smartphone in ten minutes and have coffee being delivered by Jetski. He might, in fact, never get Tim back if he gave the younger man a submarine.

Enough of that, he just needed to get the sub up. They were at least than 200 feet, flying blind, and (thank God) showing no ships on the radar. The radio crackled and Batman answered, keeping one eye on the pseudo-captain.

‘It’s Hood,’ the Red Hood said on the other end of the line. He was breathing heavily. ‘All clear down here, put ‘em in one of those theoretical airlock rooms. Never known how those work.’

Batman did, but teaching it to a submarine full of hostiles wasn’t something he wanted to do today. “Hang in there, Hood.”

‘Is it lookin’ like we’re gonna have to use it? We might have enough suits, but—’

“I’d appreciate it if you’d check on that dent in the hull,” Batman said, keeping his voice neutral. “As well as checking on the men we encountered earlier.”

‘Can do.’

“Be careful. Stop jumping down hatches.”

‘I’ll take it under advisement.’

In silence, Batman guided the submarine back towards the surface and the pseudo-captain, who had introduced himself as Frank, kept a running commentary of all the things he could offer if Batman were to take his side in this ‘unfortunate endeavor’. After fifteen minutes, the Red Hood made it onto the bridge again, thoroughly drenched... and with his hands handcuffed behind him.

“Ahoy, captain,” he joked.

“You found another hatch,” Batman noted.

“Door actually. And they had a hell of a guy sitting with their arsenal.”

The said ‘guy’ knocked the Red Hood forward onto the bridge and moved towards ‘Frank’, leaving two men behind him (who Hood had already beaten up) to train their weapons on the vigilante.

“Are we at the surface?” Frank asked as soon as he was on his feet. “If so, we can simply shove these two off.”

“And here I thought he was better than Bond villains,” Red Hood said in a quiet voice, thankfully too low for the men to hear. Batman didn’t bother motioning for him to stop talking – he wouldn’t
anyway.

“Wake up our engineer and get him on the hull issue,” Frank ordered, addressing his men but still standing a fair way from Batman and the Red Hood. “If either move when we don’t say to, shoot them.”

“In this tin can? Boy, I bet you are NOT popular with your engineer.” Hood remained still, belying his own comment, because the men with guns were angry. No amount of logic would change that.

Frank’s expression darkened and he checked the depth gauges again. “On second thought, let’s prioritize getting them off the damn boat.”

#

To say the water was cold was like saying Dick was ‘a bit athletic’ or that Tim was ‘kinda bright’. Batman didn’t feel much of the cold through the thickness of the suit; what he did feel was the tug of a handcuff on his left wrist. Too dark to see – he had to assume Red Hood had remembered to hold his breath long enough. Since they had taken the younger man’s helmet, there would be no rebreathing options, similar to Batman’s unmodified suit. They had left Batman with all of his gear, both because the goons were too suspicious of Gotham vigilantes and because it weighed enough to drag him down.

The pair had been pushed off the submarine’s casing, which hardly constituted an inconvenience in finding it again, since there were already tracking beacons studding its surface. Picking it up, wherever it went, would be child’s play, maybe even a task for Red Robin and Robin.

Red Hood began yanking on the handcuff, calling Batman’s attention to something he’d been… faintly aware of, but not fully paying attention to. When wearing the suit, he was denser than Hood by a long shot and sinking fast, dragging Hood down with him. Batman scissor-kicked in the general direction of the yanking, careful to keep his cowl close to the water as he emerged to the ocean waves surrounding them and the dark night sky overhead. The submarine sat some fifty feet away, but it didn’t look like they were looking for the Bats. Red Hood surfaced close to him, letting out one long sigh of air.

To Batman’s surprise, the younger man didn’t lead in with a complaint about almost drowning, or even an inquiry as to where the submarine was. Without his helmet, it wasn’t likely he could see far in the darkness, certainly not as far as Batman could see with the cowl.

“Red Robin, Robin, come in,” Batman said, hoping the comms would work now that they weren’t encased in steel and water.

“Batman,” Damian said, before Batman had even finished the ‘come in’ part of the statement. “Red Robin thought you had met some dire fate and is preparing a boat.”

“He left you?”

“I am patrolling the docks.” His youngest sounded proud and a little indignant that Batman had sounded surprised. “Should I triangulate your location?”

“No, we need the submarine coordinates plugged in,” Batman said. “Hood, tracking numbers.”

The Red Hood shook out of his stupor long enough to rattle off the serial numbers that would activate the beacons. Both of them had to keep treading water, which proved challenging when a left hand and a left hand were handcuffed together, but Hood still didn’t comment.
“Father,” Damian said in a low voice. “You are sending Red Robin to secure the submarine, but you are in need of an extraction, correct?”

“Go with Red Robin,” Batman said firmly. “Apprehend the criminals before they abandon the submarine and disappear.”

“Understood.” Damian sounded petulant. “I will see you soon.”

If the conversation hadn’t been over, and Batman’s mind very much on the present situation, he wouldn’t have heard the Red Hood’s whispered: “Sorry.”

“I’ve been in worse situations.”

“No, I should’ve cleaned this up months ago. Shouldn’t have sat around hoping Red’d… get it fixed. Now you’ve got a reason to throw yourself over a barrel and I frakkin’ gave you it.”

“No, a barrel would be convenient,” Batman said, deadpan, and the Red Hood tried to smile. It didn’t work.

Batman felt privately sure that Red Robin would be triangulating their position as soon as the younger man acquired this ‘boat,’ but he didn’t want to lead Hood down that path in case it didn’t work out. Instead, he moved to check his compass readout – and sank under the waves.

The moment he started paddling again, they were fine, but apparently, even a second’s pause would be problematic.

“What were you trying to check?” The Red Hood asked, as soon as they had restabilized.

“Compass.”

“Shore is that way.” The younger man jerked his chin in the direction to Batman’s right. “I’m hoping we’re not too far out to see it, but I’m not sure. The stars are right.”

“We’re 2.5 miles out, based on the submarine’s last readout.”

“Oh, good, little over 3,800 meters, that’s, what, 120 minutes with the handcuffs?” Red Hood glanced at Batman and sighed. “Can you drop the cape, the boots?”

“Not without a lot of effort.”

“And sinking,” Hood said and glanced at their manacled hands as if assessing whether or not he could get it done faster.

“Hood, do not do anything rash.”

“Well, since we’re eliminating our top skill sets, I guess I’ll be doing nothing. I guess you’ll be obvious and chatty, if we’re taking this all the way. Hey, you can basically be Nightwing!”

It hadn’t escaped Batman’s notice that the younger man was nudging them in the direction of the shore. Even if both of them were cooperating in their swimming, they’d move slowly, hampered by the weight of the suit and one of them swimming backwards at all times. Unless one of them “rescued” the other, that might speed up their progress, but Hood couldn’t carry him and Batman was certain the younger man wouldn’t cooperate if the situation was reversed.

The best they could, they moved towards the shore, Batman hoping beyond hope that he was right about Red Robin picking them up all the same. Then hoping he was wrong, because it would be in
flagrant disregard of orders. Then hoping he would again.

“Hood.”

“Yello.”

“You said there was chili at home?”

There was a grin in Red Hood’s voice as he replied. “Yeah, but I said we had to swing by the grocery store after patrol to pick up cornbread.”
Please, try to remember, you looked at me and you called me by another name

Chapter Notes

Holy Toledo, I rewrote the last chapter so very many times. Thank God, we’re on to what I know again!

Good God, it’s getting so hard to find musicals I haven’t used yet and that are appropriate to the chapter at hand. Today’s is ‘Finale Sequence: The Death of Alonso Quijana – Dulcinea (Reprise) / The Impossible Dream (The Quest) (Reprise).’ Which is probably not the actual title, but from Man of La Mancha’s 2002 reprise with Stokes!

Thank you, as always, for reading and commenting and generally making my day half the time. :D

Once again, Tim and Damian had been stuck with each other. Tim had successfully secured (i.e. hotwired) a boat and, after an ill-advised leap from the dock to the boat, Damian had joined him. The submarine’s beacons were as easy to find as Batman had told Damian they would be and the crew too waterlogged to put up much of a fight. The group had been subdued and restrained in under thirty minutes with only one injury to speak of (Tim had misjudged the trajectory of a punch and Damian wasn’t going to let him forget it anytime soon). Tim called the Coast Guard on one of the criminals’ cell phones and told them the exact coordinates of where the submarine had gone down. Enough evidence was on the men’s cell phones, and in the loose tongues of some of their employees who thought they were going to get a plea bargain, to put all or most of them away for a long time.

Fortunately for the safety of the marina, it was now past one a.m. and had little to no traffic at this hour. The bright lights of the Coast Guard stood out against the darkened sky, visible a long way off.

“Father instructed us not to search for them.” Damian said, seeing that Tim had begun to calculate Jason and Bruce’s position the moment they were on the boat and heading away from the submarine and related criminals.

“No, you said that he said we had to finish the case first,” Tim replied, continuing his search. “Since we did that, and since we told the Coast Guard where the ditched submarine was and where the perpetrators were, we’re free to go after them, cause if they were ON the submarine and aren’t now, they’re probably swimming. Here, help me, I’ve gotta drive.”

Damian took the device without complaint and set it up in Tim’s line of sight not a minute later. “They are still in the water.”

“And that’s why we ignore Bruce’s orders sometimes.”

“YOU do,” Damian replied. “This entire excursion will be on you, Drake.”

“Keep that statement in mind when we save their lives,” Tim shot back, though the venom in his voice was a little less than usual as he’d focused his attention on their course.

“Father would not send us away if he didn’t think he could safely resolve their situation.” Damian
sounded certain. Tim wished that he still had that level of certainty about Batman.

“We’ll be there in fifteen,” was the only thing Tim said instead.

Calling what they were doing ‘swimming’ was a compliment.

Batman and the Red Hood had been treading water for more than an hour and while neither was fatigued, Red Hood appeared to have passed out of his apologetic phase and into an unexpectedly irritable mood. Well, not ‘unexpected,’ Batman could feel water soaking into the suit, the cold working its way into old, technically-healed injuries, the feel of the depth of the ocean below. You couldn’t be scared of heights if you were Batman, and by the same token, feel of depths would have been a problem, so he wasn’t afraid but very… aware of the fact he could start sinking.

“Y’know,” Red Hood said. “You could end, literally end, all of this by calling them back.”

Strangely enough, the younger man hadn’t tried to do so without Batman’s consent yet, which Batman found to be out of character. He didn’t want to bring it up, lest Red Hood turn and do it to spite him, but this didn’t line up with Tim’s dossier.

“The hull was cracked,” Batman said, repeating the argument he had had with himself thirty times now. “If Robin and Red Robin don’t catch up with the sub, it will either sink and kill everyone on board or the criminals will manage to get it to shore and abandon it, where it will pose a threat to other boats and they’ll be in the wind. I thought you wanted to solve this case.”

Red Hood said nothing and they continued ‘swimming.’ Batman knew they hadn’t moved more than a mile and was disappointed in himself for the failure. They should be at home by now or, at the very least, at the grocery store.

“Hood.”

“Mnh.” The Red Hood didn’t turn to make eye contact or pause in their haphazard swimming, probably knowing that there was very little Batman could say that would take his effort away from this activity.

"We're not going to die out here."

"Good to know," Red Hood replied. "I plan not to let us, since your plan is to avoid requesting any help at all."

"They're doing something important, Hood," Batman said.

"What, you think I'm arguing?"

"Aren't you?"

"Do you have any idea how much they freak out when they have to abandon you?" Red Hood snapped. "All of us, ALL of us, have seen you die or had a time when we seriously thought you weren’t coming back. Yeah, I know you know that’s happened to each of us and frak, you’ve had to leave Dick to his own frakking devices before, but you’re the old man. You say go and we—they have no idea what situation you’re in and they GO."

“Red Robin and Robin are professionals.”
“They’re children who think they’re soldiers,” Red Hood said, almost too quietly to hear. “They’re worried about their commander.”

“You’re underestimating them, Hood. They’re stronger than that,” Batman said and could hear his own voice getting darker in tone, more the Knight than the Wayne that had been growing in power the longer he stayed with Jason.

“Yeah. Sure they are.”

The Red Hood focused all his attention on swimming, for lack of anything better to do, and didn’t say anything as Batman did the same. In this hobbled format, they made their way onwards. After another half hour, Batman knew what he wanted to say. He always knew what he wanted to say EVENTUALLY, to his sons, but either he missed saying the most important words, or he said them at the wrong time, or at the wrong place, or most commonly, said them in the wrong tone and far too late for them to convey that he had been thinking them for years.

“Hood.”

“We can’t be more than a mile out now,” Red Hood said, his breathing long and slow. “The dock lights are actually visible now.”

Batman stopped swimming for a moment and heard Red Hood grunt irritably as he discovered he couldn’t tug the Bat along behind him.

Batman had to say it. “I remember – I’m never going to forget – you vanishing down each of those hatches and not knowing if you’d come back. Without comms, in an enclosed space, without a plan of attack… you could have died.”

“We could die every time we go out.”

Batman could hear Hood’s teeth chattering in his reply. Without a helmet, the younger man had probably been losing more heat than Batman. Despite the irritation of still wearing the cowl, it did insulate Batman’s head fairly well.

“But right now, you would die without my remembering you,” Batman said.

Red Hood was suddenly quieter than he had been before. Somehow, the only sound that Batman could hear was the lapping of the waves, the sounds of traffic from the far-off docks, and the distant sound of a boat motor. This felt too close to himself and all of Bruce Wayne’s feelings about his sons, things that Batman shouldn’t be feeling on patrol.

But, since Batman had said the words without explanation, Bruce had no choice but to continue. “Jason, it’s fair that you don’t want to me to remember you and forget you again, but you can’t do this.”

‘-to me,’ Bruce’s mind whispered, an addendum that couldn’t make it past his lips. That was as emotional as he could afford to get and even expressing that much verbally was like… like handing Dick the paperwork to legally make him Bruce’s ward. Or telling Damian that he was proud to work with his son as his Robin.

“Look, I remember you too,” Red Hood said, straightening up to peer into the darkness behind Bruce. At first, the older man thought this was to avoid eye contact, but when Hood didn’t continue speaking, he twisted to look as well. The boat sailing up behind them wasn’t large enough to hold more than six people.
“I remember coming home from school when I was fourteen and telling Alfred about the plays I found in the school library and how I was reading ‘A Long Day’s Journey Into Night’ between classes. You had been walking by and you stopped to listen. You didn’t say anything about it, we went on patrol afterwards, but when I got home the next day, you’d filled up the whole bookshelf. Neil Simon, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Henrik Ibsen. And we never talked about it. I didn’t know what to say. You never asked if I’d enjoyed them.”

Too much emotion had lodged itself in Bruce’s throat to reliably answer. He remembered the books now – remembered researching the best plays, asking Alfred, remembering which ones had helped him through the nightmare of his own youth. He had never sought them out as a traumatized child but Alfred, a thespian himself, took him to those that would help. Many had been musicals, but Alfred made sure that he had a thorough and nuanced path of how to move forward.

Not that Bruce had moved forward, not really, but it was an attempt that stayed with him through adulthood, understanding the ways in which, if he were a different person, he could have been better.

Jason was staring at him, the younger man’s eyes suspicious and only a little hopeful. “And if that wasn’t strong enough, I don’t think I can handle it today. If Red and the dem—Robin show up and don’t know who I am, I might damn well—”

“It worked, Jason. I remember you. I remember… everything.”

The younger man stiffened, the muscles in his neck flexing, and looked back towards the boat. “Great.”

It didn’t take a psychologist to determine that Jason was anything but ‘great.’

“What’s wrong,” Bruce asked, glancing around at their surroundings. “Aside from our current situation.”

“Oh, now you’re the one with the jokes,” Jason said, beginning to swim in the direction of the approaching boat.

“That’s not an answer.”

“This worked out for you,” the younger man said flatly. “That’s great. But if I can’t get a memory right on the first try with the next person, I’ll have to do everything over. Including getting the hell out of your house if Tim can’t convince you I’m safe. And your nerd is TIRED of running around trying to help me with this.” Jason took a raggedy breath. “And—and that’s all.”

“Obviously not,” Bruce replied, feeling the detective side of him creep back into the equation. “Does me knowing change something?”

“I just wanted to be done first,” Jason said, addressing the water.

“Done with what? With the memories?” With remembering other people, so he could be far out of Bruce’s path before he remembered?

“No. It’s not important.”

The arrival of the boat interrupted any further conversation. When he looked up, Bruce didn’t feel surprised to see his youngest son hanging off the side of the prow’s railing with a flashlight.

“Batman!” Damian shouted. Within seconds, the boat had stopped and two life rings splashed onto the water near Batman and Jason. The younger man snorted in amusement, then looped his free arm
over one of the rings. Batman did the same, relieved to be done treading water. For someone in the physical condition he and Jason were, one to two hours would be annoying, certainly, but not close to exhaustion and consequent drowning. The cape and full gear had been more stressful than usual, of course.

With difficulty, Damian helped them get onto the boat, scowling when he saw the handcuff that had grown tighter as they swam. Neither Bat had found it worth the projected recovery time to try to break a hand and get it free. The youngest Bat vanished to find blankets.

The moment Damian had left, Jason fumbled with his pocket, muttering to himself until he managed to get a lockpick out. The muttering continued as he worked, somewhat clumsily, on the handcuff lock until with a salt-encrusted ‘click,’ the cuff fell off.

This task done, Jason kicked off his boots and flopped back on the boat’s desk, putting his injured left wrist over his forehead. He looked for all the world like he had decided to go sunbathing, regardless of being drenched and fatigued. Batman motioned for him to get up.

“You should clean up the wrist.”

“Mn. It’ll heal,” the Red Hood replied.

The older Bat felt the question rising in his throat again, ‘what did you want to have done before I remembered you?’ but didn’t ask it. Damian returned anyway, throwing a blanket carelessly on top of Jason and handing another to his father.

“There is a bathroom middeck,” Damian said. “Regrettably, there is only one change of clothing.”

“B can have that,” Jason called, unmoving.

“Thank you, Robin,” Batman said. Starting the argument about who would get to wear dry clothes right now would be an automatic loss and he knew it. Leaving Jason at his preferred location on the deck, Damian showed Batman where the bathroom was, filling him in on what had happened with the submarine as they went. It sounded like his two youngest had miraculously avoided getting into a fight while working together – and that they had agreed as to whether or not to pick Batman and Red Hood up.

“I didn’t tell you to come,” Batman said. “I appreciate the help, but it wasn’t requested and could have been dangerous for both of you.”

“Tt. Drake would have stolen the boat and come on his own. If we are realistic, he is good at finding people and would not have returned until finding you. There would have been no point in waiting on the docks if it would mean an extra trip for him then. You were missing much longer than the half-hour you said at first.” His youngest son looked suspicious and more than a little irritated. “If we hadn’t shown up, one of you probably would have had to break a hand.”

Batman didn’t like thinking the kinds of things that Jason had put in his head – that the boys were scared of losing him, that they would come running back if they suspected he might be in trouble. And they had come running back, as soon as they were done with what he’d sent them away to do. They couldn’t go home, they couldn’t recover from a fight (easy as it might have been) – they had to come running after him despite his own instructions.

“Father?” Damian looked puzzled now by Batman’s sudden lack of readable expression. “We were just making sure…”

“I understand. You did well. Thank you for getting along with Tim.” He moved to close the
bathroom door. “And for coming to get us.”

#

The trip back to the docks passed in a flash to Jason, who napped on the deck the entire time curled tightly under the blanket. He hadn’t fallen into a deep enough sleep to truly ‘rest,’ and only grunted when Tim tapped him on the shoulder to wake him. An arm shot out from under the blanket and swatted at the hand.

“I don’t think the owners are going to appreciate you napping here,” Tim said.

“Can’t B just buy the boat?” Jason said, sitting up and half-stretching all the same. “Holy frak, how am I already sore?”

Tim shrugged and vaulted over the side of the boat onto the dock below. “Dunno, but you should hurry. It’s almost four and the notes on the helm seem to indicate there’s an early fishing trip planned.”

“Are we good for,” Jason yawned. “Fingerprints and shit? B didn’t leave his cape in a wadded-up pile by the door?”

“No, I did not,” the Bat said from behind him. Jason glanced back – and stared.

“I don’t remember the last time I saw you in a polo, Bats,” he said. “You look very… Kent.”

“Hurry up,” Tim whisper-called. “It’s not going get any better if Mr. Wayne gets caught with a bunch of vigilantes and some of us don’t have civilian clothes!”

“Oh.” Jason glanced down at his gear thoughtfully. Technically, people would just assume he was a blue-collar worker with the boots and the pants and an undershirt… he shivered slightly in the cold morning air. Yeah, no, he’d freeze. Instead, he followed Tim over the edge of the boat, landing heavily on the floating dock, which rose and fell over the water beneath it. Ugh. He’d had enough of water, and boats, for the night.

“How far’s the Batmobile, Red?” he asked Tim, who gestured with some trepidation towards the entrance to the dock where bright lights waited.

“Robin ran off to get it.”

“Oka—wait, seriously, the brat has the KEYS?”

“Not my call,” Tim said. He sounded annoyed, faintly, but more as if it was something he had become used to a long time ago. Jason turned on Bruce, who had just leapt onto the dock. The Red Hood gestured incredulously in the direction of the rapidly-approaching Batmobile lights.

“He DRIVES?”

“Better than Nightwing, at times,” Bruce replied. “Though you may have to give him directions to a grocery store.”

#

The Batmobile, unsurprisingly, didn’t fit in any one of the grocery store’s parking spaces, so Damian double-parked between two empty spaces. The parking lot was deserted anyway, but for a few employee cars as the lights came on inside the building.
“Okay, for sanity’s sake, I think it should just be me going in,” Jason said, trying to state what was going to happen before it devolved into all of them going in. “Nobody else is carrying money, right? Just makes sense.”

“I’m in civilian clothes. It makes more sense for me to get it,” Bruce said. Tim sighed internally. Here they went.

“Father should not be seen getting out of the Batmobile in civilian clothes,” Damian pointed out. The kid made no move to relinquish his seat behind the wheel. “Todd should go alone, if it is so important to him.”

“Thank you, Robin,” Jason said evenly, though the word ‘Robin’ was said in the same tone he usually said ‘demon’ in. Not for the first time that day, Tim wondered what was going on between the two of them.

“You’re in gear,” Bruce said, as if Jason hadn’t noticed.

“You’re Bruce Wayne and wearing a plaid sports shirt at four in the morning when the media thinks you don’t get up until four in the afternoon. Everyone’s suspicious except me if I take off the domino, so I’m getting cornbread and none of you need to come.”

#

So naturally, the entire group of Bats was standing at the checkout stand in the next fifteen minutes. Jason had given up on arguing and had been assigned to ‘lie to Alfred’ duty. From where he stood at checkout, Tim could intermittently hear the phone conversation taking place next to the GetPayd kiosk as the domino-wearing older teen wandered around the lobby.

“No, we’re just picking up some things at the grocery store … no, uh, specialty food products, there’s nothing you can’t make, Alf … yeah, he’s fine, we just had an adventure on a submarine today.” The Red Hood glanced up to see if the employee walking by had heard him and quickly retconned the statement. “Yeah, uh, a submarine exhibit at the Gotham Museum. Really good, fascinating stuff, but you know, submarine captains can be real jerks. Just historically.”

Jason’s tone was a little more relaxed now that he wasn’t actively lying about the cornbread. “Yeah. See you soon … sorry, we were trying to get back sooner so you wouldn’t be up all night … yes, we should’ve called. Would it help if I reminded you that you’re the best of butlers and best of Englishmen … yeah, I figured you already knew. They’ll see you soon … fine, yeah, I’ll be there too. Bye.” Jason hung up the phone, glancing up to check on the Bats’ progress.

Tim wandered over, leaving Damian to ensure his father remained ‘safe’ throughout the transaction.

“Was he mad?” Tim asked, gesturing at the phone.

“No more than usual. Annoyed we didn’t call.” Jason leaned back against the wall. “But good God, that man can’t make cornbread.”

“It isn’t that bad,” Tim replied, keeping an eye on the Bats. “Cornbread just isn’t British.”

“It’s a box mix!”

“And he never does box mixes. Or at least I’ve never seen him use one to the recipe – he always adds something or tries to replace one of the ingredients with something higher quality and… it doesn’t work.” Tim could remember an incident with a box of brownies that he and Dick had tried to make when Alfred was sick. The butler had dragged himself out of bed, stormed into his kitchen and
promptly insisted on throwing half the ingredients into the mix, arguing that the mix was simply chocolate flavoring and couldn’t be trusted. They’d made the brownies… which were unsurprisingly inedible.

“I guess he’s never let me in the kitchen with him when he’s working with a box mix,” Jason said.

“Perhaps it’s your snide response to all experimentation,” Damian said as he and Bruce finished up the purchase. Bruce had been recognized by the cashier, who was now attempting to get a selfie with all the (recognizable) Bats. There was little they could do about it now but argue Mister Wayne was ‘a hazard to himself’ being out this early in the morning.

Sometimes it was surprising people believed that Bruce Wayne chose to live in Gotham at all, with the city being how it was and his bubble-headed persona being what it was.

“Your insistence on ignoring Penny-One’s cooking skills is shameful,” the youngest Robin told Jason, who grinned as he took the box from Bruce.

“Clearly, you were not here for the great pancake bake of Nightwing’s 24rd birthday.”

“That one wasn’t Penny-One’s fault,” Tim protested. “Nightwing wanted cereal in the pancakes.”

“That’s a thing! There’s recipes all over the internet!”

“He also doesn’t do internet recipes. Never mind that Nightwing sent me videos of them being made and I almost threw up.” Dick sent Tim all sorts of things, namely because he knew that Tim was always on his phone and would see them in minutes, but no one had Dick’s tolerance for sugar. No one Tim had ever met anyway.

“I’m driving,” Damian said, effectively switching the conversation tracks.

Tim grimaced. “Didn’t you ’drive’ enough on the way here?”

“Robin, you’re not driving,” Bruce replied quietly, checking over his shoulder to make sure none of the employees were watching. They were. “Jason, you’re driving.”

The older teen’s eyes went wide behind the domino, then wrinkled in a smirk. “Hell yeah.”

“Bat—Fa—Mister Wayne!” Damian protested, just in case anyone was listening.

“It’s the smart call,” Jason said, disappearing into the driver’s seat behind the tinted windows. “You look about ten.”

“Take that back, Todd!”

Tim found himself in the backseat with Damian, because why not, they were all tired and snappish so why not put him next to the person who disliked him most?

Fortunately, both of them fell asleep before any actual argument could kick into high gear. The last thing Tim remembered before falling asleep was Bruce asking Jason what he had wanted to get done before Bruce remembered.

Jason’s answer was muffled but sounded like: ‘I wanted to be sure I could live… legally… as your son.’
When they got back to the cave, Tim felt dead on his feet. How Damian could be awake enough to make his own dinner, which was a kind of macaroni and faux meat, was beyond Red Robin’s ability to fathom. Alfred volunteered to make the cornbread mix and Jason, demonstrating unusual tact, managed to persuade the butler to allow Jason to make it. Alfred didn’t take well to anyone taking over responsibilities for him – but he had been up most of the night waiting for them and worrying about the lack of communication from Bruce.

After making the cornbread, which took another twenty minutes, ‘dinner’ had finally been completed. Bruce took a bowl back down to the Cave, brushing off Alfred’s complaints that he could give it a rest for the night. When Bruce naturally refused, Alfred took a bowl and plate, thanked Jason for his help, and left the kitchen.

Jason sat down at the counter with his own servings of food, closed his eyes, and seemed to drift off before even taking a bite. He jumped awake when Damian slammed a hand on the countertop in front of him.

“Fu—! Robin,” the older teen recovered himself.

“Demon, what the hell?” Tim said, communicating what Jason had probably meant to say.

“Todd, I requested that you distract Batman, not endanger him,” the youngest Robin growled. Jason shrugged in response, stirring cheese into the chili.

“It’s patrol, what are you gonna do? And I did make him remember me, on the first night no less.”

“Our agreement was for one week. You are moving too quickly.”

“What agreement?” Tim asked. Both of them ignored him.

“Again, can’t control much about it, definitely can’t control what B goes after on any given night. Oh!” Jason raised his glass of milk to Tim. “You guys helped finish my case!”

Tim shrugged off his earlier question. He’d come back to it later. “What, the one with the kidnappers? That was this one?”

“Yup.” Jason took a bite of the chili. “B didn’t even know.”

“Or he said he didn’t know,” Damian corrected. “Father often knows more than he shares with those who call themselves his sons.”

“You weren’t the one handcuffed to him in deep water for an hour. He wasn’t all that reticent by the
time we got out. I assume you’re going to share where you WERE, Robin?”

“While I don’t need to, there may be a way that you two can assist me.” Damian folded his arms in a way that reminded Tim of when Damian worked with the Titans, specifically with Starfire, Raven, and Beast Boy. It was the stance that kid took when he was trying to lead heroes who he knew had more experience than he did. It felt a little complimentary, even though his posture was nothing but.

“The individual I met with tonight was the doctor who gave Wendall the implants in the first place,” Damian explained. “He is skittish and unrepentant. I also delivered a cash card to him, which I’ve taken back and replaced with an empty card. He’s already checked the balance and won’t be suspicious. If he does try to transfer it, he thinks I’m an idiot, so he’ll simply tell me to bring cash.”

“Why did you give him money at all?” Tim asked, though his mind had already sped past the kid’s probable answer and onto how they would solve this crisis.

“Up for debate,” Tim muttered and stirred his bowl of chili several more times. Jason watched the stirring.

“Stirring isn’t eating, Red.”

Tim glared at him, nudged the chili away, and turned from the counter. “Oh look, time for coffee.”

“Drake, sit down, I’m not done,” Damian ordered. The older teen ignored him and began making a pot of the wonderful liquid. Damian gave up and continued his story.

“I will meet the doctor tomorrow, at the same location. He may attempt to run.”

“This is the Gregory Watersted guy?” Tim asked, putting in a little over six scoops of coffee. “We could just track him down at his office.”

“I checked on that while returning to the manor. He hasn’t been affiliated with any hospital, health care provider or insurance company in six months. Ms. Ducat is affiliated with all three and often books appointments for Dr. Watersted during hours the clinics she works with are not open. These are listed as ‘private appointments’ on her personal calendar.”

“How do you know all that?” Tim said, actually stopping coffee preparations to stare at the youngest Robin. “You—”

Damian held up Tim’s phone, lifting an eyebrow with smug amusement. “For a designer of intensive research applications, you have never been good at choosing passwords, Drake. I would’ve thought you had invested in a fingerprint-based code by now.”

Tim snatched at the device and Damian moved gleefully out of range, locking the phone with one hand.

“I should probably tell you that I changed your code anyways,” the youngest Robin continued. “If you were stupid enough to lose it to me—”

Jason reached over with one long arm and removed the device from Damian’s hand. He kept the
Robin at bay with his other arm, trying a variety of password combinations before stumbling on one that made him smirk and, apparently, unlocked the phone. He held it out towards Tim. “Okay, Timmy, get your phone and choose a better password than ‘Battastic.’”

Tim retrieved the phone and did so, encrypting it at a higher level this time since Damian had shown such an interest. The password had always been steep enough to discourage civilian attempts, but nothing civilian ever kept a motivated Bat brat out for long.

“Damian, you never got to the part where you told us what you needed us for,” Jason continued. “Aside from stealing Tim’s phone so you could check on all the cool spy apps.”

“I’m meeting with the doctor tomorrow,” Damian explained. “Father would not let me go on such an attempt at all, so I require other backup.”

“Yeah, I can see how your dad wouldn’t want just you going after an illegal doctor who likely has bodyguards assigned to him,” Jason said dryly. “Besides, what kind of evidence do you think you’ll get? If you have all those records from Tim’s phone, that’s more than enough to send B after him.”

Damian looked at the older vigilante with what he probably thought was tremendous patience. “We don’t need him arrested, Todd. We need him to remove Wendell’s telepathy so Bluetooth can’t identify all of us to the police. We don’t all have your ability to go unremembered for weeks on end.”

“So, you want to lure him in and then kidnap him,” Tim confirmed. “In front of probable security and his own unwillingness to go.”

“It’s possible he might not even be reluctant to come,” Damian said primly. “He warned me about the potential dangers of telepathic implants with sincerity.”

“And you don’t think that dropping him off at the police station after you finish is going to piss him off?” Tim said, hearing the anger that crept into his voice. “You need to tell the Justice League, not —”

“-I- found him. The Justice League does not need to be involved at the apprehension stage,” Damian shot back. “You said they are debating setting the Yellow Lantern free, and not prosecuting Wendell for the things he did as Bluetooth. Their lax stance on finding this doctor, which was SIMPLE, is an indicator of their overall apathy towards addressing the threat to the Waynes. The Justice League doesn’t care about the safety of Robins. They certainly did not care about yours while you were at the Watchtower.”

Tim didn’t feel confident with his argument to that statement. He remembered the Watchtower showdown quite clearly and, more importantly, remembered Damian being mad as hell throughout their argument with Jason and the youngest Robin being sullen and withdrawn during the flight home. The kid hadn’t seemed to care about their safety then either.

Damian had continued his explanation/rant. “They manipulated Todd into shooting someone. Drake, you would have been kidnapped and killed if he hadn’t. Kent left you alone with highly dangerous individuals who were not sufficiently restrained. I am not calling in the Justice League and will not tolerate either of you doing so.”

Jason sat quietly for a long moment before nodding. “All right, then I’m your backup. Where—”

“Drake is my backup,” Damian corrected.

Jason looked in alarm at Tim, who couldn’t hide his surprise.
“I… am?” The first idea that ran through Tim’s mind screamed that this was some effort to get him killed.

“It is the practical, however unpleasant, choice. Todd is a better pilot,” Damian said. “While your hand to hand skills are lamentable, you can dispatch the doctor’s security quietly with a staff, as opposed to guns. It should be simple to knock the doctor out, plus whatever manpower he brought, and Todd can fly us out of there.”

“And if you two go inside? Are you under the impression I regularly fly planes into buildings, Robin?” Jason said, but he grinned. Of course he did, this plan meant he got to fly without Bruce’s permission.

Damian noticed. “I am under the impression you seize every opportunity, Hood.”

“Okay, WHY aren’t you calling him demon? Or brat?” Tim demanded, tired of wondering. Damian and Jason glanced at each other, the younger Robin giving an almost imperceptible shake of the head. Jason groaned.

“Ahh, trying to set a better example for both of you. You’re always calling each other demon, or brat, or abomination—”

“Those are all Drake’s doing, Todd.”

Jason shrugged one shoulder. “—and ‘Drake,’ and ‘intruder’ and ‘worthless’ and ‘waste of Father’s time,’ and it’s honestly hurtful to both of you little jerks so. Be. Nicer.”

“Sorry, did we not go to Apokolips to save his life?” Tim asked. “I think I’ve already done the nicest thing I’m ever doing for him.”

“And who asked you to do that?” Damian replied, snapping as if by instinct… at the wrong time and with the wrong words.

Tim bristled. “Bruce did, and since I wanted to, y’know, stay in this family you want me out of so much, I went!”

“And you think I owe you a debt for that?!?”

“That would be implying you understand the concept of a debt!”

Jason raised a hand, similar to how one would ask a question in class, and spoke louder than both of them: “I CAN SHOUT TOO.”

They quieted.

“You both owe things to each other. Damian, you can’t demand he goes. Tim, you can’t threaten not to go just because you feel like you’ve done more than Damian but, again, you don’t have to go. It’s been a long-ass night and I’m too sore to listen to you two shouting at each other.” He rose, put his dishes in the sink, and shuffled towards the door. “That’s it, that’s all I’m playing Nightwing slash traffic cop tonight. Damian, you need backup. Me, Tim, Dick, whoever, but somebody. Goodnight.”

The Red Hood headed upstairs. Tim glanced at Damian, who scowled and refused to look at him.

“I’ll come,” Tim said slowly. “That’s fine.”

“Tt. I don’t actually need your help, Drake, I thought asking you would be a simpler endeavor than
keeping everyone in the dark, as you are so fond of doing.” The younger Robin kept his arms crossed in that same defiant, secretly-threatened posture. Tim couldn’t help but sigh.

“I’m helping because I want to. I’m glad you asked,” he lied, keeping the tone light enough to be mistaken for honest. “But if Bruce asks, this ‘whole excursion’ was your idea.”

“Be more concerned about Todd coming in too low and chopping off your head.” But there was a tinge of relief in the youngest Robin’s tone. “I will let you know when we are leaving. Before that, I have school in three hours.” Damian clenched his teeth, as one usually did when suppressing a yawn.

Right, sleep. That thing for other people. Tim picked up his coffee mug and headed for the entrance to the Cave. Damian grunted in irritation.

“You should sleep as well, Drake. You are useless when exhausted.”

Tim pretended he hadn’t heard the comment.

#

Damian felt alone.

That was good; he could hardly sense Drake dealing with the standard six to eight members of security personnel on the building rooftops surrounding the meeting place. They had run into trouble with getting Red Hood, who felt obligated to make sure Batman had at least some form of backup during patrol but would break away long enough to get one of the Batcopters with a cloaking mechanism and pick them up. Then, and only then, they would tell Batman. And then optimally get in one of the space-capable shuttles and drop the doctor off directly on the Watchtower. Damian had no objection to leaving the doctor WITH the Justice League; he simply didn’t want them in charge of securing the individual. Besides, any opportunity to one-up Kent represented a good opportunity.

The doctor had once again failed to show up on time, so Damian waited just outside of the glare from the streetlights. Meanwhile, Drake had all the fun.

‘Any sign?’ the older teen asked over the comms. The change in breathing indicated that he was still fighting the goons.

Damian clicked out a message of ‘yes, radio silent’ in Batcode (yes, it was a thing and he’d spent less than a week before he was better at it than all the other Robins). He had eyes on the doctor’s approaching silhouette, outlined by the lines of the parking lot lights. If the doctor walked up to Damian while the Robin was chatting on the comms, he might be spooked and then where would they be?

“Doctor Lychee,” Damian said. “Thank you for meeting me.”

“Did you bring someone with you?” Watersted asked, his attention on the buildings above. “You should always tell someone if you’re bringing someone else to a meet like this. People could get the wrong impression.”

Ha, that was a joke; Damian could sense at least seven individuals at the vantage points around where they were meeting and Watersted had mentioned nothing about bringing other people.

“I didn’t bring anyone else. You’re the only one who can do this for me,” Damian said. “I’m not going to betray my only chance to continue Batman’s legacy in the way I want it to be.” Was he laying it on too thick? Given Red Robin’s derisive snort on the other end of the line, it was too thick
for Drake, but the doctor appeared taken in by it.

“I had trouble cashing the card,” Watersted admitted. “Part of this meeting tonight was to be sure that doesn’t happen again.”

“Absolutely.”

“…how old are you, kid?”

‘damnit,’ Red Robin said quietly.

“That’s not relevant,” Damian said, crossing his arms. “If any of us were interested in legality, we wouldn’t be here.”

“Some of us are interested in not getting killed by the Batman when he finds out what I did to his protégé.” Watersted spread his hands and adopted a helpless expression. “And, if we’re honest, I doubt you have enough money to carry off this deal at all.”

Fine. Plan B then. “You weren’t thinking about age when you worked with Wendall Hodgins, formerly Bluetooth of the Chaos Pact. That’s really why I’m here. So, come with me, remove his implants, and I’ll refrain from telling Batman about your existence.”

Doctor Watersted looked tempted, but displayed slightly more self-preservation skills than Damian had expected. “Yeah, no Batman, but the cops, right?”

Should he lie? Would a lie even be believed at this point?

“We only need you to remove the telepathic implants,” Damian said firmly.

“That’s as good as admitting you’re taking me to the cops after.” The doctor took micro-steps backwards, still wearing a strained smile. “How about I give you a referral to another doctor who can get the implants out, right? Just give me a second to run up to the apartment and get a pen—"

“Do you think I’m an idiot?!” Damian shouted.

The sound of several dozen safeties clicking off, from a dozen different locations, made Damian tense. He didn’t regret his recent words, but he did regret selecting Drake as backup. Clearly the older teen hadn’t been paying enough attention to the close-range, ground-level threats.

“This wasn’t what we agreed on,” he said, trying to channel Todd’s usual obnoxious bravado in the face of certain failure.

“Not between you and me, no, but this was always the plan,” the doctor replied. The unease he’d been showing was still there, probably due to the guns and mercenaries, and his strained smile turned a little smug. “Even if you hadn’t backed out, they’d ransom you out to the people who WANT to go up against Batman, pay me, and skip town. I was paid before you even showed up tonight.”

“Okay, Robin,” one of the gun-carrying voices said. “We don’t have to do anything rash if you don’t —”

Damian leapt forward, bringing down the figure of Doctor Watersted as the older man tried to back into the dark. Damian got both of the doctor’s arms pinned behind his back without trouble. As he’d suspected, the man had little muscle definition or ability to shake him off. The security remained hesitant to fire, in case they hit Watersted.
“You didn’t do your job, Red Robin,” Damian hissed into his comm.

“There’s another vanful in the parking lot,” Drake replied, the rhythmic sound of his staff striking assailants audible in the background. “Try to get him somewhere out of the line of fire and I’ll catch up with you.”

“Tt.” Unlikely, Damian thought but aloud, he asked, “And where is Red Hood?”

Drake always had a monitor running of their relevant positions, he should—

“Do I sound like I’m dripping with free time?” Drake shot back. Damian allowed this tantrum. Seconds later, Red Robin said ‘He’s nine minutes out. Where are you headed?’

“Hood keeps a safehouse here on the third floor. The key is under the mat, because he’s an idiot.” While he spoke, Damian continued tugging the doctor backwards. Guilt at using the man as a human shield kept tugging at him. Still, the man had planned to ransom him off, even if things had gone to plan! Concern ran rampant in the back of his mind as to the quality of the bullets. If they were rubber, fine, they could handle a couple of people who were trying not to kill them. If there were real bullets involved, and he was stuck at ground level with this reluctant weight—well, there had definitely been some panicked whispers of ‘is this the violent one?!’

“Just make sure he knows it was YOUR idea to break into his apartment,” Drake said over the comms. “I’ll try to keep them off your tail.”

“Hn.”

Damian gave up on his escort mission for a moment and targeted the mercenaries closest to them. Since they wanted him alive and ransomable, he could get closer than usual even if they were ‘prepared.’ By the way they moved and tried to communicate with each other, it was clear they hadn’t been hired as a team, hadn’t trained as a team, and the majority had never been up against a Bat before. The ones that HAD were at the back of the team and trying to get further away.

One found his nerve and fired at Robin, using a projectile slower than a bullet. It zipped past him as he ducked, plowing into Watersted’s shoulder instead. The doctor looked at the projectile and snorted.

“Red Robin, they have tranquilizers,” Damian said, retreating to secure the doctor as he began moving out of the line of fire.

“WHAT? Get out of there!”

“I’ll be back as soon as—”

“That dose will be calculated for an adult man, if they even bothered to calculate, and you’re NOT the weight of an adult,” Drake said, using an intentionally calm voice as if to make up for his earlier screech. “Get out of there and don’t come back.”

“Tt. You weigh less than me,” Damian said, moving Watersted along all the same. “Even if you’re only hit with half a dose, you may—”

“I’ll be fine, because tranquilizers don’t work instantly and we both have better reflexes. But you have a civilian and it’s a little late to start being concerned about me now.”

He grabbed Watersted’s arm and led the way in and out of the building. Sometimes he missed his powers on patrol and this was one of those times. It would be so easy if he could just pick up the doctor by his collar or pitch him over his shoulder. He could do it, but without ease or mobility and it was utterly impractical to try when people were shooting at them with tranquilizers.

After what seemed like an eternity, they arrived at Building I23. One of Todd’s safehouses. One of the safehouses where there was no choice but to kick open the door and drag his struggling hostage after him.

Damian hoped desperately for a pickup from the roof. Grayson hated traveling by ground and Damian had grown to loathe the same thing. No more running through darkened apartment complexes, heading for locked doors.

Speaking of which, Todd’s safehouse here had never made it into his rotation of commonly used safehouses, so it looked spartan, without so much as a couch or actual bed. Still, there was a sliding glass door and a balcony they could exit from. It was a very Robin-friendly setup. Damian imagined that was why Todd had chosen it.

Watersted had curled up in the corner and Damian let him. Better for the doctor to think that he was going to have to go up against Batman AND the cops for his crimes than to know that Batman didn’t even know he was apprehended.


“Hood’s two minutes out. Landing on the roof.”

“Meet us there,” Damian instructed, puzzled by the increasing speed of Drake’s statements.

“Get him to the roof,” Drake said firmly. “There’s too many of them for me to get through.”

“Don’t be a moron, no one will pay a ransom for your sorry carcass.” Damian intended the words to galvanize the older teen into fighting harder. The dry laugh that Red Robin replied with didn’t reassure him much.

“Get onto the roof,” Red Robin repeated, the words almost in one angry breath. “Don’t make me go shot put on you.”

“Tt. You couldn’t. Where are you?”

“Kickin’ ass. Taking names.”

“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Replacement!” Todd’s voice came loud and gleeful over the comms. “Now if you don’t tell me where you both are, I’ll get out and start shooting people.”

Damian grabbed Watersted’s collar and shoved the unresisting doctor out the door. ”We’ll be on the rooftop of the I Building. Red Robin is refusing to share his location.”

“Shut up, demon,” Drake said. Given his breathing, it sounded like he was now running. “I’m on B17 and heading south by rooftop. There are a LOT of these guys looking for Watersted. GCPD are on their way.”

“At I building now. Funny, y’know, I’ve got a safehouse somewhere in here,” Todd said. Damian could hear him over comms and see the concern in the older Robin’s face as the youngest Robin and Watersted ran for the Batcopter. “Red, if you can make it here in the next three minutes, go for it. If you can’t, I’m heading your way.”
The vehicle Todd had grabbed was one of the smaller ones, fitting only three to four at a pinch. Grayson had named the smaller flying vehicles like this all sorts of things during his tenure as Robin. He had first introduced it to Damian, when they worked together, as the ‘Crunch Buddy.’ It still made for an accurate term, Damian reflected. The space felt tight even to him as he secured Watersted in one of the seats for prisoners and climbed in next to Todd. Red Hood was watching the edge of the rooftop with barely cloaked anxiety.

“Tt. Red Robin is playing things up for dramatics,” Damian muttered.

“I heard that!” Drake snapped over the radio. Todd didn’t smile and, instead, got out of the Batcopter and walked over to the edge of the rooftop. Watersted made a distinctly queasy sound from the back of the vehicle.

“Ughh… does he have to stand right there?”

Todd straightened suddenly, having caught sight of something far below the rooftop, and ran back to the Batcopter.

“Robin, watch the controls. Take off if I’m not back in—”

“You stay,” Damian interrupted. “Red Robin said the police were coming. They will open fire on an unfamiliar civilian if you come barreling down the building like a maniac, guns blazing.” Damian unbuckled his seat belt and half opened the door of the Batcopter. “You have visuals on Red Robin?”

“I DON’T NEED HELP, YOU TWO CAN FRAK OFF!” Drake shouted over the comms. Damian looked very slowly over at Todd, who had been in the process of getting into the vehicle. NOW Todd grinned.

“He’s lost it,” Damian said, fascinated.

“Oh, right, you’ve never seen Red go ballistic. Well, if he’s had a lot of… caffeine products, let’s call a forklift a spade, yeah, and then he gets tranq’d or drugged or poisoned, he goes ALL THE WAY the other way, which leads to the popular myth that he’s immune.” Todd got fully into the vehicle and began preparing it for takeoff. “So, he’s taken out all the mercenaries at this point. If you wanna go get him, be my guest.”

“…will he come with ANYONE like that?”

“Oh, hell no. That’s why I was going, cause I can at least pick him up under an arm and I wear enough body armor that a shrimp like that’s not gonna do much.” Another glance. “I’ve never seen him try to work with the police in this state alone though. Should be hilarious and/or some great blackmail material.”

“FRAK YOU, I CAN DO ANYTHING.”

“Of course you can, Replacement,” Todd told the comms brightly. “But I bet you can’t wait there patiently until we come to get you.”

Drake said something extremely rude to Todd, who grinned and patted the seat where Damian had been sitting, intentionally being patronizing. “And I thought the flying was gonna be the best part of the night! Get in, Robin, we’re hunting nerds.”

The Gotham City Police Department must hate them, Damian reflected as the Batcopter descended in the eerily-quiet way of all his father’s vehicles. The Bats weren’t doing anything that stopped the
police from doing their jobs, per se, but they would, with impunity, start fights, finish fights, kidnap villains like the doctor in the back, and finish fights loudly in the center of an apartment complex on the wrong side of town. And they rarely explained themselves.

Red Robin had indeed taken down all the mercenaries on the ground level, and many on the upper level. The GCPD were in the process of dragging many of the heavily armed men away and one unfortunate lieutenant had begun the unenviable process of debriefing Red Robin.

“But what started the fight?” The lieutenant asked as Damian leapt out of the vehicle, landing with a clean tuck and roll next to Red Robin’s side.

“We were shutting down a metahuman experimentation agency,” Damian said, careful to keep his father’s even and dispassionate tone in the explanation. “We have reason to believe they were trying to recruit Red Robin to their cause and sent these men to attempt to apprehend him.”

“I’m a big deal,” Drake said. Damian honestly couldn’t tell if the older teen had intended to be joking or not.

The lieutenant snorted. “I suppose it’s a waste of time to try and get you to make an actual statement down at the station?”

“Sorry, Lieutenant Gray!” Todd said over the Batcopter’s loudspeaker, far louder than either Damian or Drake had expected. Both teens flinched. “I’m the babysitter tonight and this WON’T happen again! You two are going to get me in so much trouble with your father!”

The lieutenant refrained from dropping his head into his hand, though he visibly wanted to. Drake smiled at him with sincere sympathy.

“Sorry for overloading your cells,” the older teen said.

“Oh no, far be it from me to protest the acts of the BATS,” Lieutenant Gray said, watching the vehicle dip low. Damian snatched Drake’s wrist and dragged the older teen towards the Batcopter, hearing the lieutenant say in the distance: “I’m sure all of these gentlemen are guilty of something.”

“Idiot,” Damian stated as soon as Drake had dragged himself into the vehicle and flopped into the second backseat. The older teen just grunted in acknowledgment but didn’t make any other reply than to buckle in. He fiddled with the back of his neck with an air of obligation.

“You hurt, Replacement?” Todd asked. He’d already brought the Batcopter into the air, so he couldn’t turn and check for himself. The passage would be tight with a man of Todd’s size so even if he could check on Drake, he probably wouldn’t have.

“I might’ve found some tranquilizers,” Drake said distantly. “They were too surprised to switch to live ammunition.”

“How many is ‘some’?”

“Four.” Drake managed to remove the final dart. “I checked the components while I was fighting. Should be fine. Not for a ten-year old, of course.”

“You know very well I am not ten.” Damian knew what they were doing now, on familiar and hostile grounds.

“Yeah, I forgot – do we count time before you were ‘born’? Are you actually YOUNGER?” Drake leaned backed in his seat and smiled, steepling his fingers. “I can never remember. Of course, it is
always hard to track the beginning of an invasive species.” The effect was dampened as the teen had to massage his forehead, wincing: “ugh, coffee and tranquilizers aren’t going to do me any favors.”

“As expected from a dependence on chemicals,” Damian replied. Drake didn’t say anything in response and tried to curl up in the chair instead (which didn’t work). Todd glanced meaningfully over at Damian.

“Anything you’d like to say, champ?”

“No nicknames!” Damian hissed.

“Sorry, you DON’T want to be known as a champion?”

“I have no need for validation from you, Hood.” The youngest Robin crossed his arms, glaring out the window. Minutes slipped by. Drake should be asleep by now, Damian reasoned.

“Thank you both for providing me with backup. I’m certain Batman will overlook my actions and be proud of my initiative.”

“You hope,” Drake said.

Ugh, he had been AWAKE. Damian spent the rest of the ride pretending that he hadn’t heard the older teen’s statement and that he was unaware of Todd trying not to laugh.
Cause what we do, is we make it a two-player game

Chapter Notes

I'm really happy to be updating this. It's been a... a while and I wanted to be better.

Oh, so, the Firebird moment talked about in this chapter. If you want to hear what it's like find yourself a version with good music (as of 11/30, 'disneysoundtrack89' has one on Youtube (the short version Firdbird Suite/Fantasia 2000 OST) and listen from the beginning. If you get distracted, even as I was while I was listening to it in order to right this, the damn thing comes out of absolutely nowhere.

Thank you all for hanging in there with me! I appreciate the support and the comments and the kudos and all the things. <3

Chapter title is from 'Two Player Game' in the musical 'Be More Chill' and for once, finding an appropriate chapter title took less than half an hour. Less than ten minutes! That... rarely happens at this point. Anyway. Thank you.

Worrying about the Replacement was surprisingly high on Red Hood’s list of things that happened when he worked with the younger man. The feeling wasn’t exclusive though – the moment Bruce realized what had happened (because they came back and Tim fell out of a chair), he ran half a dozen tests on Tim’s health, post-tranquilizers. Meanwhile, Tim acted like this had happened a thousand times before, which lost some of its coolness when he fell asleep in the middle of a sentence, woke up, repeated the falling asleep process seven minutes later, then woke up again. Damian thought it was hilarious and Jason didn’t disagree. Still both of them were relieved when Alfred, the be all and end all of Bat health, announced Tim would be fine.

“Frak, another assassination plot foiled,” Damian said, in a dead-on impression of Jason’s voice.

“Not the time, Hood,” Bruce said without looking to where they stood some ways out of the medical area.

“That was Damian,” Awake for the moment, Tim made it to his feet (against all the advice of his respective ‘doctors’) and attempted bravely to get back to the Batcomputer. Jason caught the younger teen with an arm hooked gently around his neck. Tim made a frustrated noise and attempted to duck under it. He wasn’t successful.

“Drake, you’re being undignified,” Damian said, moving away from the pair as Jason’s grip tightened.

“It’s not like anyone else is going to do my work.” Tim struggled a little more, then groaned sharply and put his head in his hands around Jason’s arm, muttering something into the confines. Alfred had already diagnosed him with a migraine from the remnants of his tranquilizer-coffee cocktail, which he was suffering through. More drugs could unbalance the situation further, so he wasn’t getting any.

“Robin, perhaps you could tell me why you enlisted your brothers to break off their own patrols and join you in assaulting a civilian doctor?” Bruce asked, striding out of the medical area while Alfred began cleaning up from the Batman’s minor injuries of the night. The Batman hadn’t even decowled
before addressing Tim’s health and stability. Jason found it a little irritating because technically, things had gone WELL once they were back. Doctor Watersted had been deposited in one of the holding cells, a call placed to the Justice League explaining the situation, and Tim hadn’t fallen over until he tried to sit down at the Batcomputer and had missed the chair.

Batman got home minutes later and found his second oldest son helping his second youngest get off the floor. Bruce already had questions prepared, since he knew about the police response, but one of his exceptionally well-trained Robins failing to sit in a chair raised MORE questions.

Now, Damian rattled off a very nice version of the story, focusing mainly on how he had COINCIDENTIALLY ended up at the dwelling of the doctor that did meta modifications and how he had actually been looking for the leader of a drug ring and the doctor had tried to BRIBE him by saying Robin could receive meta modifications and how this really hadn’t been planned at all.

Oh, this was going to make amazing blackmail later. Even better than Tim going berserk.

Tim came out of his head-holding a little, enough to hear the end of the story. He pushed away from Jason, a mix of expressions flickering across his face.

“Uh, Damian, I don’t think that story’s going to…”

“Were you aware that Red Robin has the searches on that particular system linked to the computer unless otherwise specified?” Bruce asked. Damian’s face didn’t quite fall but it came close.

“Well, Drake—”

“And the search was performed two days ago, with a similar search happening the day before?”

“What had happened—”

The youngest Robin expected to be interrupted and when he wasn’t, he hesitated.

Jason jumped in. “What had happened was that we didn’t want to involve the Justice League because they apparently don’t give a crap about finding this doctor.”

“The JLA knew exactly where he was,” Bruce said. “They were working with a Ms. Emilia Ducat to get him to take on a job removing several meta modifications from individuals he had worked with. The job would have more than compensated him for the removal, however his actions would then be leaked to the medical community and the public, via the media. Superman’s alter ego can sometimes be useful especially regarding a man who works in both Gotham and Metropolis clinics.”

Oh, Jason thought. There would be no police response to a plan like that; no property damage, no stolen helicopters and no berserker! Tim.

“Then why didn’t you say so?” he demanded, intentionally cutting off Damian’s questioning of the same. The kid had gotten himself in enough trouble as it was. Batman didn’t need another reason to be mad at him.

“Because the problem was being addressed without our intervention, Hood,” Bruce replied. “You are not the only ones who can be discreet.”

“It affects us—YOU all more than anyone,” Jason replied, catching himself on the upswing. True, they were only one person away from everyone knowing who he was, but that still meant that any threat that faced the Bats related only to the Wayne secret identities. “You should have told your kids, at least.”
“Because you will all defy my orders if not? No. No one needed to know, because it was not your case to be working anymore. Someone will be here in an hour to pick the doctor up. I’ll take care of things with Gordon. Until that time, Robin, Red Robin, get changed and go to bed. Hood, head home. I don’t need you here to worry about. I’ll wait for the JLA pickup of Watersted.”

“Master Bruce, you may remember that you and Master Jason have a final signing at the courthouse early tomorrow,” Alfred pointed out on his way upstairs.

“Nn. Go to bed then.”

“I’ll wait with you,” Jason said, not entirely sure why.

“I need to get some work done too,” Tim said. Jason glanced at Damian and jerked his head slightly towards Tim.

“Yeah, you got a lot of sawing logs to do, Timmy.”

“I’m NOT SLEEPY,” the third Robin snarled, taking steps backwards, towards the computer and away from all of them. In other word, demonstrating the usual Bat rejection of everything helpful to their own health. The younger Robin’s eyes shone brightly despite the sleep war waging within him. “I’m going to finish the damn research for tonight and, in case either of you get any ideas, that no food or drink rule is reinstated!”

“He won’t eat anything anyone gives him,” Jason explained for Damian’s benefit and glanced at Tim again before sighing. “I’m not in the mood, so let’s just leave him until the JLA comes and goes.”

Tim retreated a few more steps until he arrived at the Batcomputer, keeping an eye on all of them before he sat down, carefully, on the chair. The cocktail had probably made him paranoid too, Jason reflected, but as he’d said to Damian: better to leave well enough alone. The youngest Robin headed up to bed, after a couple of major yawns, and Jason finally had the opportunity to get out of his gear. He yawned as well, jerking himself awake a couple of times, and raiding the Cave’s ‘sugar rush’ nook, which Dick fastidiously maintained.

Munching on a chocolate bar, he crouched near where the JLA would land, regardless of what vehicle they brought. It wouldn’t be possible to transport the doctor without a vehicle, unless they had a Lantern on hand but they usually had better things to do. The chocolate bar vanished and he found himself leaning back against the wall of the Cave, eyes closed.

He didn’t want to sleep. Given the JLA’s ‘management’ of Duela on board the Watchtower, it felt like a 50-50 shot she would be the one showing up at the Cave and they’d need to have a hell of a fight. His head fell forward again and he shook himself awake. Fine. Get up. Hadn’t it been an hour yet?

He stretched, hoping the movement would wake him up. It didn’t. He could hear the distant sound of keys clacking – Tim’s typing.

“Yo Red!” he called, hearing Tim groan at the echo.

“What?”

“We got any bogies incoming?” The yelling helped. He didn’t feel half as sleepy while yelling at Tim.

“No.”
He waited another few minutes. Then moved, quiet as possible, to behind where the younger man 
sat. It should’ve been funny but sometime between when Jason called to him last and now, he’d 
crashed. He didn’t budge when Jason approached or shook him. Pulse and everything was normal, 
as normal as the Replacement ever was. And inconvenient as he ever was – Jason had to reach over 
his keyboard-sprawled form to check for incoming aircraft.

And there it was. Bout damn time.

“B!”

Tim stirred at this, sighing in the way that only a teenager could, and pulled his head off the desk. 
“Old Model, you wanna keep it down?”

“Old Model’?”

“If you’re going to keep calling me Replacement, I’m going to keep calling you something. Ooh, 
Prototype.”

“That’s Dick, obviously, unless he’s just Experiment.”

Tim smirked and chuckled in that semi-hungover giggle of the recently-sleeping. “Heh, yeeeah.”

“Dick is not an experiment and you two need to put your masks on.” Batman appeared out of 
nowhere, already cowled. The two younger men looked in surprise at him, then at the video screen.

“Couldn’t that just be another member of the—” Jason began.

“Do as I said, Hood.”

Despite the spacecraft, which would fit up to four, it looked like it was just Supes on the heat 
signature. That’s what they thought until Wendell climbed out of the cockpit, not even restrained. 
The Red Hood’s breath caught in his throat. He swore he heard Batman growl. They had essentially 
been chilling in the basement, waiting, and Superman had brought in someone who knew everyone.

“This wasn’t what we agreed on,” Bruce said, the word ‘Kent’ hovering just out of speech. If Alfred 
or anyone else got ousted by this, Superman could be damned sure Bruce would think about outing 
him too.

“Not true, you and I technically didn’t talk about anything,” Superman pointed out, waving the 
younger man forward from where he practically hid next to the craft. “You never even mentioned 
how intense the implantation deactivation is.”

“Because it wouldn’t be here,” Bruce replied with his customary scorn. “Contrary to what the 
League may think, I’m not set up for brain surgery at a moment’s notice. Hood, watch him, I need to 
have a talk with Superman.” Before Jason could answer, Bruce strode off with Superman. Jason 
coughed, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Well, uh—”

“Don’t bother,” the telepath said, rubbing the arm Jason had previously shot with the other hand. 
Pupilless blue eyes glared at him. “We’ve had all the conversation we need to. I just want to get back 
to my sister.”

“Oh, is that what you think is going to happen? You collapsed a BUILDING.”
“You think I can be prosecuted for something I can’t remember?”

“What?” Jason asked and heard the squeak of wheels as Tim turned around and echoed his question. Wendell looked from one to another, demonstrating a teen’s usual glee with his statement.

“It’s not a precise science, you morons. If someone tries to pull out ONE memory of knowing who Batman and all of you are, yeah, including Bullets here, and leave the rest, given how much I’ve interacted with you all, it could unravel my brain. Even your precious Batman can’t argue with that, due to the whole no-killing thing. So, everything will be gone for the past six weeks and, thanks to you all, I was never ACTUALLY taken into custody.”

Tim murmured something. Jason glanced back at him.

“Something to add?”

“I told Batman that Wendell might know our names and he said he’d get him checked out with the Justice League,” Tim said, locking the computer and sighing. “He must never have taken him in.”

“And no one’s going to testify, since nobody took his name or a statement from Bats,” Jason continued in an equal sigh.

“And he’s not going to remember.”

“He has to, what about Phenom?” Jason turned on Bluetooth. “You were best friends with Phenom.”

“I’ll have to find out again,” Wendell said and his eyes looked more blue than they used to. “Also, talking? So inefficient.”

“And you’re BLUE.”

“This was an optional thing when we decided to go the Chaos Pact route. There are plenty of magic users doing this if you know where to look.”

“In Gotham?” Jason said, the question an interrogation all by itself.

“Well, a lot of them spend time in Blud, but yeah, Gotham.”

“As their base.”

“Tt, like I’m going to tell—HEY!”

“Red Hood, put him down,” Batman said, returning with Superman in tow. Neither of them looked happy with their discussion or with Jason, who had picked up the telepath with one hand.

Wendell tried to do something to Jason’s mind (if that’s what all the constipated expressions were about). It didn’t work. “Ugh. Hate you!”

“Aww, you can join my hate club. They’re mostly in prison where you’ll be going, so you’ll already have friends!” Jason set the telepath down under the watchful eyes of Superman and Batman. “They write me letters, or so I’ve heard. Burn me in effigy, throw darts at my head, you’ll love it.”

“Hood.”

Jason straightened. He knew that particular modulation of the Batman voice.

“You’re kidding,” he said in disbelief. “Seriously?”
“Even if he came forward to announce that he did something he can’t remember, putting that strain on the memory could crack it severely enough that the whole thing would collapse,” Superman said. “We’ve contacted Marisa and shared that he’ll be needing to live with her and can’t know about the incident.”

“Oh that seems like a great and effective plan,” Jason said.

“If it isn’t possible for him to live normally, we will attempt to return the memories without the memory of the Bats.” Superman glanced at Batman out of the corner of his perfect vision. “Batman is not in agreement with me on this.”

“Do what you want. You will anyway.”

“What a wonderfully passive aggressive thing to say,” Superman said, taking a step towards the holding cells and motioning Wendell to come along with him, which the telepath did. More smugly than any of them would have liked, but he did. Jason looked over at Bruce incredulously.

“Really? FREE?”

“I wouldn’t have done it if Superman had offered a flimsy excuse.”

“Which means he did, at first.” Tim rolled the computer chair a little closer. “So, how bad?”

Bruce sighed. “He suggested that he didn’t want to go back and forth from the Watchtower so many times for a simple fix.”

“Ah, well, sorry it’s so INCONVENIENT for him,” Jason muttered.

“Nn.” The Red Hood could tell from the way Bruce glanced away that it was more or less a summation of what he had said to the superhuman. “He is performing the transition here because it may cause more trauma if he has to understand that he is offworld.”

“He isn’t asleep for it,” Tim said, realizing.

“No. But it’s very quick.”

“And then?”

“He’ll probably pass out.”

“Problem solv—”

“After expelling a significant amount of energy.”

Jason stared. “The what now?”

“It’s a non-invasive procedure, but he will experience a temporary surge of adrenaline. By letting him tear around the property, we’ll both solidify our alibi in his mind and prevent him from coming to harm.” Bruce spoke like this was perfectly normal, like Alfred hadn’t trained gardeners and landscapers who worked day in and day out on that yard. Plus, with Damian living here it practically constituted a bestiary,

“And then what?” Tim asked.

“He is taken into custody for trespassing, we do not press charges, and he assumes he had a mental breakdown. Which is functionally true, he was very distressed by the death of his friend and
manipulated by a talented Yellow Lantern.”

“What’s happening to Duela then?” Jason asked, figuring that the news couldn’t be anything he didn’t expect.

“She is continuing her training as a Lantern.”

“She’s psychotic! AND, and this is important, have we ever had a Yellow Lantern, ever, that brought some worth to the community?”

“The Justice League and its Lantern partners have a rare opportunity to help forge a Yellow Lantern’s path, using Lanterns other than a Yellow. Their representatives don’t want to give that up.” Batman sighed, seeing the look on Jason’s face. “Her motivations in coming back were to take over for me. She wants to be something more than a criminal.”

“Yeah, I thought that too until she tried to get Roy killed for votes on the internet.”

“Hm.” Batman considered this new piece of information.

“She’ll kill someone.” Jason snarled. He felt fully awake now, anger tracing through him. “Who do you think did all this? She does this for FUN. I’m not trying to reclaim that anymore and you shouldn’t either.”

“You propose killing her?”

“I’ve already tried.” He could tell by the look on Bruce’s face that the older man wouldn’t concede that the Lantern Corps, all of them, were making a stupid choice. The Red Hood pivoted, already in gear, and strode for the garage. “I’m taking your advice. I’ll be at the courthouse tomorrow. Call me if I turn out to be right about her.”

#

Around 3:45am, he got the text from Tim.

‘She flipped out on the Lantern Corps while they were taking her weight as part of her final medical checkup,’ Tim texted. The gentle buzz of Jason’s phone on the nightstand was enough to wake him up, fumbling for it in the dark of Tim’s apartment.

‘everyone good?’

‘mostly, she's on a safety hold now, but question: WHY ARE YOU IN MY APARTMENT’

Part of Jason wanted to laugh and the other part seethed in the pool of anger that never quite went away. ‘tracking my phone just to send a text Replacement?’

‘you’re one to talk about privacy violations’

‘touchy’

‘you mean touché’

‘I said what I said. Anyway you have a stereo and a badass copy of the firebird’

‘oh god you’re not still listening to it are you?’

‘maybe’
‘it gets really LOUD at the end Jason!’

Well it certainly wasn’t doing that. He hadn’t remembered it being this quiet and this LONG in the Disney version. How long was that version anyway? Several Googling’s later, he’d discovered that the symphony was about 47 minutes long and the Disney version had been nine minutes. He felt sorry for the poor composer who had had to do that hack job. Tim was crazy; this piece was downright soothing.

Almost as soon as he'd thought it, the violins exploded with a force that jumped Jason out of his phone-scrolling and sent him leaping for the volume control. He fumbled with the many stereo knobs in the dark, turning the volume UP at one point, and was grateful for the soundproofing of the room. Even so, someone was knocking on the front door.

He answered it, apologized, locked up again, and told Tim everything was fine, his neighbors were heavy sleepers, etc., etc.

‘don’t you have a court appointment in 4 hours?’ Tim texted. Jason scowled at it.

‘didn’t you have a drug-caffeine cocktail and yell at some cops?’

‘pretty sure you were doing the yelling’

‘goodNIGHT Replacement’

‘goodnight Prototype’

Jason rechecked his alarm, put the phone on silent, and laid back to wait. Not for sleep, just the morning. He smiled a little. ‘Prototype’ wasn’t really an insult, as insults went, and it felt reassuring that the Replacement could think of him as being someone who could be imitated. Realistically, that’d be Dick and JASON would be the experiment but what the hell, he hadn’t said it. Tim had.

He’d have to buy the kid some sheet music or something as a thank you.
I know you so well my friend, I know you might just run away

Chapter Notes

Oh my God, we’ve got to be so close to the end (??), so naturally I’m writing these marathon chapters trying to clean up loose ends.

Also, Tim mentions buying some ‘Russian sheet music’ and I went and listened to a little of ‘Islamey’ by Milij Balakirev and... now I’m just worried that Damian would storm downstairs threatening to kill him.

Chapter title is from 'Sonya Alone' in 'Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812'. In which there are a lot of sad songs.

None of the Bats particularly enjoyed early mornings, so both Bruce and Jason showed up squinting from a night of little sleep. Alfred had shuffled Bruce out the door with coffee, a drink he usually avoided in the morning to avoid becoming dependent on the stimulants, and Jason looked like he hadn’t had coffee for days. Still, he smirked when he saw Bruce.

“Heard you had a little problem with your ‘reformed’ case,” he said as they walked up the courthouse steps. The press didn’t get up this early in the morning to watch Bruce Wayne adopt yet another street rat (though Jason’s apparent age might have generated more interest and discussion), so they could speak with relative freedom.

“I never said she was reformed.” Bruce took a sip of the coffee. “And they weren’t entirely incompetent after that. The last time I heard from them, the situation was under control.”

“I guess anything that doesn’t make the news on Earth is good.” Jason moved to hold open the door, but it was still locked. Security let them in. “How’s Wendell?”

“In police custody for trespassing, but otherwise doing quite well. His sister is intelligent and, since Duela is no longer able or attempting to contact individuals here and Marissa has regained her brother, she is much more cooperative about the future.”

The pair got through security without trouble and Jason hit the elevator call button (only staff were allowed to take the stairs). They rode in near silence to the floor with the courtrooms. A case was already in progress, so Bruce took a seat on a nearby bench outside of the closed doors to wait. Jason paced around, growing more antsy by the minute.

Bruce watched for a while before commenting: “It’s a good thing we didn’t have to bring you down here for the adoption paperwork when you were young. That can take far longer than this.”

“Forgive me if I don’t enjoy being in the center of Gotham’s well-known attempt to have a JUSTICE system,” Jason replied. “And I have real clear memories of being at this place as a kid, thanks.”

The older vigilante straightened his posture as someone exited one of the courtrooms but it was only a young woman heading to the bathroom. He gave her a typical Bruce Wayne smile, then pretended to be engaged in the game of Sugar Smash deeding loudly on his phone. It fit with the Brucie
Wayne agenda to be playing cellphone apps to the extent that his battery died, but Bruce detested the noise he was supposed to allow the game to make. His predictable obnoxiousness put people at their ease however and that was his goal as Brucie. Jason glared daggers at the phone but didn’t otherwise comment.

Tim thought being able to fold Jason back into the family was the best possible outcome of the memory erasure. Bruce agreed. Given Jason’s interstellar and rambunctious friends, it was difficult to pin him down long enough to do anything so involved as legal proceedings or stay for the length of time they usually took. Because it was difficult and they were all busy, years had slipped by. The thought of the wasted years sent a pang of conscience through Bruce. They were both present now, they were both taking care of this NOW. Even Tim respected their relationship enough to remain in one place when asked, regardless of time expended, but Jason looked like he wanted to run. Far, fast, hare-like, even while they were about to fix the situation.

“Jay, lad…”

His second oldest froze, wearing the cagey expression he usually did when Bruce spoke directly to him. Waiting for some kind of reprimand. Bruce sighed and they both looked up as the courtroom doors opened. Relief wove its way through Bruce’s voice; he had found something other to say than what he originally meant to: “Stay close, the last case is getting out.”

“Seems like something we should be doing with the licensing office,” Jason muttered. They filed inside. The county didn’t have an exact protocol for declaring someone alive again, so the atmosphere was courtroom-quiet as they entered and Jason took a seat at the ‘defendant’s’ usual desk, next to the Wayne family lawyer, whom Jason had never liked and continued to dislike. Bruce sat on the uncomfortable wooden bench just behind them. Aside from the judge, bailiff (who was probably just waiting for the next ‘real’ case), their lawyer and necessary personnel, the courtroom was deserted.

The rote lines were said, documentation produced. Jason was sworn in and Bruce testified. It took over an hour for the judge to be convinced that Bruce Wayne had adopted a child named Jason Todd, who had been thought killed when he was fifteen and had apparently survived. And that no one remembered the child’s existence. Even if Jason hadn’t been unremembered, it was a stretch to believe the idea that a fifteen-year-old had woken up in a coffin, with the kinds of injuries Jason had, and decided to dig himself out. And Jason hadn’t just decided to dig himself out, he HAD dug himself out. The judge wanted evidence. The second Robin was sensitive about his fingertips, though they had long since healed and scarred over and healed again, but was required to submit his abused hands as evidence. This irritated him more than he said aloud.

The judge eventually agreed that Jason had dug out of some strong enclosure. As he was a legal adult with no other affiliation or identity that they could determine, all the legal evidence pointed to this being a forgotten child adopted by Bruce Wayne. As Wayne had the death certificate, signed by the judge’s own hand, Todd had clearly existed and died at some point. After that, there was more documentation, assertions, and signing required. By the end of it, Jason was losing his patience, arms folded as he sat at the defendant’s table. And taunting their lawyer. Great.

“Since there’s no property that was reallocated as a minor, I think that completes the process, Mr. Wayne,” the judge said as Bruce signed the final document. “Congratulations on your recovery, son,” he told Jason, who rolled his eyes.

“If you really want to help us, don’t tell the media we were here,” the former Robin told the judge, whose mouth moved to form a thin, straight line.

“This court is above reproach, Jason Todd,” the man said. “The media will find out about your
resurrection soon enough.”

Bruce motioned at Jason to follow him and the Red Hood did, messing with the family lawyer’s hair as he did. “Bye, snake.”

“Jay.” Bruce didn’t turn.

“Thank you, Philip,” the younger man told the lawyer, not missing a beat. “Your time and billable efforts are appreciated.”

The lawyer went through a wide range of expressions in the next few seconds, starting with confusion and ending with irritable satisfaction, before he finally looked to Bruce, who had no idea what to do. He give the lawyer one of Brucie’s strained grins. “Kids. What can you do? Bill my office for an additional 15%, Phil.” The man hated being called Phil. “You’ve earned it.”

They left before Jason antagonized people into a greater state and called the media just to spite him. As if a light switch had been flipped, the Red Hood walked a little slower after they left, tugged at his collar as they walked out into weather that was on its way to freezing. Strange, Bruce had thought the younger man would be relieved, at the minimum, or ecstatic, at the unlikely end of the spectrum.

“You didn’t bring a thick enough coat,” Bruce said. Chiding was easier than bringing up the child’s posture.

“Don’t care.”

“…is something wrong?” Bruce asked.

“Nothing.”

Normally, Bruce wouldn’t pry, but the young man should be happy. It concerned Bruce that he wasn’t. “Still the court?”

“I thought it’d be a bigger impact,” the second Robin said, begrudging the release of information. “That the judge would remember me or something, which wouldn’t be great because frak, everyone would freak out – but it’d be done. I’m so close to it. I don’t want to have to rebuild my life and then someone tips the scale and everything falls apart, no matter how much that’s par for the frakking course for Bats.”

“Nn.” The silence slipped in between the cracks in the conversation. They were almost back to the car before Bruce realized he hadn’t really said anything in answer to Jason’s comments. “You’re still planning on running, then?”

The younger man smiled a little in answer. “Bruce, even if we’re getting along right now, I’m not gonna try to tiptoe around Gotham. You know that.”

“Tiptoe,” said Bruce. “I wasn’t sure you knew how.”

“Ha ha.” There was no mirth there. “If I’m terrified of what you’ll do to me when I kill, I’ll be hesitant. I’ll GET killed.”

Bruce refrained from mentioning that as the Batman, he risked that every day. He didn’t want to get trapped in a discussion about death wishes, unprocessed grief, and control issues with the Red Hood, who had started texting someone the moment they got into the car. That, and stopped sinking into his leather jacket as if that would be any warmer.
“Success, Master Jason?” Alfred asked.

“Yup,” Jason said, smirking slightly. “And if you can drop me off at the Portugal Way exit, I need to pick up a bike.”

“YOUR bike?” Bruce asked, unable to keep the suspicion out of his voice.

“Yeah, yeah, my bike. I’m meeting Dick and Tim in Bludhaven.”

“It’s very early for Master Dick to be up,” Alfred said, glancing at the digital readout of the car.

Jason shrugged with one shoulder. “Well, he’d be insufferable if he found out we were in Bludhaven and didn’t see him. Hell, he’d be upset if we didn’t invite him to any bakery, anywhere.” Jason returned to texting.

“Are you coming back, afterwards?” Bruce asked, attempting to make the question sound as casual as possible. He failed.

Jason seemed about to answer in an equally idle tone, then looked up to analyze Bruce’s face. What he found there surprised him. “Are you asking if I’m back for dinner or are you asking if I’m coming back at all?”

“Would the answer to both be the same?”

“It’s really cute that you tried to save that statement, old man.”

“Meanwhile you haven’t actually answered the question yet, son.”

The term silenced Jason for a good minute. Bruce had called him ‘son’ many times, of course, but having it in this instance felt uncommon. Jason Todd had been deemed legally alive, primarily due to his connection as one of Bruce Wayne’s adopted sons and his death, directly related to Bruce Wayne’s actions and enemies as Batman. It could be that Jason wanted nothing more to do with him now, for all he had wanted this earlier.

“Yeah,” Jason muttered, though the words were hesitant. “Yeah, I’ll be back for dinner. Wouldn’t miss Alfred’s cooking.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

####

Jason’s steps slowed as he approached the bakery. It was a frou-frou kind of place with an iron fence surrounding the exterior and crowded enough that Dick had said he was showing up early to grab them a table. Jason hadn’t thought anything of the statement at the time; Dick probably knew the place best. Tim sat next to Dick, sheltering a coffee and with an untouched éclair sitting in front of him. ‘Wing would probably end up eating it.

But they weren’t the only people at the table. The redhead in the cap was facing the street – as a long-time vigilante, it would take a lot for Roy Harper to turn his back on any kind of threat. He hadn’t seen Jason or more likely hadn’t really looked at him. They didn’t know each other. This wasn’t the case for the Tamaranean sitting next to Dick. Even Starfire was wearing civilian clothes, nothing could keep her undercover. As an alien, and therefore someone who the memory erasure hadn’t worked on, she perked up when she saw Jason. He’d forgotten how fantastic it was to be the center of Starfire’s attention and she flew over the table and the several dozen feet to hug him. Paralyzed with indecision as to whether stay or run like hell from the ‘friendly’ group, he hugged her
back as she tackled him.

“How are you doing, Star?”

“I am well. But health is something I should be asking of you. Grayson explained your predicament to me and how long it has been going on—were you going to attempt a reconciliation with Arsenal?”

“This is actually brought to you as a Dick Grayson production,” Jason said, forcing a smile. “I’m—it’s great to see you, and I’m really glad you remember me, but I’ve had about enough of people I lo… people I know really well not remembering me. I just meant to meet up with Tim and, well, Dick’s here so he wouldn’t be hideously lonely.”

“Our former Titans commander could not make it?” Amusement underpinned her question. “Damian didn’t want to spend time with Grayson? Is he ill?”

“Oh, I’m sure he would, it was just more of a ‘thank Tim’ event and you know how he adores Tim.”

“Ah, yes.” They both glanced back at the teen, who had been needled into a conversation with Roy. “To death, I believe.”

Jason took a breath. “Okay, here we go. Roy’s first impression is not going to be that I’m another of Dick’s rage-filled younger brothers.”

“So not being yourself then,” Starfire commented, gliding smugly next to him. “What do rage-less younger brothers order from a bakery to indicate their mental stability?”

“I’ll just eat Tim’s éclair.”

“So a thief,” Starfire said, enjoying their banter far too much. “An admirable survival trait.” They both watched Dick snatch the éclair off the plate, to Tim’s protest, and snarf the thing. So much for that plan.

Jason groaned and strode across the last ten feet or so to the group’s table, still addressing his companion. “I’ve missed our supportive chats, Star, you always know just the right words.”

“It is my pleasure, as always.”

The rest of the table paid full attention to them by now. Tim had been getting up to get another dessert, but stopped upon spotting Jason. Instead, he pointed at Jason, then at Dick, directing one to the other.

“You invited this endless maw, you buy the desserts.” The younger Robin flopped back in his seat and reclaimed the coffee so strong that no one at the table would touch it. “Starting with another éclair.”

“Done.” Jason stepped over the four-foot fence and started inching through chairs to the bakery door, like a normal person would, rather than bashing through all the chairs in a straight line, noise be damned.

When he came back, Roy was telling Tim and Dick the time he and Star had to escape Lobo’s ship. Jason remembered that ‘adventure,’ more accurately he remembered the injuries, and settled in to half-listen. This went fine until he noticed that Roy kept shooting him glances, and none-too-friendly glances at that.

“You got a problem, Harper?” he asked.
Now the redhead looked affronted. “For starters, asshole, we weren’t introduced. For seconders, you don’t seem to give a shit about what I’m saying.”

Jason hesitated, trying to think of a suitable response before settling on: “I’m Jason. And I don’t, because I’m pretty sure Kori would have busted in with a stolen ship and you would’ve hijacked their nanotech or something. Lobo’s too nasty a character to take down with just you.”

“I didn’t say there was nanotech…”

“Then you’re doing a crappy job telling the story.” Why was Jason so off point? The Red Hood knew he could lie much, much better than this. “They’re going to be confused by the ending if you leave out the nanotech bits.”

“He’s kind of right,” Tim piped up. “If I know it’s nanotech, I can think of at least six ways out of the situation you’re describing.”

“I was beat up!”

“Mm, everybody at this table has pretty much experienced that, Roy,” Dick pointed out and Jason remembered with glee that the oldest Robin wasn’t opposed to siding against one of his best friends. Jason felt the same way after some of Roy’s tech experiments. And decisions. And decisions to experiment, usually on the people he lived with, typically without their knowledge.

Roy let the jibes go and finished up the story in a much quicker fashion, glaring arrows at Jason most of the time. Ugh – and Dick had thought this would help? When Roy finished the story, the table went silent… for longer than Jason was comfortable with. While Dick and Kori got along famously, they weren’t dating right now and their conversation had to be careful and cordial to avoid a slippery slope.

Tim took pity on everyone and told the Firebird story, which didn’t translate well to Kori (who hadn’t heard the music) or Dick or Roy (neither of whom were classical fans with that kind of recall). Cass would have laughed, Jason decided.

“He’s surrounded by heathens.”

“Uh,” he said, forcing the sound into the stillness of the group. “I called this group, well, really just Tim and Dick, together because Tim’s been a big help over the past few weeks and… made sure I came back.”

The replacement’s gaze was rooted on the coffee cup from almost the moment Jason started speaking. He looked angrier than Jason had expected. The older Robin pressed on.

“And, as promised, I’ve handed over two Hamilton tickets to Spoiler, if you haven’t already gotten your all-caps texts for the day…”

Tim nodded, trying to smile a little. It didn’t manage to fracture the Brooding Persona he was putting on.

“And you’ve got a gift certificate to a music store sitting on B’s piano cause I don’t know what the hell you play on piano. It’s like Christmas all over again and I’m not doing that, replacement.”

If anything, that darkened Tim’s expression a little and didn’t look up from the coffee cup. “I told you before, you don’t need to buy me off for helping.”

“Annnnd I already did.”

Roy looked puzzled at this exchange, glancing from one of them to the other. Jason could tell he
wanted to be disinterested (who cares about your brother’s friends being sappy?) and yet the archer didn’t shift his attention to anything else. When Tim got up to fetch more coffee, still wearing the scowl, Roy leaned towards Jason.

“I don’t want to kill your vibe or anything, but the kid doesn’t look like he feels good about helping with your ‘problem.’”

“If it was something illegal, would I have called everyone here?” Jason replied. Roy shrugged, though his grim expression didn’t soften.

“That is not the face of a kid who feels good about things. What’d you do, cut him out of the final step of a math problem?”

“He can’t help with this anymore,” Jason replied. His answer came out as more of an angry hiss than a practical statement, which was irritating. What the hell was wrong with Tim?

“Roy, back off—” Dick said, late as always.

“And why DID you invite us to this?” Roy asked, twisting to look back at Dick. “You’ve been weird around me for weeks now. Now we see each other in the first time in months, and you ask us into something that has nothing to do with us?”

Dick shrugged in pseudo-apology. “I just know you don’t love magic stuff, so—”

“Are you under the impression that’s an ANSWER?” Roy could keep his tone easy, even in casual situations, but if Dick didn’t own up fast, Arsenal might lose his patience. Jason put a hand on the redhead’s shoulder, mostly to get his attention and Roy knocked it away before he turned. Jason took a breath. He seemed to be doing a lot of that today.

“Don’t get mad at Dick. Don’t get me wrong, he’s fun to be mad at, but he’s probably been weird because of me.”

“I’m listening.”

Jason gave him the condensed version, his own thoughts fixated on how stupid it had been to tell Tim to tell Dick to keep an eye on Roy. He should’ve known it would trigger a paranoia in the other man. Technically, he was lucky that Roy hadn’t gone on a rampage to discover why Dick was being so newly mothering. Which seemed like the only way Dick knew how to keep an eye on his friends.

“But Starfire remembers you,” Roy said, as soon as Jason was done explaining.

“It doesn’t work on aliens. You want to know why, it’s a Tim or even a W.E. question. I wasn’t interested in the science.” Jason could do the science, of course, but found it unsatisfying and time-consuming.

Instead of asking follow-up questions, Roy nodded once and started talking to Tim, who was enthusiastic to have someone who would appreciate what he’d learned about the artifact. Jason hadn’t said anything about his and Roy’s being friends, much less their stint as a heroes for hire duo a few years back. Maybe Roy wouldn’t even remember that, or just remember it as that time he did solo mercenary work. Or chalk it up to missing time.

Jason didn’t want to think like that, hated the thought that Roy was putting on the jokester persona even while his brain processed ideas at a speed that would burn out an ordinary CPU. And the more he thought about it, the more he knew Roy would begin doubting his memory.
“Roy.”

“Yeah.” The archer turned from his conversation with Tim, who made an irritated face at Jason.

“I wanted to mention we worked together. For several years,” Jason said. “With Starfire and a little bit with the woman who caused all this and a little bit alone.”

Roy sat in respectful silence for a second, said “Cool,” and went back to the conversation with Tim. Jason interrupted again.

“It’s not just that, Roy. We…”

Roy’s eyebrows raised, in a sarcastic ‘I’m listening’ gesture.

“…I know you know when you’re clean,” Jason said, keeping his voice very quiet. Roy’s nose twitched a little with discomfort and he said nothing. “What I’m trying to say is that your memories where you’re missing time, or you don’t know why you made certain decisions, or anything else that makes you doubt that you were okay during a time you knew you were clean… we could’ve been working together and you’ve forgotten the role I played in those decisions or where we were. I get caught up in drama and you follow me, ‘cause… you’re a good guy. A better guy than me. You have—had my back.”

Roy pulled away, beginning to say “I don’t need—” and Jason grasped his arms. Starfire murmured Jason’s name, cautioning him, and Roy’s attention flickered to her.

“I’ve been in a Lazarus Pit before,” Jason continued, alarm bells in the back of his mind shrieking that he was freaking Roy out. “I know that there are memories rattling around where I don’t know who was calling the shots. But I want you to know that it might be my fault if you haven’t felt sane, the last few weeks.”

“Sanity’s a long shot in the dark for me, Jaybird.”

Jason’s heart shot into his throat at the nickname, but they hadn’t exchanged memories – it was nothing. Habit, he supposed. He let go of the other man, not knowing exactly when he had grabbed him. “Sorry. That was it.”

“Eh, you’re forgiven. Dick’s right, magic stuff sucks.” Roy still looked skeptically at him, though now there were the usual hints of concern. “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Jason glanced up at Tim, who had continued to stare down his coffee cup, shoulders tight and not even making sarcastic comments at the scene. “It’s not like you to sulk, baby bird.”

“It’s not like you to get eviscerated for calling me baby bird, but here we are,” Tim said, clearly in a mood.

“It’s not like you to—”

“Okay, stop,” Roy said, pushing his chair further away from all of them. “I see why we get along but I know the… Waynes… and you’ll continue indefinitely. Tim, you want to share with the class? Okay, okay, that face suggests a ‘no,’ yeah, no explanations. Very Bats. Is there any way we can HELP?”

Tim gave the older vigilante his best CEO smile, even and emotionless. “No. Just something Jason needs to figure out. It’s a family matter.”
Which made a thought stutter into Jason’s mind, one that he had somehow avoiding having over the last several weeks: his mother wouldn’t recognize him. Catherine was dead obviously and had rarely recognized him when she was clean enough to see him, but sometimes she had. And the thought of THIS, that there was no familial tie, no Disney-esque magical remembering that would take place with the only person who had cared for him before the Bat…

He would be nothing to her.

He shrugged off the thought. What else was he going to do with it?

Meanwhile, Roy had automatically begun to gather information about how Jason would resolve this ‘family matter.’ After he’d gotten the full story, the archer sank back in his chair to think with a muttered ‘huh.’ Naturally, his gaze then fell on Dick.

“So was this an attempted parent trap then?” Roy asked the older vigilante.

“I just thought you two would get along,” Dick said. He never had been good at tolerating his family being in any kind of predicament, Jason reflected. Roy turned his attention to Jason, probably to assess whether he knew anything about the plan.

“From what you’re saying,” Roy began, addressing Tim, who had been trying to escape the conversation by pulling a mini-laptop out of his backpack. “Most of the incidents are a big deal, not something that’s going to happen at a cafe even in Bludhaven. We could get Kori’s ship, zap his brain a little to see what works? It’s really not my first time working with an amnesiac.”

“Going directly to the ‘water-activated Teflon coating in the showerhead’ approach, huh?” Jason said, deciding not to point out that technically everyone ELSE was the amnesiac in this situation. Roy’s face lit up.

“Were YOU who I tested that on? You must have been practically invincible!”

“Since you shot me with napalm to test it, I hope so.”

Roy looked with excitement over at Kori. The Tamaranean was quick to assure him that this was when they had been working without her. She wanted no part in weapons testing if she wasn’t wielding the weapon.

“And I’m not messing up the memory project at this stage with tinkering,” Jason continued. “Like Dick said, I have to get a strong memory with one more person and then we’re done. But if I fail, everything bounces back to zero and I have to redo everything – which, if I don’t want to track Duela down again, and I don’t, is going to mean finding two more people.”

“Is there a time limit or something?” Roy asked.

“No, but—”

“Then there isn’t a rush. Star remembers you, your family knows—”

“Alfred doesn’t. And everyone else’s memories have been forged in life-threatening situations that I’m not replicating with Alfred. He gets enough of that from Batman.” The Red Hood tried not to sound like he was whining.

“I’m available for life-threatening situations,” Roy said, only half-joking. “From what you’ve said—”

“Roy, you’re not gonna remember me. And definitely not because Dick dragged you out here under
false pretenses," Jason snapped, feeling a little guilty when Roy winced. "Which isn’t your fault."

"Oh, I know that," the archer replied. "This is all on you and the weird alien artifacts your family has lying around."

"It was stolen, we weren't leaving it around for whacking people over the head with," Tim said.

"Well, did you try whacking the guy who hit you with the stick?" Roy asked.

The third Robin dropped his head into his hand. Not surprising, a lot of people reacted that way to Roy if they had more than fifteen minutes of exposure. Roy was Jason’s best friend. Really, he was. But Roy didn't leave any experiment untired, regardless of how ill-advised they might be.

“That would just extend the situation to him, without undoing anything, and then we would have to explain this whole process and he’d have to go on the hunt for five more people. It’s better to keep it with me.” And maybe Roy was right earlier, Jason reflected. Thinking that he was going to get another person to ‘remember’ him through a non-coincidental stream of events might be unrealistic. Nothing was stopping him from returning to one of his safehouses outside Gotham and finishing this quest without the help of the Bats or a time-sensitive deadline. It’d be easier on Tim, whose current mood was probably due to not being able to help, and the rest of the Bats. He could go. He SHOULD go.

He got up from the table. “Tim’s partially right though. It’s a family thing and I’ve leaned on family a lot to fix it. As he’s probably figured out, there’s not much keeping me in Gotham for the rest of this. I could find someone anywhere.”

“Are we seriously friends?” Roy asked – in what had to be a rhetorical question. “You just said that you had to start over if you had a memory that wasn’t strong enough. You want to travel all the way back to Gotham from whatever end of the globe you pitch yourself to?”

Starfire nodded. “When you run, Jason, you tend to RUN.”

“I’m not running, I’m being practical. Bruce is saying stuff like ‘come back home’ and we both know that’s going to blow up in our faces. I’ve been in Gotham more than five weeks and that’s about 34 days longer than I ever intended to be. Sorry, Timmy, you’ve been great, but staying any longer is a terrible idea.”

Tim snorted. “You say that like it’s a surprise.”

Jason looked at the younger man in puzzlement. “It’s not?” Well-founded paranoia took over. “You gonna stop me?”

Tim glanced up from his work on the computer. “No. If I wanted to stop you, all your assets would be frozen and you wouldn’t be able to so much as call a taxi. But then you’d have a fit and try to run anyway.”

“Getting really tired of your ‘smart threats,’ Replacement.”

“You don’t want to go. But you feel like you should do what you do in literally every other situation involving our family. You want to run and be halfway across the globe in case you feel any kind of emotional fallout. Not to get too psychology on you, but yes, this is what you do every. Damn. Time. Paying me off for helping you meant you could feel free to run, which is why I DIDN’T WANT IT.”

Dick bit his lip and tried to get up from the table, Starfire rising to follow him. Tim glared them both
back into their seats. They might not be involved but they were apparently damn well going to be participants. Tim continued addressing Jason, who couldn’t deny any of the accusations so far.

“I will be so, unbelievably pissed, if a couple days from now, I find that our entire family has forgotten you and you are nowhere to be found. You’re not making me the crazy one in this. You aren’t going to run off and potentially turn all your progress into ash.”

“I…” Jason began, unsure what he was going to follow the pronoun with. He felt angry, anger that was mostly shame, and so far into the emotion that it felt like being more than halfway through a deep wood. Turning around to head back to an apology would be treacherous but pressing on through the feeling could lose him Tim. The only person, besides himself, who would be impacted by a failed memory exchange. He cleared his throat. Apologize. Say SOMETHING. Why did they all have to be so good at fighting and terrible at saying words? “I didn’t think of it that way.”

“Yeah, that’s still not a ‘no, I’m not going to skip town, Tim,’” the younger man said. He had gently closed his laptop, but only because of the respect for electronics. Had it been a book, Jason was sure the snap would have echoed.

“I’ll finish things here first,” Jason said, reluctant to give his word as Tim would keep him to it. “Swear.”

“Good, because the Justice League would be pissed if you contradicted the very loose terms of your house arrest.”

“Are you under the impression anyone expects me to complete house arrest?” Jason asked.

“Plus, you just told Bruce that you’d be back for dinner and, assuming you haven’t ruined all your progress by then, he’d be upset.” Before Jason could ask how the hell Tim had known that, the younger man held up his phone. “Alfred posted it to the family group chat. Then Dick posted ‘crisis averted’ just now.” They all looked at Dick, who grinned.

“It’s always nice when my siblings are getting along.”

“Yes, but now we’re have to explain the “crisis” to Bruce.” Jason groaned. Tim looked at Dick, then back to Jason.

“Sorry, were you under the impression he DIDN’T know about your obsession with running away from difficult things?” Tim asked as Dick and Starfire finally got up to sneak over to the bakery’s counter and order more desserts.

“Ugh.” It was Jason’s turn to put his head in his hands. “Evil child.”

"Oh, Damian did come?" Tim said, twisting as if to catch a glimpse of the youngest Robin. “Speaking of which, you ever going to tell me why you aren’t calling him a demon child or any of his other formal titles anymore? He’s not," he added, for Roy’s benefit.

"It's a need to know, kiddo," Jason said into his hands. “Besides, you just said you didn’t want anything to do with being paid off.”

"Mm, but I already used the gift card and you can’t return the tickets, so… think of it as an early Christmas present. Anyway, it's something to do with me, therefore I need to know." 

"How…. the gift card's still on the piano," Jason said in bewilderment.

"Oh, the purchase you made is associated with a bar code on the gift card, which gets associated
with your bank account once purchased, and from there it's a scratch-off code based solely on what area of the state the card is purchased in. So, I ran the numbers, got a pending $50 scratch-off code, redeemed it, and bought some Sondheim and some Russian sheet music that everyone will hate."

"...ah." Jason cast a side glance at Roy, who rolled his eyes. "Then I guess I can tell you that you're allowed to play at least four hours a week at the manor without interruption from Damian."

"Wait, from—from what we talked about way back on the rooftop? How the hell'd you negotiate it?" Tim asked.

"Well, a) the demon's a sight better human being than he used to be, so it's not that difficult and b) he actually likes your playing and would rather go back to Talia than admit it. And c) I had to help him distract Bruce so he could capture Watersted, which kind of blew up in everyone's faces, but he hasn't revoked our deal yet." Jason didn't expect Tim to have any reaction. Certainly not for the younger Robin to look up at him with authentic appreciation.

"Thanks," Tim said. "I couldn't have gotten that out of him myself. It's almost worth not getting you out of my hair."

"Uh..." Jason floundered for words. "Um, pretty sure you could've, Replacement. I mean, you shouldn't agree to not call him names like I did, but he would've let you talk him into it, as long as you didn't want him to do stuff like get out of the house. He's a music appreciating little imp."

"Was that what all the..." Tim shuddered. "The Twinkle Twinkles were about? Because I would have done it myself, if so. You just seemed so adamant that you were going to play. You're lucky Damian didn't smash the grand to bits."

"Don't be ridiculous. We all know he would start with me and then, maybe, if it pissed him off or you did, move onto the piano."

"Mmn." Tim made a distinctly Bruce-like noise. Dick and Starfire had returned with double the sugary confections that Dick typically picked up, followed closely by a bakery employee with the check tray. Jason took it and left the group to their diabetes-inducing festivities as he went inside to pay. Once he was out of sight, part of him still wanted to run, despite whatever he'd said to Tim. The kid spent most of his life trying not to be an inconvenience; he should really understand this. Jason’s phone buzzed brightly in his pocket and he thumbed it out as he was paying. Another message in the group family chat from Alfred.

‘Crisis not averted. RTC’

It meant Return to Cave. AKA Responding To Conflict.

And hurry.
And everyday a little death comes and paces the floor

Chapter Notes

To steal from an Amanda Palmer song: Mary, have mercy now look what I’ve done.

I didn’t mean to set up a fight (it always ends in a fight—where’s the fight/on its way—stay down/I can do this all day—they’re not stopping/neither are we)—but some part of me knew it couldn’t just end quietly. And now we here. I have another, LONG chapter backlogged, but I’m trying to *cough* make sure the finale sequence is steady before we keep moving, hopefully on a weekly basis. I regret that the foreshadowing is not what it could be and promise that it will be... in future drafts.

So, TL;dr: I’m sorry for the delay and am not dead.

Also Balloonacy also made a REALLY good point about a logic issue, so I also started reworking some things from earlier chapters. Once I fix the logic issue, I’ll post a callout to the relevant chapter numbers (but that hasn’t happened yet).

And that comment underscores, seriously, THANK YOU for everyone who has pointed out things that need repairs or don’t necessarily track. Anyone who reads this in the future will benefit from your notes. I’m also super-appreciative of everyone who kudosed and commented and bookmarked and been a part of this project. I know exactly how fun it is to binge-read a fic (defying normal sleep hours and proper responsibilities) and am glad I can have connected some people with that experience. <3

Happy New Year!

Chapter title is from ‘Everyday a Little Death’ from the ‘Count of Monte Cristo’ (the one which Edmund sings, not the one Charlotte sings). I’m running out of musicals with appropriate chapter titles. :’D

Red Hood walked out of the garage and into the Cave with his guns drawn. Batman couldn’t be sure he had had cause to ban this kind of behavior before (how often had Jason entered with guns?), so he looked meaningfully at the weapons. While he couldn’t see Jason’s face beneath the red helmet, he imagined it looked thunderous. Jason shoved the weapons into their holsters and strode over to where Bruce still sat at the Batcomputer, pulling off the helmet on the way.

“Everyone else is right behind me. If the threat’s not here, what’re we facing?”

“It’s not something that needs your attention,” Bruce replied. He didn’t turn to look at his son again. Jason swore as he took in the on-screen images, probably piecing together the events from the files Bruce had open. In the corner of the screen, a small timer counted down the seconds until all his Bats and Birds were back in the Cave. It was difficult to call them all back during the day without calling attention to their movements, so he’d calculated an extra 25 minutes for Tim to use public transportation from Gotham, 45 minutes for Dick to drive from Bludhaven to the front of the house, one hour for Damian to—

“Father, where is the fight?”

Batman wasn’t imagining the disappointment in Damian’s voice as the boy strode into the Cave,
already in full Robin gear. Specifically, the version with the hood – what he sometimes called his ‘assassin gear.’

“What have I said about taking suits to school?” Bruce asked. He had given up on trying to tell the child that he shouldn’t change into his gear until he was in the proper Cave.

“That I could do it if I thought it were in the best interests of my classmates. And I have reason to believe it is. Besides, Kent practically lives in his deplorably unclean uniform.” Damian greeted Jason with a curt nod. “Prototype.”

“That’s complimentary coming from you,” the Red Hood said, folding his arms across his chest. “Of course, it also means that the Replacement and you are actually talking to each other, which is just weird.”

“Tt. A prototype is the stage of creation most in need of improvements it will never get and thus riddled with irreparable errors. It suits you wonderfully, Todd. Father, the threat?”

Bruce glanced at the door to look for the rest of his sons and daughter. A meaningless gesture; he knew it would be another fourteen minutes. “Jason, you don’t need to stay for—”

“By now I know someone has made it out of that revolving door we call Arkham Asylum, ‘Dad,’” Jason interrupted. “Skip the small talk. Is it the clown?”

“It’s both of them. When Duela escaped her Lantern handlers, 2.5 hours ago, she took on heavy damage but still managed to kidnap a Green Lantern, as well as retrieving her own Yellow Ring.”

“Frak,” Jason breathed. “And then…”

“She took the Lantern to the man she claims is her father. After she killed the Lantern, the Green Ring chose the Joker.” Bruce took in their surprised expressions. “He’s psychotic, and unstable, but he carries out what he begins. That’s willpower. The pair then ‘broke out,’ though Duela had already destroyed a large part of the building when she got in. They also freed every Arkham resident loyal to or afraid of the Joker.”

Bruce had been reading the initial reports when the Commissioner had called the Batburner phone. James Gordon rarely sounded shaken and, in this incidence, he was more irritated than frightened. Arkham had had full-scale breakouts before… just never with the participation of two psychotic Lanterns.

“Does he remember her?” Damian asked, reminding Bruce that Duela had been affected by her own erasure from memory. Jason looked to Bruce as well, though his expression didn’t betray much.

“It doesn’t matter much if he does,” Jason said. “She’s similar to him, stronger with the Ring. It’s not like forgetting Superman’s weakness is kryptonite.”

“Unclear,” Bruce told them both. “What does matter is that the Joker will not remember you, Jason, if you choose to help us recapture the escaped criminals.”

“That’s a point in my damn favor then.” The Red Hood joined him at the Batcomputer and pulled up one of the secondary diagrams of the criminals’ movements. Jason grimaced at the proliferation of tiny red dots versus the glowing blobs of police teams attempting to hunt them down. “You’re going to have to volunteer to show up at another police recruitment drive after this.”

“At this point, I think they’d rather have targets made out of my head than have me ‘inspire’ them,” Bruce deadpanned. “Most of them think they wouldn’t have supervillains if I weren’t here.”
“Oh look, a conversation for another time,” Damian said, in a voice almost as dry as Bruce’s. “Where will you be, Father?”

“Batman won’t be an asset until dusk,” Bruce said. “Your first priority is to clear out Old Gotham. The police will have a strong presence in the surrounding areas and we’ll work outward from there. Cass will be on the lookout for Duela and Joker throughout the city and let me know when she finds them.”

“That can’t seriously be your plan,” Red Hood said. Damian knew better than to contradict his father out of hand, but Jason had never played by the same rulebook.

“Did anyone ask for your feedback, Todd?” Damian demanded. “Father’s plans are the product of strategic deliberation and—”

“The frakking police are not going to be able to take down whoever was currently living in Arkham —”

“He’s right,” Bruce interrupted in a low tone. Damian went silent. Glowering. “A small group of Green Lanterns are on their way to assist in dealing with the Joker and Duela. I’ve given the Corps a center radius of Old Gotham, near where the office building collapsed. The police like the thought of Lantern involvement even less than I do, so I haven’t told them yet. The Lanterns lost Duela, I’m not inclined to trust them, but we’ll need an electro-shock net construct planted there to both catch the Lanterns and apprehend the villains we can’t restrain safely. If you can’t subdue someone, or you can’t leave them where they are, the Lanterns can restrain them in that field until Blackgate rearranges enough of their prisoners and security measures that we can transfer the dangerous ones there.”

Jason groaned and muttered something about ‘once in a while, bullets actually do solve things.’ Bruce pretended he hadn’t heard.

“We don’t have enough containment options.” Bruce returned his attention to the screens. “We need to herd everyone there, where few Gothamites can get caught in the crossfire. But first, someone needs to check that area for civilians. If I went as Wayne, the media and civilians would just follow him there, so I can’t go myself.”

“I can scout,” Damian said, sounding petulant. “There’s no need to use the Prototype.”

“Yeah, but your people skills are nonexistent,” Jason replied.

“Really, Todd, you want to discuss your history of blindly trusting people as an asset?”

“Punk. I’m doing the scouting. Deal with it.” Red Hood took a final glance at the diagram of villains’ movements, chanted ‘fun, fun, fun’ to himself for a second, and headed back towards the garage. “Thanks for the heads-up, old man.”

“Master Jason.” Alfred’s voice rang out through the Cave. Bruce heard the Red Hood’s booted footsteps stop immediately. “I strongly recommend you do not go out there alone.”

“Tt. Well, I’m not going with him,” Damian said immediately. “He dropped a building on my head last time.”

Jason turned back, hands shoved in his pockets. “Alfie, I’m just going to scout. And maybe to corral some bad guys so it doesn’t take Bruce six weeks away from charity functions to catch ‘em all.”

“Arkham Asylum has a total occupancy of 120 beds. All the former occupants are currently roaming
the streets and meeting up with their respective thugs,” Alfred said, taking several accusatory steps down the stairs. “And you are without an adequate jacket.”

“Feeling bad for them?” The Red Hood grinned. “Don’t worry, I’m banned from putting any more heads in duffel bags, which I guess you wouldn’t remember, but yeah, it’s a really funny story.” He had begun retreating, though in that dancey, half-retreat that was his equivalent of Dick’s backflipping out of a room to avoid a tough conversation. “Back soon. Or not.”

“Oh, Mister Harper,” Alfred said, instead of responding to the Red Hood’s baiting. “So good to see you. Will you be joining us on tonight’s adventure?”

Roy Harper, publicly known as Arsenal, had walked into the Cave with Dick. Bruce could practically hear the archer’s awe at the cavernous space before he turned around, when Arsenal shut his mouth with a snap. By his side, Dick waved at the group of Bats and, with his other hand, grabbed Jason’s shoulder to keep the Red Hood from leaving.

“Sorry I’m late, B,” he addressed Bruce, while Jason ducked under the arm. Dick automatically grabbed his wrist. “People are streaming out of town, for some reason.”

“Frakking Dick, I’m going out,” Jason hissed.

“Alfred said no, I’m guessing?” Dick returned his attention to the rest of the room. “I saw Tim on his way in by the way, Cass picked him up, ’cause the buses’ve stopped.”

“CASS is coming?” Jason asked.

“She and Signal and Spoiler are part of the group chat,” Dick replied. “Babs wanted to keep an eye on the entire city, so she’s not going to be in any fights, but yeah, basically everyone.”

Jason grasped Dick’s wrist and forcibly removed his hand from Jason’s arm. “Then I should really make sure the drop zone is free of wandering civilians.” He glanced at Roy, frowning. “And what’s Arse gonna do?”

“Shoot you in the ‘arse’ if you call me that again,” Roy replied brightly. “Starfire’s already monitoring the situation from the air, making sure the bridges are safe. I’m here cause they’re closing the roads and Nightwing said I’d be able to shoot things.”

“Arse, I’d like you to go with Red Hood,” Bruce said, rising from the chair. “Both of you have experience working directly with civilians and doing ground work.”

“That’s a good way of saying we’re basic as hell,” Jason muttered under his breath.

“Can I trust you to avoid the conflict and keep Red Hood out of it?” Bruce continued.

“Why am I being singled out?” Jason growled. “I followed your stupid rules, I came back for this, I haven’t killed anyone in long enough that I don’t remember who the last one was, and I volunteered to go scouting. I’m literally volunteering to be the nicest person out tonight when I could really, let’s be honest, be the one kicking the most ass.”

Arsenal looked over at the other man and coughed, looking mildly concerned. “You’ve killed so many people you forget who they are?”

Jason glowered at him, though the expression softened somewhat when he noticed Roy had moved further away. “…yeah. ’s complicated. And today has been complicated enough, so I’m going to scout out an area and yell at people. Cool? Cool.” He escaped to the garage before Bruce could do
anything simple like tell him to stay with Arsenal. Roy saluted him sharply and followed Jason into
the garage. They could keep each other safe. Heaven knew they’d done so for years.

But as the pair left, bickering, Batman turned to find his other two sons staring at him.

“Really?” Dick asked finally. “Jason dropped everything to get here. Literally, he dropped two
hundred-dollar bills to pay for a couple coffees and booked it to Gotham. I didn’t even think he had
$200.”

“Your brother is very resourceful,” Bruce said absently. “But this is the Joker. I’d send Jason out of
town if I thought he’d go.”

“Then why would you send him the text?!?” Dick demanded. “I swear to God, he was texting more
people for backup before he even got on his bike. You’ll be lucky if you don’t have Bizarro crashing
into the Cave to ‘help.’”

“I’m afraid that was my doing,” Alfred said, coming out of the back of the Cave with one of
Nightwing’s spare suits. “In my zeal, I overlooked Master Bruce’s proportionate and rational reaction
to working with Master Jason in the event of an emergency.”

“Didn’t everyone work together like, yesterday?” Dick asked, accepting the suit. “Something about
boats?”

“Yes. It was a very successful execution, as I understand it. But that was yesterday, Master Richard,
and as of this morning, Master Jason is legally alive and again a son of Bruce Wayne.”

“And by keeping him out of the fight, he thinks Jason’ll be… what, safe?” Dick rolled his eyes when
he thought Bruce couldn’t see, but the Batman had had years of watching his children roll their eyes
when they thought they couldn’t be seen.

Instead of responding in kind, Bruce cleared his throat. “Jason is brash and would take on the Joker,
playing out the advantage of not being remembered.”

“Yeah, we should leave the Joker to you, acting solo. As is customary.” Dick grinned at him and the
next words sounded casual, even if they weren’t: “You are taking backup when you go out, right?”

In response, Bruce tapped his communicator, broadcasting to all his children and Bat-allies, whether
in the Cave, on their way to the Cave, or elsewhere. “The scouting team will be done by 8 p.m. Herd
any villains you find to Quadrant 7, unless you can subdue and restrain them independently. Arkham
returns and police station drop-offs are not an option for the moment. Nightwing will be patrolling
with Robin in Quadrants 2 through 5, covering the eastern coasts and inland to the City Hall District.
Red Robin will be patrolling Quadrants 9 through 13, no further north than Robinson Park and I’ll
be in Quadrants 1, 6, and 8, starting by eight p.m. Signal will act as coordinator for any questions,
given his experience in the daylight hours. Both he and Spoiler will patrol their traditional areas from
the Aparo Expressway north to the Sprang River while Starfire keeps an eye on the skies. Black Bat
should be scanning for Duela throughout the southern half of the city.”

He glanced at Damian, who was scowling at the idea of being monitored by Nightwing, and
continued. “Of the two, Duela will be harder to take down, but the Joker will be harder to find. If she
or the Joker are located, contact me. Do not engage. I don’t expect to see Batwoman tonight but if
Bluebird or any other sporadics appear and want to help, they should be referred to Spoiler or Signal.
We don’t need any loose ends.”

Given the eruption of swearing from the communicator about ‘chauvinistic batguys,’ Harper Row
had been listening in.

Bruce waited for the cursing to slow down. “Bluebird, we’re happy to have you, but very few of these villains will be using hackable tech. That goes as a reminder to all of you. Fight hard and smart, but don’t stop to make complicated plans. We have to get them to the Lanterns’ trap. Joker and Duela’ll be capable of taking out any complicated plans in seconds with constructs.”

He had been trying to avoid picturing what kind of nightmarish constructs the Joker might make with a Power Ring. The knowledge that he had a Green Power Ring was particularly discomforting. The images crashed in on one another: towering skyscraper constructs falling across city streets one minute; the next a giant drill decimating a fully-occupied apartment building from the top down. Bruce didn’t know what to expect and that made the imagining worse. Prep for anything, even when the situation dictated that everything was possible. The ‘open source’ nature of the problem made him worry about Tim, who lived for schemes. Intelligence in a brawl sometimes saved your life. Sometimes though, it slowed you down.

The Red Hood cut through the communicator chatter. He sounded irritated.

“I guess I’m one of the ‘sporadics’ then. Like B said, I’ll be in Quadrant 7, which normal people would call Old Gotham. Arsenal and I are making sure we’re clear of civilians so, yeah, don’t batarang us. I’ll be wearing a red helmet, Arsenal’s got a bow. Ya can’t miss us.”

“Red Helmet isn’t really what you go by, is it?” Roy asked, voice audible in the background.

“No, I’m the Red Hood,” Jason told him, still audible over the communicator. The rev of a motor came from the garage and their conversation became much more difficult to hear.

“What, like the psycho from way back when?” Roy was shouting over the engine.

“It had a lot of meaning when I took it on, okay? I’m way more badass than that guy. Now put on your damn helmet.” Jason clicked off the microphone on his communicator and that was the end of formalized conversation.

“Ready,” Nightwing said, returning in full costume and turning an upward stretch of his arms into a graceful backwards walkover. “You sure you don’t need the kiddo with you?”

“I agree with Grayson, however much I disagree with his monikers,” Damian said. “You are the most likely to encounter the Joker, Father, and you are sequestering yourself.”

“Sequestering?” Dick echoed, amused. Damian looked sharply over at him.

“Some of us were in English lessons before coming, rather than lounging around coffeeshops.”

“It was a bakery,” Dick defended. “And I brought you a cinnamon roll.”

“We are in the midst of a crisis, Grayson.”

“You can eat it later, obvs.”

While Damian tried to puzzle out the meaning of the word ‘obvs,’ a shortened form of the word ‘obvious’ that Dick was trying to drag into the typical English lexicon, Bruce stood. Alfred approached him, anticipating the next words out of his mouth.

“I realize you would prefer my assistance, sir, but Oracle is quite capable of managing current individuals in the field this afternoon. I have responsibilities to attend to upstairs.”
“What… responsibilities?” Bruce asked, not intending to question the butler’s load of tasks, but puzzled all the same.

“Someone instructed the media that you had a son recently resurrected from the dead,” Alfred replied. “Covering the breakout of Arkham villains is being deemed more hazardous to Gotham’s newsmen and newswomen’s health than storming your front gates, asking questions such as ‘is he single’ and ‘where do they keep coming from.’ And a couple of questions about age I find myself unable to confirm.”

“Hn.”

“I suspected how loquacious you might be on the topic and have arranged a brief interview before they are all forcibly removed.”

“The streets will be dangerous, Alfred.”

“The National Guard has set up a shelter on the outskirts of Robert Kane, though they are urging individuals outside the city to stay outside until the threat is dealt with. Our journalist friends will be uncomfortable, but nothing they haven’t experienced before and certainly not unsafe with the Red Hood just south of the area.” Alfred’s expression revealed nothing about his thoughts on the plan. “Is that to your satisfaction?”

“Hn. Thank you.”

“I trust you will be taking backup.” A pause. “Sir, if the answer is no—”

“I’ll take Nightwing.”

“YES!”

“And Robin can safeguard the police teams,” Bruce said, with a glance at his celebrating youngest son.

“Wait, what?!” The sea change in Damian’s celebrations was remarkable.

“There will be dozens of villains on the streets. Most officers will be putting out fires all night, literal and figurative. It’s at your discretion to prioritize removing civilians, fighting villains, or moving on. See, you will have an opportunity to use your people skills.”

Damian bit back any further complaints, lest he be further hemmed in by provisos. “If you spot the clown—”

“I’ll make sure you know.”

“And can help?”

“You’ll know then.”

Knowing that the answers wouldn’t get any better if he pressed questions, Damian nodded once and looked down at his self-proclaimed assassin gear. “I have to change, don’t I.”

“For the comfort of traumatized civilians, Master Damian, yes, I believe that would be wise,” Alfred replied. This saved Bruce the phrasing contortions necessary to tell his youngest that yes, he looked more assassin than rescuer.

Who knew what persona they would need more of tonight anyway?
But I no longer fight for kings

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, all.

The good news is I have a buffer of narrative. I may even soon know how many chapters there will be. The bad news is that I rewrote this chapter about a dozen times and still don’t really like it. :\ And it's stupid long. As always, it's unbetaed, with all the consequences that implies.

THANK YOU ALL for your comments and kudos and support. <3 with luck, we’ll bring it all home soon. I continue working on the edits *cough* and trying to wrap up the other fic that I meant to finish already. January is ballistic.

And, weird musical trivia for you: Michael Cerveris, who plays Pyg in TV’s Gotham, is better known to me from his work in musical theatre, including Titanic, Fun Home, and Sweeney Todd. So, Pyg is canonically Sweeney Todd.

Chapter title is from “I am Condemned” from Dracula (the one with Michael McCarthy, NOT the Frank Wildhorn one).

“So, are you a bird or a bat?” Roy asked.

Jason couldn’t fault him for making conversation: the retail building area they walked through had been evacuated already. Old Gotham had a sordid history and was typically one of the first places to empty out during a crisis... and not just because the whole area was a severe flood risk. Penguin’s goons had had a presence here for a while; sometimes Solomon Grundy stalked its streets. The residences here were old money, all clustered together along the outskirts as if distancing themselves from the water risk, except for a few of the ultra-rich. To their left, Jason could spy a string of what had once been a collection of downtown antique shops, listing brokenly towards the ground.

If Bruce had been looking for somewhere the damage wouldn’t be noticed, it would be here. Jason realized suddenly that he hadn’t listened to Roy’s question.

“What?”

“A bird. Or a bat. Like, Red Robin’s a bird, obviously, and he never wants to be a bat. But Robin’s gonna be a bat, if you listen to him ramble for more than thirty seconds. Nightwing’s a bat, cause no bird’s ever moved like that dude. Everybody else kinda—”

“I’ve never thought about it.” Jason picked up the pace a little. Roy jogged after him.

“What, never? How? Robin told all of the Titans about ‘the great chasm’ within a week of taking over.”

“Roy.” Jason groaned aloud. There were so many things he could tell the archer, but what did it matter? They had to be doing their jobs, not having another of the thousand heart-to-hearts it felt like he’d had with people over the past few weeks. He needed to hit something, if he was being technical
about it. Physically. Red Hood smash. All of that.

“Just assume I didn’t get along with the Bats for a long time and even being in their proximity this long is… weird,” Jason said.

He had texted Bizarro before he got here, knowing that if push came to shove, the Superman clone would drag Artemis to help. Bizarro didn’t understand texts himself (being much more of a phone person), but if Artemis read it to him, the clone would grab her and come running.

Bizarro was also an alien, or modeled on one in a transmogrified kind of way, so the poor guy knew Jason hadn’t been ‘home’ for weeks. Artemis, being earthborn, didn’t know Jason from Dick (or Tom, or Harry). Jason had stayed out of conversation with Bizarro to avoid complicating the situation. The Amazon could protect the clone from manipulators on her own and would physically fight Bizarro himself to keep him from chasing a mysterious man across the world. These were both qualities which Jason appreciated tremendously. He had only reached out now because he thought the threat had been real.

An Arkham Asylum breakout was common as mud. The addition of two homicidal Lanterns though… that addition made Jason glad he’d told Bizarro to be on alert for an emergency assist.

Roy stopped following him, heading instead towards the dilapidated downtown manor to their left. “I saw someone move.”

“Keep your guard up.”

Jason moved to a position with more concealment, near the shrubbery lining the house’s stone fence. The area they had entered was residential with leafy trees and overgrown bushes that obscured lines of sight. At least the load-bearing pillars of the three-story manor still looked stable, not laden with bombs like other multi-story buildings Jason could mention.

Roy took his advice, moving to a better concealed position… and then continuing to move forward.

Jason activated the thermals in his helmet and realized he’d have to move forward as well. There were some heat signatures moving around inside the building, but they were towards the back of the manor and all mashed together. Either someone was playing human centipede (ugh, he’d only seen that movie because of Roy) or they were too close to distinguish for a count. He knew from experience that it could also be a million cats. He followed Roy, one gun drawn and pointed at the ground in a two-handed hold.

“Y’know, a lotta horror movies start like this,” Roy said happily. He spoke too quietly to be picked up by whatever inhabitants they were approaching.

“Yeah, well, with Gotham, you just pray it’s not Lovecraftian,” Jason muttered in reply, stepping in first to sweep the antechamber with his sights. It was clear. “Arkham is like, Lovecraft central. Batman told me once that there’s a giant bat demon living under the city or some shit like that.”

“Wow, Jay, language, there could be kids in here,” Roy said with mock horror. “Or I’m here. You could think about me.”

“Believe me, can’t get away from you.” Jason stepped into the next room, some parlor with all the furnishings covered in dust sheets. He checked the thermals again. The heat signatures were still clustered towards the back of the manor’s first floor, which they would probably reach in another hallway and another room. “I don’t like this.”

“What, rich people?” Roy replied, voice almost imperceptible as they moved into the hallway. “Or
the cats we’re probably stalking?”

Oh. That was what felt wrong. Jason didn’t stalk potential friendlies, not when he was in his right mind anyway. The Red Hood straightened his posture. “We’re here to get civilians out,” he said, in a voice a little louder than Roy’s whisper. “Cover me, I’m going to do something stupid.”

“I get the feeling that’s not unusual.” Roy dropped back to the previous room, improving his line of sight even as Jason walked up to the closed door that would lead to the final room. Cursing his terrible ideas, he raised a gloved hand and knocked. The trick here was that he couldn’t sound like a tank knocking out of politeness before it kicked your head in… the tank comparison needed work. He also couldn’t afford to sound like someone whose ass the occupant could kick. The knock ended up sounding like a repo man.

Great.

“What do you want?” A voice – a deeper voice than he expected – asked. The door didn’t open.

“We’re evacuating the area!” Jason called back, taking a couple of steps away from the door just in case they were thinking of shooting at the sound of him talking.

“From what?”

He hadn’t heard the click of a safety going off yet, so it was a so-far, so-good sort of situation.

“There’s trouble headed this way. Arkham had a breakout.”

“We don’t have anywhere else to go,” the voice rumbled, sounding sullen about it. Jason began to realize he was talking to a teenager. Maybe only a little older than he’d been when he started as Robin with Bruce.

“There’s a National Guard shelter set up by Robert Kane. I can give you cab money or there’s a shuttle they’re running.”

“How do I know you weren’t watching us to get us out there?”

God, this kid must be new to the life. In his position, Jason would have cussed any intruder out of the manor by now. Or at the very least Home Alone’d him.

“Cause I’d use the ground floor windows in that room to get in,” Jason replied. “And if we were on the second floor, I’d swing in from the roof. I’m a Bat. When we want someone evacuated, they damn well evacuate.”

The door opened an inch and one eye peered out at Jason, narrow with doubt. “You aren’t a Bat I’ve ever seen.”

“You know how there’s lots of Bats that come in and out of town all the time? I’m one of them.”

The kid looked suspicious as hell. Good, some self-preservation skills anyway.

“What’s your name, asshole?” the teenager asked.

Shit. The Red Hood wouldn’t draw any association. Being caught in a lie would destroy any of the trust he managed to build.

“Dead Robin,” Jason said smoothly. “I’m working with Arsenal, who’s a Star City kinda guy. Arse, you back there?”
“I told you I’d shoot you if you called me that,” Roy said, from wherever he was hidden.

“And yet here I stand,” Jason replied, before returning his attention to the still-wary teenager, who was keeping one eye to the doorway. “What do you think? Let us get you guys out of here?”

The teen opened the door a little wider, revealing the gun in his concealed hand. The surly expression on his face said he wouldn’t mind using it.

“Try anything, I shoot you in the kneecap.”

And yet his hand trembled as if he’d had no experience firing the weapon. Where had he got it? Tt, old houses, he’d probably just looked on top of a mantle or something; there was always somebody who was shit about gun safety in a house this size.

Making sure Arsenal stayed only a step or two behind, Jason walked into a large living room. There was still dust-sheet covered furniture in here, along with four other people clustered against the back wall. Only one of them looked older than their welcome wagon and that was a twenty-something year old boy who sat with his back pressed against the wall, unmoving. Two were between the ages of seven and ten, who had brought little kid backpacks on this excursion (one of which included a cat). The final kid had to be fourteen or fifteen and just sat in the corner, sketching. Very… Damian, about it.

All of them looked like they hadn’t eaten a good meal in a while, which was good; Jason and Roy could carry them out if needed. That just hadn’t been the plan. They also looked scared, and not of the two people their resident gunslinger had just let in. That wasn’t good.

“How long you been here?” Jason asked the sketching girl. She looked up at him with an unreadable expression, though her free hand drifted towards the duffel bag at her side.

“I’ve been here a couple days,” she told him. “They’re newer, Mateo has been here longest.” She nodded at the twenty-something boy. “There’s someone else in the house though.” This was quite clearly important. “Living in the other side.”

“An adult?” Jason asked. Their gunslinger whipped up his head at the question. He looked murderous. The girl went quiet, staying rabbit-still under his hawk-like gaze.

“Have you seen them?” Jason directed the question to the other kids, careful to encompass the quiet oldest boy as well. “The other person?”

“We don’t have to worry about him,” the gunslinger said fiercely. “Both his legs are broke.”

All the kids except for Mateo shook their heads. No, they hadn’t seen him.

“Okay… did you break his legs?” Jason asked, positioning himself so he could include the silent, twenty-something in the question as well. If he were doing this without Arsenal, Jason would’ve had to spend valuable time removing the weapon from the environment before any questioning could take place. With Arsenal, he could trust that the archer could put the fear of God into everyone and quell potential events.

The teenager shook his head, gesturing with the weapon.

“They were broken when he got here, after we did. Mateo’s the only one who’s tried to talk to him and it made him run off for a while.” Gesturing at Mateo, who subsequently tried to hide in his hoodie. The detective part of Jason found something familiar about the fearful mannerisms; the part that kept snapping its fingers and telling him to move faster couldn’t place them.
“He shut up after he talked to the guy, so we don’t know much, but Mateo’s made it real clear not to go near him.” The gunslinger’s chin jutted out. “But we hardly ever see the guy anyway. This is the best house in the place and that door locks. Even if you can, that guy can’t make it in the windows and if he came around this part of the house, I’d just shoot him.”

Mateo shook his head and made a sad noise that the gunslinger pretended to ignore in favor of preserving his badassery. Still, both teenager and older boy looked to the right to to check for anyone coming down the hall to investigate all the noise. Jason subtly pushed down the barrel of the gun while the teenager’s attention was diverted and he caught the ghost of a smile on Mateo’s face at the motion.

“If we’re evacuating, we should go, cause you’re really noisy, Bat,” the gunslinger said.

“Is he an adult or a kid?” Jason asked. “The creepy…?”

“Creepy adult. You done?”

“Okay. Here’s what’s gonna happen,” Jason said, taking advantage of the uncertain tone in the teenager’s voice. “What’s your name?”

“Smith.”

“Okay, ‘Smith,’ my friend Arsenal is going to go find your creepy guy—” Roy groaned. “—but first, I need you to hand over the gun.”

“You’re sending away your friend and you want my gun. Cch, yeah.”

“Technically I’m outnumbered here, so I guarantee, I’m not going to try anything.” He could just take the gun, but that might throw the rest of them into a panic. He really didn’t want to be chasing a bunch of kids through an ‘abandoned’ manor with a ‘creepy guy’ on the loose, if he could avoid it. These thin walls would probably allow his bullets to pass right through and risked collateral damage, so guns were right out.

Which meant Smith definitely shouldn’t have a gun.

Smith wouldn’t meet his gaze, snarling to himself about the entirety of the situation for a solid minute. During this time, he managed to attract everyone’s attention to himself, which looked unintentional. Again, if it hadn’t involved a gun, Jason would have been much more sarcastic. This was ‘getting Damian to hand over a katana’ levels of amusing.

In a begrudging tone, Smith finally said: “How do I hand it to you.”

Jason glanced around for a suitable location and then gestured at a small, dust-sheet covered table.

“Just set it on the table, muzzle pointing away from your friends. Okay?”

Thank God, Smith could take instructions. Jason stood near the table but didn’t pick up the gun. He couldn’t discount Smith due to age alone; by the age of twelve, Jason had held enough guns and seen enough violence to know that. But removing the gun from the table would only serve to stress Smith out and, hell, Jason remembered fighting with fists and breakable household items and sometimes with parts of houses that were falling apart. Loose drywall went a long way if there was enough. Don’t antagonize the kids into feeling they had to use it.

“We’re all good here, Arsenal!” he called.
“Roger roger,” Roy said, in a terrible droid trooper impression, and Jason could see his thermal signature leaving. The kids hadn’t moved from the positions they held when he came in, though everyone’s fear had ratcheted upwards.

One of the littlest kids removed her cat, a gray kitten, from her backpack and attempted to engage it with a random piece of string. Another feral cat wandered into the room, surveyed them all, and moved to sit daintily on the unused fireplace mantle.

While kids and cats were thus occupied, Jason explained to Smith that he was going to make a call for a shuttle pick-up for the National Guard shelter. Smith nodded suspiciously. Jason found that he didn’t believe they wouldn’t just bolt, the minute his back was turned.

The sketching girl paused in her work long enough to ask several, detailed questions that Smith was probably kicking himself for not asking first. How had Dead Robin and Arsenal gotten here, how many people could he transport on his bike, why did he choose a name like ‘Dead Robin,’ had he been on the streets, did he know of any safe shelters.

The way she emphasized ‘safe’ made Jason suspect she had at least knowledge of, if not experience with, people who hadn’t been mindful of her safety. He asked some careful, nudging questions as to whether or not they’d been approached by ‘the Submariners,’ as he’d started calling them in his head. The kid with the kitten said they’d tried to separate her from a group, but she was ‘really fast’.

Jason told her to keep being fast. Never be afraid to run if you don’t feel safe. Try to know where you’re going, don’t always make it the same place either.

He couldn’t afford to spend too much time with the group, not when they had as much ground left to cover as they did, so it irked him that Roy didn’t make his way back quickly.

Jason regretted that they hadn’t set up comms, because Roy wasn’t a Bat and no one had thought of it on their way out of the Cave. Sure, Roy’s habit of drawing support by setting off explosions was fun and effective, but not in an occupied house. The Red Hood checked for any approaching thermals in the house (none), before moving over to the window to check their surroundings. It couldn’t be long after 1 p.m.; the sun was high and left little opportunity for shadows. He didn’t want to leave the kids and go into the rest of the manor without cause.

Come on, Roy.

No explosions.

He opened the door to the den, feeling the entirety of the room cringe as one, and peered into the hallway. Nothing. Ugh. They didn’t have time for this and he wasn’t going to lead a caravan of innocents into the stupidly-dangerous house they had been living in.

Jason shut and locked the door, explaining why he was doing both actions, and ordered the group out of the window. Smith wasn’t the only one to do well taking instructions; Jason even got Mateo to help him transport the littlest kids (and kitten) outside of the house. Nothing seemed wrong with the twenty-year-old, but Jason didn’t like that he flinched at everything and looked back with obvious fear at the house.

Sure, neurosis maybe, but Smith kept talking about it like Mateo had been a chatty Cathy before his encounter with the creepy guy and trip into the woods. It sure as hell wasn’t making Jason feel good about sending Roy.

Once they were on solid ground outside, Smith remembered the gun and swore.
“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said, knowing that he would be worrying about it enough for the both of them. Mateo directed the group across the street and several stores down to an operational (if evacuated) pharmacy that Roy and Jason had passed on their way in. If they didn’t go far, the shuttle could still find them for the pickup. Smith fought to look cool as he leaned against the side of the building façade, jutting his chin at the general world. Punk.

“I have to go back and find Arsenal,” Jason told the group. Fortunately, no one volunteered to go back with him.

“And the gun,” Smith piped up instead.

No one knew the gun was there; it was hardly a priority, but Jason nodded.

“And we’re not getting on any damn shuttles if you’re still gone,” the sketching girl said, her tone unchanging from the matter-of-fact way she said everything up until now.

“That’s fine. Make them wait,” Jason said. He wasn’t going to force them anywhere and he sure as hell wasn’t going to force them somewhere they might be endangered. “But I have it on good authority they have a separate area for kids at that shelter. I’m going to have my good friend—uh, which of his good friends was available—“Starfire, check on it. She’s got experience, she’ll know if it’s safe.”

If ‘experience’ could be taken to mean ‘she was a child slave for years, I think she knows what danger looks like,’ anyway.

“Tt.” Now Smith sounded like Damian. “More heroes. You think we’re idiots? You do your good deed, send us back, we get separated, and you feel good about yourself.”

“I know,” Jason agreed, mentally chalking down Smith as a graduate of Gotham’s less-than-stellar foster care system. “Gotham’s hell for kids. But there are parts of it that are higher than others. What you can do is keep your friends safe, okay? Make the shuttle wait. If you see anyone with magic powers, or who looks like a clown, get out of sight before they see you.”

“The Joker is here?” one of the two younger kids whispered – the one without the cat. Her voice had dropped with fright to become so raspy that Jason almost didn’t hear her whisper. No point in lying. He nodded.

“Maybe. So, I’ll be back. You can count on that. Bats always fight the Joker.” He fired the grappling line at the manor roof, landing a couple of dozen feet (and three stories) up from the kids. He could see Mateo motioning most of them to get back from the curbside, where they would be visible, and he was sure the shuttle would see them if it pulled up. If he knew anything about how the National Guard worked, they also weren’t going to leave unless the kids came willingly.

Right now, he needed to find his idiot best friend.

#

Roy took a deep, shuddering breath. He’d come to the bakery in Bludhaven because Starfire was going to be there. So that wasn’t subtle, who said it was? He’d also wanted to see Dick because, shit, they were friends sometimes and he’d wanted to demand why Dick was hovering. All of… this… was weird. He didn’t even know Gotham that well.

He’d found ‘the creepy guy,’ at least. The man looked like a handicapped, out-of-work psychiatrist. Roy should know; he’d encountered a few, both sane and not. The hunched, wheelchair-bound figure wouldn’t make eye contact and wouldn’t respond to Roy’s “Hey, how’ya doin’?” at all.
Not the first time someone had flat-out ignored him.

Roy took a couple of sidesteps into the room, moving into the figure’s line of sight. He didn’t get closer than twelve feet, distinctly alarmed by the shawl over the man’s head and shoulders, which wasn’t normal gear this time of year. Or, y’know, ever. The man was rail-thin, which left him with significant room around the sides of the wheelchair to store a gun, projectile, or other nuisance.

“Hey, no one’s looking to hurt you,” Roy said, trying to ignore the eerie way the man wasn’t moving. “Arkham had a breakout and we’re just looking to get everyone to safety.”

The man said something – his lips moved and no sound came out. Roy hung back, not about to move forward for clarification.

“Come again?”

More mouth moving without sound. Roy swallowed. Damn Gotham and that Jason guy for bringing up Lovecraft. Roy did not need to be thinking about elder gods and demonic creatures while following around a ‘friend’ who knew everything about him and who he didn’t remember.

“What’s your name?” he asked, pushing the thoughts away.

Silence.

“Any other consonants you’d like to throw in? Or vowels? I’m Arsenal, if that gives you any ideas.”

“…who was involved in the Arkham breakout?”

The dynamic switch between intentional silence and this erudite-sounding professor voice made the hair on Roy’s arms stand on end. He stammered. Jokes wouldn’t come to mind.

“Uh, everyone? Mostly clowns. Dunno, I’m not from here. Safe to say you’re in danger if you try to stay.”

“This is an enclosed building in an area of town those searching for standard fare are unlikely to visit.” The figure lifted his head with unnatural smoothness of an automaton. A white guy, probably in his late forties, underfed. He dressed like a professor, complete with a tweed jacket and sleeves that went past his wrists. Honestly, they looked like clothes he stole from this giant-ass house.

“Why should I leave? And where would I go?” His head tilted to the side ever so slightly and the voice changed again, soft this time. “Are you here all alone?”

“You’re in danger here,” Roy said, determined not to be cowed by someone who had been advertised as ‘creepy’. “I have a friend who has already called a shuttle to the shelter. You just need to get outside—”

“What is your friend’s name?”

What’d Jason say again? Something punny…

“Dead Robin,” Roy remembered. “So you should get—”

“A Robin.”

Roy did not like the way the man said the word. Or continued the sentence with gems like: “Oh, I really don’t care for robins, Mr. Arsenal, I truly don’t.”
The professor-type straightened in his wheelchair and scooted it forwards a little, which must have been tricky with those long sleeves. Despite the fact that Roy was the one with the drawn bow and working legs, he took a step back.

“ Seems like something you’d have to bring up with him,” Roy said. “Y’know, outside? Because I’m here to help with that. Do you need help getting outside? That’s the extent of my involvement and we don’t have a lot of time.”

“I’ll tell him when he gets here,” the man said with preternatural calm. “When you start screaming, I imagine he’ll come running. I have a score to settle with one of the… ‘clowns.’ She took my legs, you see, several weeks ago in her own attempted attack on the city. She struck me down the moment I left Arkham. And any Robin will want to save her life or remove me from the equation. I can’t have that.”

Roy holstered the bow while the man was monologuing and subtly switched to a small collection of darts, calculated to tranquilize for the average male weight and height. He didn’t like the idea of attacking anyone in a wheelchair with a projectile, just on principle. He equally didn’t like the thought of moving into grabbing range when the man still had space for hiding things in that chair. He had to choose one.

“Cool. Guess we’re doing this the hard way,” Roy said.

“For you, yes.”

They gauged each other for a minute, like circling cats where one had the advantage of being under a car.

Roy darted forward first, deciding to tranq the man manually. The professor lifted a hand from the wheelchair arm as Roy moved into range and seemed to push his wrist forward. A fine mist shot into the air – only for a second as Roy batted the arm aside and retreated, the other hand thrown up to shield his eyes. He cursed his lapse in attention – this was why you bring backup, stupid!

He could still see, though a little blearily, and reminded himself to breathe shallowly, in case this was poison—the man was two feet away again.

Roy’s mentor, Oliver Queen had been no slouch when it came to training, but archery was by nature a ranged profession. Any attack from a bow at this range was ineffective at worst and lethal at best (depending on who you talked to).

So, Roy backpedaled as the man lunged upwards at him, only to realize it was a choice between letting the disabled man fall from leaping height onto the ground or catching him. Standing by didn’t come naturally. Catching the man did.

As soon as he had Roy in proximity, the professor attempted to stab a syringe into his chest. Damnit If he and ‘Jason’ were any kind of friends, Arsenal would be hearing about this screwup for weeks.

He realized, distantly, that he probably shouldn’t be worried about getting grief for this right now and be more worried about avoiding needing a rescue.

Roy yanked out the syringe before the contents could be depressed into his system and shoved the professor away, back into the wheelchair (which, given that wheelchairs were designed to move, was trickier than it sounded). His attacker hadn’t used his legs the whole time, so Roy had to assume they were actually broken. He panted, trying not to be alarmed at the thought of just being sprayed and injected with an unknown substance. Hyperventilating would just increase his heart rate and
circulate whatever it was faster. Science, yay.

He scanned the room as he retreated, looking around for a suitable tool, then broke off two legs of the nearest dust-sheet covered chair. Shoved into the wheelchair spokes at a low angle, they effectively jammed it.

Then he threw the dust sheet over the man’s head. Because what the hell, the guy had stabbed him with drugs.

Whoo, and his head was doing weird things after all that exertion.

He staggered towards the door and out into the hallway. Everything looked really… Lovecrafty, now. He was going to kill Jason. Red Hood? Dead Robin. Dead Hood. Why hadn’t they set up communicators before splitting up?! Maybe he could blow something up. Whoa, okay.

“Breathe,” he whispered to himself, using the wall to launch himself, little by little, towards the front door. He needed the backup, whether the backup was actually his ‘best friend’ or not. When he touched his chest armor, he could tell that he was bleeding a little. Or it could also be the contents of the syringe, weeping over the Kevlar. He didn’t want to lick it and find out, which again, science often said was a good way of discovering what something was. Or maybe that was detectiving. Policework? Something the Bats did.

“I haven’t had much time to work on my solution, Arsenal, so I’m afraid you’re getting a bit of the older batch,” the man called after him. “If you can still speak when you find Robin, tell him Jonathan Crane isn’t going anywhere.”

He had been getting more and more stressed about (of all things) not knowing what field of study said licking things was a good idea. Jonathan Crane’s voice took all the anxiety and honed it into a fine point. Amid the growing panic of his mind, little things like ‘what would a wheelchair-bound guy be able to do against a Yellow Lantern?’ queried their way around Roy’s thoughts and bore down.

He just had to make it out of the house, he told himself.

After all, the walls of this place were beginning to look like the alleys of Star City or the walls of any of the shitty apartments he’d gotten kicked out of when he was using and why the hell would he want to stay here? Concave, stained, covered with bugs. Reeking of loneliness and self-destruction. His breathing wasn’t cooperating with his determination not to panic and Roy kept sucking in air and trying to swallow at the same time. It made everything worse.

Behind him, he heard ‘Jonathan Crane’ moving the chair into the hall, the soft sweeping noises of his wheelchair indicating that he’d gotten the chair legs out. Suddenly, one hit Roy hard in the back of the head.

It wasn’t so much pain as his brain telling him, somehow, that he was back in one of the terrible apartments and that he’d fallen in the shower and hit his head. The fact that it had happened once before only solidified the idea.

Roy shouted, more surprise than pain, and found that he could move, that his spine wasn’t fractured, that no Green Arrowed bastards were forcing him to stay down. Seconds ticketed by as he-whirled and nocked an arrow to the bow. Sure, his panicked breathing made his aim wander like he’d had a weekend binge, but the threat made the approaching phantom stop its advance.

“Fear gas observation #97, patient goes by Arsenal. Seems to be upset over interactions with
‘Queen,’ though whether this is a proper name, nickname, or actual royalty remains to be seen.”

“Stop,” Roy said. He’d been threatened by bigger things, scarier things, and he wasn’t going to run from this. Queen had nothing to do with this. This wherever he was, whatever he was doing, Queen had nothing to do with it.

“You’d shoot a man in a wheelchair?” the figure asked meekly, though its voice warbled and grew. “Perhaps you do belong in Gotham.”

The figure began to morph, without rhyme or reason, to Queen, sitting in one of Roy’s crappy folding chairs from the apartment where he’d fallen in the shower, once upon a nightmare. Queen’s dependable fists (which Roy had joked were ‘always within arms’ reach’) were clenched on his knees, his mouth turned downward. Ever the displeased GQ model, lecturing a burned-out camp counselor.

“Maybe Gotham’ll have you, because you’ll never have a place in Star City, Roy. Not with honest, decent people who can control themselves.”

Roy aimed the shot at one of Queen’s massive shoulders and released it. It shot through the phantom, missing the mark entirely. The man who had once been his mentor looked over his unscathed shoulder. When he looked back, the eyes had become brilliant gold, gleaming bright enough to make Roy squint. The voice was no longer a voice but a roar. “You’re such a disappointment, Roy. Even when you’re angry.”

No retort came to mind. After all, Queen was in his apartment, knew what he’d done, knew what he was. Roy aimed again.

A door behind him opened. He turned and fired in one movement before throwing himself behind the concealment of a nearby cabinet. His heart rate had accelerated and kept accelerating.

Queen didn’t move from the shitty chair, watching passively as the new figure entered the apartment, hulking and covered in bright red armor. The new figure had dodged Roy’s arrow, its bulk moving with the swiftness of a much smaller figure, and now crouched near the door. Its head turned this way and that, seeking prey, and hissing something more reptilian than human. Maybe it wasn’t red armor. It could be blood, covering green scales.

Roy didn’t know why it’d bothered dodging the arrow in that case. Arrows had never bothered Waylon Jones before.

“…Arsenal?” the looming figure of Waylon growled, voice modulated and inhuman. “You don’t look—the frak is he doing here?”

Yeah, yeah, that murderous tone sounded like Waylon, metal notwithstanding. Arsenal jerked the bow up again – he didn’t intend to die today. The Waylon shape moved faster, knocking down the bow, removing it, and twisting the other arm up painfully behind Roy’s back. The archer grunted, unable to fight both the racing of his heartbeat and the surprising speed of the Waylon figure.

The Waylon shape had a free hand and fired multiple times in the direction of where Queen had been. Roy struggled, trying to get to a better position where he could deck the 700-lb. crocodile. He doubted he’d be able to do it. Even punching him in the head might not have an effect, if he could get a shot in. Damn his heart, damn the shortness of breath, damn—

He had to find some adrenaline and soon.

The Waylon shape continued talking in rumbled angry sentences to itself as it forced Roy out into the
sunlight. His posture said he kept twisting, looking back to check on Queen’s position, fumbling for something with his free hand.

“Frakking frak frak—I send you in to get one creepy adult out and of course it’s the frakking Scarecrow because Gotham. Of course Batman can’t clean up his damn escaped messes even when they have two broken legs. FRAK!”

The words didn’t fully compute. Arsenal heard the sentence, sure, but it was dark as an underwater trench and not intended for his ears. His assailant deftly removed something from his traditional red pants and injected it into Arsenal’s neck, even as as the archer fought him. He then dumped water on Roy’s head, which—made no sense. His mind fought to recalculate.

Waylon sounded angry. Waylon was always angry at Roy; for failing at his recovery efforts, for trying to be a hero and failing at that too, for always trying to be something he wasn’t, something he couldn’t be.

The moment the Waylon shape let go, Roy shoved him away, stumbling backwards until he felt concrete beneath his feet. Maybe Killer Croc was here to finally give up on Roy’s bothering him.

“Arsenal. Come on, Arsenal. Roy.” The graveled voice sounded alarmed. “Get out of the stree—”

It had his bow in one hand. If he moved fast, he might be able to knock Waylon down. Take it back. Shoot him. Roy minutely adjusted his position, though the thought of rushing the hulking, nine-foot figure who stood mere feet from him made his heart pound.

“You’re not subtle,” the thing half-chuckled demonically then stopped. As if the chuckle had been an accident, a slip-up, and now it would begin its actual plan of killing him. “Roy, please stop shaking. I have to go back inside and deal with Scarecrow. I’m assuming he has more toxin. There are kids here, we need them safe. Please, can you stay in one place? In one piece?”

Roy pretended to not be afraid. Straightened his spine, forced a smile that felt like knives were tugging it upwards. The Waylon shape didn’t move towards him anymore. Roy took a step towards him, forcing himself not to hyperventilate. The shape actually became... more defined this way; he could see that the assailant was no taller than Roy, carried guns, wore a helmet. Bad move.

“Roy, pull it together. Please,” the shape said, taking a step away from Roy. “I didn’t bring enough rubber bullets for this.”

Down the street from where they stood, someone leaned on a car horn. The figure’s helmet jerked up to check the area, which presented all the opportunity Arsenal needed.

He grabbed the base of the helmet with one hand and the bow in the other, using a boot to kick Waylon backwards. You couldn’t go half-assed on Killer Croc and he didn’t think his heart would let him at this point. Every second counted. It had been an okay year, he wanted to live (he was pretty sure he was screaming that), just in case Croc was here to finish the—

An electric pulse shot from the helmet into his fingertips and raced up his arm.

Arsenal didn’t let go. It was this or be shredded by Croc. At least this way, Croc couldn’t see well enough to get to him.

Behind him, up on the apartment stairway, he could hear Queen chuckling. By the time he got the helmet off, which was surprisingly easy after a second, Roy was beginning to question his decisions. The Waylon shape had faded to an enraged, dark-haired man wearing a domino mask. The Jason guy.
Roy dropped the helmet. Confusion started to set in and he blinked hard to try and clear his vision. His head was pounding.

Jason only looked at him, panting for half a second, before raising a gun and firing two shots at the man behind Roy – the one that probably wasn’t Queen. The man-who-wasn’t-Queen yelped in pain and Arsenal remembered Scarecrow now.

The Red Hood swore colorfully for a minute, pausing only to study if Roy was catching his breath.

“Roy, you there?” Jason asked finally.

“I’m—I’m sor—”

“Hang on. Hang on, I’m—I gotta be angry at someone.” The Red Hood jammed the helmet back on and snarled into (what Roy assumed) was an open communications line.

“Well, boys and girls, Arsenal and I just neutralized Scarecrow in Old Gotham. Would’ve damn well appreciated some warning that he had escaped Arkham weeks ago and you weren’t doing anything about it, Bats!”

A second’s pause as the Red Hood listened to the response.

“‘Is he alive?’ Really, Demon, that’s your concern? No thanks to the great and wonderful fucking Bat, sure, Jonathan Crane’s alive. Glory be. Glad we could work together to make sure he got to roam the city unhindered for weeks. ‘Is he alive?’ This is why I managed my criminal empire on my own!” His tone dripped with offense and not all of it feigned. There was real hurt there and echoes of bellowing anger.

Roy had been around crime scenes and had enough experience with chemicals that he didn’t feel the need to throw up or faint. Aside from some twitching and a wild heart rate, he gave himself just a minute before he’d even be able to stand independently. That should give the Red Hood time to… recover. Roy kept squinting at him, trying to get rid of the persistent, Waylon-shaped haze. His attention seemed to unnerve the Red Hood, despite the helmet.

Jason turned a little away from Roy, keeping him in line of sight, and kept talking in answer to some on-comms question.

“Arsenal found Crane by getting ambushed, so we’ll be a bit delayed in clearing out the area. No, if you send anyone else, we’ll make too much noise and have the luck of stumbling on frakking Bane or something. That guy hates me. Yeah, I know he hates everyone, Nightass, he just knows I hate him back.” He must have glanced at Roy again because his tone changed. “That’s all. If you think of any other homicidal maniacs you’ve lost lately, I’d appreciate the heads up. Red Hood out.”

Seconds later, he was handing Roy bandages. “Sorry. I was hoping you’ve give up on the helmet before you scorched through your gloves. You’re a persistent bastard on fear toxin.”

Roy accepted the bandages and checked the burns in his hands, where the electrical current from the helmet had burned fully through. Not bad enough that he wouldn’t be able to shoot and that was what he measured injuries by nowadays.

Down the street, he could still hear the blare of a horn as someone leaned on it.

“I’ll be good,” Roy said. “Get the kids, I’ll get the Crane guy.”

“I shot out both of his dispensers and one of his hands, he shouldn’t be able to do anything. Are you
“Sure you’re good to be near him?” Jason glanced back at where Crane was still sitting at the top of the manor’s several front door steps. “I don’t know if he’s got anything else and I’m going to be in enough trouble for shooting a guy who already had two broken legs. PR nightmare—”

“I’m fine. The only thing I’m in danger of is kicking his ass. Living with those kids so close? Anything could have happened.” Roy gritted his teeth in a grin-turned-grimace. There was nothing he’d like to do more than go home, but he could hardly abandon Jason now, after ripping his helmet off and trying to shoot him.

The Red Hood appeared torn for a second before accepting this response and heading for the shuttle at a jog. He then engaged in a hell of an argument with the driver, and finally gave several of the kids a phone number for him. They got on the shuttle. Jason did not.

By the time the Red Hood got back, Arsenal had restrained Crane, who was bitching mightily about the blood on his hands and insisting on how useful he could be to them ‘when the clowns got here.’

The Scarecrow still thought he was going to get revenge on the girl clown for his broken legs. To stop him being as mobile as he’d demonstrated he could be, Roy had made some modifications to the wheelchair’s parking brake, namely ensuring that it was on and trickier to get off than the chair legs of earlier. Jason paused at the bottom of the exterior stairs, listening to someone talking over comms.

“Copy,” the Red Hood said, then looked up at the two of them. With the helmet on, there was no way to see what expression he made. “Looks like we just leave him here until they come.”

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“You can’t leave me trapped here,” Crane protested, sounding fearful himself as Roy jogged down the stairs towards Jason.

“Yes, we can, actually,” Jason replied. “There’s nowhere safe to put you and apparently you wanted to be here, since you wouldn’t leave peacefully. Since you’ve demonstrated you can’t play nice while untied, Batman sees no problem with leaving you here, restrained, until it’s convenient.”

Roy glanced at Jason out of the corner of his eye. “Did Batman really say to just leave him here?”

“No,” the Red Hood said, sotto voce. “Police will be here for a pickup before our deadline. We’re good - you moved him out of the sun, locked the parking brake, we’ve gotten rid of his dispensers. S’fine.”

The archer nodded once, more than a little relieved. Not for Scarecrow’s safety, but for the trouble he’d have sleeping if they just left. After all, he was operating in Gotham, where no vigilante but the Bats may enter, and with a Robin who liked to kill people. Adding ‘killed a supervillain in a wheelchair by intentional neglect’ wouldn’t improve his comfort level with this damn city, no matter how Roy felt about Crane at the moment.

“What if I fling myself down the stairs?” Crane nudged the wheelchair forward – or tried to.

Jason didn’t even try to be professional about it; he snorted.

“You forgot about the parking brake.” He chuckled. “Ohhhh my God. And even if you did throw yourself down the stairs, it’s no skin off my nose, or the Bats’. You’re a pain in the ass, have been for years, and I’d love you to not be running around hypnotizing, lobotomizing, drugging, or otherwise affecting anyone, ever again. Stairs’d be favorite. Long as I don’t get blamed for it.”

Roy found himself giving Jason the side-eye again, trying to discover what the Red Hood actually thought. There was no indication that Jason was joking. Crane appeared to realize the same thing.
“You’re no Robin,” Crane said.

“Nope. I’m just a guy who needs to sweep the rest of a district. And so help me, if I find out that anyone dies because you held us up, I’ll be back to make sure you’re in the fire too.”

Roy followed Red Hood further into Old Gotham. He didn’t know what his role usually looked like, between them, and the not knowing bothered him.

“Hood…?”

“Yup.”

“Do I usually… stop you from threatening people with murder?”

Jason had to think about it. Or Roy thought he was thinking about it, until he turned on his heel to run back to the manor they had just left: “Forgot about a gun, back in a second.”

By the time Jason returned, with the unloaded gun from the manor, Roy had decided that yes, he probably did stop Jason from telling people how he could or would kill them. Jason had said Roy was ‘a better guy’ than Jason himself, back at the bakery. Maybe part of that determination was in advising him not to kill people like Jonathan Crane. Of course, Roy’s instincts regarding Crane at the moment were less than benign.

Maybe he was just better to Jason because, when they knew each other, he knew that Jason needed him to be better.

Cool, that sounded co-dependent.
Every noise and motion felt amplified.

Tim didn’t know what he could do about that now, as he suited up in the Batcave, any more than he’d know what to do about it while sitting on the back of Black Bat’s motorcycle, having been ‘rescued’ from a stopped bus in citywide panic traffic. This happened sometimes, when he had had too much coffee and then participated in something that raised his adrenaline levels. Not as Red Robin, that was a different sort of excited, and it wasn’t the motorcycle ride with Cass. It had been a long time since he felt excited about riding on the back of a motorcycle with anyone. No, he’d argued with Jason, for all they’d ‘made up’ afterwards, and some echoes of anxiety rankled in Tim about the way he worded things, whatever his expressions said that he didn’t mean…

Jason had basically fled the bakery after that conversation, emergency text notwithstanding. Tim didn’t care what the family thought of him, because he was usually right and they would just have to come around to that. But… Jason and he had reached some sort of comfort with each other.

If Jason decided screw Tim and went ahead with ignoring his promise given under duress, everyone would forget him. Tim would be the only one who remembered and Jason, being the masochist he sort of was, wouldn’t think that bothered Tim at all. In short, arguments that were actually said out loud, rather than running berserk in Tim’s mind, could have consequences. That thought made the bakery coffee’s effect feel more like the shock of consistently leaning on an electric fence.

Tim drank coffee when he was stressed anyway so, there was also that.
Tim finished suiting up as Red Robin and returned to the Cave. Since deploying all the other Bats and Birds, Bruce had almost been climbing the walls. Tim understood the guilt factor too. Never send someone to do something you would rather do yourself – unless you have modeled yourself after a nocturnal rodent and you literally can’t go do the thing in the daylight hours.

He thought about heading out without saying anything to Bruce. It wouldn’t be difficult, with all the Batman’s attention focused on the Batcomputer displaying inmate positions and up-to-the-minute apprehension reports. Dick had wandered off, now that he wouldn’t be able to head out until the Batman did (which the pair had had a long conversation/argument about before Tim arrived with Cass). Cass had taken off immediately. It was just Batman and Tim in the Cave.

That didn’t happen much. Tim went out of his way to avoid it happening, on bad days. After Damian died, Bruce had demonstrated volatility that Tim hadn’t seen since Jason died; the kind that there was no choice but to avoid. Being together in the Cave, alone, still posed a background threat.

He decided he shouldn’t be trying to dialogue with Bruce when he felt this jittery anyway.

“I’m out,” Tim said airily, heading for the garage.

“Tim.”

Uh oh. The tone meant business. But hey, at least he had Tim’s name right. Red Robin turned back around, trying to look more serene than the coffee was telling him he was.

Batman—Bruce really, he still wore his civilian getup of blue button-down shirt and slacks—stood from the Batcomputer and approached Tim, the way he might approach a battered housewife wielding a gun. This didn’t add up. Tim forced his nerves to calm down. Be tranquil. It’s probably nothing.

“Don’t be smart tonight, Tim,” Bruce said.

Well, that took the cake for most baffling statement of the year.

“Excuse me?” Tim replied.

“You heard Alfred,” Bruce said, forgetting that no, Tim hadn’t been here before Alfred went upstairs and had no idea what had been said, other than what came in over comms. “There are at least 120 criminals from Arkham on the streets tonight. You may be worth 50 of them, but you would still be outnumbered by 70.”

Tim fought back a reply about how many ninjas they’d taken down on occasion – or zombies, or fear toxin victims, or Joker gas victims. Instead, he forced a smile and felt like Dick Grayson: “Aw, you think I’m worth 50 criminals?”

Bruce ran a hand over his face. Whatever it was he wanted to say, he wasn’t saying it. Ran in the family.

“Tim, I don’t want you hyper-focused on getting every single criminal contained and beaten before you get them to the drop site. If Duela or Joker find you, they’ll come after you. Joker because you’re my son, Duela because of what happened at the Watchtower.”

Tim stared at him for a long moment as his thoughts whirred over the statements. The compliments he could gloss over as flattery, as Bruce’s ‘nice things’ he said when he was trying to get someone to pay attention. No, Batman was worried that he would have to babysit Tim all night. Because he thought Tim would be building deathtraps for criminals, like an idiot, and then Duela and Joker
would fly over and beat him to death with a crowbar. He fought not to let the offense show on his face. Judging by Bruce’s lack of reaction, nothing made it to the surface. Good.

“Roger that,” he said, still feeling like freaking Nightwing. Bruce smiled a little – the way he would smile if a Robin had agreed to do what he asked and he was relieved he wouldn’t have to bench them. The coffee screamed at Tim and he fought back the jittery feeling, reminding himself that this was another reason he didn’t live here.

“Let me know if you need me to pick up anything while I’m out,” Tim tried to joke, because he hadn’t dug the hole deep enough for himself. “Milk, eggs, biscuits…”

“I’ll get it myself,” Bruce replied. And wasn’t that just their relationship all over.

Tim left the Cave, relieved that nothing he felt had made it past the threshold of ‘an obedient Robin.’

Don’t be smart, Tim.

Bruce might as well tell him to not be.

#

Batman had buried Red Robin in south Gotham.

Tim could unpack why this was a logical solution, beginning with its distance from Arkham Asylum and ending at the fact it was on the other side of town from Žsasz’s armory. A to Z, as it were. Batman had probably intended to bracket Tim in this area by putting Robin to the south, but following the police teams kept leading Damian into Tim’s territory. Since they didn’t need help and he didn’t want to help, he’d switched places with them before long, patrolling the eastern coasts on his own. It would be tricky to get from there to the City Hall District by swinging, so he’d finally given up and moved his cycle to the new area. He kept a mental counter of how many swings he was from it at any given time.

No one joked on the comms this afternoon. Partially because it was afternoon, sure. Partially because Dick wasn’t in the field and he always started it. Partially because their scouting team had taken the first injury of the night and that didn’t bode well for the rest of it.

Bruce would be cursing himself out back at the Cave for the lapse.

Sucked to be Bruce then; Tim could get out all the frustrations he definitely didn’t have by kicking ass. After about three hours, however, he began to need to talk to someone in a non-banter-driven conversation. He’d already connected with Red Hood, briefly, to discuss the antidote and he didn’t want to be irritating the man all night. Or anyone. He didn’t want to be irritating anyone when Batman had deliberately placed him in an area where he would be the least bother.

He recognized some of the train of thought from previous overcaffeinated excursions. He could either wait out the maudlin anxiety or take one of the caffeine candies in his belt. Several candies later, the anxiety had increased while he took down seventeen thugs and completed several solo drop-offs at the border of Old Gotham. There had been a lot of bungee-cording and use of momentum to transport them three at a time, but it beat waiting for backup, which would probably be whiny (Damian) or late/underequipped (GCPD).

No more coffee, he told himself as he headed back to his not-assigned area. Bruce’s words kept reverberating around his mind, never finding an escape, and the caffeine – abundance or withdrawal – wasn’t helping.
He stopped swinging when he reached the Seventh Avenue neighborhood and dropped to a crouch on one of the buildings. The red costume didn’t cloak him the way Batman’s did, but without the cape people could still ignore him as a cosplaying traceur or something. The three men stalking a couple below hadn’t noticed him yet.

“Red Robin, report,” came Bruce’s Batman voice over his comm, seconds after Red Robin leapt off the roof.

“Having the time of my life,” Tim drawled as he fell, executing a modified-to-be-aerial pisao crusado move that Dick had taught him from capoeira. He landed and followed the move with some swift turning that put him behind his two opponents, where he clocked them with the staff. Not fighting ‘smart’ meant he’d end up doing more groundwork and even though Bruce couldn’t see him, Tim had felt immediately guilty about the ‘lone transports’ he’d been completing.

They should have given Starfire a comm. The princess could do aerial transport and make much better time. Why hadn’t Bruce thought of that?

“Withdraw to 36th and Georgetown,” Bruce growled. “Robin needs the space.”

“He already pushed me out of my area, he can’t push me out of town altogether,” Tim grumbled, grappling to the rooftop to get out of the prospective path of the other vigilante. The couple he’d rescued had already taken off running. “Who’s he fighting?”

“Firefly.”

“Ugh, of course.” Firefly hadn’t been in Arkham Asylum; the pyromaniac had only ever murdered people for traditional reasons, along with some petty crime. Lethal in his own right though, as Garfield Lynn had a full-body, flame-retardant suit that had given all of the Bats grief in the past. Regrettably, he also had ties to the Joker.

“He winning?” Tim asked, flipping to brace himself against the building’s fire escape and lean out. “Or is this a ‘clean-up on aisle 7’ kind of situation?”

“He’s doing fine,” Bruce said. The slight defensiveness in his tone didn’t miss Tim.

“Great. You thinking of coming out soon, old man?” Jason’s usual moniker for their father slipped out before Tim thought about it. Must be the coffee. “There’s plenty for everyone and I have it on the best authority you don’t actually burst into flame in the sunlight.”

Bruce didn’t dignify this with a response.

Tim shifted position, spying a couple of running figures down the street. Didn’t look like they were affiliated with Damian’s adventures, which meant there was work to be done.

“Well, it’s been fun, but my break’s over,” he told Bruce, and, when Bruce didn’t say anything else, he cut the channel.

Tim dropped from the building, the grappling line catching him on the low end of the swing to bring him between the running figures and swinging head on towards what they were running from.

Mr. Freeze, as it happened.

Red Robin released the line and fired another, using his foot in Freeze’s chest to vault off the man as a stepping stone, before he could so much as raise the cold gun. The running and screaming people were fleeing more because most of Gotham could recognize Freeze’s suit and gun on sight. Contrary
to what the Bats usually found, most of Gotham’s civilian population weren’t utter morons when it came to supervillains.

What the population tended to forget about Freeze was that he didn’t do much if you left him alone or get between him and anything he wanted. Basically, enact a Momma Bear protocol and keep expanding directives of what constituted ‘baby bears’ until, eventually, you ended up with the entire world vs. Victor Fries.

However, Red Robin had just planted his foot in the man’s chest. It was hard to take that as a good thing.

“Victor!” Red Robin perched on a balcony railing, wanting to stay close enough to talk and retain the ability to move. “Look, Victor, sorry—”

The man’s head moved glacially to track him, as if Victor (keep thinking of him as Victor Fries, maybe this will be fine) had to manually convince himself Red Robin was worth the time and effort.

“Robin,” Victor said, sounding like he had spent hours napping under the snow. “Where is the Batman?”

“Can’t we just talk? I feel like we never talk anymore,” Tim said, concurrently asking himself what the hell he thought he was doing. Why would he start bantering? He wasn’t a Robin and the actual Robin would be here any second now with Firefly on his tail. Crap, and now he was thinking about Firefly and Freeze in juxtaposition with one another.

Victor lifted the cold gun. No expression crossed his face, not irritation, rage, sadness, or even intent. People had more focus about crushing a spider on the wall of their home than Freeze had about freezing Red Robin.

So, Tim moved. Freeze froze the balcony where he had been sitting.

Regrettably, this was how fights with Freeze went: the Bats moved, Freeze shot things, the Bats launched successive attacks until Freeze’s suit could no longer hold up to the barrage and then the Bats had to save the subzero-dependent man’s life. If Tim hadn’t planted his foot in Freeze’s chest, the man would probably have gone on his way, but that wasn’t how things worked out.

He spent the next ten minutes wearing down the villain when Damian opened a channel and shouted into his ear.

“Get out of the way, Drake!”

Tim could hear two versions of Robin’s voice; one in his ear and one approaching from the west. He hurled several explosive gel grenades at Freeze’s feet in tandem and fired a grappling line that should pull him out of the mess. If Damian had made it from 36th and Georgetown with Firefly on his tail, that meant Robin hadn’t even begun to neutralize the flame-throwing villain.

Red Robin left his comm channel open, muttering just a ‘confirmed’ to Damian so the younger Robin could be sure he had received the message. Freeze, staggering from the explosive gel grenades denoting at the base of his suit, had swayed to face the west alley, where Damian would be approaching with Firefly.

Freeze’s cold gun barrages had become erratic, the only uncalculated thing about him. They could use that.

“Are you injured?” Red Robin asked over the comm channel, running scenarios for getting Freeze to
shoot Firefly. They wanted Freeze left over to fight. Non-flying opponents were preferable.

“Tt—”

“If you can’t answer honestly, I’ll assume that you are.” Red Robin leapt to the closest balcony in the alleyway, then to the next, guiding Freeze’s aim ever higher. If Firefly glided through overhead, Freeze would mistake him for a Bat and fire instinctually. Then, of course, the Bats would have to make sure Firefly’s frozen figure didn’t fall dozens of feet and shatter on the pavement.

Damian made an irritated sound. “No. But I believe you were last in charge of ‘tweaking’ the grappling lines, Red Robin? It may interest you to know that Firefly’s new chemicals burn through them.”

Damnit. That meant Damian was grounded. Red Robin leapt off the building, high sightlines be damned. He could see Robin approaching from further down the alleyway at a dead run, zigzagging and vaulting when he could, but otherwise stuck at street level. Flames followed him from above as Firefly came barreling up from the end of the alleyway, setting light to everything in the nozzle’s path.

“Pickup on your three o’clock,” Tim said, seconds before slamming into Damian’s side at the low end of his grappling line’s arc. He hit the retract trigger on the grappling gun as soon as he had an arm wrapped around the younger man’s waist. Damian struggled. Big surprise.

“I do not need assistance!”

“I’ll just tell Batman those were your last words then,” Tim replied. Seconds later, he thought better of saying those particular things to a kid who had died. Too late, they’d been said. Damian didn’t seem to notice.

They landed heavily on the nearest roof, behind the temporary concealment of a roof door. Tim retracted his grappling line before Firefly could burn it.

“Do you interpret everything as a request for help?” Damian demanded, shoving away from Tim as soon as he could. “No one asked you to ‘help’ with the composition of grappling lines. I certainly didn’t ask for your ‘help’ now, idiot!”

“We don’t have time to fight,” Tim replied. Once Damian mentioned it, he remembered why he had been changing the consistency of the grappling lines. It was a couple years back and it had had everything to do with Damian trying to kill him. Wow, had they really not fought Firefly in years?

“Here. Spare gun,” Tim offered. A gun-shaped olive branch, Jason would be proud.

Damian took the offered grappling gun, scowling. “It will still have your inferior workmanship.”

“Sorry,” Tim said, attempting not to seethe. “Maybe if you stayed with your police backup, we wouldn’t be stuck with me.”

“Tt. Who do you think I was with?”

Red Robin could hear too much self-loathing in the statement for it to be an ordinary Robin statement. He caught back the question of ‘are they dead?’ before it could make its way out of his throat. Even if it wasn’t true, Damian sounded like he thought they were.

Tim leaned around the edge of the concealment to check on Firefly. No sign of the villain above the roof line, but the sound and smell of the flames filling the air meant he hadn’t gone far. The scent
mixed with a sharp underlying chemical Tim didn’t recognize. Probably whatever acidic component could eat through grappling lines. Ugh, this was going to ruin his entire weekend.

“Let’s go kick ass then,” Tim said. He was trying not to take on everything accidentally: the possibly dead police officers, the grappling line issue, the fact that he’d instigated this fight with Freeze.

“I don’t need your help.”

“Yeah, but family shouldn’t have to ask for help.”

“You don’t have a hope of resolving problems I can’t,” Damian sneered. Tim bit back all the circumstances in which that exact thing had taken place; they didn’t have time to fight and Damian would interpret it as gloating.

Robin strode past Tim to take stock of the situation below. Whether to get away from the conversation or for necessity, Damian promptly jumped off the roof and into the fray that they could hear but not see.

Yeah, kicking ass was the goal. Still. Tim couldn’t muster up the energy to follow him immediately. The coffee jitters were fading. That meant everything he’d done while on a caffeine-high – the solo transports, the Freeze fight – began to seem childish. Like he was quietly flailing for approval by being the untroublesome one, like being a slightly older version of Damian with 30% less subtlety about his insecurities but 90% of the same recklessness.

Come on, though. If you don’t have time to trade barbs with Damian, you don’t have time to sit on the rooftop and wax poetic about inner turmoil, Tim reminded himself as he surveyed where to enter the fight.

Seconds later he went leaping after Robin, down into the song of ice and fire. The thought of Jason being there, saying something like ‘Eat your heart out, G. R.R. Martin,’ was the first thing to make him smile all day.
with the chance I've been given, I'm gonna be driven as hell

Chapter Notes

I don’t know if I’ve mentioned it before, but “Pity the Child,” which is where the “I never call” title comes from, is a phenomenally difficult song to sing. There’s a reason all the versions of it start out quiet, and that’s because it’s hard to get to that belt. I respect everyone who has attempted to sing it, professional and nonprofessional, because it’s murder. Brian d’Arcy James even turned the end of his into ‘Hey Jude’ and it works surprisingly well (it’s on Youtube). It’s also a good song for Jason Todd, however the backstory differs. Top version IMHO is Adam Pascal’s.

Also, I’ve been working on edits (incorporating everyone's notes!!), but none have been uploaded so it doesn’t absolutely mess up the entire reading experience for anyone just wandering in (I mean, more than it already is). So very many continuity errors, I am ashamed and sorry… but y’know what, I’m…really hoping this is the rewrite. *sings "See I'm Smiling"* I'm pretty sure it doesn't suck.

As always and ever, THANK YOU for anyone who pointed out things, and anyone who read this and just... bore with it. I appreciate you.

Chapter title is from 'Chip on my Shoulder' from Legally Blonde.

The clock read sixteen minutes to five thirty that evening. Bruce reviewed the constantly-updating number of criminal intakes – essentially a half-complete GoogleDoc of which criminals the police had managed to pull in thus far as the number of officers in the field steadily decreased. Each officer dispensed to taking non-powered prisoners back to Blackgate or locking them up in GCPD jail cells was one less officer in the field; still more were taking injuries or tapping out from literal exhaustion.

Bruce sighed and thought about going out early. There had been no word regarding the Lanterns yet, for or against their side.

“Bruce Wayne, as I live and breathe, haven’t seen you in a dog’s age. How’s the fam?” Dick flopped over the back of the computer’s chair, pretending Bruce couldn’t tell when the younger man was cultivating a bright façade. Dick had re-suited up as Nightwing an hour ago, as if to nudge Bruce into leaving earlier. It hadn’t worked.

“Everyone is fine,” Bruce said.

“You’re having second thoughts about not going out until dark,” Dick intuited immediately. “We still can. Cars are filled up, I’m pretty sure Alfred has Lysol’d your suit, the dogs are out, the cat is in—"

“This isn’t a joke, Nightwing.”

“You’re sitting here like it is.” Dick switched to seriousness. “An Arkham breakout, you send out the entire family but won’t risk the streets? What’s going on with you?”

“I’m a liability in the daylight. You know that.”

“And you know the cops would feel better having you out there.” Dick assessed the screen’s
dwindling number of officers deployed around the city. “It’s not like you’re not going to have elbow room, at this point.”

“The moment Cass finds the Lanterns, I’ll be there, regardless of time of day.” Bruce pulled up the e-document of escapee movements again. The two Lanterns didn’t appear on this map and he had been trying to assess their position from the clusters of other criminals. So far, his children—his extended clan, really—and the police had apprehended seventy-one individuals. Only thirty-seven were Arkham escapees, the remainder were thugs.

The trouble would be when the Arkham escapees went underground, rather than running around on the streets. Bruce knew with dread certainty that the number of murders would climb by tomorrow and keep climbing, brought on by escapees who had barged into Gotham homes and residences to hide there, often murdering the occupants.

“What does the Justice League think?” Dick asked with false casualness.

“This is a private matter,” Bruce replied.

In response, Dick huffed, leaned over his shoulder to reach the keyboard, and began typing. Bruce had noticed that his children seemed not to know how large they were, but this was ridiculous.

“Dick, you aren’t twelve anymore,” Bruce said and tried to nudge the acrobat’s suited torso off of his shoulder without tipping Dick onto the floor.

“Sssh, you can’t tell anyone,” Dick said, but shifted his position so he wasn’t bracing his weight on Bruce’s shoulder. After a few more keystrokes, he found what he was looking for and stood back altogether. He’d been looking for the local news feed. No, not local news; Bruce didn’t recognize any of these journalists.

“This is national,” Dick said, in answer to his unspoken question. “So if you think the JLA doesn’t already know, you’re way off.”

“This isn’t something that needs their attention. They have other concerns.” Bruce knew Nightwing and Superman were friends, so he needed to make it clear right off that Dick shouldn’t be telling Kent anything.

“Right.” Dick leaned back from the Batcomputer and crossed his arms. The blue and black of the costume was visible in his reflection on the computer screen. “No JLA allowed, Joker’s loose, and you’ve tried to keep Jason out of it…”

“And Tim.”

“What?” Dick’s attention went immediately to the garage where Tim had left an hour or so before. “Oh no. What did you say to Tim?”

“I advised him to be careful.”

“Nope, what did you say?”

Bruce looked back at him, feeling his expression turning towards a scowl. “Why wouldn’t I tell him to be careful?”

“Because you stopped telling Tim that when Jason came back from the dead.”

The words sent a shock through Bruce, so much so that he had to stand up from the chair, gritting his
teeth to keep his expression neutral. “I didn’t stop because of…”

“B. What did you tell Tim.”

“I told him not to be smart,” Bruce replied. “You know patrolling alone isn’t his forte.”

Dick blinked at him. “Um, what?”

“Tim’s skill is casework, but tonight is not about casework. It’s boots on the ground. I can’t have him getting distracted, focusing all his attention on minor players while larger villains kill their way through the city. I would have paired him up with Damian if I thought they could work together.”

“You don’t think Tim can prioritize?” Dick interpreted. “You honestly don’t think Tim can triage a situation better than, say, Damian can?”

“Tim will try to do both and I can’t have him going dark to enact hour-long plans he won’t explain.”

“Tim is—Tim isn’t a Robin, Bruce. You don’t need to give him an individual agenda for how to work during an Arkham breakout.” Dick sounded exasperated to have to explain this. Some part of Bruce’s mind, the Batman part, noted that exasperation for Dick was only one step below anger and when Dick got angry, he would seethe and comply with orders, as if his rage was enough punishment. It meant that they would be efficient when they went out—

No, Bruce shouted at the Batman part of himself. It meant he’d lose his oldest son’s company and conversation for up to three weeks until Alfred forced Bruce to apologize or until Dick forgave him for no other reason than he was used to fighting with Bruce. Be patient.

“I realize Tim isn’t a Robin,” Bruce said, forcing himself to speak slowly. “And that he is capable of making rational and time-sensitive decisions in the field.” What was the phrasing Alfred had told him to use? “I would prefer it if he were accompanied.”

Both of them stopped as the comm channel clicked open. Tim’s voice crackled through the Batcomputer speakers.

“What’s the approved methodology for getting criminals to the containment area?”

Bruce pulled up Red Robin’s location by tracker. “Klostermann and 40th, Starfire will perform the pickup.”

“Wait, so she does have a comm?” Tim asked.

“Of course,” Bruce replied, privately puzzled. How else did Red Robin think they would get villain to the drop point? “Also, why haven’t you called in with any of the others you’ve apprehended?”

Red Robin said nothing. Robin became audible in the background asking ‘Yes, Drake, are you really so incompetent this is your first win of the night?’

“Found an alternate method,” Tim told Bruce, curt and professional. “What channel is Starfire?”

Bruce told him. Red Robin cut the channel as soon as he could, leaving Bruce and Dick to stare at the silent speakers for a long moment. Bruce wondered if Tim had just been transporting them manually, unaware of the pickup procedure or maybe not wanting to talk to Bruce to find out what it was. He reached forward, about to open a channel to Starfire and ask her to keep an eye on Tim, when Dick cleared his throat.
“He is with Robin. Pretty sure he’s not going to appreciate Kori sicced on him.”

“Hn.” Bruce leaned back. Looked at the police officer dots and the criminal escapee dots estimated on the board. “…I’ll go get suited up.”

“Why were you trying to scare the boys off?”

“Nn.” Bruce had already stood and crossed the room to the area with the suits and gear, mind half on what he might need most tonight.

Unfortunately, among the things Dick had learned over the years, it was that he could make as many guesses as he wanted about why Bruce might be doing something. At this point, he was usually right.

“You’re planning on getting hurt,” Dick said. “You’re planning on taking on the Joker alone, despite what you told everyone, despite agreeing to team up with me. And, what, when you get injured you think it’ll be easier on them if they’re angry with you?”

“They’ll get hurt if they’re distracted. I don’t want them focusing on me.”

“That’s a Robin’s damn job,” Dick said, ferocity threading its way through his words. “You and I are patrolling together. Heading out in full knowledge of what we’re facing. We’re not getting ambushed. Have a little faith in me, B. You and I’ve fought the Joker enough times, and we’ve fought Lanterns enough times, what the hell, why not combine the two into an unholy abomination of clown-faced Sinestro-wannabes? I know you’re already up to date on your submarine capers, but maybe we can find some ludicrously large bomb to run around the docks with.”

“Now is not the time to bring up comedy sketches.”

“Well, somber faces weren’t working.” Dick rubbed his forehead. “This would be easier with the JLA. You know that.”

“I don’t have to remind you that our jobs are not intended to be easy, or that allowing the JLA to work in Gotham would announce that we can be made vulnerable by our own residents and need outside help.”

Dick turned his eyes heavenward as Bruce turned back to the suits. “I love you dearly, B, but sometimes you sound like AM radio.”

“Don’t let the Kents hear you say that.”

“If you are quite finished, Masters, I believe the city streets could use you both sooner rather than later,” Alfred said, descending the stairs with a tray of sandwiches – protein-heavy, since cucumber didn’t tend to last long in the field.

Dick didn’t bother trying to talk any more sense into Bruce.

#

In the heart of Old Gotham, Jason felt relieved that they were almost done.

Forty-seven people hadn’t evacuated before they showed up. That meant forty-seven people getting in his and Roy’s faces, asking if the clowns would really come here and/or if the vigilantes could just hold on for another twenty minutes or so, the speaker’s cousin would be here to transport them or that they had a place coming available in just another two days and if the vigilantes didn’t mind, the
speaker would just wait it out. After all, the Penguin still owned this territory, right? And Penguin had never bothered them. Penguin would never tell them to move. What if you two are just enforcers for Two-Face, huh? Or what if you work for the Joker?

The Red Hood spent more than half the time biting his tongue inside the helmet, listening to Roy talk to the people. Roy always had the better skill with words between the two of them, even if the words Jason mostly heard were ‘can,’ ‘we,’ ‘buy,’ ‘this.’ And, only a little less infrequently, ‘it’ll be so cool.’

Today, there was none of that. There were a lot of ‘I understand’s, and ‘we can call a shuttle to get you anywhere you need to be’ (which was a lie, the shuttle went exactly one place), and ‘It’s only for a couple hours, swear to God.’

When Roy said, ‘we’re like stormchasers, except we’re more like storm pathologists,’ Jason had finally spoken up.

“You mean weather forecasters? Meteorologists?”

“Yes. That, exactly,” Roy said with more enthusiasm than he had any right to have left. The archer turned back to the non-evacuee he’d been talking to – a walker-leaning man in his eighties that Jason was worried wasn’t going to make it over the steps of the house he theoretically owned.

“What do you think?” Roy asked him. “Are disaster forecasters trustworthy enough for you?”

The man looked up with a twinkle in the eye that didn’t have advanced glaucoma. “Never did have much truck with economists, but I suppose if you’re confident enough to run around in spandex, that’s good enough. Your friend’s got the right idea.” He motioned loosely at Jason’s holsters. “It’s nice that the Batman feels comfortable with his batathingys, but there’s no substitution for a good old sidearm.”

Jason grinned, then, realizing the man wouldn’t be able to see it, pulled off the helmet to leave just his domino. “Finally, some validation!”

“If you’ve got a couple of new tennis balls on hand, you can call your shuttle, boys.” The man leaned back on his walker. “Used to depend on Sally to get me out of the house, but she’s reached some place she won’t have to hustle me around anymore, g’restersoul.”

It didn’t take long. The shuttle driver from the National Guard shelter had learned after two trips that staying in the area saved everyone’s time. Other shuttles had been commandeered from Gotham Transit and were servicing the city’s other districts on more of a call-for-help basis. This driver returned to follow the vigilante pair at about a mile behind, after each drop-off at the shelter. From the several phone conversations Jason had had with the driver to arrange pick-ups, the Red Hood had the impression was mostly relieved she didn’t have to convince the people herself. The woman sounded nice enough, not frightened, but distinctly uncomfortable at the idea of climbing out of the vehicle and heading into mysterious ‘empty’ buildings.

Meanwhile, the Red Hood part of Jason felt pragmatically relieved that the shuttle didn’t take more than five minutes to arrive if it wasn’t on a drop-off. They’d lost so much time with the Scarecrow incident. Seconds counted.

Around seven, both parts of Jason sighed. The sensors in the helmet had kicked on the night vision, complementing the streetlights as they came on. Roy had made an irritated sound that probably meant his mask didn’t have any kind of light filtration or enhancements. If he’d happened to be staring at a darkened streetlight a second ago, it blinded him when it came on.
“Didn’t realize how dark it was getting,” Arsenal grumbled.

“Only one more hour,” Jason said, dialing the shuttle driver’s number. “If we don’t find anybody in the next thirty, we can head back to the bike.”

Roy nodded, not replying as Jason finished telling the shuttle driver she could take off for now. Another nice thing: Roy hadn’t been asking questions about Jason’s being Robin or the relationship to the Batfamily or even more about the Red Hood. Jason had been initially concerned that it meant Roy was still shaken up about the fear gas, but the brief verbal surveys he had given the archer kept coming back negative. Roy didn’t have significant lingering effects from the toxin.

Jason knew he owed Tim for making sure the Red Hood had the latest version of the antidote. Shortly after he’d shouted at all the Bats, Red Robin had opened a private line to ask if the antidote he’d been ‘tweaking’ with had worked all right. When Jason finished sputtering about how stupid it still was that they’d needed an antidote and hadn’t known they would, he’d made sure Red Robin knew that Tim’s ‘tweaks’ with the antidote were probably the only reason Roy didn’t have to have his own emergency pickup. Then he’d chewed Tim out for banning any future gifts of gratitude. Tim sounded like he was fighting nerves. Jason had bitten back comments about ‘is it Bruce,’ or ‘are you injured,’ and instead allowed the kid to share what he wanted to share (i.e. nothing).

“Red Hood,” Arsenal said, once Jason had hung up. “So, it looks like it’s pretty unlikely anything is going to happen, but we should have this established before… y’know, the rest of the night.”

“Oh?” Jason said.

“Who’s your emergency contact? It sounds like you don’t get along with Batman, and if we’ve worked together before, you know I wouldn’t want Green and Pointy as my primary point of contact. So.” The archer sounded uncomfortable now. “Just want to hash that out. In a non-crisis sort of situation.”

“Sounds to me like you’re inviting a crisis,” Jason said, double-checking his tone to make sure he sounded dry, not antagonistic. “But just call Red Robin. He’ll get everybody in line.”

Or, as they had discussed several weeks back, prepare his funeral.

“Who’s your preference?” Jason asked, after a minute of silence. Roy wouldn’t remember that he usually gave the Red Hood as his emergency contact. Instead, he found Arsenal looking at him intensely.

“I’m guessing I usually say you?” Roy asked.

Jason shrugged a shoulder. “I am pretty good at not losing my shit if you get hurt.”

The archer sighed with feigned frustration. “Well, if I get hurt, you’re likely to be right next to me bleeding out, so let’s settle for one of us trying to call Nightwing. If Starfire doesn’t show up and shouting for Superman is ineffective.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Great, let’s never use it.” Arsenal shuddered a little and Jason frowned beneath the helmet.

“Is it the—”

“Leave it, Red Hood.”
They were coming to the end of what Batman had defined as their area to patrol. To the south, Jason could spot the lights across the Sprang River, outlining the edges of the multi-story botanical gardens. He and Roy passed a small church (Saint Mary’s), crossing a dead-quiet street, and paused for Jason to check their positioning against the helmet’s built-in map. He didn’t know Old Gotham from the ground as well as Bruce would – he’d spent most of his time above the city streets.

“We’re out of neighborhood,” Jason said. “Let’s head back.”

“You got a flashlight in that thing?” Roy asked. Jason looked over at him, puzzled. Generally, no, carrying around a giant flashlight on your helmet at night in Gotham was a good way to die. Then he looked up.

The streetlights had gone, along the whole street. And the next couple down.

“Well that’s not good.” Jason lifted the faceplate of the helmet to get a better idea of what Roy was seeing – or rather not able to see. “We could call the shuttle back, but the electrical fault looks localized to the couple blocks here. See, the power’s on about six blocks down.”

As soon as he said it, those lights winked out as well. Cool.

“It won’t be that bad,” Jason modified the statement. “How are you at rooftops?”

“In the dark?” Roy asked.

“The most likely candidate to be knocking out powerlines and electrical grids is Freeze or Firefly and this is a little quieter than fire. So, unless you’d rather meet him on the ground…”

“I don’t think I like you,” Roy informed him.

Jason shrugged, knowing that Roy would only see his silhouette while they ran for the fire escape. He didn’t want to explain to the archer that he could hear a fight coming, still some city blocks away, and didn’t want the archer stuck on the ground.

Freeze tended to fight quiet, like the ice and shit he used as weapons, so it was good he’d been obnoxious enough to knock out power and clue them both in before they stumbled on the man. Since nobody had contacted him to say they were chasing Freeze over the Sprang (since it was Freeze, that wouldn’t be difficult), he couldn’t be sure it was a Bat in combat.

From the fire escape, they made it from the roof of an apartment building and, from the apartment building, to the next fire escape. Mapping things out from the air felt like second nature to Jason and Roy barely even grumbled about not having a grappling gun. The Red Hood even felt confident enough to think that everything was fine… until the archer stopped following him and rolled to a crouch on the roof of a hardware store. Jason had already leapt to the next rooftop and had to double-back.

“What’s up?” he asked Arsenal.

“Isn’t it a member of your family?” Arsenal asked, gesturing in the direction of the fight. “It’s been going on ten minutes now. Do you guys have a moral backup code or something?”

“No. Someone would’ve called if they needed me,” Jason said, tapping the general area of his comm unit on his helmet. “I don’t know if anyone told you, but Bats are pretty defensive about unwanted backup.”

“Nightwing never seems to complain.” Roy didn’t mean anything by it, just pointing out that no,
Nightwing didn’t generally complain about backup. Jason agreed. Nightwing was fine with backup as long as he didn’t feel babysat or that he felt the backup looked like they were going to kill people. In other words, he rarely wanted Jason.

“Okay. We’ll find out. Witness the wonders of an ancient technology.” Jason tapped into the open line for the rest of the Bats. “Anybody fighting in southwest Old Gotham? Knocking out some powerlines?”

There were a chorus of ‘nopes,’ which Jason didn’t bother to count. He was only looking for yes’s. He ended the channel and returned his attention to Roy without taking off the helmet.

“We’ve already been through that area, so it’s not a civilian. No Bats are calling it and the fight’s happening within the drop zone. It’s probably a couple of villains hashing it out. We need to get back to the motorcycle before the Bat comes out to play and definitely before the Green Lanterns show up to boobytrap the place.”

“I want to check,” Roy said, in a tone that Jason recognized as the archer’s ‘can’t stop me’ voice. “It could still be a civilian. Or Scarecrow could have gotten on the move and they’re killing him.”

Jason felt relieved that Roy couldn’t see his expression inside the helmet. No part of him wanted to rescue Scarecrow from anything, including Freeze, which he thought privately was a much nicer way to go than other ways Jason could suggest. If the two had beef, they should be allowed to take it out on each other in the privacy of an area they should already be in. Instead of saying that, Jason straightened from crouching beside Arsenal and headed for the edge of the roof.

“Let’s make it quick.”
Extremely long author note follows: Hi all!! Okay, so, I am more or less done with my edits. It only took like, two months of background typity typing and now I can stop knowing that the whale of inconsistency could trip me (and everyone else) up at any moment.

Below is a tl;dr of chapters that I changed for accuracy and consistency. **None of these should change the reader's ability to understand the finale. If there is any new information or rules, it will be restated moving forward.** This is too long a fic to suggest 'hey, go read these again or nothing will make sense.'

Chapter 4: Proper discussion of the artifact at WE and better interns.
Chapter 8: This chapter became even more info-dumpy than it already was, yikes. Details more on Bruce’s first encounter with Duela, her goals, and foreshadowing Scarecrow.
Chapter 10: Pacing and dialogue changes in this one, relating primarily to the artifact, how it works, and the ship. The artifact does not work on inanimate objects.
Chapter 11: Reworked the Duela vs. Nightwing, Robin fight. Devil Dog explicitly stated to be murdered by Duela.
Chapter 12: Duela and the Batfam’s conversation got some reworking, nothing major.
Chapter 14: Tim and Damian’s interaction following Duela got some reworking, nothing plot-sensitive. Also, Java Posh. :)
Chapter 16, 17: The artifact discussed as a form of exile.
Chapter 18: Reworking the first memory 'glitch'. When the memories bounce back, it reverts to the level of knowledge people had immediately prior, rather than wiping everything they knew.
Chapter 21: What & why Marisa Hodgins is doing stuff.
Chapter 22: Fixing plot dialogue with Dick and with Supes.
Chapter 24: Fixing the fight with Duela and Wendell on the Watchtower.

Nothing really escaped 'unscathed', but that's the majority.

Chapter title is from ‘The Point of No Return’ in ‘Phantom of the Opera.’

And of course, and as always, and with apologies, thank you for hanging in there with me. There have been so many gracious commenter, and constructive critiques, and suggestions, and I just appreciate it and you so much. And your patience! Is so appreciated! Because I never mean for things to take a month to happen.

For all that Red Hood compulsively checked on Arsenal, post-fear gas, actual vigilante Jason Todd was crap at checking on his companions, Roy decided. By the time Arsenal had caught up via rooftops, the Red Hood had descended to street-level. What took Jason seconds was going to take Roy a full two minutes without a grappling gun. He did it, of course, but the irritation that he didn’t have one of the Batjerks’ proprietary comms so he could bitch at Red Hood grew.
The fight continued, only a street over from where Roy kept to the shadows of the alley. Robins could be pretty showy when they were doing groundwork and Roy hadn’t seen one yet, which reinforced the idea that this wasn’t a Bat, or a ‘sporadic’. Could be a civilian they’d failed to get out. Some part of Roy panicked at the thought, angry and unsurprised by the fact he’d screwed up AGAIN—

No. Remnants of fear gas didn’t know anything about reading battle fields. Pending Red Hood’s return from who-knew-where, Roy needed to get higher and figure out what he was dealing with.

On his way to a strategic rooftop, he constructed some poor-man’s night vision for his uniform’s glasses, cannibalizing a couple of targeting systems to do so. Worth it, to get a glimpse of what was going on. Every time he came to Gotham, he reminded himself, he should be bringing night vision goggles. Regardless of intention. Hell, any time he met up with a Bat, he should just be expecting the dark to move in like a haze around them, and bring night vision goggles accordingly.

The first thing he saw from the rooftop vantage point was a figure, silent and unmoving, hovering at least two stories up in front of an old bank. Not Red Hood; the hovering alone would’ve ruled him out. The figure didn’t emit any light, other than the crude thermals Roy could read, or make any sound. He checked without the glasses and found that he couldn’t see the shape, barely even the silhouette of their edges in the deep darkness. The hovering screamed meta though and patient metas were the frickin’ worst. Like stonefish, just waiting for someone to come along and unknowingly step on them.

Roy swept the street below, only to see the night vision display flicker as he moved. Damnit, the connections weren’t built for this. He moved to fix it when the display cut out altogether. It wouldn’t come back for hissed compliments or violence and he tried both (very, very quietly). The archer moved like a ghost to the edge of the rooftop, trying to get out of the meta’s potential range of perception. Whatever Red Hood was doing, it didn’t involve looking out for Roy, which meant Roy needed to find Red Hood before engaging.

Still, Arsenal’s steps faltered when he reached the fire escape. The only people left should be subdued villains dropped off by the Bats (which a hovering meta decidedly wasn’t) or civilians they had missed evacuating. Again, the meta wasn’t a likely civilian.

At some unseen signal, the meta began emitting yellow light. Roy had to throw himself to the ground before his silhouette could be outlined against the roof. The light flashed, almost blinding for a second, and someone wailed. Not Roy; someone in the alley below, someone who the light had moved to focus on. Keeping low, Roy rolled across the rooftop until he could peer over the ledge, looking down at the brighter scene.

Below, he could see Scarecrow’s wheelchair, overturned in the street. Crane had made it several feet away and under the concealment of an abandoned SUV. Roy had seen Red Robin do the same maneuver once before, sans wheelchair. Except… Tim had made it under a Camry, which was a little embarrassing for him since none of the rest of the Titans could fit under a small car wearing body armor.

The meta had outlined herself entirely with light and was lifting the SUV with two constructs, like the prongs of a forklift. If Roy held his breath, he could hear what she was telling the Scarecrow, gentle wisps of sound over the wind. The sound of a power ring being used didn’t make noise, the way an actual forklift would. Huh. So, were all power ring battles quiet?

The Yellow Lantern asked Crane where ‘they’ were. Crane didn’t know.

Without appearing to think about it, she dropped the SUV on him. Picked it up again. Repeated the
When she dropped the SUV again, Roy scanned the dimly-glowing street for any sign of Red Hood. Nothing. Okay then. He looked back and found that she had picked up the SUV. Scarecrow, for all the professor was the pain-inflicting type, was starting to make sounds that went beyond mild injury and into agony... and fear. The Lantern asked the question louder this time. Arsenal didn’t have to strain or hold his breath to hear her.

The archer sank deeper into a crouch, keeping his movements fluid and out of her line of sight while he readied the bow. He’d only have one shot while still fully concealed. The minute he fired, he would have to be approximately two rooftops away, keeping far enough back that when she flew up over the buildings (as she invariably would), she wouldn’t see his shadow. That made the downed power handy, at least.

Crane screamed a denial, the light bright against the undersides of his arms as he tried to pull himself away from the car. Roy glided out of his crouch to balance himself, draw, anchor, aim, and loose the arrow.

The Lantern spotted the bolt with preternatural swiftness and spotted Roy just beyond it. The light around her went out, as if she had gasped and took the only light in the street with her. Roy stopped breathing. Not knowing if he’d hit her or where she was now. The darkness reminded him that he could run for the edge of the rooftop, get out of here without the threat of leaving a shadow, and yet, when he turned, he could spot bright green light, several streets over. Brighter than anything that could be dismissed as a rogue stoplight.

The sudden shine of yellow behind him made him think of sunlight.

“IT’s really not nice to shoot people, Roy,” the Lantern said, rising over the edge of the building.

“Given the SUV situation, I figured I had a free pass on niceness,” he said, turning and notching the bow in a single movement that carried years of practice – but not drawing the bow to fire. He hadn’t hit the Lantern anywhere important, he could see now – the yellow light outlining the Lantern’s form was interrupted only by the thin line of dark red trickling down her side. At this range, anything could prove fatal though. He hesitated to take the shot. Batman didn’t have a good reputation for forgiving murderers.

She rose a little higher and a yellow lasso construct yanked the bow out of his hands, throwing it off the side of the building. He realized, then, that he should have shot her as many times as possible before that happened, Batman be damned. He put up his fists, causing the Lantern to tilt her head to the side in muted amusement.

“Where is the other one?” she asked. “Unless you’d like me to get the SUV.”

“What the ever-loving hell is it you think you want?!” Red Hood snarled from behind Roy. The archer was better trained than to flinch, but Jason must have been just arriving when Roy turned around – or waiting for him to turn around. Ugh. Bats.

“I see we’re all done with pretending you’re upset about shooting me,” Duela responded and Roy realized, at close range, that her face didn’t make sense. It took a second to understand what he was looking at and both of her faces twisted upwards in a grin at his revelation.

“Yeah, you’ve never been supportive of my aesthetic, Harper. Even when I wasn’t trying to kill you.” She returned her attention to the Red Hood, eyes going dead cold behind the stapled-on death mask. “And I want what I’ve been telling you I want. Gotham.”
“And everyone and their brother has been telling you it’s occupied. Find another stall,” Jason replied, flicking the firearm’s safety off. “And take your ‘dad’ with you.”

Duela glanced at Roy instead of replying. “Why should I run when your first line of defense is arrows?”

“I would’ve thought you were experienced enough with being shot that you’d want to avoid it,” Jason drawled.

She responded by reaching back into the darkness to do something Roy couldn’t see but it seemed like the Red Hood could – judging by the way the other vigilante tackled him. Both of them thudded into the roof’s edge barrier in a clump. Meanwhile, the SUV from earlier flew near-silently over the edge of the building, visible in the glint of yellow light from Duela’s form and the arching lasso around it. A mass of shapeless weight, the vehicle crashed into the roof, destroying a large chunk and forcing Roy and Jason to brace themselves from the resulting debris.

The SUV’s car alarm went off the moment it hit – drowning out noise as the horn blared, creating light only as its headlights flashed.

When Roy uncurled, adrenaline higher than he was comfortable with, it was to see Jason, helmet half-shattered, already aiming into the haze of dust. The edge barrier served as a bulwark behind them, ensuring Duela couldn’t circle them – on foot at least.

“Hood?” Roy asked, coughing.

“’m good. Helmet’s too broke for thermals though,” Jason replied, though he made no move to remove the fragments. “And comms.” His finger tightened on the trigger. “You gotta spare bow?”

Roy was already unfolding his secondary bow. “Only fires energy bolts.”

“Yeah, I know.” Red Hood fired once into the darkness and yellow light suddenly lit up around a figure in the midst of the dust. “Go for hands.”

“Roger roger.” Roy pushed himself to a half-stand only to hear a sickening crunch from the direction of the SUV’s hood. Everything went dark. And quiet.

“Move, move,” Jason hissed. Roy could hear Red Hood scrambling on the uneven terrain of the roof, trying to get to a new position. Roy circled the rooftop in the other direction, spare bow in hand, and aware that they both had to move slower. Maybe fifty percent of the roof was still intact and safe to travel – he had to hope the fire escape was part of that intact structure.

“Hood!” Roy shouted.

His grasping fingers caught the Red Hood’s leather jacket and held as Jason scrabbled for a foothold, adjusting to grip Roy’s wrist instead. Slamming into both Roy and the wall barrier had slowed down his momentum enough that he could pull himself back up. The Red Hood patted Roy’s shoulder once in rough, shaky thanks before both of them ran for the fire escape.

“I want Gotham,” the Lantern said, yellow light growing brighter around her form until it outlined her in the darkness. “Dear old dad wants the Bats gone. And you know? There’s a way to do both. Erase you all. Destroy the evidence. I would’ve started with Dick, to save him grief, but he put up
too much of a fight at the bridge. So, I’ll start with you.”

The light was getting greener, Roy realized with sudden concern. Brighter and greener and... wasn’t the Joker supposed to have a green power ring? Red Hood must have been having the same thought because his grip on Roy’s arm tightened painfully. Jason practically flung the archer at the fire escape, whispering ‘go, go, go.’ As if Roy wouldn’t.

The Red Hood ducked below the roof edge just as the Lantern was picking up the SUV again. Since Roy was ahead of him, that should’ve cut off his view, but she whistled for their attention. When they looked up, she held the vehicle, its nearly-dead lights flickering with the movement, directly over the fire escape.

“Afraid that exit’s blocked!” she said, and dropped it.

“JUMP!”

It wasn’t Jason who yelled, but Roy jumped anyway.

The two-ton vehicle came crashed down through the fire escape landings, buoyed for only seconds as it slammed through each one and gained momentum. Red Hood had tried to grab him and grapple at once, but a yellow lasso yanked the grappling gun out of his reach. It figured that the Red Hood was going to die angry about something. And Roy would die—

Something hit them, travelling upwards at a rate of speed exceeding their own. It knocked the wind out of him and, at first, Roy’s mind informed him it was the car. But that didn’t make sense, the vehicle had reached the ground with a crash and Roy hadn’t. The archer felt a warm arm wrap around his chest, hearing an accompanying whoosh of air that suggested the Red Hood had experienced the same thing.

“Kori!” Roy cried, when he could breathe again. He didn’t want to explain he recognized her smell.

“You were meant to call for backup when you found them,” the princess replied, the words taking no effort away from her flying out of the area as fast as they could go.

“How—how did you know?” Roy asked.

Starfire shot him a bemused look. “What did you think I was doing up there all this time? She is the only glowing and moving source of light in the area. And then she threw a vehicle onto the building’s roof. You two should be the only people left in Old Gotham, aside from those who couldn’t be safely restrained. It isn’t hard to conclude that you weren’t doing well.”

“We can’t just leave her to it.” The Red Hood fidgeted, his attention never wavering from the neighborhoods passing below, though he didn’t struggle much. “Put me down, I’ll go back—”

“I have already informed the Batman of her presence,” Kori replied, tightening her hold on him. “He reminds you that you are a scouting party only and that it is past your agreed-upon time. We still have not located the Joker.”

“I thought you were him at first,” Roy whispered, thinking of the growing green light from earlier.

“I’ll admit that was my intention, but only to affect the Lantern’s guard.” Kori sounded distracted and he could feel her shifting to look over her shoulder. “There is no time to waste. Batman and Nightwing are rendezvousing with Black Bat to thoroughly check the area for the Joker. I will drop you off with your vehicle.”
“Joker’s not gonna be here,” Jason said, before giving Kori instructions on how to find his cycle. “Do you have an open line to Tim?”

“He has not been very responsive, but yes,” Kori replied, shifting the position of her head so Jason could remove the comm. “Did this Lantern tell you what the Joker wants?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, settling the comm into his ear. “If he hasn’t done it already, he’s going to rob Wayne Enterprises.”

#

“Can’t we catch a damn break?” were the first words out of Red Robin’s mouth at the revelation. From where he crouched, restraining three Arkham inmates who had holed up in an appliance store, Damian glanced up to assess whether the comm call was important. Tim called up the security footage from Wayne Enterprises on his wrist computer, scanning for any sign of activity or break-ins in the past two hours. The last thing they needed was the Project Muninn artifact in play and in the Joker’s hands.

“Is it there?? Replacement?” Jason demanded over their comm channel.

“It’s gone,” Tim said, feeling the headache begin behind his eyes. He waited for a break in Jason’s cursing before continuing. “We all have minimal amounts of bare skin in uniform, Hood, it’s not like he can just tap us on the shoulder.”

“Really? You want to tell me of all people that having your uniform shredded and skin exposed while the Joker is trying to kill you is… unlikely?”

Damian looked back down at the inmates he was restraining but not before Tim saw his ‘better you than me, stupid’ smirk. It took Tim another thirty seconds to try to calm Jason down, at which point the Red Hood cut the channel.

“Well, idiot,” Damian said, getting to his feet. “It sounds as though your failure to resolve the memory issue continues to plague us.”

Tim didn’t respond, checking instead on the nearest cluster of inmates through the wrist computer’s VPN to the Batcomputer. He moved into the shadow of the store, away from the glaring street lights, to get a better look, leaving Damian to make the ‘can you pick these up too?’ call to Starfire. No word from Batman or Nightwing. Or anyone, really. It felt more and more as if they were alone out here, doing groundwork and bickering, like they’d been sentenced to sit at the kids’ table during a family event.

“Next steps,” Damian said, having followed him into the shadow. “If you are just going to brood, I will leave you here.”

“No, stay with me. The Joker won’t have stolen it himself, which means he’s still on the streets,” Tim said, without turning. “And we both know he’s got the capacity to capture multiple Robins when he wants to. Stay together, you keep your hood up—”

“Batman nixed the hood when I left.”

“Then watch your head. If I have to single-handedly remember both you and Red Hood for the rest of the family, I think I’ll go back to San Francisco.” Tim began heading for the Financial District, shooting off an open message to the rest of the Bat clan about the artifact. Short enough that it wouldn’t distract them from a fight, long enough that they would know what they were getting into.
“What about your head?” Damian asked, when Tim had finished delivering the message to the rest of their compatriots. “Not that it’s worth protecting, but I certainly don’t want to be the only one remembering you.”

“Sounds like you’re getting jealous of Red Hood’s helmet,” Tim replied, even as Batman got back on the comms, saying that if the artifact was in the field, Robin and Red Robin should focus their efforts on tracking it down. Tim bit back the bitter reply that came to mind (“oh, really B, you’d like me to be smart now?”) and headed instead for the police station. Night was falling, Batman was already working, but Commissioner Gordon was well-known for being a friend to Batman. If Joker’s goons needed to create chaos on the most chaotic night of the year, making everyone forget Gordon would be a good first step.

And Tim couldn’t be sure Joker wouldn’t just beat people to death with the artifact. Honestly, that sounded a lot more in character.

#

Though Batman had agreed to take to the streets early, he still gave the Red Hood and Arsenal more than enough time in Old Gotham to evacuate the hangers on. Instead, he spent the late afternoon supporting the police as their numbers dwindled. It would be a second or third shift for most of them tonight, assuming the Arkham inmates didn’t go underground. As it was, an entire district had been (briefly) held hostage by Zsasz and the resulting debacle took them over an hour to resolve safely. The assassin shorted out the comms for a second and when they came back, everyone was chorusing ‘nope’ for some reason. Batman let it go – because he was taking fire.

A liability in daylight, he’d called himself, and he wasn’t incorrect.

Finally, Batman had restrained Zsasz, while Nightwing bagged the rest of his goons, and called for Starfire to come pick up. She responded that she was busy and, also, hadn’t the boys told him Duela was in Old Gotham?

He’d grappled off without a word. Nightwing fell into airborne stride alongside him and, as they travelled, Red Robin made his report about the artifact and the intention – information he’d probably collected from Red Hood but which the helmeted vigilante hadn’t seen fit to share with everyone.

Nightwing cast sidelong glances at Batman when he thought he wasn’t looking. Fair enough, Batman decided, given his grinding teeth. Out of all of them, Nightwing was the most exposed, uniform-wise. Batman couldn’t contain his worry about that. The pair travelled fast and high above the Gotham streets, towards Old Gotham where Duela had been spotted. Black Bat was already there but hadn’t engaged. Duela, for her part, hadn’t been spotted anyone else. She might be waiting for them.

Batman didn’t know how he felt about that, but it made it easier to plan their arrival.

On the way over, he’d authorized Robin and Red Robin to bring the Commissioner up to speed on the Lantern Corps arriving. He’d intended to do it himself, but time wasn’t on their side anymore. Tim could weather any fallout and Bruce would… apologize later. For his part, he had contacted the Lantern Corps delegation (three Green Lanterns, two rookie and one senior member, none of them Lanterns that Duela had attacked on her escape) before he and Nightwing left to let the delegation know their arrival should be quiet. Gotham was already in crisis. No one would be of a mind to differentiate between the two homicidal Lanterns flying around and three new Green Lanterns, not in the midst of an Arkham breakout. The Corps representative, the senior officer, told Batman without hesitation that a human could not take on a member of the Lantern Corps. She underlined to Batman that a vigilante, such as himself, would only be sacrificing all he had achieved and all his city needed
him for, by taking on such a disproportionate battle. Batman told her he didn’t intend to fight the Lantern.

When he had gotten off the communicator with her, Nightwing coughed politely, glanced in the direction they were heading, and said: “Well, then we’re not going to Old Gotham, are we.”

Batman had looked back and said: “Of course we are.”

They hadn’t spoken much since. The pair landed at the place where the lights ended, where something or someone had taken down the power grid. Red Hood had said they might find Scarecrow here, though it was more likely the man would ignore his injuries and drag himself to a safer location. Finding Duela required only that they search for the yellow light Red Hood had mentioned. Black Bat joined them from the shadows.

“Moved,” she said, pointing. “Up.”

“How long ago?”

“Minutes. Thirteen. Staying up.”

Nightwing shifted position to get a better look at the Gotham’s clouded sky, where the light pollution of the city turned the cloud landscape into an ever-shifting palette; nothing could be found unless it was substantially brighter than the rest of the sky. “When I say I’ll go high, this isn’t generally what I mean.”

“And the Joker?” Batman asked Black Bat, who shook her head. The movement had an un-Cass-like hesitation to it, thinking about the rest of her family’s safety rather than the absence of the Joker in this environment.

“I know,” Batman said, one eye on the skies. “I don’t like this either.”

None of the goons and other nefarious persons surrounding the police station had been entrusted with the artifact. While Drake and Damian were cracking heads, they slowly learned that the goons’ charge was to kidnap James Gordon, get him away from the police station (none of them appeared to know how far, just ‘away’), and take him to whoever had control of the artifact. As per usual with the Joker’s plans, a lot of it depended on no one person having all the pieces except for the Joker.

By the time the goons were all imprisoned, Damian’s patience was fraying.

Drake, on the other hand, had somehow acquired a police station thermos full of crappy coffee and was alternating gulps of the liquid with attempting to locate the tracker his intern Hannah should’ve placed on the item when W.E. first acquired it. Damian wasn’t sure exactly how Drake could still drink the coffee. It had been an attempt at a ‘thank you’ from Gordon, so Damian had been compelled by politeness to try it. He knew the brews Drake usually drank, he knew what passed for ‘coffee’ in the Americas – this vile substance met neither specification. No wonder the Commissioner smoked.

The pair sat on the roof of the police station, Damian half-hidden by the Batsignal while Drake sat on the edge of the roof. Damian kept a covert eye on their surroundings as Drake researched. The Commissioner had gone back down to ensure the goons experienced due process, despite the overcrowding of GCPD cells.

“Where to next, Drake?” Damian asked.
“Field names, we’re literally sitting on top of the GCPD,” Drake said, slurping at the bottom of the thermos. Oh good, so he did know where they were and how stupidly exposed he was. “And I’ll know where it is in seconds.”

“I’ll just tell Batman those were your last words then,” Damian echoed back, in perfect vocal mimicry of Drake’s earlier statement.

“Fine, do that,” Drake said, flinching only a little at the impersonation. He forgot it as the program chimed. “There, we’ve got a lock. Finally. They damaged the GPS when they stole it, but the proximity alerts are still responding.”

“Where is it then?” Damian had his grappling gun in hand.

“…overhead?” Instead of moving, Drake brought the readout closer, squinting at it, adding more data to the search parameters. “That can’t be right.”

Damian would’ve kicked Drake off the side of the roof if he could’ve trusted Red Robin to catch himself. Instead, he grabbed the back of the Red Robin uniform and yanked Drake off the roof along with himself, firing the grappling line as they fell. Drake made some hand gesture that closed out of the wrist-computer program, seconds before Damian let go of him at the low end of their swing. Red Robin went crashing through one of the opposing building’s windows with a rewarding ‘smash’ and Damian stabbed at the ‘retract’ button on the grappling line. The device yanked him upwards, the younger vigilante using its momentum to flip and land on a window ledge several stories above.

Muttering threats into their comm channel, Drake reappeared at the window, barely visible in the now-dim light.

“Was that necessary?” Drake asked in a hiss. “Double-checking data kills no one, whereas you could’ve—”

“It is safer to be split up,” Damian said. He wouldn’t bother denying that he’d enjoyed pitching Drake at a window. “I have reached the roof. Do you have an estimate on the device’s current height?”

“I would have,” Drake grumbled, pausing to call up something that glowed against his arm. That was all Damian could see from his current angle. “It moved west. Maybe a hundred sixty feet above the police station. The proximity alerts are only designed to be accurate to three hundred feet so, given my current elevation, it’s harder to tell than before. Do you see anything from the roof?”

“Negative.” Damian checked the skies again, hearing the firing of a grappling gun as Drake vacated the lower levels. Reviewing his environment one final time, Damian followed him westward, swinging from one building to the next at a higher altitude than Red Robin, who apparently didn’t feel motivated to move any higher. Not… unintelligent, Damian reflected, and decreased his swinging height slightly.

“How is your progress on Lantern containment techniques?” Damian asked. Anyone else probably would have laughed at the idea that they had spare time to work on side projects. Drake, the workaholic, made a speculative sound.

“Nothing I’d want to test right now. I’m still hoping the designs I gave them for a power dampener weren’t what they were using when she escaped.”

“I’m sure they have better technology available than your haphazard science projects.”

“Y’know, I used to think that. Then I saw how much of what I was making got put into prototypes,
with or without consulting me, and I realized adults don’t know what the hell they’re doing sometimes.” Though he had been flickering in and out of building shadows for the past ten minutes, Red Robin vanished from view – and stayed gone.

“Red?” Damian asked, verbally confirming that he couldn’t see the other vigilante.

“Switching to groundwork.”

“Because you think you’re better at running?” Damian said. He didn’t feel contemptuous, but it was how the words fit together when he said them.

“Because I’m in a fight,” Drake shot back. “Get backup.”

Damian had already begun his descent. “For what? Sewer rats? We do not have time for you to be getting into fights, Red Robin, we are on the path of the artifact.”

Red Robin ignored him. Damian had no choice but to descend into the alleyways, following the same logical path that Drake would have taken. The other vigilante must still be moving, he realized, since he quickly travelled more than three blocks from where he had last seen Red Robin. The alleyways showed signs of brawling, which Drake didn’t excel in, and while he could hear the fight, Damian kept arriving seconds too late to enter or see it. Irritated, he issued an open call for backup to anyone near the neighborhood, emphasizing that they had confirmation of the artifact but no confirmation of a Lantern.

“Yes, we do,” Drake said, interrupting him over the comms. Damian wouldn’t admit to the relief that flooded him at the sound of Drake’s voice – it had now been twenty minutes since he had seen anything other than signs that Red Robin had been there and been in a fight.

“Then get out of it, idiot,” Damian said instead. “You can’t fight a Lantern!”

Drake cut the comm channel, presumably so he could continue focusing on keeping the fight just ahead of Damian’s ability to enter it, in some mad, masochistic desire to keep Damian safe…

The Robin put on a burst of speed at the thought, truly angry now.

Using the overturned dumpsters, walls, and his grappling line, he increased his speed until he could have fetched the entire Batfamily to their aid in under thirty minutes, if he could have maintained the speed. Damn Drake. Damn his know-it-all, self-sacrificing tendencies. Damian rushed past other potential combatants, swung around corners without adequate prep, was certain he demolished a car roof when he had to use it for one of his landings. He still wasn’t fast enough.

When Robin broke out of the final alley, knowing he could only be seconds behind the fight, he broke out into the shipping yards at a run. Row upon row of storage containers and miserable lines of sight, crowned by the skeletal structures that moved them. No doubt existed in his mind that this was where the fight was now, more than seventeen blocks from where it had originally begun.

Following the yellow glow now, instead of the sounds of the battle, he focused on catching his breath. They wouldn’t go back into the city from here, not with this ‘open’ space available. His vision spun a little with the adrenaline, but the fight was visible now.

Damian realized with discomfort that hadn’t been the only one moving at breakneck speed.

Red Robin used the grappling line closer to how one would fling a tetherball around a pole, making minute adjustments with his gauntlets the way Batman and Nightwing had spent years instructing Robin to never do because if you didn’t time it correctly, the line would break your hand.
The grappling line was tough and unforgiving of reckless actions, they’d told Damian; like anything used for the Bats’ warfare against villainy. It didn’t take prisoners.

Instead of considering this, Drake went faster and ever closer to the floating Yellow Lantern, attempting to restrain her with the grappling line and deliver close-range attacks at once. He’d managed to block most of Duela’s line of sight, which was his only wise move, but she was struggling and twisting to get free as he wove the grappling line around her.

Distracting him wouldn’t help and Damian already felt unsettled Drake’s chosen method of fighting. 

*Nightwing* had the capacity and speed for the moves he was making, as did Black Bat. Possibly Robin, were he not already winded. Not Red Robin and certainly not Red Hood or Batman.

The second she could see anything, Red Robin was toast.

Damian crossed several shipping containers to get a closer look, careful not to be seen or heard by Drake. It didn’t matter – Drake must have sensed the sound of his footfalls or noticed vision out of the corner of his eye. The fool looked up, the way they had all been taught never to do, failed to see Robin, and the unforgiving grappling line snapped at his hand. Drake yelped and Duela tossed her head back in his direction.

Her head connected with his torso, and the flailing blow must have had the force of her whole body behind it – even risking whiplash or spinal injury if she hadn’t connected – because knocked Red Robin off-course, putting him in closer range to one of her relatively-unrestrained knees. She doubled-up, knocking Drake first in the solar plexus and then kicking both feet together to send him slamming backwards into one of the shipping containers with a resounding ‘clang’.

Red Robin recovered, up and running across the containers. Damian hesitated to follow, still unnoticed by the Yellow Lantern. He wasn’t Drake, to think he could fight her, and he knew she could see now.

The blindfold Red Robin had somehow gotten over her head had moved, and she looked around the yards with interest. It took her seconds to spot Red Robin, to rise in the air and set the rows of shipping containers rattling beneath him. Some kind of giant mole creature, Damian would guess, based on his vantage point from several rows over. Less than a second passed as she brightened the light around her until the grappling line’s restraints fried. Drake wouldn’t have a spare, since he’d only had that one and the gun he’d given to Damian. Grounded.

As usual, Drake, you didn’t think things through.

Damian reopened a private comm channel to Red Robin, intending to tell him to get down, when he saw Duela’s attention shift to himself. The golden light turned. He could see the much-vaulted artifact, held in one of her gloved hands, free of any other containment methods.

Damian sent another open call for backup over comms. No point in running, no point in pretending his position hadn’t been compromised.

Watching Duela approach, gliding vampiric over the surface of the shipping containers, Damian heard Drake mutter a curse through the comms. Whether that meant Red Robin would come back or he was too injured to be of any use was anyone’s guess.

Damian found himself hoping for the latter. There was no point in both of them getting erased.
Take this sinking boat and point it home, we’ve still got time

Chapter Notes

Lanterns are OP and fight scenes with Batfam vs. Lanterns is, like, not a good idea. So, here we go. Things not going well. Chapter title is from ‘Falling Slowly’ in the ‘Once’ musical, so I’m sorta cheating, but Damian and Tim’s relationship defies a lot of musicals. Not to mention, it’s not a very calm chapter and I think they’d both like to go home atm. And the Lanterns would like everyone to go home and I would like to sleep.

Thank you, all, for your patience and readership. I did rewrite this chapter a couple of times, so hopefully there are more ‘this is the changing plan’ than 'this isn't continuity' coupled with a healthy dose of wisdom from cross-stitching: ‘oh my God, don't look (at the) back.’ Thanks all, again, and g'night. I think a chapter of 'never be the first to believe' should be up this week as well.

“I hope if you plan on erasing me, we won’t waste a lot of time on banter,” Damian said, his voice crystalline over the comm channel in Tim’s ear even if his words weren’t directed at Tim. Red Robin crouched behind the shipping container, where he’d both gotten out of Duela’s line of sight and finally escaped the giant mole creature she’d sent after him. He was beginning to form an opinion of her constructs by now: everything she sent was either knife-shaped, energy bolts, or semi-organic. Maybe it had something to do with the ring’s previous owner, but she didn’t seem to know how to make much else, yet.

Hopefully, she wouldn’t have time to use Damian as a test subject. Think, he told himself. Get time on your side.

Damian bantered with Duela, which meant he was planning something on his own. The Yellow Lantern’s voice wasn’t getting picked up by the comm channel, so Tim kept moving, heel to toe, towards the pair. The plan became to get as close as he could before climbing back up onto one of the shipping containers, without his grappling gun and running low on batarangs.

By the time Duela’s replies to Damian’s jibes became audible, only three shipping containers lay between them and Tim. He moved into the shadow of a stack of the units and climbed noiselessly to the surface of a stack of just two. He used to think drills for moving silently on a shipping container’s surface were ridiculous, but Batman’s paranoia had paid off, time and again. More than a few times, Tim had caught out villains just from the clanging and banging of panicked feet on metal.

Suddenly, Batman’s voice was in his ear: “Robin, Red Robin, report.”

“Duela chased me to the yards. Robin’s cornered, I’m concealed and out of grappling guns,” Tim said. “Backup would be good.”

“It’s been dispatched to your location. Do not engage,” Batman replied, after a moment. “Joker isn’t present in Old Gotham, we’re searching.”

Tim could hear the unspoken irritation in his voice, the tacit demand of ‘why would you drag Damian into this?’ He wanted to shout at Batman that he hadn’t. His mad dash across the city had been initiated by Duela. She knew Damian was around, ignored him, pursued Tim at nightmarish
speeds all the way to the yards, and made damn sure he knew why. She wanted Tim dead, not erased. Damian… may or may not know that part.

“If you call him out, I’ll give you a whole minute to run,” Duela said, loud enough to be heard without amplification. “I bet you can get real far in a minute.”

“Is it even any fun to chase him?” Damian replied. Tim crept forward on top of the shipping container, mapping what he’d seen in his head and the constructs she seemed to favor. She liked flying but wasn’t close to being as maneuverable as a traditional meta or Kryptonian. If he could get Damian shepherded to at least three hundred feet from her, she’d probably resort to energy bolts, rather than trying to catch them from the air or sustain a construct (her maximum duration appeared to be two minutes or less). It was the energy bolts that she was best with; unsurprising, for the Joker’s Daughter.

If Duela was only this good with constructs after weeks with the ring, and still kept trying to make organic ones, Tim found himself not all that worried about the Joker’s fledgling abilities.

“It is when he thinks he can still run,” Duela said in answer to Damian’s question. Tim took a breath, hearing the impatience in her voice. Nothing to wait for. Never a better time.

He moved to the side of the closest stack of shipping containers, delivering an attention-getting kick that made the entire stack reverberate with a ‘clang’. Then, he moved to the next. Speed would be the key; moving swiftly enough that by the time she followed one of the sounds, he would be at another stack, and so on. He calculated a minimum of nine stack transitions, with the possibility of going up to as many as seventeen, depending on how Duela moved.

He arrived at Damian’s unit on stack transition number nineteen, though Robin had long since drawn his grapple and leapt away. At 8.5 feet on average, transitioning between stacks the way Red Robin barely could would be too dangerous for the shorter Damian. Tim would stay grounded, draw fire. Not bad for a nonverbal, on-the-fly kind of plan but Tim was getting tired of groundwork.

“How is it I’m always cleaning up your messes?” Tim asked, dropping off the current shipping container stack and onto the concrete below.

Robin ‘tsk’ed into their shared comm channel. “Because even your distractions are lacking.”

“You can do the next one then,” Tim said, throwing himself into a headlong roll to switch between stacks. Some ways behind them, an energy bolt came blazing across the yards, slicing into a nearby stack and burning a hole clean through.

“You should have said she was pursuing you,” Damian grunted.

“Yeah, well, where’s that backup I asked you to call?” Tim shot back.

“You heard Batman,” Robin replied, reappearing for a moment only to vanish over the top of one of the stacks. “And it’s not his fault she hates you. Perhaps you shouldn’t have thrown your lot in with Todd.”

Red Robin drew breath to reply something scathing when the energy bolt – smaller, calculated – took him in the back. It wasn’t even so much the blast as it was the slamming into the stack in front of him, feeling himself hit it wrong because he was still preoccupied with the burn. Tim tried to push himself up immediately and met the ground with his face. A draft moved over the charred skin of his back and crap, he’d told everyone to avoid having skin exposed, where the artifact could have an effect. He needed a better hiding place.
He scowled, did a kip-up… and staggered into the stack of containers at the resulting lightheadedness. Do not bend and roll a scorched back across concrete. Message received. He swiped at his bleeding nose.

“Red Robin, confirm location,” Robin said over the comms. Tim twisted to catch a glimpse of the Lantern gliding through the shipping containers, searching for wherever he’d flown with the blast. She didn’t have erasure on her mind, not with the force of that blow. And Robin hadn’t seen what’d happened, he just lost sight of Red Robin. If Tim said anything about being injured, Damian would feel quid pro quo was in order and double back.

“Confirmed. I have one,” Red Robin said.

“Drake, I swear, if you are lying injured in the stacks somewhere—”

“You’ll kill me? And field names, God, I know she knows and all, but you don’t hafta broadcast.”

Damian must have found the response uncharacteristic. “Location. Now.”

“Nope. You’ll come get killed and I’m not showing up to another funeral for you.” Red Robin pushed off the stack, noting Duela noticing him and approaching rapidly. The death mask fluttered in a mix of rage and pride and Tim had to adjust his footing, retrieving the last three of his batarangs. Why hadn’t she attacked yet? She twirled the artifact and took a step forward. Oh. Yes, it would make sense to erase him first, then kill him. Maximum impact.

Tim made the executive decision that he wasn’t going to let her do that.

“Red Robin, stop blocking your location!” Robin shouted over comms. The kid must be attempting a trace.

She’d have to come in close, because the artifact wasn’t that long in the first place. Tim played up his injuries, shifting the weight onto his back foot in a feigned retreat. Nothing exposed should come close to her. No turning around; not for anything, not even an attack. She needed to be entirely focused on attacking him with the artifact head on, because if she got in another energy bolt, he wouldn’t be able to get up.

Fight smart, Tim.

Duela was righthanded, would use a backhand for the strike since it would give her more power. Tim intentionally lifted his right arm in a low-grade shielding motion, misleading her into thinking his only concern would be preventing more injury.

As expected, the artifact came at his head moving from left to right. He yanked the ‘shielding’ right arm into a block and reached across with his left to grab the artifact as it impacted. The tool hit his gauntlet and arm hard as he ducked his head but it didn’t touch anything exposed, he repeated to himself. It didn’t, it didn’t, it couldn’t—

He closed fingers around the artifact, shifted position to pull it out of her grip and kick her away as he twisted, putting all his coins into the gamble that he would grab the artifact. Though she’d been expecting some sort of return attack, Duela hadn’t been expecting him to jeopardize so much to get a hold of it. The item came away from her grasp easily. Not that he could go anywhere with it. Wrapping it into his chest, simultaneous with ensuring it couldn’t touch any exposed part of him, Red Robin dropped to the ground.

He curled around the artifact like a dedicated football player beneath a dogpile – and stayed there.
“If you are dead when I arrive, I won’t be happy,” Damian hissed into the comm channel, sounding beyond angry already.

Nice to have confirmation that everyone still remembered him, Tim thought. Duela had started kicking him, in an attempt to get him to turn over, but he didn’t know what Damian would be able to do against her when he arrived, aside from die. Tim also didn’t have a hand free to call Bruce and tell the backup to hurry their asses up.

“That’s a first,” Tim said, feeling blood dripping from his nose. He also couldn’t pass out, no matter how nice it sounded, because Duela would just retrieve the artifact from his limp body. As it was, he was lucky to be still lying on the concrete, rather than dropped repeatedly onto it like a seagull with a crab.

“Robin, Red Robin, report.”

Bruce. Tim curled tighter around the artifact, feeling more than blood start to drip from his face.

“Batman, we need the backup now.” It took too much energy to convince himself not to try running, knowing that if he got to his feet, he’d fall over. “Damian can’t take her and I can’t—”

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Damian arrived on the scene as Drake’s voice cut out of the comm channel.

“Inbound to rescuing Red Robin, Batman,” Robin said, and muted his end of the channel.

Training took over, in situations like this, so he didn’t allow himself to think about Drake’s pitiful positioning. His back was exposed to the enemy, first of all, and it took a moment for Damian to realize that Duela no longer had the artifact in hand. Her raggedly-breathing victim, huddled around some invisible item, did.

“Always cleaning up your messes, Red,” Damian whispered and crashed onto Duela’s head from above, bringing with him all the force of the grappling line in a peregrine falcon’s descent.

Yes, he knew better. He was not supposed to engage, everyone said. Batman in his ear said that the backup should arrive any minute now and the Lanterns were 11.1 minutes out. Damian failed to care. He knocked Duela back from Drake’s form, expecting Red Robin to get to his feet and run as soon as he was no longer being threatened like an alley cat. Duela didn’t initiate any banter this time around, going directly for the energy bolt approach. When coming from head on, they were easy to avoid. By the time Damian had outrun her for a minute (12 bolts to your evasion of two, Drake, by the way), he turned back to check Drake’s progress.

Red Robin had made it to a standing position, stumbled several feet to the nearest stack, and listed against it, still half-hunched around the artifact.

“Move, imbecile,” Damian said into their private comm channel, dodging another of the bolts. “I may make this look easy but we have no time for recovery!”

“Stabbed me in the leg,” Drake mumbled, sounding faint. “s not artery but ’s close.”

“Why would you let her stab you in the leg?!”

“Art’fct. ’s r’son couldn’t fix it either. Whoo.” The sound came as Drake slumped against the shipping containers, almost out of sight and partially concealed in the shadows. His next words were more coherent, underscored with urgency. “Batman, do we have fliers in route?”
Father had not heard the earlier portions of the conversation, so he reminded Tim that the backup was on its way. Robin growled, unsure whether to double back to rejoin (and half-carry) Drake or continue distracting Duela. Not that that was going all that well. Only minutes stood between himself and ending up with similar injuries.

“Red Robin, move!” he settled on barking.

Drake finished up some task that Damian hoped wasn’t spraying skin adhesive around the knife still in the wound and staggered out of sight.

“’m clear. G’t outta there, Robin.”

“Gladly.”

Damian grappled away in the opposite direction of Drake, hoping that she would follow. “Batman, I need the incoming heading for the Lanterns. She is on my tail.”

“Lantern ETA is 7.3 minutes out for two units, approaching from the northeast, through City Hall District. The third unit is addressing transport and restraint of combatants in Old Gotham. Joker is also inbound from the west, pursued by Black Bat, myself, and Nightwing. He’s alone.”

Damian resisted the urge to blurt out an instinctual, Todd-like curse in response. “You said there was backup!”

“Outlaw backup, now featuring Red Robin,” Todd cut in over the public comm channel. “What the hell did you let happen to the Replacement?! Kid looks like he fought the sun.”

This time, Damian couldn’t resist a gut response. “Perhaps if you fought your own battles, he wouldn’t be pursued as collateral by your enemies.”

Speaking of which, he checked over his shoulder as he landed on one of the metal structures and noted that Duela wasn’t gaining on him – she held back, eyes on the sky before them, and Damian felt dread sink into his stomach. Green light approached, some from the northeast, traveling at speed, and one light from the west, traveling slower and more erratically. Baiting. Even so, the westward light would arrive first. Duela veered away from following him and directed her course towards the light from the west. Damian had to chase her now, knowing that if she turned around, any attack could prove fatal.

“Duela’s joining up with Joker,” he said on the public comm line. “Batman, what’s the rendezvous point?”

Ordinarily they would fight until the battle was done and rendezvous at the closest safehouse from their location, but the youngest Robin didn’t feel certain in this instance if the safehouse would be far enough away from the action... or if Starfire could get Drake there without being tailed. Not that he was worried about Drake; Red Robin just made it sound like the knife was too close to the artery to walk on and he still had the artifact. Damian experienced nothing but proportional concern for the mission.

“Withdraw to point 53,” Batman said, using the code for a slightly more distant safehouse. “Travel priority.” Meaning minimizing instances of ‘stop and assist.’

Robin complied, only to spot Duela dropping out of the sky, back towards the shipping containers. The green light of the Joker kept approaching, putting on speed and drifting downwards as well. He couldn’t see the grappling lines of his father and the other Bats yet but it was only a matter of time.
“Outlaws, Red Robin, they’re converging on your location,” Damian said, moving with new urgency towards where the Outlaws would be extracting Red Robin, if not providing fire support. In tandem with his words, Duela vanished, the yellow light winking out like the death of a star.

“No shit,” Todd growled. “Keep outta the sky, Robin.” Translation, I’m going to be shooting at shadows. “Kori, can you get Red out?”

Damian was still making his approach via the stacks when he saw Starfire glide into the sky, collect herself to accelerate away – and instead take an energy bolt to the head. Red Hood shouted her name over the comms and he heard Arsenal’s terrified cry as well. The Yellow Lantern shot out from behind one of the stacks where she had been hiding and yelled something about ‘that being for earlier,’ but no one but Damian would have noticed. Starfire fell, taking Drake with her. Too distant to catch, even if Duela wasn’t a threat. They left his field of vision.

“Report!” Robin shouted into his comm. He couldn’t care about the desperation in his voice anymore. If either of them had hit the ground…

“Caught ’em,” the Red Hood grunted, coughing. Damian could only imagine he meant manually, in the flying-tackle way Todd usually had of catching people. “Red’s still got the artifact but our aerial support’s gone. And…” Todd trailed off, listening to an agonized, insistent voice just off-comms. “Nah, it’s fine. I’m sure it’s fine, Red. Breathe. Breathe, bud. Shit, his leg—Arse, cover us, I’ve gotta get this knife out before it actually severs somethin’. If it hasn’t already.”

Damian landed heavily on a stack of the shipping containers, securing a line of sight on the group. As he expected, Arsenal fired arrow after arrow on Duela’s hovering form, all of them falling short. Todd enacted an emergency medical setup, checking the health readings from Drake’s suit and alternating care with Starfire, who lay unmoving next to Red Robin. Battle maintenance, in the open only because there was no cover that would stay cover for long.

“Robin,” Drake’s thin voice came through the comms on the open channel. Damian heard the twin swift inhalations that meant Batman and Nightwing had just realized how dire the need for backup was, even when bracketed against the Joker fight. “You still remember Red Hood?”


“Um,” Drake said, voice distant with effort. “Cause the artifact broke.”
I’ve had this one written in bits and pieces and it’s slowly coming together, though I’m unhappy with my writing quality lately (yeah… starting NOW… XD). Endings with a big cast are… tricky and somehow that’s what I’ve created (a big cast that is). Also, I didn’t think I’d get to write one of the scenes in this chapter. Wanted to, wrote it, didn’t think it’d be usable, AND YET.

I’m hopeful (and doubtful) that nothing in this chapter conflicts majorly with what has been said before about rules on the artifact. If you do go back for any reason and find that there are parts of the story that have changed and you are annoyed… yes, I did do several rewrites in September and January/February, because consistency was *cough* a train wreck. I apologize for the errors, all errors - current, prior, and future. I already know that I’ll glance at the chapter in a day or two and be like ‘damnit, that’s terrible phrasing/contrasts with this/arrrrghhh’, but if I don’t post it, I’ll never post it. So thank you. You’re all terrific for hanging in there with this meandering, emotional ride.

Chapter title is ‘The Goodbye Song’ which is technically from Smash but for those of you following along at home (?), you want the George Salazar and Joe Iconis version from ‘Two-Player Game’.

Green Lantern of Sector 1491, M Baberak, decided that their ‘Batman’ contact knew nothing about Green Lanterns, Space Sectors (more importantly, the size of Sectors), or about being a tour guide.

That last gap was becoming more and more important as the evening wore on. The three assigned Lanterns had landed in a country called Nova Scotia, because Batman had not set up a tracking beacon for them to follow. Then he had failed to respond to the Sector Lead’s repeated hails and, when he finally did, explained that he needed them to ‘wait a while’ and ‘avoid upsetting the populace’. It felt like they were anthropologists, trying to avoid contaminating the locals with their alienness.

Given that they were three uniformed, largely non-bipedal entities in the middle of a humble Earth town that seemed to be composed solely of battered wooden buildings painted cheerful colors, Baberak figured the damage was done.

The Sector Lead for Sectors 1400 through 1415, Kaiya, worked with Batman’s second in command, Penny-One, to set up the beacon. In the process, the pair of them made the discovery that they were nearly 900 miles off course. Baberak could still hear Kaiya’s muttered swearing while the Sector Lead entered the butler’s directions and coordinates into each of their communicators.

Meanwhile, Sector 0062’s Green Lantern, Jygarandur, sighed into the membranes of her webbed fingers, wings wrapped tightly around her small frame in an effort to seal out the cold air. She didn’t complain otherwise. Baberak patted her narrow back to communicate a sort of camaraderie.

“They say that Hal Jordan avoided parts of his own homeworld,” Baberak said.

“Hal Jordan probably couldn’t find anything big enough to fight here,” the Sector Lead said, before
Jygarandur could stop shivering long enough to reply. “Baberak, I want you on this Joker character. They seem to think they’ll need a heavy to stop him. Jy, you’re on containment. The butler convinced them to place a beacon in ‘Old Gotham’ and we’ll flag you when we need you elsewhere. The city isn’t more than 300 square miles, population of less than ten million, in Earth estimates.”

Now Jy did stop shivering, pulling her head out of the nest of her wings. “Seriously? And they have trouble with that small of a space?”

“Only when they get two rogue Lanterns. Remember, Earthers are mostly harmless and a bit pissy about it. Don’t rub it in.”

Baberak tried not to let amusement show on her face. At Baberak’s standing eleven feet tall with a prehensile tail, plus her ‘heavy’ status at 800 pounds, showing up anywhere in Earth space qualified as ‘rubbing it in.’

“I’ll be taking on the Yellow who took out Sector 1067’s Lantern,” Kaiya finished, stowing her communicator in her uniform’s many-pocketed belt. “Get this done in under three hours and you’re both free to return to your Sectors.”

They left Nova Scotia with little fanfare and no applause. Unlike most towns or planets, Baberak reflected, Earth seemed happy when Lanterns left places. It still boggled the mind to think that this ‘mostly harmless’ place had generated a Lantern capable of taking out Nuran – the entity Kaiya just called ‘Sector 1067’s Lantern.’ While they had all seen Lanterns fall, the Corps dictated they lost their name. Said it helped the grieving along and cemented what the Lantern had sacrificed and who it was for. It was a long-standing rule on the books that almost no one paid attention to, but Kaiya had learned it, clung to it, in basic training.

And maybe it worked for some places, for some people, Baberak thought, putting on a burst of speed to her flight. It didn’t work for Baberak. And not for Jy. If she got the chance (and as the heavy, she probably would), she was going to make sure the Yellow never forgot Nuran’s name.

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Joker’s constructs left something to be desired.

Specifically, tact, timing, duration, and appropriateness. What they did not lack, and this was the part Dick really regretted, was effectiveness. If the Joker imagined a laser cannon, he was familiar enough with laser cannons to make something that flickered and sputtered long enough to get off a few rounds. If he wanted a dozen clay targets to shoot out at the Bats like a flock of birds, they braced themselves for ‘pull’. Nothing held together for more than a few seconds, as befitted Joker’s level of skill, but long enough to slow Nightwing and Batman down. It was all a little more ‘good old days’ than Nightwing had wanted when he came out on patrol with Bruce.

They still didn’t know what was happening with Tim.

Batman kept hailing the Red Hood, in between volleys of clay targets and laser cannon fire, but Jay didn’t respond. Nor did Robin. Starfire must still be unconscious and Dick’s heart wrenched at the thought of the group being injured and pinned down by the Yellow Lantern. Make sure the youngsters get in okay, Jason had said, weeks ago now. Keep ’em safe.

With no one responding over the comms, Dick felt like he just kept failing at that.

Batman must have noticed his consternation and paused, perched behind one of the gargoyles. “Nightwing. Go ahead. Black Bat and I will handle this.”
“Not a chance.” Dick straightened, adjusting his position on the side of the building ledge. Any lapse in focus would mean Bruce tried to go traditional Batman and push him away. “Dynamic Duo.”

“Chopped liver?” Cass intoned over comms. She hovered somewhere out of sight, playing goalie if Joker tried to make a break for the yards to the south.

“You are a damn risotto, Black Bat, you don’t need anything to make you better.”

Black Bat considered this idea. Finally, she said: “Wine.”

Nightwing grinned, but the gesture didn’t last long.

A series of maniacal giggles came from somewhere further in the layers of the Surh complex of warehouses below and, as one, the Bats zeroed in on the sound of the Joker. They didn’t stay as one for long, Batman pulling away and ahead of the both of them as he dropped into the maze of warehouse rooftops. Dick followed, hearing Black Bat’s intentionally-audible movements as she did the same.

It would be easier to pin Joker down here, cut off his escape route through Miller Harbor to the south and, passing beyond that, the yards. It was the Bats’ wordless goal that Joker wouldn’t manage to slip away to join Duela before the Lanterns arrived, hence Black Bat’s positioning, and that goal meant a never-ending game of keep-away. Joker hadn’t learned to dim the glow that surrounded him as he flew or when he used the ring, which meant he was easy to pinpoint in flight. Attempts to stop him had ended in constructs of laser fire, clay targets, giant mallets… non-lethal stuff designed to knock them out of the air so he could flee. Whatever was waiting in the warehouses below would be similar in scope.

Black Bat flitted past Dick and spoke with a fond smile in her voice, continuing their risotto conversation: “And cheese.”

“You said it, not me,” Dick replied.

All traces of banter vanished when they rejoined Batman three warehouses down, swinging in past the sign that announced this warehouse was still owned and operated by a low-end department store. Inside the steel structure, cover was abundant and sightlines were few. The pair kept to the tops of the towering merchandise racks as they ran, following the sound of gunfire and trashed merchandise to the back of the building.

When they arrived, Joker’s goons were unleashing hellfire on the upper right side of one of the warehouse racks, to the extent that they were decimating the rack behind it – and the racks behind that. The goons didn’t have long to live by Dick’s estimation: Batman had managed to grab Joker before being pinned down and, judging by the flailing arms and screaming, the clown actively feared being blown to smithereens by his own men. An intermittent Lantern shield was the only thing standing between them and most of the bullets.

This was more like old times.

Using the harsh shadows thrown by the fluorescent lights, Nightwing and Black Bat moved through the distracted goons like thieves, dispensing justice until Joker’s ‘cavalry’ lay in an untidy heap. The moment the gunfire stopped, Batman started punching Joker. Again, old times. Nightwing let Black Bat head over to provide backup as he focused his attention on restraining the baddies. The way the night was going, they didn’t have much time between attacks and the goons would be up and conscious again shortly. He tried to have his back facing the fight as little as possible – but minutes later, the concussive force of an energy blast left him sprawling over a couple of the goons.
He shoved himself up, whirling in time to see Batman knocked clear of the rack and into a line of packaging one row over. Wooden crates and pallets, not steel beams at least. Black Bat had caught herself on the top of the nearest rack, undamaged.

“Status!” Nightwing barked over comms, finishing the restraints on the men he had fallen over. A word from Batman and he would be ready to tag in.

“Stand down.” Batman dropped from the rack to the ground, landing on his feet. “It’s our contact.”

“The attack wasn’t the Joker?”

“No.” Batman sounded irritated. “Our contact wanted us clear.”

The fixture where Batman and Joker had been fighting swayed on its metal girders, despite being bolted to the floor. Flashes of green light erupted from the other side. Joker’s attempts at attacks were like a dim bulb in comparison to the intermittent floodlight of power. Black Bat perched on the rack above Dick’s head, expression unreadable under the face mask but pose suggesting she was equally ready to tag back in.

Three agonizing minutes slipped by while the Lantern fought – agonizing for Batman, anyway. Nightwing finished restraining the goons and tried to raise Red Hood on the comms. Damian picked up but said nothing but a string of curses that would have sharpened Alfred’s tone to a point. All Dick got out of him was that he “couldn’t see!”

Dick cared about that, he did, but that was when the Lantern stepped around the corner of the racks, a beaten Joker hanging limply from one of its hands. Their hands? In one hand. Nightwing didn’t know what species or gender the new Green Lantern was, only they looked like they carried the force of a train within their eleven foot, looming frame. The Joker’s weak ‘hee hee hee’ broke the relative silence. The Lantern looked down at the prisoner they held by a single leg. Their expression, if Dick was reading it correctly, was one of distaste and not concern.

“Do you require any assistance?” Batman asked.

The Green Lantern peered at him, then at the clown. “This one has barely had his ring for eight hours. All three of you couldn’t catch him by yourselves?”

“He is a… problem, even without the ring.” Batman appeared to be considering the alien’s tone. “You aren’t the Sector Lead.”

“I’m M Baberak. Obviously, I’m more than enough.”

Now that Dick was getting a better look at the Green Lantern newcomer, they were even more alien than Gotham usually saw. An eleven-foot-tall grey and purple alien with four eyes and a tail of kangaroo proportions meant ‘Baberak’ look like a popular legendary Pokemon… just a little bit. If Dick saw it, Gothamites wouldn’t hesitate to categorize them as such.

“Where is Deitch Kaiya?” Batman asked. Dick didn’t recognize the name – must be the Sector Lead.

“Weren’t you the one in a hurry? Go find your spawn,” Baberak told him, taking in Black Bat and Nightwing with the statement. “This one is harmless.”

“He is—”

“He is dangerous to you. He’s not much of a Lantern.” Baberak transferred their grip on the Joker to his collar, ensured he was restrained and his ring removed. Following this, they adjusted their stance
on the warehouse epoxy floor, like a swimmer bracing for a push, and looked up at the arched ceiling. “The other will probably be the same but I’d rather meet her.”

“Don’t underestimate the Joker,” Batman said. Baberak made a sound that might have been a scoff, the movement making a previously-invisible frill flutter around their neck.

“Kaiya might take you serious but that doesn’t mean I have to, Bat Man.”

Dick began to suspect that Baberak was either a) the bad cop of the good cop/bad cop Lanterns they had been sent or b) a cocky teenage rookie. Wonderful.

Meanwhile, Baberak launched themselves, exiting through the thin roof and sending a shower of debris over the warehouse contents. The battle had rendered the facility a write-off anyway, though Joker’s goons still lay unconscious and restrained behind their makeshift barricade. Nightwing made a mental note to come back for them – after.

Right now, he moved to follow Baberak’s departure, grappling through the hole they had left and back towards the yards. Black Bat and Batman trailed him in turn, Black Bat keeping pace with Nightwing’s flips easily and Batman taking some alternate, faster path. Black Bat was just audible opening the public comms channel, clicking with unfamiliarity through the options. She spoke without preamble.

“Risotto.”

Alfred’s reply was immediate and not very apologetic: ‘I am sorry, Black Bat, I’m afraid I have some rather pressing tasks that keep me from beginning preparations on mushroom risotto at this time.”

“With cheese. Will be hungry,” was her only response.

#

Jason thought of himself as having limits around his self-control like the rings inside of a tree. Scorched with fire, scored with deep cuts, stabbed with pocket knives. He felt himself burning through them, the longer he was trapped here, exposed, trying to keep blood inside people. His searching mind found the metaphor of an angry Ent from Lord of the Rings. He shared this thought with Tim, who watched through half-lidded eyes while Jason tried to remove the knife without taking half of Red Robin’s leg with it. Tim focused unsteadily on him and whispered that that was the stupidest thing he’d ever heard; Jason was obviously a Ranger.

Then he passed out.

Jason cursed and prayed in the same breath. Every medical textbook he’d ever read said leave the knife in, that it blocked additional bleeding and prevented hemorrhage. When Tim fell, the knife had been jostled badly enough that it was gushing blood around the wound. Whatever dam the knife was blocking was minimal at best and he didn’t want to do this here, he couldn’t do adequate repairs here, but there was blood welling beneath the skin adhesive Tim had sprayed on. Too much blood for where they were and Red Robin didn’t have much of it left to lose.

He hadn’t gotten into this to be responsible for Red Robin’s survival. If it were him, he would have screamed at his ‘rescuer’ to yank it out and frak the consequences. But Tim would’ve gone with the textbooks.

So Jason did too.

In the background of his awareness, he heard Duela unleashing a volley of energy bolts at Arsenal
and the archer was forced to retreat until he was only feet from Jason, leading the fire in their
direction. There would be no fleeing their current position until Duela was dealt with.

So Jason went full Ent.

Duela had gotten used to the idea that Jason was too busy playing doctor to shoot her, so the bullet,
and subsequent bullets, took her utterly by surprise. The sound alone diverted Damian’s course from
launching an attack on the Yellow Lantern to rushing for the nearest stack of shipping containers
instead. Probably for the best; Jason had impeccable aim, but Robins should stay out of his way.

Several of the bullets connected with Duela – no headshots, but Jason still felt reality flinch through
him as her body flinched. She was probably dead. If she was, Bruce would kill him. On the heels of
this thought came a cold certainty that if Tim died from this, he didn’t frakking care what Bruce
thought or did. Arsenal yanked Jason’s gun hand down, shouting something at him that sounded like
water rushing a long way off. Jason ignored the archer, watching Duela’s unsteady, yellow-lit form
veer onto the top of one of the stacks and crashed onto it, out of sight.

Arsenal followed Jason’s line of sight in her direction and, by the time he returned his attention to
Jason, the Red Hood had gathered Tim up into his arms. He’d plastered enough bandages on the
knife wound and on the smaller vigilante’s burned back to make a Halloween mummy, but the kid
needed a transfusion and sutures before he bled right through. Jason couldn’t take the chance Duela
would get up.


He ignored everything until the edge of the yards, in fact, stopping only when Tim made a noise and
- shit. Jason almost tripped over his feet in realizing he’d left the frakking broken artifact behind.

What now? Stop? Go back? Yell at Roy to get it? But Roy had Starfire to carry and Damian –
Damian would be distracting Duela if she was capable of getting up. Jason’s feet carried him
onwards through the stacks, trying to leave a plain enough trail for Arsenal to follow without sending
skywriting to Duela and the Joker that this was the way they were going.

“J’sn?” Tim asked into his hair. He wished he’d replaced his helmet before coming out. He couldn’t
get upset right now and Red Robin sounding like a small child when he’d called Jason out for being
childish just this morning would damn well upset him.

“The artifact’ll be fine,” Jason said, his mind on the blood. “Bet the Lanterns can fix it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nope, sorry, injured people clinging to consciousness so they can apologize is one of my triggers.
You’re gonna have to stop or I’ll tell Big Bird. He’ll make you stop being so mean to me.”

Tim managed to sound indignant, which was both the most heartbreaking and hilarious thing Jason
had heard in a minute. “Sorry my leg’s bleeding, y’terrible medic.”

The Red Hood had finally reached the edge of the yards and wracked his brain to remember which
safehouse Batman had been telling them to withdraw to. He’d never memorized the stupid numbers;
he only ever memorized what the house looked like, smelled like, the interiors or the cats that
frequented the alleys outside. Point 53 was either the one with rainbow flowerpots in the windowsill
across the street or it was the safehouse where the lady two doors down secretly bred Siamese cats
and they ran the neighborhood more than any of the packs of feral dogs. As a kid, he’d made friends
with the cats. As an adult, he’d mastered the art of bumping them out of the way without actually
kicking or hurting them. They liked that he smelled like blood. In any case the breeder safehouse sat further away from the yards.

He started walking in that direction.

“I’m not sorry I might’a killed her,” he told Tim. “Get that on my tombstone, when B kills me.”

“You’re puttin’ me in charge of your tombstone? ‘s backwards.”

“Well, what do you want on yours?”

“I’m not dying and y’re a jerk.”

“You say that, but you know I’d run an IV line of coffee right down into the coffin for you.”

“C’d fin’ly get some work done.” Tim’s voice trailed off and Jason shook him.

“Nope, no more sleeping. How will I know you appreciate the blood I’m giving you if you’re unconscious?”

“Eugh. You know ’ve got my own blood at ‘t safehouse, don’t need your gross blood.”

“How dare you, I’ve half a mind to make you walk.”

Red Robin’s laughter was quiet, though he sounded like he had genuinely found the comment hilarious. “Been tryin’ to get you to admit y’ only have half a mind for years.” His voice went singsong, though it didn’t increase in volume much. “And all I had to do was die.”

“Well, that’s a lot less work.”

“We oughta give it a try.”

“Hey, maybe a little talk less, smile more?” Jason suggested, because being allowed to make Hamilton jokes was only making Tim fidget and aggravate his injuries. And man, Roy was lagging behind. He thought about sending an open message to the rest of the Bats but didn’t want to have to answer questions right now. Tim would be the better option for speaking to them but, against all his encouragement, the kid had passed out again.

Jason scowled, scrapped all the half-made plans, and broke into a run.

He’d only made it a hundred feet or so when the batarang clipped his right ear. The Red Hood part of him thought, for a heart-stopping moment, that it was Batman. That Duela was dead. That he would, in short order, be needing an epitaph.

“PUT HIM DOWN!” Damian roared.

Jason stared, wide-eyed, back at Robin. Stared so hard his vision felt like it was twitching and yet nothing became any clearer. The demon stood about twenty feet behind him, livid, with another batarang poised to throw. Jason had had a lot of batarangs thrown at him during what Tim called his ‘Pit’ phase. Crowbars he could handle, batarangs – especially when he’d just theoretically killed someone – set off every alarm bell that wasn’t already ringing.

Every plausible reason Damian could be angry ran through the Red Hood’s head. All of them were unlikely to evoke this kind of reaction. Jason slid one foot backwards to brace himself against Tim’s weight. Damian twitched, but he didn’t throw yet.
“Robin, we don’t have time for whatever this is. Red’s hurt,” Jason reminded him. Because apparently the fact that Jason was carrying Red Robin’s unconscious form wasn’t enough.

“Put him down or I will kill you where you stand. I am not Batman. You are facing your death.”

“Yeah, you wish you were Batm—” Shit. The only reason Damian would tell Jason he wasn’t Batman was if he thought Jason didn’t know who he was. Which meant vice versa. And to a Damian who had forgotten Jason Todd, it looked like a gun-wielding maniac had shot down a Yellow Lantern, grabbed his injured older brother, and took off running. No wonder he was pissed.

“Dames, I’m not—”

The second batarang skirted his throat. Jason stopped trying to explain.

“I told you what I wanted you to do,” Damian said. “It wasn’t talk.”

Attacking his throat, face or head made strategic sense; Damian couldn’t go for his arms or legs or Jason might drop Red Robin. Instead, feeling anything knife-like against his throat made the Red Hood’s grip tighten around Tim; something that Robin couldn’t know would happen but did anyway. Jason’s breath quickened. He could feel panic setting in, working in tandem with the blood dripping down his throat. He didn’t have time to panic for himself, yet every instinct was trying to run to the corner and hide anyway.

Talking was out. Run or fight. Split decision. Pros and cons on both sides and terror riding shotgun on both of them. Tim was unconscious, bleeding – what if Tim didn’t know him anymore either? No, decision time, come on, he ordered himself. Robins never had time to ask questions like ‘why’ or ‘what’s going on;’ it was Batman’s right alone to hang back and ask detective-y questions. The Red Hood made decisions and said frak the consequences. Make a decision.

So Jason ran for Point 53.

Point 53 had transfusions and Tim’s own blood and a full medkit and sutures, which meant he could throw Tim on the porch and Damian would give up the chase immediately to keep Red alive. It’d be a cold night in hell before Jason Todd couldn’t outrun someone to keep another Robin alive.

#

Nightwing found Arsenal and Starfire before he found anyone else. Roy had a shattered artifact shoved into his nearly-empty quiver and an unbalanced Starfire trying to regain her footing. Neither of them could direct Nightwing to Damian or to Tim. Starfire looked at Dick through half-lidded, puzzled eyes and asked why Nightwing hadn’t asked about Jason.

“Red Hood?” she clarified, searching his eyes for any trace of recognition. He couldn’t tear his gaze away from the burned patches of her scalp, where she said she’d been shot by a Yellow Lantern’s energy blast.

“Who?” he asked.

#

Batman found the collapsed form of a female Yellow Lantern, who had been shot twice in the chest, once in the shoulder, and left. The Sector Lead, Deitch Kaiya had arrived first and begun emergency medical assistance, though she didn’t yet know if the aid would do any good for the nonresponsive Yellow Lantern. Lantern Baberak took one look at the collapsed form and the urgency that had been driving their movements dropped by a factor of ten.
“We’re late.” Baberak sounded immeasurably disappointed.

“You can find whoever shot her, then.” Kaiya’s gaze flitted to Duela, then to Batman. Kaiya was humanoid and her expressions comparatively easier to read. She did not like Batman much. “You realize if you hadn’t sent us to Nova Scotia, this wouldn’t be the situation?”

“I don’t know who could have done this,” Batman said. He didn’t like his growing level of confusion, which included questions which the Lanterns didn’t appear to be asking themselves. Such as, he knew Tim had been injured but he didn’t know how. He knew Damian had been working with Tim but he didn’t know how or who against, even when logic dictated it was the Yellow Lantern. He didn’t know who had shot her, but the timeline ruled out the Joker and looked more like the work of an assassin.

“Has to be one of your own, we don’t carry guns.” Kaiya sighed. “Baberak, look into it, please.”

“You said—” Baberak began.

“I said please.”

Batman rather envied the fact that that ended the discussion.

#

Black Bat did not want to revenge herself on the Lanterns. She also didn’t want to get bogged down in Nightwing’s reunion with his friends, which he meant to be quick but wasn’t going to be quick. His movements took on a subliminal lethargy when he saw them, a desire to help, knowing that he could only help them if he moved at molasses-speed. Black Bat let him slow; she did not.

She was not confused by her own shift in memories; it reinforced her focus. Find Robin. Find Red Robin. Rescue them if they needed rescuing.

Damian left practically visible wisps of anger in the air, like a whale leaving a wake as it passed, but this was not what Black Bat followed. She followed the scent of blood, the erratic movements of two people bleeding, one carrying the other. Blood and fear, painted in footsteps that she followed until she realized they were headed, in a roundabout way, to Point 53. She took to the rooftops, making faster progress that way, until she perched over the doorway to Point 53.

Somewhere not far behind she could hear Damian, who had apparently not yet thought of Point 53. The red-armored figure on Point 53’s porch chanced a glance over his shoulder, not spotting her, and turned back to nudge aside a pack of Siamese cats lounging on the doorstep. ‘Pssh, pssh pssh, go on, go on.’ Shifting Red Robin’s position in his arms, the red-armored figure felt for the safehouse’s secret key box. No hesitation in finding the key box in the potted plant or in entering the appropriate code. He was either an experienced intruder or Black Bat had just never met this ally.

Red Robin stirred, murmuring. Gripped the doorframe and pulled away from the figure to lean against it. He looked like death and his stance said he felt like death, unsure even of who was standing beside him. The red-armored figure looked over his shoulder again, spotted Black Bat this time (she didn’t care if he saw her anymore) – and turned back in time to catch Red Robin as he fell.

“Damnit!” His whisper was frightened, but not of her. “Cass, help, please. I gotta go before the demon catches up.”

She dropped next to the red-armored figure and laid a hand on his arm to stop him leaving. Tim smelled like blood. So much blood.
“You did this?” she asked harshly. The look of pain across his face answered the question for her.

“Fix,” she ordered, instead of waiting for an explanation.

“I can’t fix anything if Damian kills me in the meantime.” His throat was bleeding. He didn’t appear to be aware or rather he was aware and didn’t want to be. Actively resisted being aware of it, even as a wound on his right ear dripped from his chin and the batarang wound on his neck soaked his collar until everything looked worse than it actually was.

“Fix.” She rose smoothly and stepped around the red-armored figure, putting her back to him. If he knew her, he would know that this wasn’t much of an opening to attack. If he didn’t and he still meant well, she had lost nothing in the gesture. If he didn’t mean well, he would lose all safehouse privileges and probably the use of his arms for six to ten weeks. Clothing scuffled as the figure picked up Red Robin and fumbled with the key.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but… thanks,” he said, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. A Siamese cat wound its way cautiously around one of Black Bat’s legs. She shifted to scratch its head, keeping one eye on the roadway for Damian.

Whatever was going on, she was intrigued by the red-armored figure who exhibited so much fear, respect, and love at once. Nothing would happen to Tim in his care. And she didn’t disagree that sometimes, her littlest brother could be a little too enthusiastic about killing people.

#

They argued so much.

Baberak regretted every choice that had led her here, up to and including the quest for vengeance for Nuran. Nuran would have been laughing his ass off at the idea that the missing Exi of Shiloh had ended up on Earth, after 1,500 years of peaceful existence as a tool of exile in an intergalactic council. He would not have stopped laughing at the idea that it had been acquired by a dysfunctional family of people who dressed up as bats and got itself broken in the first ten weeks.

He would’ve started crying with laughter at the idea that the one Bat person who got hit with the Exi was, until recently, legally dead.

He probably would have shown a fraction of decorum after that because the unfortunate dead/not-dead Bat had been completely forgotten by his compatriots in the middle of a fight when the artifact broke and no one appeared to like him much. Baberak sighed, bringing an end to her briefing of the situation to Jygarandur, who was still trapped in ‘Old Gotham’ doing busywork.

On the other end of their communicators, her companion was breathless with laughter, not unlike Nuran would have been.

“So where is the Exi now?” Jy asked, catching her breath.

“In front of me.” Baberak looked at the several shards of artifact held together by gossamer-thin fibers. “It seems more like the kind of thing you scrap at this point.”

She had lowered her voice to avoid being heard by the hat-wearing archer who had brought it to her. She wasn’t sure how much she needed to worry about him; he was conversing quietly with the only non-confused person in the room besides her and Kaiya: Princess Koriand’r of Tamaran. Who in the nine hells knew why she was on Earth.

“If you say so.” Jy’s efforts to catch her breath ended in a yawn. “And the Lanterns?”
“The Green was de-ringed, the Yellow still has hers to assist in healing. The Batman insists she needs to live.” Kaiya hadn’t been as sure that trying to save her life was necessary, but then the Batman had threatened to expose his secret identity by taking her back to a more equipped ‘Batcave’ (again, Baberak imagined Nuran howling with laughter), and Kaiya had relented. The Sector Lead’s species had some intrinsic healing abilities and she would use them, under the condition that Batman refrained from attacking the dead/not-dead Bat in red armor.

“Let me know when I get to be done,” Jy said. “I’ve completed containment for the villains they rounded up. If I don’t have something to do soon, I’m going to go scouting for more and we both knew that might ‘upset the populace’.”

Baberak bid her farewell and assessed the occupants of the safehouse again. It defied logic, for one family of obsessed people to have a medical setup this complex in the middle of a place that was not their home. More miraculous still, that all of the medical equipment remained in good repair. The one everyone called ‘Red Robin’ had regained consciousness once the knife was removed and they got the transfusion started, using packets of his own, pre-donated blood to minimize the chances of rejection. The boy devoted most of his limited energy to insisting the red-armored Bat not be attacked or allowed to leave the safehouse. Everyone respected this insistence, despite the crowding of the space and the Batman and smallest Bat’s intense dislike of him.

Once he realized he wouldn’t be allowed to escape, the red-armored Bat had retired to a shadowy corner to stitch up his throat with trembling hands – until the ‘Nightwing’ man saw what he was doing and insisted on taking over. Within seconds, they had started arguing about why the red-armored man already had some distinctive scarring on his throat.

Now Nightwing was angry at Batman and the red-armored one had stopped speaking.

All of them were tacitly angry at Baberak for not fixing the artifact yet. As she had already tried to explain to Batman, it wasn’t that simple. You wouldn’t try to fix a nuclear reactor meltdown with a hammer and nails (well, Baberak wouldn’t; who knew what these Bat people would try to avoid asking for help). To function at all, the artifact needed something with a single power conduit, preferably with healing or positive energy properties, tying it together. It didn’t have to be strong, but it did have to be a single, physical unit, like Wonder Woman’s lasso. Baberak might be able to hold it together with a construct, but not permanently. Kaiya’s healing abilities didn’t have a physical component. Very few Earth materials had anything like that. The research team trying to resurrect the Blue Lantern Corps had some physical prototypes, but nothing proven or in current usage that would be closer than the Watchtower…

She found herself staring at Red Robin, who had pushed himself up on his elbows to protest something Batman was saying. Something in his voice rang familiar; the arrogance of his tone, combined with his being so young by Earth standards. She imagined him without the domino, revealing bloodshot eyes, then with a shirt that read ‘NONSTOP’ and cargo shorts. They hadn’t met, officially, but she had walked past video screens he was on, heard audio recordings of his research findings.

“Drake?” Baberak asked.

Red Robin shifted position to look at her in response, his balance wobbling. The red-armored man looked up in lethally calm assessment.

The littlest Bat, ‘Robin’, looked outright startled. “How do you know that name?!”

“He works with the Blue Lantern research team,” Baberak replied. “Drake was the name he gave them.”
“You’re not on the research team though.” Drake’s voice sounded weak and sure.

“Nuran was.”

“…was?”

Baberak glanced at the gagged and restrained Joker, who had been planted facing the wall. “Where they got the “Joker’s” ring.”

Drake dipped his head a little. “I’m sorry. Nuran was…”

“There’s no time for it. You had one of the Blue Lantern prototypes. If you still have it, it may be enough to restore integrity to the Exi.” Drake looked confused. “What you call the artifact, or Project Muninn.”

Drake reached for his utility belt, only to find it had been removed. He blinked, frowning at the foggy realization that he wore only the undershirt and pants (with one leg cut away) of his uniform. “Sorry, ‘m a little… does anyone know where the rest of my uniform is?”

“I told you passing out would bite you in the ass,” the red-armored man murmured. The small pile of Red Robin’s removable gear sat next to him and he held up the utility belt for Drake to see. “Pocket number?”

“Fourteen.” Drake slumped back on the cot. “Counterclockwise.”

Seconds later, the red-armored man handed the prototype to Baberak who felt… less than impressed.

Drake seemed confident and in-command when he spoke to the research teams, even though he was an Earthling and by definition stunted in potential by his world’s stance on intergalactic policy.

Nuran had mused privately that Drake would one day drag Earth kicking and screaming to meet the aliens next door, like reluctant children on a playdate. Knowing what she did of Earth, Baberak felt that future would be a long time coming.

This prototype, for instance, was literally a long piece of unencouraging blue string. When Baberak experimentally wound it around the artifact, it sparked a reaction. Blue light danced around the device as she continued winding, tying off in places, and making a shambling repair of the artifact. When she had finished, everyone was staring at the red-armored man.

“… I should not have stabbed you in the throat.” Robin sounded apologetic. Baberak got the feeling apologies were rare from him.

The red-armored man ignored him, ignored all of them, and fixed his attention on Baberak. “It broke. Why the frak did it work and then not work?”

“It has greatest power within the thirty feet radius. When you were still within thirty feet of the artifact, it could keep working. When you left that radius, it removed all trace of your existence.”

“But I didn’t forget Duela. The Yellow Lantern.”

Baberak shrugged. “She probably didn’t forget you either. The artifact needed to hold the memory of her somewhere in order to restore it. When it broke, your brain could’ve been a convenient backup or it was too much trouble to erase part of itself. And, as stated, it was broken. My race didn’t put it together, so I have no idea.”

“And… now?”
“It’s still broken, just a little less broken than it became during transport here. And you’re within thirty feet of it. I’d stay that way. Her too, if she lives.” She offered the artifact to him and he put a glove back on before accepting it.

Kaiya took over the explanation from there, her tone more soothing on the whole than Baberak had the patience to be. “It’s still broken, but you should be able to get your exchanges out of the way as long as that strand holds. Once those are done, it releases the memories. Like a completed contract. Understand?”

“Could’ve used this explanation weeks ago,” Drake said from the cot.

“You’re the one with the secret cadre of Lanterns at your beck and call, ‘Drake,’ I don’t think you get to complain about withholding information.” The red-armored man held the artifact carefully, a gentleness at odds with the fact that this man had near-fatally shot the Lantern Kaiya still worked on. Batman appeared to have the same thought at the same time.

“Sector Lead Kaiya, what is your prognosis on the Yellow Lantern?” Batman asked, though his gaze remained on the red-armored man.

“Don’t shoot her again.” Kaiya bent over the Yellow Lantern and had apparently had just about enough of Batman.

“Will she live?”

“Not up to me anymore.”

“She would have frakking killed me.” Drake addressed the ceiling, which would have seemed like a non-sequitur if not for Batman and the Red Hood both seeming to know what he was talking about. “Literally. Was killing me. Also, your kid stabbed him in the neck, we going to bring that up, B?”

“By that token, ‘Drake,’ I can also argue that I thought he was killing you.” Robin circled back to the cot, causing Drake to again try to push himself back on his elbows. “And that I have not yet heard an expression of gratitude.”

“If I have to explain to you the difference between what he was doing and what Duela was doing, I’ll kill you myself.”

“No one is killing anyone!” Kaiya and Batman barked in unison.

Again, the fighting. It managed to hide the sound of the door closing as the Red Hood slipped out of the safehouse. Baberak felt slightly relieved to see the archer and Princess Koriand’r follow him. Too many people in a sickbay helped no one.
There are glasses to raise in the praise of surviving the day

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! This one took several drafts just to reach something I was happy/could live with. And I don’t know where my head was at. And I already know I’m going to post it, and then think of plot holes, and then want to edit.

Thank you all for your patience.

Chapter title is from ‘Streets of Dublin’ in ‘A Man of No Importance.’

In the absence of anything else to do, Damian actively considered going to find Drake coffee.

During one of his periods of consciousness, Red Robin had offered him an exorbitant stipend to go find some and, honestly, no one was paying enough attention to Damian to stop him. Batman had initiated a conversation with the Lantern’s Sector Lead, which they were continuing in hushed tones in the corner. Baberak had taken the Joker and stormed off to find their compatriot and enact all the proper containment protocols for the apprehended Arkham escapees. Black Bat accompanied the Lantern to round up more, the Outlaws were off doing some group bonding activity that no one had given them permission for… and Damian was supposed to monitor Drake and the Yellow Lantern’s condition until Batman told him otherwise.

Hence, debating going to find Drake coffee, at a current bid of $104.72.

“Why do you have that kind of money in your uniform?” Damian demanded.

“Because my Gotham informants are too poor for bitcoin.” Drake shifted to get a look at Duela in his peripheral. “She’s definitely unconscious, right?”

Damian didn’t allow his expression to change. “Yes.”

It sounded like Drake remembered a little more about the Yellow Lantern than Damian himself did. Since the Red Hood had taken the artifact out of the building and more than thirty feet away, it meant ‘Duela’ was out of range and her recent activities shrouded in a haze of uncertainty. Since Drake had been at the epicenter, it made sense that he would remember a bit more. Damian explained in brief that it looked like Duela would live, but the Lanterns had determined her physical condition would be much safer if she didn’t wake up for now. The Sector Lead had abilities to make that happen, so she had.

“And,” Drake readjusted his position, adopting the usual expression of stillness he got when reinjuring his injuries in pursuit of a goal. He scanned the room from this new posture. “And, um, we got rid of the Joker intentionally, right? He didn’t just…”

Damian followed up the earlier explanation with a description of where everyone had gone. Inside the confines of his mind, he groaned the entire time at how little Drake knew.

“The clown is the least of my concerns for the night anyway,” he finished (finally). “Even the Lanterns didn’t feel it necessary to afford him respect in combat. Father said Lantern Baberak took care of him singlehandedly.”
“Yet he’s still breathing.”

“Regrettably, Baberak did not have sufficient cause to murder the Joker. It’s not explicitly against the Lantern charter, but neither is it encouraged for superpowered beings with magical rings to murder people because other people ask them to.”

“Damn.”

“For once, we agree.”

Drake sank back on the cot again, having cast a final look at the Yellow Lantern’s motionless form. “We agree on more than that. Thanks for… trying, to help, brat. With all the non-Jason parts.”

“I see you are only capable of being appreciative in private.”

The older teen’s expression of weariness deepened. “You don’t make it easy.” He seemed to bite back more barbed words. “But I do appreciate it. And you didn’t know about the Jason parts. What you realized was that she would’ve killed me if you hadn’t come slamming back into the picture so… I do have to thank you for that.”

“That is enough thanking.” Drake’s earnest gratitude made him uncomfortable and he wracked his mind for a suitable change in subject. “If you want to demonstrate your actual appreciation, you could participate in Todd and I’s deal.”

“Oh. The piano thing?”

“I’m not incapable of enjoying music, even if its source is you. All you have to trade is basically everything you call me that is not ‘Wayne’ or ‘Damian’.”

“You’re ruling out ‘Dames’?”

Damian rolled his eyes. “Do you seriously think Grayson hasn’t forced me to watch ‘South Pacific’ by now?”

“I didn’t think he was a big fan of the movies.”

“He isn’t. We went to a production.”

“And?” Drake sounded bemused.

“He forced me to stay past the first hour.”

Red Robin unsuccessfully stifled a snort. “Yeah, uh, it’s a bit long.”

“Even so…” Perhaps it was because the knowledge had been hard won by sitting through a show for three hours but Damian found himself continuing. “Within the political context, ‘Carefully Taught’ was a timely song buried among insipid love ballads.”

Damian could see in Drake’s resulting smile that he was caught off-guard. Caught off-guard and happy about it. It felt equally uncomfortable to having Drake thanking him, but in a different way – knowing that this expression wasn’t in obligation. Closer to relief that they shared something other that Batman.

“Wake me up when Jay gets back. Or if anything changes,” Drake said and turned over, the smile dissolving into the injury-still expression.
“You’re giving up on the coffee?”

“No, I just don’t think you’re gonna get it. Are you?” A look over his shoulder at Damian, neither hopeful or disillusioned. Damian realized Drake was actually presenting his back to him. That didn’t happen much. He shook his head: no, he wasn’t going to go find coffee, hundred dollars or no. Drake grunted and went to sleep in seconds.

#

Point 53 had reacquired its herd of local cats within seconds of their being scattered from the front door. They didn’t seem to be frightened by the sudden influx of people as realistic about their chances of getting food from any of the Bats. Several cats trailed after Jason when he left, making angry little Siamese hybrid sounds that suggested the neighbors fed them and that Jason should do the same. Too bad. Tim’s secret stash of utility belt food had been left behind with the kid’s uniform and Jason couldn’t remember eating anything since the meal at the café, if eclairs even qualified as a ‘meal.’

“Making your way downtown, walking fast?” came a drawl from behind him.

“Piss off, Roy.”

“Hey, I’m not blaming you.” Roy sped up in order to match his stride. “I’m just surprised you’re still in the mood for a walk tonight.”

“Between walking and waiting for B to get mad, I’ll take the walk.” Jason let his pace slow only because he heard Kori, felt the tangible heat of her presence before he ever saw her. “How’s your head, Kor?”

“Buzzing.” The Tamaranean ran a hand through the newly-shorn side of her hair. “I wish I had been faster. I don’t fear your father, but I will respect his rules in his city... and in attempting to do so, I underestimated the Yellow Lantern.”

She looked at Jason appraisingly, which he reflected he should’ve expected by now. After an uncomfortably long silence, she continued: “You shouldn’t feel ashamed by what you did. You were the only one with the element of surprise left to you and she would have used every wasted minute trying to kill more of your family. The Lanterns’ conversations suggest they would have used lethal methods without much angst.”

“I’m not ashamed.” Jason set his jaw against the words. There were instances where people needed to be stopped and he would stop them when Batman wouldn’t and... damnit, she needed to stop looking so understanding. “I wish I’d moved faster too.”

Kori’s gaze became a little bemused but didn’t lose its fondness. “Then you’re angry.”

“’Course I’m frakking angry.”

“Because of Red Robin?”

That was Kori all over; she would say ‘angry’ and then change the subject to something he was scared or sad about and then the whole psychological nightmare would have to be processed. No thanks, not starting that right now; he wasn’t going to talk about fear with clueless Roy right here and new stitches in his neck and the fresh memory of trying to decide whether or not removing a knife would kill Tim.

“Because of the frakking Batman,” he growled. “Any other city on the planet could’ve had a
Lantern here when Duella first showed up. And he’s the detective, isn’t it enough indication that she’s sticking around for the long haul when she starts hiring people to come after Bats?”

Kori shrugged a shoulder, reminding him that she hadn’t been here from the start.

“Okay but,” he repeated, urgently. “Batman knew about all of it, or most of it, and still pretended like Gotham could handle herself. He’s the only one who’s fought Lanterns before and—argh, he treats his damn—he tried to—like we’re the frakking Magnificent Seven, except we’re also the villagers!”

“You cannot control his actions, or lack thereof.” Kori landed lightly on the sidewalk from where she had been hovering behind him. “As you know well, Batman makes his choices without a quorum.” She considered the word choice. “‘Quorum’? How many of you are there, nowadays?”

“It’s not a joke when it ends with me in charge of Red’s life, which should just never happen!” The growl in his own voice surprised him and he had to pull it back, search for another target to his rage. “And where is Martian Manhunter, huh? Our resident superpowered anything-goes, who could keep secret identities secret? I’d take any bidders with useful telepathic powers who aren’t actively working with the other team, let’s be honest. Batman dragged his feet on this one and I don’t know why because people were getting hurt the entire time. Crime was occurring, and not all of it was me.” The idea sent a bolt of alarm through him. He hadn’t considered that Batman’s reluctance might have been… “But he knows who I am. Knows.”

“No one can speak for Batman but Batman. It seems like he’s who he should speak to, as well.” Despite the fact Jason was shouting, Kori maintained an easy and unperturbed tone. “Though you are dragging your feet about ending one part of this process. That cannot be blamed on him.”

Jason had been avoiding looking at Roy for just that reason. It wasn’t difficult: the archer had wandered to the other side of the street to look for an open eatery. And probably to get away from the conversation.

“Don’t you think that was enough emotions for the night, Kor?” Jason muttered, shoving his hands into his pockets. The formerly-busted artifact weighed heavily inside his jacket’s inside pocket and a part of him wanted to smash it to pieces. Show the smug thing who was boss and that it couldn’t keep making people forget him and remember him and forget again. And damn it, he didn’t want to start all the awkward drama that would force Roy to exchange memories with him.

“You promised Timothy just this morning that you wouldn’t run from this,” Kori reminded him.

“I’m taking a walk.”

“You forget that I dated Nightwing. A Bat taking a walk often means, as Red Robin put it, ‘putting the conversation off for four to five business months.’ You cannot flee this for that long.”

“I can ‘flee’ it long enough to get dinner.”

“I’m sure Roy will share his byproduct jerky “food” with you if you ask nicely.”

Damnit, she was too quick. The Tamaranean followed the statement with a glance at the skies, smiling. “However, I can locate actual food while you two fumble around your feelings. For all that you two are my favorite boys, I’m not so desperate for drama as to wait around and watch that.” She leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek, deftly avoided his neck in the movement. “I look forward to the world being aware of your existence.”

“Yeah, yeah. Pretty sure everyone is just glad I didn’t try to reestablish street cred.”
“Why, what’d you do the first time around?” Roy asked, summoned back through some nonverbal signal between him and Kori, just in time for the Tamaranean’s smile to turn into a grin. She left.

Jason was stuck cramming the persistent anger at the situation down into himself like paste into a container. As part of the paste-shoving process, he diverted the conversation from ‘street cred’ and onto recapping the memory exchange process worked. Roy nodded and appeared to understand, adopting a crossed-arm stance several feet from Jason.

“Ah…” Discomfort settled into Jason’s guts. “And other people typically go first because I have… all the memories. So…”

Roy nodded again. “Sure, I gotcha.” A beat. “So, why’d you vanish in Old Gotham?”

Frak. Jason had hoped that when the dust had cleared, Roy wouldn’t remember that aspect of the fight. And certainly not bring it up now. “Scouting.”

“Scouting without me. The other half of your scouting team.”

“Yeah. The other half of my scouting team who had been exposed to fear gas not three hours before. I don’t know who you thought you were fooling, but it wasn’t me.”

“Are you seriously implying that any of the Robins haven’t patrolled while choked up on fear gas?”

“I’m saying we prepped for it, yeah. But your dumb ass could’ve died and it’s not my job to keep it safe.”

“But you did!” Roy seemed to realize even as the words came that they weren’t the insult he’d meant them to be. “No one asked you to treat me like somebody who needed protecting. You leapt into that mode with Red, sure, because it was necessary, but you ditched me. If anything happened to you, you were running around with Kori alone as backup. In the dark, so, y’know, if she even saw you. Did you know where I was the whole time?”

“Yeah.” If push came to shove, Jason would have been able to locate Roy within a fifty-foot margin of error.

Roy dropped his head into one hand, making an exasperated noise. “Thanks. Thrilling endorsement of your choice in friends, I’ve gotta be both ditched and babysat. You oughta trademark your trust issues—”

“I trust you with my life.” The statement caught Roy by surprise and that hurt. A little. “I don’t always trust you with your life, ’cause you are the guy who would build a bomb just because you had all the parts on hand, but I’d trust you with mine. And I have. We’ve… when we met for the first time, you figured out I wasn’t Dick immediately. Everyone did, even with Batman’s ‘just dye your hair black’ technique. Not all dark-haired kids equal gymnasts, which is math someone not me should explain to him. You called me Robin, which no one else was doing, and you partnered up with me, instead of taking over the operation and forcing me to kick your ass.”

Jason remembered thinking that at the time even: ‘I really hope I don’t have to kick his ass while he’s using ranged weapons.’

He continued. “You were the first to say we could swap secret identities and the first person who didn’t set off all my alarms that you were trying to get something over me. Even after I went through a rough patch with B and you went through one with Arrow… you took my side, rather than theirs. You’re literally the only one I could say understands what it’s like to compete for the slot of ‘worst former sidekick ever.’
One of Roy’s eyebrows rose. “Not cool.”

“It’s an exclusive club.”

“I get the feeling our club meetings are getting drunk alone and sobbing about our father figures.”

“We’re a La Croix kind of club, out of respect to our lightweight and recovering members. Neither of whom know how to tell the other members when they’re not in peak form, so sometimes they preemptively ditch/babysit each other. …sorry.”

“Then…” Uncertainty contorted Roy’s face into a mask of reluctance. “Okay, then… I’m sorry. If this doesn’t work. But for the good of the club… look, I’m not going to forget the way you told me to take over when you needed to help Red. With the scouting and everything, obviously, we’d been getting along all right, but you’re very happy on the lonely-badass parts of your job, and when you started helping Red… you left everything to me. I’ve got a bow and arrow and you left yourself exposed, didn’t try to move, you just trusted that I’d cover you and him. You wouldn’t have judged me if I hadn’t been able to, but you trusted me to be everything right then. And people don’t do that, not over the last few weeks and not people who know me and… you did. Without hesitation. So yeah, I’d remember you. I’d remember that.”

Jason meant to say something clever (“got a funny way of showing it” ranked fairly high), but the quip was derailed by the look on Roy’s face. The first thing Roy breathed was an expletive, followed closely by: “Jaybird.”

“Hey, it’s been a hot minute.” Jason tried a wave. It felt as stilted as it probably looked.

“How long?”

“Oh, y’know, long enough that I could ask Killer Croc how you were doin’ and he said not great, so I thought I’d circle back and—”

The archer lunged forward and threw his arms around Jason’s neck, the weight staggering the Red Hood even as he felt several of the stitches pull uncomfortably. Roy didn’t seem to notice. Jason let him have this, for a minute, before fidgeting in pain.

“Easy, dude, everybody told me Washingtonians were supposed to be all reserved and shit.” Jason dislodged one of Roy’s arms, relieving the pressure on his neck. “And I will get blood on you. Don’t think I won’t.”

“Why the hell didn’t you call me sooner?!” Roy pulled back, gripping Jason’s arms. “It’s been weeks, right? If Nightwing has been acting weird for weeks, this has probably been going on for weeks!”

“It wasn’t planned.” Jason attempted to fully extricate himself from the other man’s grip because things were getting odd. His chest felt strangely warm, and getting warmer, until it felt like leaning on a radiator. “I had to run an errand with Red Robin, then the errand went sideways and why the hell do I smell like burning leather?”

“You do smell like dead cows more than usual, not gonna lie.” Roy finally released his arms so Jason could trace the heat back to the artifact.

The item had dedicated itself to a singular mission of burning through his jacket and beginning to scorch through his body armor. Braving the singed fingers, he plucked it out of his jacket pocket and tossed it away, though not fast enough to save the charred remnants of his gloves. The blue strand that was supposed to act as a repair had turned a pale turquoise with its own heat and, looking at it
now, he didn’t know if he’d be able to touch it.

The heat charged the rest of the artifact with energy and Jason and Roy watched the device become a tiny, white-azure pyre, crackling and flaring as if a star had been mixed with a grill flareup. From the street around it came the smell of newly-poured asphalt.

Jason wasn’t sure when Starfire returned, only that she tugged them both a few steps back and out of range of the melting asphalt.

“It is good to know I can’t leave you to find a pizza parlor without you lighting fires in the street,” she said dryly. Then, squinting: “That is the item Red Robin was so concerned about.”

“Him and me,” Jason said, watching it burn. “Uh, Roy and I just swapped memories and that worked so maybe—this isn’t that bad?”

“Are we going to try for a ‘walk away from explosions’ photo, Jay?” Roy asked.

“I’d rather be sure I can get away from it.”

“It will not explode,” Starfire said, gliding a little higher in order to get a better look at the blindingly-white artifact. “Though I believe it will no longer be useable. The element in the device, not just the thread, has burned out.”

“So no humans will remember Duela?”

Roy shrugged when they both looked at him. “I’m glad you’re better, Jaybird, but I have no idea who Duela is.”

That was unexpected. A little fortuitous – Batman wouldn’t know Jason had shot her. Only the Lanterns and Kori and other aliens would know so, functionally nothing changed but… damnit, he’d need to talk to Bruce. She couldn’t keep her Ring and he’d need the Lanterns as backup to argue that to Bruce. To argue everything to Bruce. And he said he’d deal with it, so he would.

“C’mon.” Jason pivoted away from the artifact, which was beginning to smolder as the thread burned away. “We can’t touch it and I’m gonna have to explain this to—”

He spotted Batman at the end of the street. At the same time, Artemis called him. He let the call go to voicemail even though, of the two conversations, he knew which he would rather have.

“Old man,” he greeted, stopping a safe distance away. “No Lantern retinue?”

“I don’t need Lanterns in order to work with you.”

“You might, for this.” Jason drifted back a few steps, feeling his phone vibrate with a voicemail. Artemis was going to kill him. “I was coming back to tell you the artifact couldn’t handle the final memory exchange or, maybe it’s Red’s blue thread thing that couldn’t handle it. Either way, it’s flambé.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder and was gratified to see the Batman’s cowl-eyes widen slightly.

“You are leaving it burning in the street?” Batman asked. Jason held up and wiggled the charred fingers of his gloves.

“No one’s likely to be out driving or picking up sticks tonight, B. But, and this is why we need the Lanterns, no one’s going to remember Duela. The Yellow Lantern.”
“The one you shot.”

The part of Jason’s brain that kept wanting to switch to default took over his mouth for a moment: “If that’s how it’s gonna be, I can skip the dialogue and get out of Gotham. Save you the bother of trying to re-put me under house arrest. Hell, Red probably remembers enough about what she did to convince you she can’t have her Ring back or be trusted to behave peacefully.”

Batman’s head dipped a little, fighting the words that came slowly. “I don’t want you out of Gotham. And I don’t want you here in any of its prisons. This morning at the courthouse – it made me realize I can’t push you out every time you’ve done something I disagree with.”

“Don’t think of it as pushing me out then, think of it as involuntary unplanned road trips and international cruises.”

“They’re your family,” Batman said. Jason could hear the ‘Bruce’ filtering back into his voice – the careful, don’t-say-it-wrong tone of that morning at the courthouse reappearing, rather than the cold-days voice of an hour ago. “I’ve been more concerned with addressing the Yellow Lantern issue than with reminding you of that. Give your guns to Starfire and come back to Point 53. We’ll work through this together.”

It didn’t constitute an enticing offer, but it was better than 99.9% of Bat-deals. Kori kept his guns, he got to make sure Tim was okay, he wasn’t—surprise stole over him like a blanket at how much he didn’t want to be out of the family.

“You’re sure?” Jason asked.

Batman hadn’t moved from where he stood; not approaching the Outlaws but not escaping on a convenient shadow either. Jason had to take it on faith and the smallest movement of the Bat-cowl silhouette that Batman nodded. He reluctantly handed over his guns to Kori, who promised – tongue in cheek – not to melt them into slag.

When he looked back, he found that Batman had indeed vanished this time.

“Y’know,” he told the shadows, heading in the only conceivable direction the Bat would have headed, Roy and Kori in his wake. “You’re lucky I know that doesn’t mean you rescinded the invitation.”
All gone is incredible strife

Chapter Notes

This is… actually **the final chapter**. I’ve been promising that for half a year but no, this is actually it, with obligatory apologies for the delay (and for the suddenness/not knowing it was going to wrap up here. I appreciate some warning from authors when a long fic is going to end but apparently that’s Not How My Brain Worked.)

Way back in the beginning, I mentioned this was my first Batfic. I can now say with certainty that DC’s multiple continuities are challenging for me to write (especially given the types of things DC continuity retcons or ignores. What’s that all about?). All that to say I’ve decided this IS the final form of the fic. Regardless of what hideous plotholes might be discovered, I won’t be doing another massive rewrite. I hope you can take some enjoyment out of its current complete form (the writer equivalent of “I did my best.”)

Order of prioritization for completion, following this, is ‘never be the first,’ ‘in the faraway,’ and then/in tandem with rewriting an original short story for The Story Geeks and finishing my comic, Corona. God, I have so many half-finished things.

You’re all awesome. Thank you so much for reading, commenting, encouraging, being patient, letting me know about my own inconsistencies, and so much more. Seriously. It’s very long, and I know the plot meanders and there’s Angst and Drama and Inconsistency but I’ve enjoyed it and I’m really appreciative, from the comments I’ve received, that you seem to have enjoyed it too. It’s been a hell of a year for me.

Questions I failed to answer!:
RandomReader13: The artifact is unusable, but Jason completed his contract, so he’s good. …Duela not so much. I’m hesitant to recommend re-reading because it’s so long and so much has changed. ;_; I’m hopeful that the ending will be consistent with all current knowledge and there shouldn’t be a need to reread.

Reggie_live101: My canon knowledge here gets real foggy/convoluted and I shouldn’t have referenced it. There’s a period of time where Jason claims his hair is red in Arkham. That’s been mostly retconned, apparently, so short answer: …no. I should fix that, let’s go with he’s natural black.

The chapter title is from "I'd Rather Be Sailing (Reprise)", used in "A New Brain". It's wonderful. It's close to my favorite. And at some level I think I knew we'd go out on this song.

And now… conclusions.

The Martian Manhunter had planted himself next to Duela like a tree. The comparison wasn’t far off, given that he was taller than everyone else in the room (until Baberak returned), green-skinned, and immovable. Tim had never known trees to make Jason uncomfortable, but from the way the Red Hood’s steps faltered when he entered the room, this one did.
“Mars,” Jason greeted.

“Jason Todd.” J’onn inclined his head ever so slightly. “Apparently I should have come earlier.”

“That’s what I said! Batman danced around for so long that by the time the heavy-hitters like you show up, we’ve rained out the game.”

“I did not anticipate that you would break the Exi of Shiloh just because I wasn’t here.”

“Point of interest: we fixed it,” Tim interrupted. J’onn turned his pupilless gaze on Tim for a long moment. Whenever he interacted with J’onn, Tim tried (in vain) not to think about how much the Martian’s Dracula-esque collar made him look like Ra’s al Ghul. He must have failed again, because J’onn smoothed down the collar before he spoke.

“The Exi is broken again. Permanently.”

“Jay, what the hell?” Dick returned at that moment with Cass in his wake and Jason took a few steps back, trying to regain access to the exit they were collectively blocking.

“Hey, I finished out the five memories requirement. It’s not my fault Red’s string tapped out in the same instant.” Jason glanced side-long at the Yellow Lantern’s unconscious form. “Which is why you all probably still don’t know who she is.”

“J’onn,” Dick said, not answering the question. “Would you be able to fix it?”

“No.” The answer came with such certainty that Tim suspected J’onn had simply looked at the images in their minds and made a deduction from that.

“You can’t pull it from my head?” Jason asked. The question came through gritted teeth; invulnerable to mental meddling as he might be, Jason made no secret about how much he disliked anything to do with mind games. Opening up to J’onn was probably the last thing he wanted from the night.

“I realize my powers may seem all-encompassing, but I can’t restore her molecules to their original state and influence the memories of an entire race at once,” J’onn said, expression unreadable. “And the memories themselves would be diluted and spread thin. You may have to live with being the only human to remember her. I have taken the liberty of removing her memories of your true identities, aside from the Red Hood’s. What you do next is up to you, Batman, as this city is your well-known jurisdiction.”

Kaiya coughed at that and if the cough sounded a little like ‘bullshit,’ no one was going to comment on it.

“She can’t stay in Gotham,” Damian announced, with a sidelong glance at where Batman stood in the shadows. “She will only use being forgotten to her advantage. We know what she has done by report – Drake’s injuries won’t be easily forgotten – but the population will have forgotten her role in tonight’s incidents. She can’t be trusted.”

Now that Roy remembered Jason, the archer tended to never be far from the Red Hood’s side and Tim noted that Roy had taken up a lean against the wall behind Jason, establishing a defensive line of sight on the rest of the room. Apparently, Batman going after the Outlaws hadn’t healed all the bad blood between them.

“Look,” Roy began. “Ordinarily I’d be the first to say screw her, she was trying to kill Tim, but Jason’s already tried to kill her and now we have a live, injured person who no one but Jay
remembers. I don’t know how you typically make decisions in Gotham, but she should either go to prison or some kind of institution or... something.”

“Hard to claim custody or prosecute when no one remembers her,” Tim replied, fidgeting until he had at least one foot on the floor, then the other. “At least no one is trying to say she can demonstrate enough self-control to be a member of the Lantern Corps.”

Damian watched with uncommon intensity as Tim got to his feet. The movement took a little more coordination than usual as Tim tried to avoid aggravating his scorched and bandaged back, the leg that still felt like there was a knife in it, and hobbling his IV along with him. With the way they were clustered around the beds, if Tim stumbled there were plenty of people to catch him; he’d made sure of that before he tried to stand. Still, Damian’s expression twisted with displeasure, even as he demanded to know what Tim thought he was doing up.

Tim reached Duela’s bed on the far side of the room without falling over. Take that, Damian’s overprotectiveness, Tim thought, leaning heavily against his IV stand. And, in the following instant: Never thought I’d think that.

“Can you safely wake her up?” Tim asked Kaiya, who nodded and slipped off Duela’s ring. The item had been left on to promote healing abilities while she was unconscious but there had already been an unspoken rule set around whether or not it would be there when she was conscious. The rule was ‘hell no.’

“What are you planning?” she asked, putting a hand to Duela’s wrist even as she handed off the ring to Batman and that special containment box he had. Stupid Bat secrecy; if Tim had known about the containment box months ago, he could have used it in their research. Still… even knowing the ring was in the box and that he was surrounded by some of the city’s best fighters at the moment, Tim still felt like he was climbing into a lion’s cage at the zoo.

He channeled that energy into his explanation: “Every other time we’ve tried to ask what she wanted, she had all the power in the conversation. I want to have at least one conversation where that’s not the case.”

Tim looked around for a chair, of two minds about whether or not he actually wanted one. Sitting felt like allowing a power imbalance into the dynamic. The feeling was illogical; they were both seriously injured, and she was shot, and he was still thinking about what it would mean to be looking up at her bed as he spoke. Damnit, now he wanted the coffee he’d tried to bribe out of Damian. Anything to feel a little more awake and on point.

“Red Robin,” Batman said in a warning tone.

“Arsenal’s right, B.” Tim stifled his yawn. “We can’t kill her. No one will remember what she’s done and she can’t remember us. We need to talk to her or it’s only going to make her more aggressive when she finds out we’ve made all the decisions for her.”

“Nightwing could talk to her,” Batman said. “Or myself, or the Lanterns—”

“If I’m remembering Red Hood’s description correctly, she’s got too many memories and preconceptions associated with you and Nightwing. The Lanterns aren’t from Gotham, or even Earth, and aren’t even involved if she’s not a Lantern anymore. By comparison, Red Robin’s just a pain in the ass who recently bested her in a fight.” Tim nodded to Kaiya. “Wake her up. Please.”

Duela came to consciousness faster than Tim expected. She did nothing with her consciousness at first, staring at the ceiling beneath that death mask of the Joker’s old face, her gaze impassive. An
expression he had only ever seen her wear in half-second blips between mad cackles and violent
attacks – something that suggested she wasn’t on the same wavelength as the Joker’s brand of
madness.

“Duela…?” Tim asked, his tone venturing and, hopefully, not too unsteady.

She turned her whole head, instead of just glancing at him, and focused on first the domino, then
intensely on his eyes beneath the domino. It made him glad that he had chosen to stand, rather than
sit below her bedside.

“Red Robin. Thought you’d be dead,” she said. Tim attributed that to J’onn pulling the Bats’ names
from her mind, everyone’s except Jason’s, until they decided how they were moving forward. Given
her lack of reaction, he guessed that J’onn had also removed some of the more incendiary parts of
Red Robin’s role in her recent activities.

“Sorry to disappoint,” Tim said, resisting the urge to take a step or two backwards. “Stuck around to
act as a… coordinator, of sorts. We’re trying to decide where would be the best place for you.”

“Gotham.” Her tone remained flat. “I’m from Gotham.”

“Do you know anyone there?” If she already thought they had moved her to another location, this
might be easier. Maybe.

“I lead a kingdom in the sewers… but they forgot me. I had a ring—” She glanced down. “Oh, but I
don’t have it anymore.” Duela’s gaze glanced around the room but she didn’t ask where she was;
Tim wasn’t even sure if she could see the Bats in the far shadows of the room.

“Do you have family in Gotham?” Tim asked, though the suggestion made him feel like he was
leading the witness in a court case. Duela moved to shrug, flinched, and decided not to move.
Throughout the aborted movement, she hadn’t changed expression.

“The Joker. But we haven’t seen each other in a long time.”

“Then why do you want to stay in Gotham?” Tim asked, after giving Duela a long moment to add
anything else. “It sounds like everything there is gone.”

“Are you kidding?” Still no variation in tone, aside from a faint but growing underscore of affront. “I
belong in Gotham. Fear is currency and I wanted to be rich. It gives and it takes and that makes
sense. Gotham cut up my face, Gotham gave me a mask, Gotham surrounds me with a kingdom of
ugly people like me who love me. Fear me. Same thing. Where would I go if I wasn’t in Gotham?”

Her wandering gaze caught on Martian Manhunter and became fixed there, shifting a little towards
alarm at J’onn’s green skin and crimson eyes.

“Besides, I jump straight to the big leagues here,” she murmured. She remained quiet as, presumably,
J’onn spoke to her. After a minute, she shook her head. J’onn blinked once, certifying his
understanding and he took a few steps forward. His hand settled on Tim’s shoulder.

The Martian meant well, but the mere weight of his hand staggered Tim and he half-fell into a green
chair construct, which he was certain hadn’t been there a moment ago. Damian’s ‘tt’ could be heard
across the quiet room, as well as something muttered about ‘Red’s damnable pride.’ Jason, on the
other hand, could be heard chuckling.

“She would prefer to be delivered to the civilian authorities,” J’onn said, once Tim was sitting and
had stopped drowning in embarrassment.
“She believes herself capable of escaping within an acceptable amount of time, particularly with the lack of a legal case against her.” J’onn looked out of the corner of his eye at Batman who had strode forward once the conversation was done. “She is familiar with how the justice system works in Gotham, among other things, and would prefer to be added to what she considers Batman’s ‘weekly roster.’”

From the corner where he had sequestered himself, Jason muttered an expletive. All trace of a chuckle was gone.

“You couldn’t have pulled the memory of Batman out of her head as well?” Damian demanded of J’onn, who looked at him without expression. Damian’s protest turned into a sulk and Duela’s attention turned to Batman, a smirk tugging at the lips beneath the mask.

“It’ll be more boring without the ring, Bats, but I think I’ll get by.”

“You could choose a more normal life,” Bruce said, his voice gruff. “We had hoped you would choose a better life than… this.”

“And what would I be?” Her voice went low, more of a rasp than a question. “A politician? A professor? An insurance claims adjustor? A girlfriend? A mother? I am Gotham’s. You can steal all the memories you want, but you can’t take Gotham away from me.”

Tim had managed to regain his footing and the chair had consequently vanished. He wasn’t ready for Duela to turn her gaze on him though, and froze when she did.

“Red,” she said flatly.

“Duela.” He braced himself for the inevitable death threat.

“We have strong enough memories of each other to swap yet?”

Tim swallowed. “Oh. The… device got broken. During the fight.”

Duela’s expression went contemplative. Confused. “Shoddy workmanship. Could’ve had the good grace to kill you before it broke. How long before the new one’s ready?”

“I… don’t… they’re not making another one. Or… they might, but it wouldn’t have the same memories. It wouldn’t have you, in it.” Someone else should have had this conversation with her, Tim thought. The rest of the Batclan could have presented this information matter-of-factly, even with a tone of dislike, but Tim knew better than most of them what it looked like for Jason to have been forgotten. In breaking the Exi, Duela had been doomed to starting over, having professed an intention to get on Batman’s rogues list and continue her mission to rule Gotham, come what may.

Confusion turned to understanding. “I see.”

“If you want to choose a different path, get help, we can arrange—” Tim began. Duela smiled, unsettlingly slow and catlike.

“I’ll be my own help. Always have.”

She shifted position, testing her reflexes, and Tim was suddenly glad of the distance between them. Her injuries prevented her from lunging but he felt certain, if she still had the ring or the physical capacity, he would have been the first one she attacked. From the quiet shifting of position in the
shadows of the room and J’onn’s hand returning (lightly) to Tim’s shoulder, the rest of his family felt the same way.

The strained atmosphere only truly relaxed when Kaiya put Duela back to sleep to continue her healing. Tim busied himself with attempting to stabilize his footing without turning into a full-on lean against J’onn as support. The silence ended up being broken by Damian, who opening a call on his comms to make an anonymous tip to the police: criminal pick-up with medical requirements.

“Seven-minute ETA,” Damian confirmed as he got off the line. “Point 53 is now a burn site, Batman.”

“Which is a shame. I liked the cats at this one,” Jason mentioned to Roy, who looked in turn at Kori.

“Want a cat, Kor? Or a lot of cats?”

Tim could see the drift in Jason’s stride, moving in tandem with the other two prior Outlaws and recognized it as the usual signal that the Red Hood wouldn’t be returning with the Bats.

“Hood,” he said. Jason’s step hitched guiltily.

“Not big on long goodbyes, Replacement.”

“I’m sure Penny-One would like to see you before you go.” Yeah, because he wasn’t above using the Alfred card tonight. Tim didn’t feel above much of anything right now and was about 93% sure that J’onn’s hand on his shoulder was conferring some telekinetic or regenerative charge, keeping him on his feet.

‘Very perceptive,’ J’onn replied, the dry tone echoing in his mind. ‘However, continuing to stand is doing significant damage to the torn muscles and ligaments in your leg and the deep breathes you are performing to manage the discomfort only serve to push your lungs against the cracked ribs. The Lanterns think you are a prideful idiot for not sitting down. Or lying down.’

‘Is Jason still thinking of leaving?’ Tim replied.

‘Yes. He has assured himself you will be taken care of and Penny-One will understand his absence, having spent enough time at the manor to satisfy social interaction requirements.’

Tim came to a decision. ‘Drop me.’

‘I strongly advise against that.’

‘I’ve been run across town, slammed into a shipping container, kicked in the gut, stabbed in the leg, and fallen a couple dozen feet onto a pointy object today, J’onn, please drop me.’

Tim hadn’t expected the whoosh of gravity to be that impressive. His fall definitely got Jason engaged – the Red Hood crossed the room faster than the speed of the Lantern constructs and caught Tim on the descent.

“You manipulative little bastard,” Jason muttered, attention flickering from Tim to J’onn as he realized he’d been had.

“We have no time for shenanigans, Red Robin,” Damian spat, brushing past them on his way out the door. “It is very late. Come along, Red Hood.”

Jason grumpily settled in under Tim’s shoulder, but it didn’t exempt Bruce from getting a dirty look
shot his way. “There better be a free dinner involved.”

Cass ducked under Tim’s other arm. The fabric movement around her full facemask suggested she was grinning. “I made sure.”

“Alfred, when the hell did you find the time to make risotto?”

“A pocket dimension, Master Todd,” Alfred replied, relocating the risotto dish to the far side of the table yet again. “With the gentle encouragement of a fairy.”

“Cass asked and you made time?” Jason interpreted, taking another scoop of the dish before nudging it at Dick across the table, a destination from which few dishes ever came back intent. Kori had demurred from the dinner né breakfast invitation, stating that she had already ‘spent enough time with Bats today, thank you.’ Roy left with her, taking the chances of sharing a meal with Kori over free food from Alfred and Jason was going to give him a lot of crap about it next time they saw each other. J’onn had vanished, without farewell or announcement other than ‘I am needed elsewhere.’

“Ms. Cassandra did place a special request.” Alfred didn’t sigh long-sufferingly. He performed his equivalent, which was to say nothing at all and vanish into the kitchen. Jason shot a look at Bruce.

“He needs a raise.”

“There isn’t enough money to pay Alfred adequately,” Tim pointed out, between plucks at the plush grey arms of the wheelchair. “I figured you would have burned this, Jay.”

“Are you kidding? I only burn crutches. Wheelchairs are expensive.”

“And Todd would be the one majorly inconvenienced by destroying it,” Damian muttered into his remaining risotto. “Drake, you should go to bed.”

“Jason will peace out the moment I—”

“Drake,” Damian said, at the same time that Jason said “Tim.” They glanced at each other, before Damian conceded the floor to Jason and returned to pushing risotto around his plate to maximize cheese distribution.

“I’m good, Replacement,” Jason said. “You’ve done way more than I could have expected.”

“We still need to—”

“To nothing,” Jason interrupted. “The Exi is broken. Bats sent J’onn over to visit Marisa, then a brief visit to Watersted, neither whom now know anything about our identities or told anyone, aside from Marisa’s friend Karl, who she was happy to give up and J’onn took care of. Cops picked up Duela. Arkham’s working with all three of the Lanterns to transfer the escaped prisoners to safe locations, and Batman owes all three of them a hell of a favor. And they took the frakking rings off our hands.”

Tim slumped back a little in the wheelchair, making unhappy eye contact with the risotto. He vaguely remembered those things happening and disliked that he needed to be reminded that they had happened. Injury tended to do that to him – distract the long-term memory portions of his brain with trivial facts like ‘did you know you feel like death?’ ‘did you know your leg feels like seven colonies of fire ants are gnawing at it from the inside out?’ and other fun factoids. Being needed to do something would’ve at least been… something.
Jason had continued listing things: “And Damian asked Alfred to dust the piano—”

“Shut up, Todd.”

“And took your Broadway songbook out of the bench before burning the Suzuki books.”

“Master Damian, we have discussed not setting fires in the drawing room.”

“And Baberak invited you to Nuran’s memorial celebration which is, apparently, a big deal.”

Tim blinked hard. He had no memory of that. “I… did she invite me, directly?”

Dick groaned and handed Damian a five-dollar bill, muttering ‘how on earth does he know she’s a she?’ and Tim replied, ‘because of the frill?’ out of habit, before focusing again on what Jason was reporting. The Red Hood shook his head.

“Nah, she invited you before they left but after you passed out on the way back. I said you’d be delighted and were taking a week off, so you’d have plenty of time for the travel requirements.”

“I’m not taking a week off,” Tim said. He resumed shredding the wheelchair arm, since getting up and/or storming out in protest wasn’t an option. “All my projects have been delayed as is. Odds are Hannah thinks I’m dead and Darren has put together a presentation demonstrating why I’m another ‘irresponsible Wayne child’ and can’t be trusted to manage the salad bar, much less my team.”

“You’ve said yourself you don’t plan on keeping Darren on another year,” Dick interrupted from where he and Damian had begun having an argument over who got the last serving of grated parmesan. Damian won when Dick focused, laser-like, on Tim. “You’re taking a week off.”

“I’m not.” Tim caught himself back from saying ‘you can’t make me,’ like a little kid. It would only aggravate his two older brothers’ protective instincts and urge on his two younger siblings. “Bruce—”

“Oh, real mature,” Jason interrupted. “Pulling rank.”

“Jason has the best understanding of how much effort you’ve put into this issue,” Bruce said, blatantly refusing to commit himself to anything other than munching on salad. “And Darren reports that Hannah has been doing admirable work during your absence, so I have no concerns on that front. It’s all right to take some time off, Tim.”

All they would do was make it massively inconvenient for him to work. The memorial would be an entire day of travel, wherever it was; he still had an exam or two floating around to finish up; he wouldn’t be able to train for at least four days which usually meant Dick would probably try to assign him ‘relaxation’ activities, and Damian—

He must have looked warily at the youngest Robin because Damian’s head jerked up and the kid glared at him.

“What, Drake?”

Not quickly enough, Tim returned his attention to the risotto on his plate, only to discover most of the food dotting the china had been cleared away. When he glanced to Cass on his right, she beamed at him and scooped another forkful off what little risotto remained off his plate. Tim nudged the plate towards her and rolled the wheelchair back from the table. He might be too tired to fight their Batmob-mentality tonight, but he could catch up on some work in the Cave. He said as much, ignored the protests, and left.
He’d made sure the Red Hood didn’t vanish into the ether after their fight, since that was the other’s general modus operandi. As well as, of course, deciding that the Bats had merely been tolerating him and he didn’t have to communicate with them for another six months. Jason was an adult, he could do that, but Tim had long ago decided it was childish as hell. At least with this configuration, he couldn’t pretend all the Bats had been ‘tolerating’ him and that he would be pulled aside and shown the door.

What Jason did now was up to Jason.

It took Jason some thirty minutes to extricate himself from the family table and follow Tim downstairs, where Tim had opened one of Bruce’s cold cases. Jason wandered up, assessing the photos over Tim’s shoulder.

“Meant it, earlier,” Jason commented.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Tim replied, attention firmly on the dozens of pictures he was flicking through.

“Helping more than I could expect you to. I owe you, Red.”

“You don’t owe me.”

“Just saying, I can pull some seats out of the Outlaws’ current base of operations, aka a Honda Odyssey, make some room... You might even be able to play DJ, if you can keep Biz away from the ska and Artemis away from the death metal.”

Tim shook his head, pulling up several new files on the computer. “I’m good here, though I am going to send something with you.” Jason’s phone vibrated, somewhere out of sight but still audible. Jason began fumbling for it, shooting a quizzical glance at the younger man.

“What is it, a tracker?”

“No. And try not to break your phone, or at least make a backup,” Tim ordered while Jason located the device and opened the files. Tim felt quietly gratified by the stunned response.

“How’d you get the documentation from the courthouse so fast?” Jason asked, scrolling through the high-quality scan of his birth certificate, death certificate, and the legal revocation thereof. "Bruce and I were there just before everything went to hell, you could hardly…”

“Wi-fi scanner in the courthouse. Sends documents to a burner email of mine if it contains certain keywords,” Tim said. The rule was originally put into place to make it more difficult for Bruce’s insidious doppelganger, Hush, to do anything, but on a practical level, the arrangement helped Tim stay in the loop even when Bruce didn’t want him (or anyone) knowing things. Any advantage was fair game when it came to Bat-secrets.

“Well… thanks. Awkward to double-back for my ‘hey, I’m legally alive and a Wayne’ certificate if anything like this ever… well, it won’t. But I could use a get out of jail free ticket all the same.”

Jason’s phone chimed, relieving both of them from the pressure of awkward mutual gratitude. Tim returned his attention to the computer screen, racking his memory to determine if he had already thanked Jason for making sure he didn’t bleed out on the docks. Tim probably only had a minute or two left to do so before the older vigilante would announce ‘his ride was here’ or that he couldn’t hang around the manor any longer. Jason was already not-so-subtly trying to avoid being caught by
Bruce and lectured for the multiple, near-fatal attacks on Duela.

And no. No, Tim hadn’t thanked Jason yet, he was almost sure (foggy memories notwithstanding), which needed to be addressed. Even if it was expected of vigilantes to save those in need, it wasn’t always expected of Jason which was dumb and he needed to know Tim recognized him as someone who could be counted on. Tim turned around, words scripted in his mind.

“Jay, I wanted to—"

He’d already left. Tim considered heading after him, for a half second even considering taking Jason up on the offer to become a temporary Outlaw and making sure they didn’t get themselves killed because of bad tech… but then a message came through from Oracle, asking if he had time to help with one of her overflow cases. Promised to be tricky and she was running low on the bandwidth to take it on.

Tim opened the case file, sending a quick text off to Jason with the other hand.

‘you left before I could say thanks’

The reply didn’t come back for a couple of hours, by which time Tim was knee-deep in the case and on his ninth cup of coffee. He’d expected a quip or remark about how Tim wasn’t exactly going to save himself, so the simple line ‘you’re welcome’ caught him off guard. The text that followed on its heels made more sense:

‘Now stop working and go play piano or something.’

Tim glanced at the case splashed across the screen, then guiltily checked the ‘computer use monitor’ application, which informed him that he'd been working on it seven hours since sitting down. It was 4pm. He shot off a message about taking a break to Oracle (which was met with all the expected exclamation points and question marks), and headed upstairs.

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