When Barbara first tells him that Alfred misses him and he has a chance to go back to the manor, Jason does not believe it, but the doubts remain. In the end, he decides to contact Alfred and dare verify Barbara’s assessments. For once, things start spiralling in a good way.

Notes

Written for Batfam Week 2018, Theme: AU. Could also have worked with Theme: Homecoming, but I already did one for that, and this story is an AU of an alternate canon. I had been planning to write this one for quite a while now, mostly as an experiment along the lines of "How quickly could Jason have undone the occupation of Gotham if he had decided to BEFORE the Cloudburst". Answer: pretty fucking fast. Probably gonna need tons of proof-reading for this, because I wrote 80% of it in three hours.

„How’s Alfred?”

„He misses you,” Barbara said with a tone of misery in her voice that almost lived up to how he felt. “We all do.”

Almost.
Oh, you know what they miss, the Knight laughed in his mind, all dark amusement and scorn. They miss Robin Jason. They miss the fifteen-year-old, starry-eyed loser, who was too stupid for his own good.

Jason could feel his fingers curl around the arm rests of the wheel chair, could feel his lips twist into a sneer that shifted the brand around, scraping it along his cheek bones like a hammer wrapped in sandpaper. He was painfully aware of every single millisecond of the change, and yet powerless to stop it. Trapped, paralyzed in his own body. Just like back then with Joker. His body had escaped. His mind never had.

“You miss a shadow,” Jason finally blurted out as he took a step back in disgust at the weakness that almost overwhelmed him. “You miss a glorified memory of something that never was.”

“No, I don’t.” Barbara bit back at him, at the Knight, “and there’s a part of you that knows you’re lying to yourself. You’re just too scared to admit it.”

He wanted to kill her. He wanted to hug her. He wanted to snap her neck and save her life. He wanted—The Knight wanted her dead. Jason wanted her alive. It was a familiar stalemate. Oh, he had played that game before… so many, many, many times…

The door snapped open just a second before that dreadful voice slithered into his ears again. “The Cloudburst is charged, Knight. It’s time.”

Jason’s first reaction was panic. Scarecrow had never seen his face. None of the militia had ever seen his face. Jason’s finger all but shot up to the pressure point that caused the red hood to slide back over his face, tinting the world red and letting him finally, finally breathe.

The Knight’s first reaction was disgust. Three years out of the asylum and Jason was still pitiful. A weak little coward who jumped at the first slither of empathy like a starving dog at a chicken bone. Pathetic. The blue visor slid over the red perfectly and tinted his world gray. He felt the weakness subside almost instantly, felt his back straighten and his fists clench.

“Someone put a gag on her,” the Knight ordered.

“Anybody touches her, they’re a dead man!” Jason added. The Knight sneered, but he could give that much. Scarecrow needed her alive after all. But once he was done with her, then it would really be no skin off his back anymore.

He had almost made it out the door when her voice pierced through the static of his comms.

“Call him if you don’t believe ME! Call him and ask him yourself if you’ve got the—”

The rest of her words were lost in the gag and the ever increasing distance between them. The Knight refused to look back as he headed for the garage. He had a job to do and he WAS going to do it. Batman was not going to stop him. Oracle was not going to stop him. An old, half-senile butler was certainly NOT going to stop him.

His name is Alfred, Jason growled in the back of his mind. And he’s worth a million of you.

There were times when the Knight really hated his own mind.

The Cloudburst had been mounted to his personal tank, as requested by Scarecrow, and the Knight sneered at the hideous, brightly glowing device that stuck out of the tank’s armor like a particularly ugly tumor. He might as well have painted a big, shiny, red bulls-eye on the tank.
He was in the middle of checking whether all systems were operational when the report came in. They had found Ivy. Batman was trying to protect her, of course, and doing a frustratingly good job at it, but it no longer mattered. He balked at the growing nervousness in the Sergeant’s voice. “Yes, I read you, Sergeant, this is in hand.” As the tank started rolling out of Killinger’s Mall, the Knight felt a smile creep onto his lips.

Yes. Everything was in hand. And in a few more minutes, Gotham was going to be a toxic wasteland and Batman the greatest failure that had ever lived. His time had finally come.

He stopped on Perdition Bridge, the agreed-on ground zero and deactivated the safeguards on the Cloudburst’s release mechanism.

And yet his finger refused to push the trigger.

_Call him if you don’t believe ME! Call him and ask him yourself if you’ve got the—_

He was gonna kill that bitch. He was gonna make it slow and painful. Hell, maybe once all this was over, he’d just open up all the cells in GCPD and dump her there, in a sea of criminals who hated both her family and her employer.

_Yeah, go on and do that_, Jason chimed in, and for once his voice was not begging, pleading, panicked, helpless, tearful or soft. For once, it was cold, hard, unforgiving steel. The Knight felt a shudder run up his arm. _Don’t get your own hands dirty. Barbara is right. You ain’t got the balls. You ain’t got the balls to kill her yourself. You ain’t even got the balls to let me call an old, half-senile butler. You’re afraid of her. You’re afraid of him. And you’re afraid of me._

“I am not.” The Knight wanted to laugh, but the sound stuck in his throat. He WAS fear. He had been born of it, had breathed it, every single second, buried forgotten in the dirt under the Asylum. “I am not. Afraid. Of Anything.”

Hacking into the Batcave communications systems was easy. He knew them inside out and even though Alfred had doubled up on the security since he had hacked Bruce’s gauntlet, it was nothing he couldn’t manage. No. The real trick was to keep the conversation shielded from Batman. If he wasn’t on a line with Bruce at the time, it would be relatively easy. If he was, it would be the shortest conversation ever.

He took a deep breath, then tore down the last firewall.

“What on Earth—” The confusion was evident on Alfred’s face and in his voice, in the little spark of indignation at the intrusion and the way his eyes were still focused on the keyboard beneath his hands, trying to tear down the comms block the Knight had created. However, the moment vanished quickly, leaving behind the same unflappable manner that he had been greeted with all those years back, when he had first arrived at the manor. “Good evening. I presume this is not a social call.”

The Knight laughed. Oh yes, Alfred was running a trace on this call. If he couldn’t contact Bruce, at least he was gonna leave a trail of bread crumbs. It was classic Alfred.

“Actually, it kind of is,” the Knight finally answered with a smirk on his face. “Bruce has tasked you with finding out who I am, hasn’t he? How’s that going, Alfie?”

“Indeed he has,” Alfred Pennyworth said, stoic as ever. If the use of not just one, but two real names had shaken him even just a little, he wasn’t showing it. That too was to be expected. “Ten seconds ago I would have said it was an abysmal chore, but you just narrowed down the list considerably. You have my gratitude, Arkham Knight.”
“How about I narrow it down to exactly one, just for you?” The Knight smiled. Jason was nervous again. Good. He was going to break him into a million pieces. “How about it, Alfie, hm? Just you and me? In on this little secret? I haven’t even told my own men.”

“I’d be honored,” Alfred replied tersely.

Most people would have missed it, but Jason could see the subtle tells and so could the Knight. The slight twitching of his brow. The way the line of his mouth became just a little more tense. Alfred had been a special agent long enough to know that generous offerings of information from the enemy’s side only came just before the main attack, just before devastation and ruin. He knew the Cloudburst was ready.

_I am ready, too_, the Knight thought as he reached for the release mechanism and let the helmets slide upwards to reveal his face.

“Jason?!” That was new. A little, irrational ball of... dread... settled in his gut. “No. This can’t be...”

“How?” His voice sounded so... strange... without the modulator. So weak... so whiny...

“Disappointed Bruce’ll have to do the job himself, after all, rather than leaving me to Joker?”

“Good grief, no!” Alfred shook his head. “He sent us the video! We saw him shoot you! We spent two weeks analyzing that footage for a clue of—What are you doing out there, Master Todd?”

Suddenly, whatever anger had swung in Alfred’s voice had melted away. “What are you doing wearing that ghastly diamond on your chest and working for Scarecrow? Come home!”

“Home?” He snorted at the notion. “You have no idea how many people I’ve killed, how much pain and suffering I’ve caused to get here, do you? He couldn’t be bothered to care for me the first time around, why would he now?”

“I do not speak for Master Bruce,” Alfred said softly. “I speak for myself and I refuse to give up on you, Master Todd. You are family, regardless of your actions. As far as I am concerned, you are still welcome at the manor. You always will be.”

“You’re lying!” He could feel the cold, wet sting of tears in the corners of his eyes and wanted to rip them right out of their sockets. Jason again. The little, sentimental fool. “You’re lying.”

“I have been many things in my lifetime, Master Todd, but ‘a liar’ is not one of them.” Alfred sighed. “The choice it yours, Master Todd. It will always be there and it will always be yours, but know this: I have missed you, every single day since you disappeared and I am immeasurably glad that you are still alive.”

“Alfred...”

_He’s not_, the Knight cut in quickly. _He’s lying! He’s playing you! Now push the damn button and gas this fucking city!

“If there’s a part of you that’s wondering whether I am truly serious about this,” Alfred said as if he had heard his thoughts. “That’s Joker’s manipulation and torture of you talking.”

_Come back to the manor! Let us help you_, Barbara’s voice echoed in his mind. _Don’t let Joker win._

He did sound like Joker. Jason cringed. All melodrama in public, all pointed, excruciating torture in private. Why had he never noticed it before? Or had he and he had just pushed the thought away, far, far away? Wasn’t this what Joker had wanted? For him to be his sidekick?
The shoulder and breast plates came off first. His hands shook as he tore them off and he could feel the bile rise in his throat at the sight of the white diamond painted on them. He swallowed hard, ripped the blue visor off his helmet, and planted his armored fist right into it, cracking the display. Somewhere in his mind, the Knight screamed and raged as he tore out the voice modulator and tossed the broken helmet to the floor.

It was bad enough he had that demonic voice in his head. He never wanted to hear it in real life again.

“What have I done...” His lips muttered the words on sheer automatic as his face sank into the palms of his hands and the full gravity of the situation he had created hit him. “What have I done... what have I done... what have I done...”

“The right thing, Master Todd.” Despite the slight static of the comms line, Alfred’s voice was soft as a feather. “You did the right thing just now, Master Todd, and I am immensely proud of you.”

This was a dream. It had to be. He had had it many times before, but reality never went this way. Reality was cruel and harsh. This wasn’t real.

And, dear god, he dreaded waking up. He didn’t want to wake up... he didn’t—

“What are you waiting for, Arkham Knight?” Scarecrow’s voice slithered into the tank no sooner than the comms line was open. Jason cursed the Knight for having put that one on priority. “Stop procrastinating! Activate the Cloudburst now! Or I will transfer command to someone who will.”

You’ve got some fucking nerve, Jason wanted to growl back into the comms. After all these hours of keeping him from putting a bullet through Bruce’s head, now he suddenly wanted to speed things up? Jason wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. But pushing the ‘mute’ button... that felt good.

What felt decidedly less good was the fact that he knew Crane was not bluffing.

“Alfred...” He swallowed hard.

“Yes, Master Todd?”

“Scarecrow is catching on. I won’t be able to delay the launch of the Cloudburst much longer before he takes control over this operation and hands it to Deathstroke.”

“Slade Wilson?”

“The same.” Jason flinched. “I brought him on as a contingency. In case I failed. I am giving you the GPS tracking code for his mobile command unit. It’s a fortified tank strong enough to crush a Cobra drone. Get it to Bruce. Tell him to take Slade down, no matter what.”

“I certainly shall.” From the sound of his voice, Alfred was fully aware of the urgency. Deathstroke was not someone to be trifled with. As a matter of fact, he was probably among the handful of people who could, potentially, best Bruce in a fair fight. “He will ask how I got this information.”

“So tell him.” His gut turned to ice at the idea of facing Bruce now, without the strength and conviction of the Knight, but if he could play this right, he wouldn’t have to. “I will destroy the Cloudburst right now, but I can only safely call off my men after Crane and Wilson are dealt with and Barbara is safe, or else they’ll get killed the minute they try to—”
“Miss Gordon is alive?” He sounded genuinely surprised. For a moment, Jason wondered whether this was his mind playing tricks on him. Then he remembered the decoy.

“Yes. The Chinatown safe-house – that was a decoy, which brings me to job number two: call Nightwing and Robin. I am sending you the coordinates for Barbara, too. Tell them to get her out of there and apprehend Scarecrow. Then I can call off the rest of the militia.”

“I shall inform Master Grayson immediately,” Alfred agreed. “He will have to handle this mission alone, though. Robin is working on something incredibly important and his comms unit is faulty. I could not contact him, even if I tried.”

“What?” That didn’t compute. Batman’s equipment was never ‘faulty’. And even if it got damaged, he always had spares. Jason could all but hear the alarm bells ring in his head. Something was wrong here. Very, very, wrong. “I mean... understood.”

Jason cut the comms before he could get any answer to that. There was no way he could voice his suspicions to Alfred.

Because you can’t trust him after all, the Knight teased. You are pathetic, you know that, right?

“Fuck you.”

He sent the coordinates and the GPS tracking frequency, as promised, then considered the options. He could just leave. Break the Cloudburst, wreck the tank, pay his men what he still owed them, and issue the evacuation order. Then, get out of Gotham. Away from Bruce and Dick and Robin and the possibility that Alfred and Barbara were the outliers on the curve of forgiveness.

Or he could save Robin. He didn’t know how, but Jason knew, knew with every fiber of his being that it was not just a faulty comms unit. He could save Robin.

Oh please, the Knight scoffed. You think saving the new and improved model is gonna make you feel any better about the fact that they couldn’t be bothered to save you?

And if Robin really had been working on something important, then that meant he would have needed access to the Batcomputer. Access to all the files. Including that video. If it existed.

Jason took a deep breath and got to work. He had already plunged head-first into the abyss of uncertain madness. There was nowhere left to go but down.

The Cloudburst was first. He overloaded the nimbus system with a strategic burst. Nonetheless, the feedback took out half the electronics in his tank. Jason cursed, then got out to remove the fear gas canister from the crucible and remove the Cloudburst device from the tank. Two strategic shots melted it into a pile of metal. The fear gas stayed in his tank.

Next up was the search. He accessed the recon division’s latest reports manually and browsed them quickly. There was no mention of Robin, the beta target. Not a single word, so at least that part must have been right. Robin had been working on something else, far away from militia business.

And so had Harley. Jason felt his skin crawl as he skimmed the section on the movements of her gang. The only base whose location he had given away was the Clocktower and even that he had only told to Scarecrow personally. And yet here Harley was, concentrating all her forces on Panessa Studios. Something was very wrong.

Thankfully, the movie studios were only two minutes away.
He was on the right trail. Jason was sure of it. The rooftop had been littered with unconscious thugs. The voice access records had confirmed that Robin had entered the building just after sundown, followed by several visits from Batman and one from Harley. Jason shut the red helmet and drew his guns as the elevator finished its descent and the doors opened. He was prepared for Harley.

He was not prepared for two bodies, one old and one young, lying in the middle of the room, their faces white as chalk, with blood red smiles, even in death. For a moment, it was as if his lungs had been surgically removed from his chest and replaced with blocks of ice. This had to be a hallucination. Joker was dead. He was DEAD. This could not be real.

“Hello there, Arkham Wanna-Bat!” The voice that sounded from the isolation cell to the far right made his skin tingle. Even now, three, almost four years later, it still made his muscles ache and twitch in anticipation of more drugs, more torture, more insanity. “You come to be my Knight in shining armor and rescue me?”

Part of him wanted to laugh. Then shout. To scream at her and let her know that she was the last person he’d ever be willing to safe, that he’d let her rot in this cell for all that he cared. But without the voice modulation... Harley knew his real voice. She had heard it before, screaming, pleading, and crying. The last person who needed to hear him, was her.

Jason swallowed hard, walked over to the cell, and activated the isolation shielding. The glass clouded almost immediately, blocking out all sight. The seals hissed quietly as they tightened, compressing until the cell was sound-proof and air-tight. Nothing was going in. Nothing was coming out.

The Batcomputer was running some kind of chemical analysis. Blood cells, some kind of infection. Someone had been trying to isolate prion cells and develop an antidote. Jason couldn’t have cared less. He minimized the windows and headed straight for his folder.

There, at the very bottom of the chronological entry list, was a series of folders from 2012. Jason opened them and once again felt like throwing up.

He had been on the other side of the camera back then, but even so, he recognized the footage. He recognized the room, the chair, the monitors... the gun. The scar on his chest ached in a phantom recall of the experience of a bullet burrowing deep into his flesh, right next to his heart.

Alfred had been right. Bruce had spent almost two weeks taking the footage apart frame by frame. He really had tried.

“He really had cared...”

Jason turned around to survey the rest of the room and nearly stumbled over his own feet.

“Oh fuck no...”

On the other side of the room, one more cell was occupied. Jason shuddered as he approached it in hesitation.

Robin looked pathetic, sitting on the cod in the tiny cell with his face in his hands, his shoulders slumped, and his cape hanging from his shoulders like a sad old sheet draped over ancient furniture in an attic to keep out the dust.

THIS was who Bruce had replaced him with?
Fitting, the Knight laughed. *He looks just as pathetic as you did.*

“Robin.” The boy didn’t answer and something inside him snapped. They didn’t have fucking time for this. He punched the glass hard and even though it hurt his fist worse than the cell, at least it made the miserable excuse of a replacement twitch. “Stop your fucking wallowing and look at me, you pathetic loser!”

The quiet sobbing stopped. The hands sank. Robin spared him one glance, then turned his attention back to the floor of his cell. “Arkham Knight, huh? Let me guess: this is the part where you kill me to hurt Batman, right?”

“Maybe I should,” Jason snapped back. “You seem awfully chill about it.”

“That’s how all you psychos tick.” He sounded... tired. Resigned. Broken. “Newsflash: the entire ‘kill Robin’ thing has been done before. I doubt it’ll have the same impact this time.”

“Is that why Bruce locked you up in here? Because you’re a fucking quitter? How long have you been in there, huh? One fucking hour? Two?”

“Bruce?” Suddenly, there was a spark in Robin’s eyes. *There’s a bit of green in them,* Jason found himself wondering as he watch Robin jump to his feet, shifting his body weight just enough to assume a fight-or-flight pose. “Okay, who the hell are you?”

Jason didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. Pressing the release on the helmet was enough. He could tell from the way Robin’s eyes widened in shock.

“Jason?!”

“Huh... so you know about me...”

“Know about you?!” Robin sounded downright insulted. “We looked for you for over a year! I spent two weeks watching you die, frame by frame, hoping that video was fake! You know Bruce called me by your name for months! And then you show up here, strolling in with an army, trying to murder us all, and *this* is what surprises you? Jesus fricking Christ...”

Robin shook his head and gave a slightly hysterical laugh.

“You know what? You got the right idea! Go back out there! Get Bruce! Put another bullet in between his ribs and don’t you dare stop until he’s down! You’ll be doing Gotham a favor.”

“What?” *Oh, I like this one!* Jason shuddered at the Knight’s laughter. “What the hell is wrong with you? You do know the entire point of Robin is working with Batman, right?”

“Oh, yeah, I did!” Robin started pacing. “I worked with him alright. I did everything he asked. Worked my ass off on this stupid cure for Joker’s epic last prank and guess what? He couldn’t even be bothered to let me know that HE should be in this cell. Not ME!”

“He locked you up in here and cut your comms.” Jason could all but feel his blood freeze in his veins. “That blood analysis on the screens...”

“...is an analysis of people who Joker infected with his Titan-poisoned blood, back during Arkham City,” Robin concluded. “I’ve spent the last nine months working on a cure. It turns the host crazy, like Joker. Nine months... and Bruce didn’t even bother to tell me until Harley attacked us tonight... and even then I only found out because he was finally starting to show physical symptoms and the other infected recognized him.”
Robin slumped back down onto the cod. “I was such an idiot! Five infected! He always said there were five infected, but we only picked up four patients. And he’s been so... brutal over the last nine months...” He shook his head. When he finally looked back up at Jason, the domino mask was off and his eyes looked twenty years older. “The last time he got like that was after Joker had kidnapped you. I should have known that something was wrong. I should have stopped this—”

“Then stop it now.” Jason all but punched the locking mechanism of the cell. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to scream. He wanted to hit himself for not going after Bruce.


For once, he had done everything right.

“Get up!” He yanked Robin to his feet by one arm and went to retrieve a new pair of gauntlets with functioning comms and trackers from the nearby emergency cache. Robin put them on without protest. “We’ll get a status update from Alfred, but Bruce should be fighting Deathstroke right now. That fight should wear him out enough for us to take him down. And you’d better do it before me, because I can’t guarantee I won’t break the bastard’s neck.”

“What...” Robin looked at him with wide eyes, but put his mask on nonetheless. “You and me together?”

“Yeah.” Jason shrugged. “You got a problem with that, princess?”

“My name’s Tim,” Robin chuckled softly. “And believe it or not, I’m both terrified and honored. I mean, you did try to have us all killed until—what? Half an hour ago? On the other hand: you and Dick were my childhood heroes.”

***

Jason had been through a lot of awkward rides. As a child, ‘car ride’ had either meant people he wouldn’t want to remember or cops who wanted to throw him in jail. Bruce had been sour company at any time. His time as a mercenary, especially as a commander, had been even worse. Any sort of transport had been like herding a sack of testosterone-fueled fleas.

And yet nothing compared to having Robin sitting next to him in a tank, heading for a fight between Deathstroke and Batman to take down whichever one of the two made it out alive and in one piece and lock them both up. It was surreal beyond compare.

Thankfully, Tim had done most of the talking. And fucking hell, had there been a lot of talking.

First, there had been the call to Alfred, to explain what was going on with Bruce and Dick and Barbara and, oh, apparently, Robin and Oracle were dating. Jason had barely resisted the urge to slam down hard on the brakes. And apparently, Bruce hadn’t told Tim that she had ‘died’ until after locking him up. And apparently Dick’s reaction to finding out that Jason was the Arkham Knight was the vigilante equivalent of ‘I’m not paid fucking enough for this and I need a drink’. And apparently Scarecrow was out like a light already.

This night was insane. He tried to connect the dots of how he had gone from nearly dousing the entire city in fear gas to suddenly trying to save it again and none of it made any sense. Which was probably a good reason to wrap it up quickly. The less chance he had to be the Knight again, the better.
By the time they arrived at the last known coordinates of Deathstroke’s command unit, fighting Slade and Bruce really seemed like the least of their worries.

The battle had just finished. Up on his perch, Jason gritted his teeth as he watch Batman pick himself up off the asphalt and crawling over to Deathstroke and handcuffing him while groaning in pain. The scan showed three cracked ribs and multiple cuts of varying depth. Slade had not gone down quietly.

Jason took a deep breath and dropped from his perch.

Bruce raised his head wearily at the sound of his approaching steps. His voice sounded like gravel and tar. “Jason? Is that re—”

The staff came down hard on the pressure point on the neck, with a precision that was almost uncanny. Jason watched as Batman’s body went limp and raised an eyebrow at Robin. “That was fast.”

“What? Did you want to have that conversation? Right here, right now, in the middle of the street?” Tim retracted the staff and bent down to remove Batman’s utility belt. “Besides, what was I supposed to do? Wait until you shoot him?”

“Fair enough.” Jason holstered his guns and tied Deathstroke to the nearest structure—a metal fence—while Robin heaved Batman into the Arkham Knight’s tank.

The world really had gone insane.

***

It was finally over.

Jason watched as the plates with the Arkham diamond and the blue visor, now all disabled, wiped, and fried, sank to the bottom of Gotham River. Then, he retrieved a cigarette from the pack he had looted on his way out of the city, lit it, and took one deep draw.

Bruce was locked up in Panessa Studios, with nothing but the trackers hidden in his civvies. Scarecrow and Deathstroke were locked up at GCPD. The others would soon join them there. Two-Face, Penguin, Firefly, and all the rest. Dick and Tim had promised to stay until the city was safe. So had Barbara. She was alright. She was safe.

And the militia... Jason coughed as he steered the car up the winding mountain roads. The Knight hadn’t smoked and the nicotine was killing his scarred lungs, but Jason had never been able to fully shake his favorite anxiety-coping mechanism.

The militia was leaving. He had given them the order half an hour ago and just as efficiently as they had set up shop in Gotham, they had also disappeared once more. Some had... protested. Some had simply been confused. In the end, the arrival of their final paychecks and a stern warning had been all ninety-nine percent of them had needed. And the one percent who had still stayed behind? Well, they had more balls than brains. For all Jason cared, they had no-one to blame but themselves. Nightwing was going to get them. Or Robin. Either way, they were not gonna last.

He had kept up his end of the bargain.

The manor looked just as it had all those years ago: a bundle of warm lights in the darkness of the surrounding forest, like a swarm of huge fireflies, guarded by gargoyles and high hedges. Jason felt his lips tremble around the cigarette as he pulled up the driveway to the front door and killed the engine.
You can still turn around. You can still leave. If you don’t play, you can’t lose.

But he knew he couldn’t really win either. Not if he left.

He stubbed out the cigarette before leaving the car. No littering on Alfred’s carefully kept grounds. The steps to the door loomed ominously in front of him and they seemed to get higher and longer with every inch. Jason forced his feet forward, one at a time.

He had not come so far to give up. He couldn’t.

The knocker burned in his scarred palms, even though he could see it wasn’t hot. The scar on his check seared.


Five seconds passed. Ten. Fifteen. Eighteen seconds in, the door finally opened. Warmth flowed towards him from inside, beckoning him to enter.

Alfred looked him over from toe to crown once, then stepped forth and circled his arms around Jason’s shoulders.

“Welcome home, Master Todd.”

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