i didn't want to be (here)

by PrettyMissKitty

Summary

...
The BatFam has reached an Impasse, with Jason running Crime Alley as Red Hood and the rest of them just kind of ignoring it as long as Hood doesn't kill outside his territory.

Tim thinks it's bullshit and is hell bent on getting the family to reconcile – even if it kills him (which it probably might).

When Tim shows up on Jason's roof, punch drunk and dying, the ex-Robin winds up saving his Replacement and suddenly has to deal with the consequences of his choices (and so does everyone else)...

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Fits into the Series AU (with Tim and Jason meeting while Jason was Robin), but can be read without the others.

Notes

I have absolutely ZERO self control... I wasn't gonna post this until NEXT Tuesday, since I just managed to finish off the last chapter of Manners and get that up here like /yesterday/ or some such nonsense...

Anywho, this story is largely based off a song that's been stuck in my head for a few months now. It's called *Wanderlust by James Bay* and it's pretty dang awesome. I've loved this kid since his second album (Chaos and the Calm), and I just do NOT understand how he's not CRAZY FAMOUS at this point.

This story is an emotion heavy look at how Tim forcibly arranges reality to bring Jason back into the Batfamily fold.

Strap in for some FEELS people. <3

See the end of the work for more notes
you get me high (love)

Chapter Summary

Tim's hurt badly and he heads straight for Jason, because Jason was his Robin... Tim knows he's still the boy who made Robin into something truly magical, and frankly if Tim's gonna die, he'd rather it be with Jay... besides, Tim TRUSTS Jason, and he is hell bent on getting the family to reconcile – even if it kills him.

Chapter Notes

We're gonna work through a LOT of PoVs in this one!

And we're starting with Tim; sweet, idiotic, angsty little Tim... ^_^<3

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter One – you get me high (love)

Tim was punch drunk.

He was riding a 60 hour sleep dep, what was probably a concussion from that explosion back on Sixth and Hanover, and he was bleeding in a bad way from some shrapnel that had clearly cut him deeper than the distant, floaty twinges of pain he felt had initially indicated...

So yeah, he’d known this was a bad idea when he’d had it – known it was stupid and dangerous and knew he was delirious and understood perfectly well that his judgement was beyond utterly screwed, and yet...

Here he is, limping his way across the Gotham skyline, way on the wrong side of the invisible territorial line that cuts Crime Alley and the Bowery off from the rest of the city – the part of the city more or less kept successfully under Bat control... he’s heading away from that part, away from what the rest of his Family would consider ‘safety’.

Tim’s not so far gone that he doesn’t know where his feet are taking him, that he doesn’t realize he needs help here soon or it’s a pretty damn safe bet that he’s not gonna make it to seeing the spectacle of colors in the chemical haze of Gotham’s next sunrise.

Some people think the pollution is what nails down the coffin lid on Gotham as being utterly unredeemable in its overwhelming filth, but Tim has always liked what the smoggy haze does to Gotham’s sunrises.
He could be biased, though.

He’s been watching the sun come up for over a decade now, after all, and that kind of familiarity and consistency is the sort of thing that inevitably leads to unwarranted affection.

Still, Tim wants to see his city’s next sunrise.

He does.

He’s not heading deeper into Crime Alley because he’s suicidal.

Or because he’s too messed up to realize what he’s even doing.

Tim might be punch drunk, but he’s not stupid.

He has a plan.

He always has a plan.

This plan is just as perfectly well thought out as any of Tim’s other schemes. It just isn’t one that’s officially endorsed as reasonable by the majority of the Bat Clan he belongs to…

Tim’s com is blown, so he can’t call for the help he knows he needs.

The rest of the Family is all the way across town.

Well, most of them. Steph is close, but she has no resources on hand to immediately provide the kind legitimate medical aid he needs right now and he is not keen on a bumpy ride across town in a frickin’ glorified golf cart to get all the way back to the Cave.

Tim could never make it close to the rest of them, not at the speed he’s moving or at the rate he’s bleeding… he’d never even to a Bat approved safehouse where they could come to him.

The only place Tim can go for help is a place where help isn’t readily available.

The only person Tim can go to is Jason…

He knows Jason’s dangerous, knows the Red Hood is a killer – knows the former Robin has no reason in the world to help his replacement keep breathing for another day.

Tim knows that the odds are about even on whether Jason’s in a mood to just fuck it and help him or whether his mindset is leaned more towards murder and might just finish the job he’d initiated twice now and choose to just kill Tim outright.

Or, you know, he could just wait another ten minutes or so until Tim just bleeds out on his own damn dime. Tim’s probably got about four minutes of consciousness left, so he probably won’t even notice if Jason rejects the olive branch he’s trying to hand out.
Not one between him and Jason – no, Tim’s not that stupid.

Jason has no reason to ever want to accept Tim as anything less than the usurper he is.

Maybe there could’ve been hope for something between them, once upon a time. But any real chance at that died when Tim forced his was into Jason’s still warm pixie boots.

Tim’s fully resigned to the fact that there’s nothing left to salvage.

Jason will never have any kind of truly resonate kinship with Tim.

But to the rest of the Family?

That relationship is something that can be saved, that can be carefully repaired and knit back together in a way that makes it stronger for its scars. That makes it more beautiful.

Like Kintsugi ceramics, the fissures will never disappear or be forgotten, but with the right kind of nudge, they can be filled in and smoothed over.

Tim can help with that.

The other Bats have mostly given up on Jason – resigned themselves to taking the easy way out of thinking that the Pit ruined him, that he’s now nothing more than a murderer and that he belongs in Arkham with the other poor souls who can’t be saved.

Tim knows better.

He knows that the Jason he knew from before, that the boy who took up the Robin mantle because he just had to help – the boy who took a stupid yellow cape and made it something magic, made it something more than a mere symbol – is still in there somewhere, deep down and drowning in a swirl of acidic green and anger and fear and pain.

Tim trusts Jason.

Trusts his Robin, trusts the sweetness and kindness of the boy who died because he’d been chasing down a dream of Family…

And frankly, if Tim IS going to die tonight… which he is not planning on, really, he’s not… but… if he is… he’d rather do it after seeing Jason one more time.

Tim would rather see Jason than see the sunrise, but the two have always been linked for him – he’d spent his nights out chasing Robin, after all, and it was only on the good nights that he stayed out late enough to spy the sun coming up while making his way home…
Jason’s physically closer to him at the moment than any other Gotham vigilante.

And Jason’s about 48% likely to help him.

And if Jason does help him… it’ll be a way for him to start reaching back out to the Family, to start proving that he’s not quite the irredeemable bad guy they currently believe he is.

Because Tim is hell bent on getting them to reconcile.

He’s decided that it’s necessary, for all of their sakes, to get Jason back into the fold.

He’s determined to do it even if the effort kills him.

Which, with how his night is currently going, it very well might.

And sooner, rather than later.

But it might not.

Tim’s almost to the spot where he needs to be.

He knows exactly where Jason hangs out, knows his routes through the beat he’s staked out as his own, and knows exactly when the Red Hood will be taking a short break with his feet kicked over the side of an elegant old cornice with a gold brushed frieze depicting some meaningful Greek tragedy to which Jason’s drawn a painfully unironic personal connection.

Tim knows that if he lands on this corner, even if his landing is rough enough to be heard across the building, that Jason won’t bolt immediately.

Tim knows that Jason will have his helmet off, knows that he’ll be as relaxed as he ever gets these days – with a quiet street in the dark beneath his feet, steady hands checking over the ammo reserves in all his weapons’ magazines, and a lit cigarette tucked between his lips.

He knows that if he limps his way over, Jason will turn to face him – slow and cautious but not terribly concerned by his replacement’s display of woeful stupidity in the reckless act of wandering so far out of bounds.

Tim knows that if Jason doesn’t shoot him in the next fifteen seconds, he’ll probably live to see that god damn sunrise he’s been thinking about.

His heartbeat is too fast to be an accurate measure of time, and his breathing is too slow, so it’s safe to assume that he won’t be able to tell exactly when he crosses that important threshold and lets go of the desire he has to be directly aware of it.

Tim’s brain is too busy keeping his feet under him to mourn the fact that he would never accept such sloppiness from himself in other circumstances.
Maybe he really is dying.

Maybe he’s okay with that.

Because Jason turns around and smirks at him – but it’s not the harsh, cold smirk Tim’s come to know as the Red Hood going on a bad bender… it’s the warm taunt of the Robin that Tim once knew, the smirk he used when he was playing with fire and possessed the implicit understanding that he could handle whatever twist or wild spark might come.

“Thought you were supposed to be the smart one, Replacement,” Jason drawls out, his tone sharp and spiteful as he lifts the barrel of his favorite revolver to aim between Tim’s eyes – it’s a Smith & Wesson from the late 1800’s, more antique than military machine, a gift from someone Jay respects and a weapon usually reserved for the Red Hood’s more ceremonial kills…

Tim would say some sarcastic quip about being honored to warrant such a special weapon for the one to finally kill him – since Jason’s last two almost murder incidents with him involved no weapon more refined that a refurbished batarang and some piano wire… he would spin something snippy like that, but right now shuffling forward and breathing in concert is enough a feat to warrant every drip of his attention.

Jason notices immediately that something’s off.

Notices, perhaps a second afterwards, that Tim is badly hurt.

Tim doesn’t stop inching closer even as Jason scrambles to his feet, draws the curved blade of a kukri from his pocket, and snarls viciously, “I told you to stay the fuck outta my way, Replacement, so don’t you dare believe I’m not gonna take advantage of your shit for brains decision to come here in shape like that.”

Jason crosses the last few feet between them, wraps his hand up in the collar of Tim’s still unwashed new uniform. Distantly, Tim realizes that this one might never be washed, that if it weren’t for that stupid explosion, it would still be nice and shiny in whatever new memorial case Bruce might erect for him inside the Cave.

If Bruce would even do that for him.

He might.

Tim wasn’t Robin long, but it didn’t fuck it up too terribly.

The thought makes Tim want to smile. Almost openly.
He’s not quite able to manage the feat in full, but without having to concentrate on standing up on his own anymore, he’s able to make his lips twitch a bit that way.

And he’s able to focus on the small things about the man standing right in front of him at the moment – like the way he’s breathing, actually *breathing*, when Tim had bowed before the remaining rubble of his gravestone not more than four hours ago.

Like the way his face is so expressive, even from beneath the domino – he’s schooled his features well, and his masks are damn impenetrable, but below the façade is a flurry of emotive movement that’s unreadable primarily because Jason is all heart and just *feels*… feels everything about everything just so damn strongly.

Like the way Jason’s radiating warmth on the icy rooftop, radiating warmth and comfort and peace, and a hope that makes Tim giddy bubbles up his throat in a laugh that is wildly inappropriate considering the circumstances.

“The fuck you laughin’ at, runt,” Jason demands, giving Tim a rough shake and displaying his teeth in a rancid, vicious snarl. “What you think’s so funny?”

“You didn’t shoot me,” Tim answers, utterly honest.

He’s too tired to lie right now, too tired to pretend – to snipe and snark.

Too tired to feel sober about Jason’s criminal record when he’s just so damn happy and relieved and overwhelmingly grateful that the man is even *alive* here to be a dangerous problem.

Tim’s definitely high.

Well passed punch drunk and at the end of his rope.

He’s got another three minutes or so to keep breathing if Jason doesn’t decide to help, and only about twenty more seconds with his eyes open.

His odds are good though.

Jason didn’t shoot him, and it *has* to have been more than fifteen seconds since he first leveled his revolver with the barrel pointed at blowing out the giddy goop of Tim’s sleep and oxygen deprived brain.

Jason doesn’t have an answer ready.

He waits a beat and asks, off kilter, “Shouldn’t you be limping home to daddy? You’re looking pretty dead here, Replacement, and I’m pretty sure only one dead bird gets to pull the zombie card with those stupid, stingy assassin assholes.”
“You were closer,” Tim explains with free admission.

Jason snorts, snarl jerking uneasily at Tim’s clear honesty and the implied trust that must be there in him behind it.

“In case you forgot, genius,” he spits with as much venom as he can muster, “I’m one of the bad guys these days. Who’s to say I’m not just gonna let you die? You seem like you’re bleeding out quick enough on your own that I won’t even have to help you on your way.”

Tim’s chest lets loose another giddy bubble of drunken glee.

“But you were Robin,” he counters.

“That don’t mean shit to anyone, dumbass,” Jason hisses, giving Tim another shake and digging his finger into Tim’s shoulders hard enough to bruise.

Tim’s not entirely sure when he put his kri away, or when he got both warm hands on Tim’s rapidly numbing body, but it makes him glad belatedly.

“It does to me.”

The fact that Jason was Robin means everything to Tim. It’s the only reason he’s done anything useful with his pathetic little life. And if this helps Jason reconnect with the Family he needs, the Family that needs him, well, that might just be something well worth dying for – and by the distant feel of arms around him, scooping him up via strong grips around his knees and his battered ribcage… Tim thinks it just might.

He’s high as hell and well more than halfway dead, but he can still hear Jason’s voice – feels it rumble through his very being…

“Don’t you dare go dyin’ on me now, baby bird.”
Chapter End Notes

NEXT TIME: Jason makes a fateful decision and kicks off a long chain of consequences...
i didn't want to be (here)

Chapter Summary

Tim shows up punch drunk and dying, and Jason knows what he has to do (doesn’t mean he wants to)… but he gets the baby bird the help he needs, and then faces down the consequences.

Chapter Notes

HOLY BATCOW. The response to this one has blown me away guys. <3 You are all so wonderful!

Anyway, on to angsty, confused, but still pretty protective Jason (being aggressive and vicious when the rest of the Family is irrationally antagonistic towards him!)

(Again, warning for angstiness, self esteem and self worth issues, and warped world views... this is not a happy story. It should end kinda happy, but it's gonna be a rough ride).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Two – i didn't wanna be (here)

Jason ain’t alright, and he knows it.

He’s not in a good place, and he’s definitely not any kind of good person, but he’s doing a damn good thing for this fucking city and he’s gonna keep doing it no matter how ungrateful the stupid fucks who live here are about all of it.

Murder rates and overdoses and cases where a kid becomes a victim have all drastically decreased since the Red Hood has been doing his thing here. It’s made this part of the city into what’s still a rough part of town, sure, but it’s also not actively considered a ghetto anymore.

That’s somethin’.

Ain’t much, but it’s more than could be hoped for without him.
Certainly, more than *Batman* and his goody two shoes little brood could ever manage.

He’s got a decent thing goin’.

It’s been a year since he figured out that not all of the anger was helpful, that most of it wasn’t even *him*, and it’s been a few months since he got back from that little vacation with the Outlaws where he ran himself raw enough to root out the worst of it and detox into something a touch closer to being human. Zombie boy won’t ever be normal again, but at least he can be a conscious killer that makes his own damn awful choices of his own free will.

It’s not a lot, but he’s established an uneasy status quo that he can kinda keep on livin’ with and anyway, he’d got himself long ago resigned to the fact that he’s not the kind of special that gets to go to sleep without the nightmares that he’s earned.

The Bats still consider him a criminal, but seem like they won’t actively hunt him down anymore for some reason Jason doesn’t care to understand.

They keep outta the slums and Jason keeps outta their way, minding his own damn business and running his own damn neighborhood the way it needs to be run.

Everything is goin’ just fine with his night – goin’ smooth and quiet, honestly – when that god damn *idiot* who replaced him in the pixie boots shows up punch drunk and dyin’.

Just the sight of him still makes that irrational anger rise, makes a haze of venomous green swirl up in his eyes. He draws his gun, the snazzy ass one that Roy gave him – a modified antique that could now level a skyscraper if utilized properly – and aims it at Tim’s head.

“Thought you were supposed to be the *smart* one, Replacement,” Jason greets with his spiteful furry out on full display.

He doesn’t really want to shoot the kid, not anymore.

Jason’s fury is more for Bruce than for the idiot who Bruce let take his place in the god damn ridiculous green tights.

Even so, the idiot’s sudden, inexplicable presence on one of Jason’s favorite rooftop havens requires immediate explanation.

But the baby bird is clearly worse for wear – wouldn’t make for a shred of sport in killing him, wouldn’t even still be standing if a drop of rain hit his head – and he doesn’t give an answer, doesn’t even try.

Jason squints suspiciously at him across the roof as he continues to shuffle forward.

Tim’s all sorts of bloody.
There’s a nasty gash on his thigh, and another on his chest, both glistening in the grimy moonlight with the slick gleam of fresh and gushing blood. It’s too dark to see much else, but from the way Tim’s standing, or rather swaying on his feet, he’s probably got a head wound under that damn cowl of his – and his left arm is hanging awfully limp as it tries to nurse some hidden injury along his ribs.

Kid’s got both feet in the grave already and looks just about set to slide the rest of him in.

It strikes something spikey in Jason’s soft underbelly, gauging directly at an old wound that won’t ever likely heal correctly.

He’s on his feet before he realizes it, kukri drawn and pressed against the idiot’s neck inside the same second as he wraps a hand around the red and black collar of Tim’s new costume. Jason doesn’t hold his anger back at all as he snarls, “I told you to stay the fuck outta my way, Replacement, so don’t you dare believe I’m not gonna take advantage of your shit for brains decision to come here in shape like this.”

Tim doesn’t quite seem to hear him.

Even from behind the domino lenses, Jason can tell Tim’s eyes aren’t focused right.

His stupid, too-pale expression twitches towards a smile.

He stares up at Jason, wearin’ a dumbass look that seems something stupid close to awe, and then the hysterical gurgle of a choked off laugh bubbles up from deep inside his chest.

“The fuck you laughin’ at, runt.” Jason demands viciously, halfway ready to pitch the kid off the roof as something odd like shame or sorrow swirls inside his gut with an almost forgotten feeling he can’t quite fully name. He squashes the sensation like it’s nothing more than some extra painful, potent embarrassment – bowls it over with defensive anger.

“What you think’s so funny?”

“You didn’t shoot me,” Tim replies immediately, his lungs tight and wheezing, but run through firmly with a bitingly guileless wonder.

Tim is so high right now on his own rapidly impending death that he obviously doesn’t have the energy to spare in keeping up that famous Drake façade.

Jason doesn’t quite know what to do with that.

Another feeling he’s almost forgotten rears up with irrational force: worry.

He waits a beat, thrown by the force of his own concern, and asks with a dash of poorly
feigned flippancy, “Shouldn't you be limping home to daddy Bats? You're looking pretty dead, Replacement, and I'm pretty sure only one dead bird gets to pull the zombie card with those stupid, stingy assassin assholes.”

“You were closer,” Tim confesses, eyes starting to drift closed as he either just succumbs to the fucking blood loss or gives in to the bizarre and unreasonable sense of safety he seems to be feeling as Jason sheathes his knife.

“In case you forgot, genius,” he spits with less than half the venom he could fight for as he shifts his hold to Tim’s shoulders, “I’m one of the bad guys these days. Who's to say I'm not just gonna let you die? You seem like you're bleeding out quick enough on your own that I won't even have to help you on your way.”

Part of him still wants to do it – to hurt Tim, and hurt Bruce by proxy through him.

But part of him doesn’t.

And it’s not just the part of him that doesn’t want to let himself kill without good reason. It’s a part of him that doesn’t want Tim to die. Doesn’t want him even hurt.

A part that doesn’t like seeing him hurt, but kinda sorta almost likes seeing him *here*.

Likes it so much it nearly drowns out the flare of anger that he exists at all – that rises up with force enough to make the clashing tides inside him roar loud enough that the sound of Jason’s own heartbeat pulsing through his ears should cover any sound that Tim makes in reply.

It doesn’t.

It stops entirely for just a beat – just long enough to hear Tim’s answer as if he’d shouted it above the clouds: “But you were Robin.”

Like it’s just that simple.

Like Jason can be trusted with something so important as keeping Tim alive without even half a second’s doubt to dull the matter.

Like there’s no reason Tim would have chosen differently if the situation were less dire.

Like Tim still believes in him just as thoroughly as he believed in the stupid little boy with the dumb yellow cape and the hideous green tight pants he befriended by accident.
“That don't mean shit to anyone, dumbass,” Jason hisses with a hint of hysteric desperation. Tim needs to understand that he’s not that dumb kid anymore, that any goodness left in him – if there’d ever really been any there to start with – had died when Robin did.

He knows his grip is too tight as he gives the baby bird a shake – knows his fingers will leave a stark few stripes of bruises. But Tim has to understand.

Jason needs him to understand.

With a giddy sigh as he starts going limp, Tim explains, “It does to me.”

The words are resigned and real – not bloated with any shiny shit delusion.

Tim knows Jason’s gone down a long dark road and he’s not so stupid so as to think Jason can just turn around on it, can back track from the course he’s set.

But he’s also convinced that Jason can turn the road still left ahead of him towards a slightly brighter patch of darkness – possibly close enough to call it something of a grey area.

He believes in Jason, now, not just the dumb kid that got his stupid ass killed.

Tim believes that this current Jason can still make something decent of himself.

And that just about guts Jason.

In other circumstances, Jason’s knees might give out at such an unexpected blow.

His head is certainly spinning hard enough to warrant such a weakness.

But Tim’s gone wholly limp by now and Jason’s scooped him up into a secure hold without even realizing – with firm pressure on the wound he can reach, hand carefully covering the gash on Tim’s thigh.

Jason has a safe house on this block.

It’s a rotten little bolt hole without any real creature comforts, but it’s sterile enough to use in medical emergencies and, like all his places, it has a plethora of med kit materials.

“Don't you dare go dyin' on me now, baby bird,” he whispers as he gets his feet to move.

It’s half prayer, half plea, and Jason doesn’t even feel ridiculous in saying it aloud.

The walk is awkward with Tim in his arms, but the idiot’s so light it’s hardly taxing –
physically, at least.

Mentally… well, every one of the 289 seconds it takes to walk there is excruciating.

Jason gets Tim laid out on his sterilized counter, efficiently cuts through the parts of his uniform that surround his most obvious injuries – where the armor tec is shredded and has already been half torn away. Moving as quickly as he can, Jason gets sanitary gauze packed into his wounds to halt the bleeding.

Tim’s out cold, at this point, can’t even muster up a subconscious flinch when Jason tests his ribs to the kind of unnatural flex or stiff swelling that would indicate an internal injury.

Nothing seems broken or punctured, but he’s certainly gonna feel it for a while.

“What the devil did you get into, baby bird?”

Jason's question is lost, feeble and desperate in a way Jason distantly feels he should be more self conscious about – can’t scrounge up the care for it while he’s so frantic over how to keep Tim breathing. The kid needs stitches, and a blood transfusion, and he might've had a concussion that needs to be tended to… and Jason can do the stitches, and could even rig up a transfusion of sorts, but the concussion is a problem… and Jason doesn’t think he's bleeding internally, but he doesn’t have the set up to monitor for that… and the fever already Tim's developing does not bode well for his hope of escaping infection.

And Jason can’t handle this.

Can’t handle any of this, not at all, not by himself…

And certainly not for someone like Tim.

Not for someone as fragile, as breakable as Tim.

For someone as important as Tim.

Jason’s not exactly sure when he realizes that he somehow still thinks of Tim as important, still thinks that even after all the dying and killing and whatnot, Tim’s continued existence is important to his world view – necessary even – but he does...

And whatever the reason, Tim is too important to let him fuck this up by going it alone when he’s so painfully aware that he can’t hack it in the lonesome wild.
Jason pulls his phone out of his pocket, lets his thumb hover over the numbers in one last burst of hesitation. He doesn't hate his replacement anymore – never really did before, even – but that spiteful niggle in him still has to wonder what the fuck makes Tim worth it… but Tim is worth it, Jason decides – feels the certainty of that thought coagulate inside him.

Jason is physically rocked by the momentum of decisive change coursing through him, shifting the parameters of his tiny corner of the universe – he's physically shaken through to his bones when the other feeling, the one he doesn’t have a name for, wins out and suddenly keeping Tim alive is worth everything.

It's worth burning this phone number.

It's worth burning this safe house.

It's worth possibly burning every bridge he has left to ask for a favor.

Jason dials the number he knows by heart - it's the one to Dick's daytime cell, the one that all the Bats and cape associates know he monitors through whatever com or burner he's got on him at any given moment because big brother Grayson will always be there if you need him.

That last bit is BS, but the bit about keeping track of his calls is real – real enough for the click of connection to sound half a second after the first ring.

“Tim needs help,” Jason reports, skipping the small talk and rushing to get enough information out over the line to keep Dick from hanging up on him.

The silence says that Dick's still listening as Jason rattles off Tim's condition, his immediate medical requirements, and the address where Jason's got him stashed.

There's a tense moment of pause.

“Five minutes.”

Dick never sounds more like Bruce than when he's out for blood – ironic really, considering how disappointed the Bat would be in Goldie if he killed.

Jason doesn’t acknowledge the promise – doesn't acknowledge the threat laced within it, either – and simply hangs up as he turns his full attention back to Tim.

The packing will hold if he slaps on a few compression plasters – long enough, at least.

The worst wounds temporarily secured, he cuts through the remains of the tattered Red
Robin uniform – a costume still so new and fresh and shiny that it still has barely any clever traps or complicated protective connections in the layers spread around the joints and between the plates of more solid armor. Hardly more than tatters now, though.

Once Tim is stripped down to his boxers, Jason looks him over again, plasters a few more sticky bandages onto cuts that are still oozing blood after he disinfects them, but aren’t immediately life threatening.

Then he carefully flips Tim over and slips the ruined costume out from under him before giving him another careful once over.

His back in in better shape than his front.

He's got some major contusions that will hurt in the morning, but no more open gashes or bones that feel broken or swollen spots that feel too stiff to be simple bruising.

Kid wasn’t lying when he said he'd made some improvements to the cape.

Jason’s pretty damn sure that his version wasn’t nearly so effective at keeping him alive.

Gingerly moving once again, Jason flips Tim onto his back once more.

As he does, he notices that Tim's skin has gone from being unnaturally warm to distressingly clammy, slick with sweat and ice cold.

Tim's muscles are being wracked with micro tremors and his pulse is far too fast and thready when Jason finds it – it’s barely there to feel beneath his fingertips.

Tim needs fresh blood in him before the hypovolemic shock starts to do real damage.

Jason got a pint of his own blood stored away and he’s read Tim's file carefully enough to know they’re compatible without question.

He’s halfway through getting it strung up on his cheap chandelier when he pauses – just before he sticks the needle into the vein he's prepped inside Tim's elbow. They're compatible, he knows, and he knows that the Pit probably won’t be able to infect him – it hasn’t affected Roy at all and there have been times lately when Jason's sure that half of Roy’s current blood supply came out of a bag with Jason’s name on it – but the uncertainty of maybe makes him hesitant to pump Tim full of tainted blood.

What decides the issue is the fact that Jason feels Tim's already weak pulse abruptly stutter – one strong beat and then nothing for far too long before another, and then a third that’s way too weak coming far too quickly after…

Tim's heart is trying to work with what it’s got, but it’s trying to run the whole damn machine on empty… soon, too soon, it's going to just shut everything down on him. He's already looking pale enough to be a corpse and if he starts to seize...

If Jason doesn’t get some blood in him, he probably won't live through the drive up to the Cave, no matter how much Dick speeds.
With that in mind, Jason presses the needle into Tim's skin, allows the blood to flow.

Then Jason wraps Tim up inside his own thick leather jacket, throws a thick blanket over him to help retain additional heat, and keeps a steady finger on Tim's unstable pulse.

The weak, thready thing disappears altogether just as Dick appears at the door Jason had left hanging open when he first arrived. Tim's pulse miraculously flits back into being as Dick crosses the room with Damian at his hip. Jason doesn’t even take the time to curse in gratitude before he gives the pair a run down of the changes in Tim's condition.

Damian holds the blood bag aloft as Dick and Jason carefully maneuver Tim out to the Batmobile. Jason's holding Tim's shoulders and surprises even himself when he voluntarily slides into the backseat and cradles Tim's head in his lap - it's only after Damian slides in to kneel on the floor at Tim's hip, and only after Dick has them careening up the roads towards the Cave, that Jason realizes he is going to have to face Bruce and the others… and yet, he doesn’t regret the fact he's here.

He wouldn’t want to be here, to be anywhere near here, without Tim’s life on the line, but since it IS… well, Jason finds he wouldn’t be able to tolerate being anywhere else.

Jason needs to know that Tim is going to be alright – needs it more than he needs air, if the clenched feeling in his lungs is anything to go by – and he can bear another fight if it means he'll be able to know for sure…

If it means he'll be able to hear the words straight from Alfred's mouth.

The Batmobile screams into the Cave and Dick spins it like a pro to situate the door at Jason's back to the platform with the gurney that Alfred's already got waiting. Further inside Babs is presumably all set with the med bay preparations – even the updates, because Dick is com linked into the Cave's active network, so she got the info on Tim's evolving condition right when Jason laid it out for big blue.

Steph and Cass appear in a blaze of sound and light a moment after the Batmobile is thrown into park, barreling into the Cave on the big black motorcycle Cass uses as Black Bat – Steph’s stupid little electric golf cart thing might be fast for what it is and useful in a thousand different ways for Batgirl’s weekly rounds of delivering medical supplies, especially those with high value price tags on the black market, to clinics in the grayer areas of town, but it’s not even comparable to the speed and maneuverability Cass can coax out of her bike. Steph’s cart is likely secure in a Bat hidey hole, but her rounds have clearly been abandoned for the night.

Bruce is lurking around somewhere, Jason's sure, but he doesn't give much care or thought to it until he's hooked his arms under Tim's to hoist him out of the car – and he only thinks about it then because as soon as his grip is secure the door behind him opens and someone grabs hold of him the same way as he's latched onto Tim.

There's only one person in the Cave who could manage hauling Jason backwards, especially with the addition of Tim's dead weight.

Jason grits his teeth and doesn’t think about it – focusing on Tim alone.
Damian slides out after them, keeping his pace even to ensure that the umbilical connecting Tim to the blood he needs doesn't pull taught. He kneels on the end of the gurney as Jason and Bruce get Tim settled on it and then, together, they manage to strong arm the contraption up the ramp to the med bay proper in record time.

Alfred and Babs are both already gloved and sterilized, and they are elbow deep in little Timmy's innards before Dick even manages to get his ass out of the car.

Damian has secured the blood bag to a proper stand, and is standing by respectfully in case Babs or Alfred need something, when Bruce locks his hand around Jason's upper arm and demands to know what happened.

Jason doesn’t answer immediately – not even with a derisive snort and a snarky quip.

He’s too caught up in looking at Tim – too stuck inside his lack of comprehension over how much he apparently cares about his Replacement’s survival.

He knows why, honestly – he knows plenty about why he’s so invested. Tim is a good kid, and he's a damn good detective – with just the right kind of sass to mix being a goody two shoes with being a fairly hardened criminal to make him an excellent vigilante… and he's just a good person, the kind of good that could keep Jason grounded… that could make the awful screw up of a kid that Jason used to be want to be better, to grow up right and become a better man.

Tim was the kind of good and sweet and kind that even an asshole like the kid that Jason used to be might have once grown up to love...

All that is well beyond his grasp now, that potential had definitely died with Robin in Ethiopia, but still… something about the utterly clear headed Tim Drake deciding to put such blind faith in him niggles at the wants and dreams he’s put effort into convincing himself he’d forgotten. But this version of Tim was almost making him want to remember...

Jason is yanked out of his thoughts when he is hauled roughly out of the med bay.

Damian drifts after his father, eyeing his wayward predecessor with a dark and wary gaze Jason can feel in his bones while Cass and Steph push into the med bay and begin to scrub up to provide extra hands with a measure of experience the littlest Robin just doesn’t have yet.

Jason is still pretty lost in the swirl of his thoughts, but as Bruce works him backwards down the ramp, his brain is rapidly attempting to reorder itself.

Jason's eyes are still on Alf and Barbara, on Steph and Cass beside them, and on the bloody mess of kiddo currently laid out between them that is Tim.

As the pressure in Bruce's grip increases, Jason finds his focus.

He does not yank his arm out of Bruce's hold – despite the awareness that, yes that is going to be a bruise tomorrow – and instead admits, “I don’t know.”

He sounds pathetic.

He feels pathetic.

Some distant part of him cares, but most of him just needs Alfred to make it all better.

“The hell you don’t know,” Dick snarls suddenly, appearing behind Jason's shoulder and wrenching him around so that he's facing almost directly away from the med bay.

And oh boy, Big Blue is out for blood tonight.

He's removed his domino and it is all Dickie bird behind that bloodlust glare. He's not gonna need a reason to pick a fight, he’s not even gonna need the okay from Bruce to just go ahead with swinging punches here soon.

“What. Happened,” Dick growls, repeating Bruce’s words, but with twice the threat and all the gravitas – his time in the Bat's dark cowl gave big boy blue some balls.

“I dunno, Dick,” Jason returns, a raspy weak attempt to reflect Dick's venom. “He just showed up on my beat, all blown to hell and looking like fresh meat for Crime Alley entrepreneurs. Now, I ain’t been keepin' close tabs on the bird brain – figured that was your job – but I’m pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to be anywhere near where he found me. So, Dick, why don’t you know what the fuck happened to that reckless little scrap?”

Dick gives Jason's shoulder a violent shake, gets his other fist wrapped up in the fabric at Jason’s collar, declaring, “I don’t believe that for a second, Hood. You know everything about what happens in your part of town; you control what happens there.”
“There's no controlling what goes on in Crime Alley,” Jason spits back, resisting the urge to sweep his arm across his chest to brush away Dick's grasping fingers. “At best, there is containing that shit, limiting the worst of it and getting very lucky with the rest.”

Dick doesn't believe him, obviously. The asshole barely even has his ear open to listen, let alone to genuinely assess Jason's words for truth and logic.

As if Jason hadn’t spoken at all, Dick asks, “Why was Red Robin in Crime Alley? What did you do to make him go there?”

“I didn’t do shit,” Jason hisses back, his glare focused on Dick now, though his hands remain floundering halfway to fists while hanging limply at his sides. “I was minding my own damn business, like I have been since I got back again. It's all you tight pants assholes who can’t seem to keep your grubby paws out of other people's lives.”

“Jason,” Bruce says, in that quietly threatening I'm being obnoxious and reasonable voice that used to make guilt burn through him, “just answer the question.”

It used to make Jason rot with guilt and ache with dutifully shamed embarrassment searing into his bones, but now, at that heat does is make his anger boil.

“I told you, already,” Jason growls, fists finally forming firm, “I don’t have any idea why your dumbass little baby bird flew into my side of town. And I don't know how he got himself all beat to hell. Comprende?”

“I think you do know,” Dick counters venomously, “I think you know, because I think you did it. I don’t know if was a bout of Pit rage or what, but I think you did it and you just don't want to come clean about it.”

Jason’s got a swirl of green over his eyes, he fights down the violent response it wants him to answer with. The green heat of fury courses through him, tensing up his muscles and choking up his throat – cutting off his air and any words he might use to tear down the false logic behind Dick’s blind accusations.

“You've tried to kill him before, and you say you regret it, you say that you're better now and that you're not gonna hurt him again, but do you actually mean any of that? Really?” Dick goes on ranting, “Tim keeps tabs on your whereabouts like he scared of running into you, and the first night he goes for a solo patrol anywhere near your side of the city he winds up like this. What am I supposed to think about that?”

A realization hits Jason hard just then, so hard he blurts his out conclusion without even processing the words, “You really don’t know what the fuck he was doing out there.”

The statement is met with stony silence.

It's sullen and remorseful from Dick, and stoically condescending from Bruce.

Both their faces wear the same mask of cold suspicion – it's eerie, really, how alike they've gotten in the last two years.
Bruce is unchanged, the arsewipe standing firm and frustratingly inflexible – just as immovable as ever. But Dick has gotten so much darker… he's always had a hot streak and a hell of a temper, but the man standing here before Jason is a hollow wreck of the sunshine-y Mr. Smiles that Bruce's golden boy used to be…

It would probably be a sobering point of recognition in other circumstances.

Right now, it's just more fuel for the fire that the influence of the Lazarus Pit is currently stoking… Seeing how Dick has matured into the perfect little soldier, how he's become Bruce's carbon copy mini me, just makes Jason twice as furious.

“So much for the title of ‘World's Greatest Detective’,” Jason huffs caustically, “Can't even keep track of a sleep deprived teenager in bright red spandex.”

“He wanted space,” Dick says, a hint of that soft underbelly of his coming up in a coil of whining desperation. “He wanted autonomy, and independence, and the freedom to run his own cases on his own terms.”

Jason bares his teeth in a smirking smile. “Sounds like excuses to me.”

Dick is just about at his breaking point, just inches away from trying to hoist Jason up and throw him across the Cave to start a real fight, when a polite yet demanding cough rips through their collective distraction.

“Ahem.” Alfred waits a moment for his audience to settle down, knowing that their desperation for news is so consuming that they won't be able to process his words without careful accommodation. “Young Master Timothy has suffered tremendous blood loss and significant damage in line with a concussive impact – mostly intramuscular and subcutaneous contusions with several severe shrapnel lacerations.”

Alfred’s captive audience is still holding its breath, certain that Tim is going to be alright – or else Alfred would have opened with an apology and a far more grave demeanor – but still needing to hear it stated directly.

“He is currently sedated and is being given a second blood transfusion. When that has been successfully implemented, he will have hydration, key nutrients, electrolytes, and his usual course of antibiotics administered intravenously,” Alfred continues. Then, with a slight smile elucidating a sense of profound relief, he finishes, “Miraculously, he should be fully recovered within the week, though bedrest is advisable for at least three weeks, preferably six, and he will require careful monitoring for at least twelve.”

There is a stretch of distorted time – too long to even be measured in seconds, and yet to short to take up more than a few of them – in which the entire Cave lets out held breath as relief comes crashing down.
But with the worry settled and adrenaline still high, the little sparks that could be brushed off before now begin to catch – and the fire burns *hot* when let to run ablaze.

“So, it was an explosion,” Dick reiterates, fingers tightening around Jason's shirt and shoulder as his body process the accusation before he even makes it verbally. “In Crime Alley. You're the only one who creates explosions in Crime Alley. You made sure of that – by being quick to put a *bullet* through the brain of anyone else who even tried.”

“Yes, I did that,” Jason snarls, letting the green haze descend without a pause of hesitation. He moves to extricate himself with the speed and power and *no holds barred* intent that he developed with Talia, that he *knows* neither Dick nor Bruce is used to the idea of him possessing – of his being able to call on in the space of a heartbeat.

It catches Dick completely off guard and is enough to get a bit of breathing room between them – though his arm throbs from how Bruce's grip tightened at the last second before he wrenched himself away.

Dropping into a more aggressive stance, Jason viciously pushes his advantage to antagonize, “I did that and the number of explosions with civilian casualties went from two or three a week to *zero*. I cleaned up my neighborhood, no matter how much you disapprove of my methods, you can't argue with statistics.”

Dick mirrors Jason's move to an aggressive fighting stance, looking for any *hint* of an opening to launch.

“You're a *murderer*, Jason,” Dick shouts across the space between them as he begins to push Jason backwards – stepping off to the side in a way that would put Jason's back to Bruce if he followed. “You kill people—”

“I kill *scumbags*.”

“—and you've tried to kill Tim before, *twice*, and you just admitted that you're the only guy in Crime Alley who can use explosives and keep breathing,” Dick barrels on. “Sounds like a guilty conscience talking to me.”

“I fucking *called you*, bird brain,” Jason spits back, “Replacement got himself blown up somewhere and I kept him alive. I could've just let him bleed out – I considered it, you know – but it ain't Pit rage anymore, and like I said, I only kill scumbags.”


But Jason has always been good at reading people, good at seeing weaknesses and mental vulnerabilities, and he doesn't hesitate to dig his claws into Dick.

“See, I don’t think you're worried that I tried to kill him,” Jason points out with his best insufferable smirk, “I think you're worried about the fact that once he *got* hurt, he didn't go crying to you for help. Baby bird got hurt, and came to *me*. Whatever you did to fuck up the hero worship thing he had for you must've been some hella bad shit, man. ‘cause *I tried to kill him*, and apparently, he still likes me better.”

*That* got Dick's control to break, frayed nerves snapping as the strain of pretending to be civil – to be the better, calmer, more morally justified person – became too much.
Dick launched himself at Jason like he was just another bit of scum to be scrubbed off the streets – though he did not fail to treat the fight with more caution than he would the usual back alley thug in a brawl.

Still, Jason knew Dickie bird's moves, even his most vicious ones – which weren't half as brutal as what Jason himself rolled out nearly unprovoked on an average night.

Bruce did not intervene, but the fight was over before his lack of engagement became a glaringly negligent issue. Jason ended up getting the heel of a steel braced boot to slam into Dick's sternum in a brutal round house that knocked the wind from his lungs and left him bowled over and coughing on his back.

“Well it's been real fun folks, but honestly, I didn't even wanna be here to start with, and now that my Replacement ain’t about to kick it like his predecessor—” Jason's eyes flick up to meet Alfred's sad, but stoic gaze and waits for him to give a subtle nod of confirmation before rolling his attention back to Bruce, “I’m just gonna mosey on out.”

No one makes a sound as Jason back towards the Cave's entrance – except for Dick, who is still recovering from that kick to the chest – and Jason keeps his front facing them until he’s close enough to the manual side door to know he's got enough of a head start to get clear if he has to take drastic measures. And there’s a grenade in his pocket ready and waiting.

“It was a great party guys, real swell,” Jason comments with acidic sarcasm and a flippant two finger salute of farewell. “But next time, how 'bout you just lose my invitation, m'kay? Fabulous.”

Jason slips out into the night and starts the sprint back to the city proper with mechanical alacrity. He keeps his focus on his breathing and is almost successful in pretending that the ache he feels inside his chest is just the strain of overexertion and not that he left a piece of himself shriveled up on the Cave floor.

He’s not quite sure he could ever truly believe the lie.

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i didn’t wanna be here (without you)

Chapter End Notes

Poor Jason. Poor BatFam in general... But Alfie's a BAMF and that makes things better.
NEXT TIME: Damian has FEELINGS. And he doesn't understand them.

^_~<3
Chapter Summary

Damian observes Grayson’s treatment of Todd and finds himself unsettled, far more potently than he is comfortable with...

Chapter Notes

VOTE VOTE VOTE.

If you are an American Human, today, PLEASE be a responsible human and go out to the polls. Our petty little Republic doesn't have all that much going for it right now, but we can't do anything to change that if we're not all actively participating in the attempt. I know it's pretty disheartening, and seems like it can't be at all impactful, but it's very much like playground bullying: if you do not attempt to help, YOU ARE THE PROBLEM.

So please. Vote.

I'm posting this chapter SUPER early this week because your comments are all deeply inspiring and motivating and I'm using the good vibes of putting up another chapter to reward myself for doing my civic duty!

Anywho, on to Damian... the 'kicked puppy' force is strong with this one.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Three - every one of us (got wanderlust)

Damian is still getting used to the idea that he is part of a Family – to the idea that he wants to be part of a Family.

It’s hard for him to process what he’s feeling on the best of days.

Mother always said that emotions were synonymous with weakness and therefore never taught him much about them beyond how to mollify the worst of their effects in order to ignore them more successfully.

He understands enough of what he feels when he’s with Father to function adequately in his designated role, and he understands that the stranger feelings he has regarding Grayson are not ones that represent a challenge to his obedience or his excellence in performing up to par.
Pennyworth offers a uniquely easy comfort that does nothing to disturb the calm lake of Damian’s day to day emotional state – even when he uses that peculiar manner of his to chastise some act or declaration of Damian’s that he finds unbecoming.

Brown and Cain are hardly worth mentioning most days, mere blips of occasional impact within the confines of Damian’s localized universe.

Todd… The wayward former Robin causes both Grayson and Father great strife, and therefore Damian hates him out of hand. He’s never particularly cared to look beyond Todd’s obvious failings and for the longest time he doubted that he’d ever have the desire to delve further into the details of his history.

That is shifting here tonight, however.

It’s a subtle shift, one he doesn’t wholly understand yet, but it’s one that has already made Damian’s usual indifference transition into the kind of tense queasiness within him that he’s grown to understand means some sort of emotional turmoil.

It’s Drake’s fault, as usual.

If there is anyone within the Family for whom Damian does not understand his feelings, it would be the ridiculous Pretender who had been occupying the role of Damian’s birthright in the place at Father’s side.

The otherwise rather pleasant evening had started to go wrong right when Grayson first received news from Oracle that Drake’s signal had disappeared on the edge of the Crime Alley territory still claimed by the Red Hood (and Damian still does not understand why Father and Grayson tolerate such disrespect within their home city).

Grayson wore his emotions openly – so openly that Damian is frequently unconvinced that such histrionic displays could possibly be genuine – and his woeful fretting had only built up an increasing degree of irritation as the minutes wore on without news. Oracle had sent Batgirl to investigate, and while Brown is not a detective of any true caliber, Damian can admit, if only to himself, that she is also not entirely inept.

And she, absurdly, cares quite deeply for Drake.

If there was anything to find in the area where Drake had vanished, Brown would have found it quickly enough to prevent this gnawing unease in Grayson.

Nightwing keeps up a façade of relaxed confidence and focus on the Mission, purely for his own benefit in pretending to himself that he must be strong to keep Damian at ease, but it’s clear to Robin that no more productive work will be accomplished on Patrol tonight.

Initially, resigning himself to that inevitability is not particularly taxing.

Drake is always getting himself into trouble and when this most recent idiocy is resolved Damian is certain he would be able to take great pleasure in admonishing the Pretender for yet another example of why he is so unsuitable to maintain the role of Robin.

But as the half hour without news stretches into completion, and then as one hour turns over
Grayson’s antleness becomes nigh unbearable.

Though his constant fidgeting is somehow infinitely preferable to the granite stillness he adopts when he picks up a call to his emergency cell – a call from Jason Todd.

Damian cannot hear Todd’s side of the conversation, even though the cell phone’s connection has been redirected through Nightwing’s active com, but he can read an extreme reaction of displeasure within Grayson’s stillness.

“Five minutes.”

Grayson hardly sounds like Grayson when he speaks.

It makes that queasy tightness start to pull at Damian’s internal organs.

Grayson taps his com to disconnect the call and reconnect to the Bats’ communication network, getting to his feet and leading Damian down to street level as he grimly explains the updated situation, “Hood found Red Robin – he’s badly hurt, requiring immediate medical attention. He’s lost a lot of blood from a few deep lacerations and several shallower ones, and he may be concussed, but he does not appear to have any broken bones or internal bleeding. Robin and I are closest, and we have a Batmobile with a suitable back seat for medical transport and are en route to collect him. Cave ETA: eight and a half minutes.”

“Roger that,” Oracle intones immediately, adding with a confident assurance, “Agent A and I will have the med bay prepped and waiting. You just bring our baby bird back to the nest.”

Grayson gives a grateful nod – knowing that Oracle is likely watching from some street side security camera hidden in the dark – and continues leading Damian back to the car in the kind of stony silence that makes his shoulders so tense Damian often wonders how the pinched muscles don’t cut off the man’s cranial blood supply.

The drive to the address supplied by Todd is bracing – it would’ve been impossibly reckless if Grayson had been anything less than exceptional behind the wheel of a vehicle he’d first learned to drive over a decade ago.

Not a word is spoken until they reach the apartment Todd indicated – its door hanging open to allow them easy access.

“He’s in hypovolemic shock and has lost consciousness,” Todd reports as soon as they step across the threshold – his honed senses ensuring that he doesn’t have to look up from his task of readying Drake for travel to be aware of their arrival.

Additional details are doled out as Todd secures his hold around Drake’s shoulders and Grayson grabs his legs. Damian hops up to acquire the IV bag in the process of transfusing Drake with fresh blood and follows at a trot as they move Drake out to the car.

Damian is diligent to keep proper pace.
If Drake is to die because of Damian, it will be on an honorable battlefield in a public demonstration of skill – he will not allow the Pretender to meet his doom because Damian wasn’t quick or attentive enough to keep his transfusion at an appropriate height and slack umbilical. It would simply be unseemly, and would not be the definitive statement of higher value and more appropriate personal worth that Damian requires to assert his Robin aptitude.

Todd is in the backseat with Drake’s head cradled in his lap and Damian kneels at Drake’s hip with his transfusion aloft while Grayson drives with truly ludicrous abandon.

They reach the Cave in two minutes and ten seconds – five seconds less than Grayson’s initial estimate, even when combined with the time it took to get Drake into the Batmobile.

Everything is ready for them, regardless.

Father is there to help them extricate Drake from the back seat and speed up to the medical bay proper – where Pennyworth and Gordon are already gloved and waiting.

Damian secures the blood bag to an appropriate stand that keeps the blood flowing and ensures that the delicate umbilical is out of the way of Drake’s attendants. He stands by as Brown and Cain arrive to scrub in – though, only partially out of a desire to prove useful to Pennyworth should the elder require an immediate extra hand.

The bulk of the reason is that the queasy feeling in Damian’s stomach has turned into something violent and twisty and he isn’t sure what it means or what to do about it.

He knows that staring at the nearly exsanguinated Drake doesn’t make it feel better, but it also does not increase the reaction’s severity at all – merely allows for an uneasy plateau.

Looking back at where Father and Grayson are maneuvering Todd away from the vulnerability presented by the close quarters of the medical bay is a different story. That makes the twisty feeling in Damian’s gut redouble its violent thrashing – makes it feel as if the sensation is proactively growing thorns to maul him with from the inside.

“Hood,” Father says with a calm, commanding tone, “What happened?”

Todd still has his gaze locked on Drake – and he’s looking lost and pitiful in a way that Damian should be amused to see, in a way that should make him feel vastly superior.

But it doesn’t… and Damian does not understand why.
Sounding pathetic and useless, Todd eventually answers Father with a slow string of nearly inaudible words, “I don’t know.”

Damian is perversely drawn out to be close to the scene – he drifts away from the medical bay as Father works Todd down to the Cave’s main level and Grayson gets more proactively involved with ensuring that Todd cannot escape his due interrogation.

Grayson grabs Todd’s shoulder and violently yanks it in an arc that forces Todd to turn away from the medical bay consuming his attention, and Grayson’s voice is dark and furious in a way that Damian has never heard from him before as he snarls, “The hell you don’t know.”

It makes the thorny, twisty feeling ache within him.


Todd, at least, sounds normal – even if his normal is despicably irritating – as he returns in a snitty rasp, “I dunno, Dick. He just showed up on my beat, all blown to hell and looking like fresh meat for Crime Alley entrepreneurs. Now, I ain’t been keepin' close tabs on the bird brain – figured that was your job – but I’m pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to be anywhere near where he found me. So, Dick, why don’t you know what the fuck happened to that reckless little scrap?”

Todd hides his worries far better than Grayson, but it’s clear he’s just as scared as his predecessor is regarding the current fate of Drake, and just as confused and anxious about the unknowns of the immediate lead up to Drake’s precarious condition.

He doesn’t know anything about what happened, clearly, and it’s ridiculous to imagine otherwise – and yet… Grayson is not convinced.

“I don’t believe that for a second, Hood,” Grayson snarls venomously, “You know everything about what happens in your part of town; you control what happens there.”

“There's no controlling what goes on in Crime Alley,” Jason spits back, voice aggressive though his posture still remains weak with distraction. “At best, there is containing that shit, limiting the worst of it and getting very lucky with the rest.”

As if Todd hadn’t spoken at all, Grayson barrels on to ask with thickly layered accusation in his tone, “Why was Red Robin in Crime Alley? What did you do to make him go there?”

“I didn’t do shit,” Todd returns in a hiss as his muscles cease to seem like jelly.

Damian can still see the obvious slackness in his stance, the limpness in his joints, but he seems more focused on the present now.

Perhaps the legitimate threat he potentially could pose might be enough to knock Grayson back into behaving with some shred of sanity.

Todd’s voice and posture start to strengthen in equal strides as he lays out, “I was minding...
my own damn business, like I have been since I got back. It's all you tight pants assholes who can't
seem to keep your grubby paws out of other people's lives.”

“Jason,” Father says emphatically, his own clearly compromised emotions being forcibly
tamped down as he successfully remains the only figure of calm in this wildly impassioned and
irrationally emotional discussion, “just answer the question.”

“I told you, already,” Todd growls abrasively, fists finally forming firm, “I don’t have any
idea why your dumbass little baby bird flew into my side of town. And I don't know how he got
himself all beat to hell. Comprende?”

“I think you do know,” Grayson counters, roiling still with that painfully uncharacteristic
venom, “I think you know, because I think you did it. I don’t know if was a bout of Pit rage or what,
but I think you did it and you just don't want to come clean about it.”

Todd shudders – seizes, almost – like Grayson’s viciousness has stoked a literal fire inside
him that sears his internal flesh as it burns.

Grayson takes it as a sign of guilt, of weakness, instead of the animalistic recoil that Damian
suspects is a sign of impending danger – the building static before a strike of lightning.

“You've tried to kill him before, and you say you regret it, you say that you're better now and
that you're not gonna hurt him again, but do you actually mean any of that? Really?” Grayson goes
on, “Tim keeps tabs on your whereabouts like he scared of running into you, and the first night he
goes for a solo patrol anywhere near your side of the city, he winds up like this. What am I supposed
to think about that?”

A beat of pause.

Then Todd blurts, “You really don’t know what the fuck he was doing out there.”

The statement is met with stony silence.

Damian cannot interpret the quiet, and he cannot see his Father’s face nor that of his older
brother, but he can guess at the dark glowers filled with cold suspicion.

It’s painful and sobering to recognize the degree to which Damian dislikes his supposition.
He should want his older brother, his mentor, his only deserving predecessor, to emulate Father so
perfectly, and he himself should want to be involved directly alongside them.
But he doesn’t.
Very much so, he does not want anything to do with this.

And he does not quite understand why.

“So much for the title of ‘World's Greatest Detective’,” Todd huffs caustically, “Can't even keep track of a sleep deprived teenager in bright red spandex.”

“He wanted space,” Grayson says – no, whines.
It’s keening and desperate in way that’s almost sickeningly pitiful.

Grayson wants so badly for Todd to believe his words because Grayson himself does not fully trust the Truth of them.

“She wanted autonomy,” Grayson continues in a futile effort, “and independence, and the freedom to run his own cases on his own terms.”

Todd doesn’t hesitate to call the con and bares his teeth with vicious confidence in his clearly accurate assertion as he says, “Sounds like excuses to me.”

A shudder runs through Grayson – one that makes Todd’s smirk tick up a fraction with a visceral sense of knowing accomplishment. Todd has seen Grayson like this before, knows how to push and pull and pick apart his anxieties in order to break him down completely.

Todd is pulling in air to plant the final charge in the explosion of tempers that he’s knowingly getting staged to blow, when Pennyworth’s polite yet demanding cough rips through their collective distraction. “Ahem.”

Silence falls as uncontested calm descends.

“Young Master Timothy has suffered tremendous blood loss and significant damage in line with a concussive impact – mostly intramuscular and subcutaneous contusions with several severe shrapnel lacerations,” Pennyworth explains.

Drake must be stable and recovering – elsewise Pennyworth would have started off this cool headed report with less gruff malcontent for his Family’s internal squabbling, with something more akin to absolute disdain for it.

Damian knows that Drake must be recovering, but the knot of tension behind his lungs does not feel like it will relax at all until Pennyworth states such status directly.

“He is currently sedated and is being given a second blood transfusion. When that has been successfully implemented, he will have hydration, key nutrients, electrolytes, and his usual course of antibiotics administered intravenously,” Pennyworth continues.
Then, with a slight smile elucidating a sense of profound relief, he finishes, “Miraculously, he should be fully recovered within the week, though bedrest is advisable for at least three weeks, preferably six, and he will require careful monitoring for at least twelve.”

There is a stretch of distorted time – too long to even be measured in seconds, and yet too short to take up more than a few of them – in which the entire Cave lets out held breath as relief comes crashing down.

But with the worry that had kept the rabbits nestled and in the grass now dissipating and with the adrenaline in everyone’s bloodstream still coursing high… it’s like a gunshot in a herd of nervous wildebeest – with all hope for containment zipping off in the first echo of the sound.

“So, it was an explosion,” Grayson reiterates darkly, with a chilling edge in his voice that Damian knows premeditates violence – knows it from his past with the League and his contact with villains… He’s never imagined the possibility of hearing it from Grayson.

But there it is, ringing clear in his voice, as he continues, “In Crime Alley. You're the only one who creates explosions in Crime Alley. You made sure of that – by being quick to put a bullet through the brain of anyone else who even tried.”

“Yeah, I did that,” Todd snarls back – vicious and feral and like he’s fresh from the Pit, Damian has seen this sort of thing plenty often from Before to recognize it now… seen it shortly before Grandfather declared the subject incompatible, rendering the experiment as failed and ordering the rabid animal’s prompt execution.

But Todd… Todd was vicious enough, strong enough – focused and determined and aware enough to somehow use that wild rage to aid in his escape from Mother and Grandfather.

Damian can name the new sensation that he’s beginning to feel here, and that awareness is at least a touch comforting to hold with certainty.

He knows that this exact form of distress is fear… But not for himself, or his own sake.

This is fear for Grayson.

Fear for the older brother who is letting his emotions blind him to the very real threat that his wayward little brother currently poses.

Damian’s fear is validated in the next second as Todd extricates himself from Grayson’s hold – managing to even pull himself free of Father’s grip on his arm.

Riding high on the fiery waves of the Lazarus Pit, Todd declares with heady and abrasive confidence, “I did that, and the number of explosions with civilian casualties went from two or three
a week to zero. Ever. I cleaned up my neighborhood, no matter how much you disapprove of my methods, you can't argue with statistics.”

He is not wrong – about any of the truths implied by his statements – and that is, perhaps, what gives Father and Grayson such indelible strife.

Todd drops into an actively aggressive fighting stance and Grayson mirrors the motion blindly with an eagerness to start a brawl that Damian can’t rationalize.

Not from him.

“You're a murderer, Jason,” Grayson shouts, entirely lost to reason. “You kill people—”

“I kill scumbags.”

—and you've tried to kill Tim before, twice, and you just admitted that you're the only guy in Crime Alley who can use explosives and keep breathing,” Grayson barrels on. “Sounds like a guilty conscience talking, to me.”

That thorny, twisty bit digs in again and Damian resists the bizarre urge he feels to shrink his stature and curl in protectively on himself.

“I fucking called you, bird brain,” Todd spits back, “Replacement got himself blown up somewhere, and I kept him alive. I could’ve just let him bleed out – I considered it, you know – but it ain't Pit rage anymore, and like I said, I only kill scumbags.”

“You're still dangerous, still a killer,” Grayson presses with vehemence.

Todd doesn’t lose his edge like Damian wants to… instead, Todd pushes his advantage with the kind of vicious twist that gives tell of how thoroughly he’s embraced the raging venom of the Pit that courses through his veins.

“See, I don’t think you're worried that I tried to kill him,” Todd points out with his best insufferable smirk, “I think you’re worried about the fact that once he got hurt, he didn't go crying to you for help. Baby bird got hurt, and came to me. Whatever you did to fuck up the hero worship thing he had for you must've been some hella bad shit, man. ‘cause I tried to kill him, and apparently, he still likes me better.”

And that’s the one… the singular nerve that’s already been rubbed raw – that needs just the barest brush of irritation to snap through Grayson’s self restraint as white rage fury over comes every
Grayson launches himself at Todd as if he were a Rogue escaped from Arkham.

He is aptly cautious, but still failingly irrational, and Todd knows well exactly how Nightwing’s talent and training makes him move. And Todd has no qualms about throwing down the biting brutality he’d been taught by Mother and the League – moves meant to maim performed with blazing swiftness mixed with the occasional move designed to kill, but executed at a reduced speed to allow Grayson to escape.

Todd is terrifyingly cognizant of every action.

And Grayson is even more frighteningly blinded.

Which makes the thorns in Damian’s gut writhe with anxiety.

Father does not intervene.

Damian can’t tell if that is a positive sign or not.

At last, the brawl culminates as Todd gets a vicious round house to land squarely against Grayson’s solar plexus. The blow knocks Grayson to the Cave floor and leaves him spent and coughing as his body ripples through the shock.

Todd spares him just a single second of disgust before he turns his attention to the wider room – shoulders squared to face Father while his gaze drifts up to meet that of Pennyworth.

“Well it’s been real fun folks, but honestly, I didn't even wanna be here to start with, and now that my Replacement ain’t about to kick it like his predecessor—” Damian cannot bring himself to look away and does not have to turn to know that Pennyworth nods a carefully supportive assurance, before Todd finishes, “I’m just gonna mosey on out.”

No one moves as Todd backs towards one of the Cave’s emergency entrances.
Todd’s hand drifts towards his pocket with the promise of a back up plan he can deploy if any of the Bats might deign to follow.

None of them do, but Damian can’t help but think his wariness is more than reasonable.

“It was a great party guys, real swell,” Todd comments with acidic sarcasm and a flippant two finger salute of farewell as he finagles the door to swing open via carefully reaching around behind him. “But next time, how ’bout you just lose my invitation, m'kay? Fabulous.”

No one moves for a long moment after Todd has vanished.

Grayson is still on the ground, though he’s stopped coughing. He’s folded over himself with his head hung limp and his elbows thrown heavily across his knees – defeated.

Father is the one to break the silence, chastising Grayson by saying, “You should not have allowed yourself to attack him.”

“I know,” Grayson breathes out, sounding hollow and cold.

“You are emotionally compromised, and you have compromised this investigation,” Father continues, “if there ever was evidence to prove that Hood is responsible for Red Robin’s current injuries, he now has the opportunity to effectively cover his trail.”

Grayson’s slow breath is acknowledgement enough.

A beat of quiet throbs painfully in the tense Cave.

“Well, then,” Pennyworth declares, voice prim and utterly scathing in a deceptively light manner that manages to gouge deep furrows straight down to bone, “I think there’s been quite enough drama for one night. Now, if you all would kindly acquiesce without a fuss, I will remain with Master Timothy while you shower and change; and Miss Stephanie may return to the medical bay to sit with us once she has eaten something. The rest of you, really ought to get some rest, don’t you think?”

Everyone is cringing with internalized pain they know full well they deserve and, they all know that Pennyworth executes his verbal whipping only when they’ve truly disappointed him.

“That sounds agreeable, Alfred.” Father manages, accepting the terms on behalf of the entire group of assembled Family.

“Very good, Sir,” Pennyworth acknowledges with icy reserve.
Father removes his cape and gauntlets, triggering a slow, shambling shuffle of activity that ripples languidly through the ranks – affecting Robin last of all as he waits for Grayson to, at the very least, lift his fallen head.

Damian cannot explain the difficulty he has with breathing as he waits – cannot explain why his lungs clench up entirely when Grayson does lift his head, and his sad blue eyes seek out Damian’s with a weighted apology swimming in his gaze.

Damian cannot quite feel his face – cannot be wholly confident in the idea that his expression is steady and impassive, but he has enough faith in Mother’s training to feel strong enough to keep his spine straight and stand his ground.

“Dami.”

“Get up, Grayson,” Damian huffs, pleased with how unaffected he makes it sound.

Grayson takes a slow breath and then complies.

He doesn’t attempt to make conversation again until after they have changed and showered and made their way upstairs to the Manor proper – after they’ve thrown something edible together and eaten it in silence.

Grayson walks Damian right up to his bedroom door, almost like he intends to tuck Damian into bed directly – like he’s still some sort of hapless child – when he kneels down at the threshold and looks Damian directly in the eye, with his hands resting warm and heavy on Damian’s still visibly stiffened shoulders.

“Timmy’s gonna be alright, Dames,” Grayson assures him – unnecessarily.

“I am aware, Grayson,” Damian responds haughtily. “Pennyworth was very clear.”

A sad sort of smile flickers into view as Grayson prods, “It’s okay to admit that you’re worried about him. I know that you two are still officially unhappy and bitter rivals, but you don’t have to pretend you hate him still on every count.”

Damian can cede – to himself, at least – that there is some truth to Grayson’s claim.

He is uncertain why exactly, but he has come to respect and even admire some aspects of the insufferable Pretender – and he is rather unspeakably grateful for the part Drake played in rescuing Father while he was adrift in time – so he is indeed a touch anxious for Drake’s continued well being.

But he is being truthful in saying that Pennyworth had allayed those concerns completely and without reservation. Drake’s condition – and Damian’s apparently rather involved investment in his survival – is not responsible for Damian’s current tense unease.
The cause of *that* is far less simple to pin down.

And Grayson's continued presence here in front of him, in *physical contact* with him, is not helping matters – an odd occurrence considering how his mere existence has made a great many things more bearable in the past.

“Go to bed, Grayson,” Damian instructs imperiously.

“You too, Dami,” Grayson responds.

Instead of releasing him as Damian anticipates, Grayson pulls him into an inescapable hug – an inevitable action, in retrospect – and adds, “I love you, kiddo.”

He presses a kiss to Damian's temple as he stands, and ruffles his hair as he turns away, saying, “Goodnight, Damian. Sweet dreams.”

Damian only responds with a slam of his door.

Normally, it would be a reaction of mostly pretended indignation about Grayson's typical penchant for obnoxious displays of affection, but this time… this time it's because Damian's heart rate has kicked up ten fold and it feels as if the organ has somehow crawled out of his chest and is now lodged in his throat.

And Damian simply doesn't *understand*.

It's a fear response, he recognizes, a fairly severe one… but fear of *what*? Surely, he is not afraid of *Grayson*, the idea is utterly absurd.

Damian locks his door and takes a seat on his floor, determined to meditate upon the question until he has a satisfactory answer.

First, he fixates on the feeling he had when Grayson had hugged him just now – attempts to identify the exact parameters of it. The feeling is a slimy one, the thorny vicious thing that has been mauling him internally all night – well, since this incident began at least… except, no.

It hasn’t been bothering him the *whole* time… when Drake was initially reported as off the grid, Damian had felt a vague concern – a mild mix of worry for Drake and annoyance that Grayson was distracted – but *this* feeling, this spiky painful feeling… that didn’t emerge until Grayson got the call from Todd.

Systematically working through the entirety of the last few hours, Damian isolates the moments when he most prominently felt this thorny, twisty ache of distress.
He identifies that the feeling only came up in regards to Todd – more specifically, in response to Grayson's reactions to Todd.

It clicks in him a moment after that, sends a biting chill racing down his spine.

Because… Damian is afraid of Grayson.

He's afraid that he is going to do something… something wrong, and Grayson is going to react to him the same way he reacts to Todd.

He's afraid that Grayson doesn't understand that Todd is not the only member of the Family who has blood on his hands… Damian is a killer, too.

Grayson keeps making the excuse that Damian was a child, that he didn't know what he was doing, that he was simply following Mother's orders and that he didn’t truly understand, but none of that is true and Damian is afraid that he will do something terrible and Grayson will realize… and Grayson will hate him like he hates Todd.

Because Todd was Grayson's precious little brother, too…

Once, at least, a long time ago.

Todd was the little brother who screwed up and came back a killer and started to purge Gotham of her darkest scum and now he's a demonized criminal that belongs in Arkham... And Damian is uncomfortable with how similar his own circumstances seem.

He will not be a child forever – should not be considered one even now – and when Grayson no longer has the ability to make excuses for him… how long will Damian retain his current position in Grayson's favor?

Even Drake has not been spared from entirely from Grayson's aggressions – and Drake is a vocal proponent of the No Kill Rule, to the extent that he has appropriately called Father out for excessive use of force. Damian meanwhile has aligned himself with Todd's position on more than one occasion, to the extent of causing friction with Father.

When Damian's world began to fall apart last year, it was Grayson that protected him – Grayson who promised that, even without Father's obligation to care for him keeping the others tolerant of Damian's presence, there would always be a place for him in the Manor, in the Crusade, and in the Family.

Damian had believed him then – still wants to believe him now.
But there's an itch of doubt beneath his skin, a terrifyingly acute sense that he doesn't belong and that he can't possibly hope to stay…

All of a sudden, Damian's room feels suffocating and claustrophobic. He needs fresh air, needs space and distance and the quiet of anonymity.

He cannot stay inside the Manor any longer tonight.

He changes out of the sweats he put on after his shower – slipping into the one relic from his old life that he's never felt the urge to abandon: the soft, dark clothing he received from Grandfather when he reached a transitory phase of accomplishment in his League training.

The air vent in the back of his closet connects Damian's bedroom to the seldom used study on the floor below and while Damian is finally beginning to grow, he is still currently small enough to shimmy through the gaps to make an unobserved escape if necessary.

Or.

Mostly unobserved, as it were.

Pennyworth is standing by the door as the study's secret nook lets out into the auxiliary garage – his gaze soft and filled with the kind of pervasive understanding that he is uniquely capable of expressing without a sense of condescending pity.

“Be safe, Master Damian,” Pennyworth says quietly, without any attempt to dissuade Damian from his current course, “and please return home before sunrise.”

Damian gives a nod of acknowledgment – not daring to speak a promise he is unsure he will be able to keep – and lifts his helmet and the keys to his electric motorcycle from the wall.

He is grateful for the butler's choice not to condemn his excursion, as he is distinctly aware that Pennyworth is only staying silent on the matter of his riding a motorcycle without a license or supervision because he knows that if he is not permitted to use his own gear – which he knows well and has extensive practice with handling – Damian will simply steal something else to serve the function from a neighbor.

Damian throws himself into the ride, moving silently across town at a swift speed that few outside the Bats could ever dream of traveling at within the city limits. He knows exactly where he is going: the safe house where Todd had given Drake his initial first aid.

Damian knows that Drake must have been bleeding quite profusely and he may be able to follow a trail of bloody footprints back to where the incident of injury actually occurred. Sure enough, Damian finds a clear trail to follow – so clear that he has to pause more than once to marvel
at Drake's luck for having managed to avoid bleeding out before he even found Todd.

Pennyworth is very confident in Drake's continuing survival – of his rather expedient recovery, for that matter – and Damian should not think to doubt the old man's judgment.

Without further dallying Damian puts all thoughts of such impossibilities out of his mind – set his focus to solving the case in front of him.

Damian tracks Drake's progress backwards through the evening – finds a smoked out utility hut on the corner of Sixth and Hanover that used to be the secret entrance to some sort of underground construction, possibly a laboratory.

It will take some delicate maneuvering to carefully investigate the circumstances surrounding what happened to make the building explode with Drake inside it.

Damian is beginning to poke at the collapsed material of the staircase to attempt finding a route inward when he feels the weight of a stare on the back of his neck. He senses the gaze mere seconds before the boom of a heavy body dropping down behind him – a body reeking of leather, gun power, and cigarette smoke – alerts him to Todd's arrival.

“Well now,” he drawls facetiously, “If it isn’t just the littlest Bat brat I ever did see! What brings you along, short stop, out to defend big blue's honor?”

“Don't be foolish, Todd,” Damian snaps, “I am here to uncover what occurred to render Drake incapacitated.”

“Fancy that, so am I,” Todd mentions, eyes narrowing to evaluate Damian's truthfulness.

“Oh obviously,” Damian huffs.

Todd stares at him a moment longer, pinning him down more effectively than even Father managed. Todd's assessing gaze is nearly as powerful as Pennyworth’s own.

Damian refuses to let it rile him. Todd easily could have killed him prior to his moment, being that Damian was shamefully unaware of his presence and Todd has at least four separate distance weapons visibly on his person, two distinct fire arms and a minimum of two silent throwing knives – blades likely laced with poisons.

Whatever Todd can see in his expression appeases him enough to coax a sigh from his chest. “I suppose I could make use of those tiny hands of yours,” Todd accepts, huffing off without anything more solid indication as an invitation for Damian to follow.

He feels off kilter and out of sorts, but as he trails after Todd, Damian realizes that the anxious itch beneath his skin has settled.

After being so unsure of so much already today, this last uncertainty hardly registers over the calmness of relief at being useful and out in open air.

Damian has little concern for picking apart the causes and consequences of that – right now he just needs to be moving, needs to be doing and Todd can facilitate the calm he needs to feel better than anyone else Damian could call on.
The rest must be addressed tomorrow.

but every one of us (got that wanderlust)

Chapter End Notes

Poor Dames. Sweet, angry little baby bat...

Also, I LOVE how the song I'm basing the chapter title on reps Wanderlust as a kind of potent, irritant that makes people move and do things they don't necessarily WANT to because they simply can't tolerate staying put. XD

NEXT TIME: Steph gets involved... and reacts poorly.
we started to fade (i know)

Chapter Summary

Steph stays at Tim’s bedside until he wakes up, and can admit, if only to herself, that she kind of hates Tim for being ridiculous, and definitely hates Jason for the way Tim seems to trust him...

Chapter Notes

This story has clearly taken over my life a bit, but next week I'll probably have a Trading Faces chapter up! ^_^~

Anyway, on to STEPH!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4 - we started to fade ( i know )

Tim falls off the grid while it's early enough in the evening for it not to seem too obviously worrisome. It's more of an annoyance than any immediate cause for alarm when Steph is directed by Oracle to check up on his last known location.

Steph is only just getting started on her rounds in the Batgirl zip cart she uses to haul around the highly steal-able and steal-worthy medical supplies that the free emergency clinics scattered around the city need, but they make these deliveries frequently enough that missing one isn’t going to ruin the ability of the clinic to help people. And she should have time to finish her rounds after she catches the idiot.

Still, when she gets her hands on Tim… she’s already planning how to wring his skinny little neck for pulling yet another stupid stunt like this.

This isn’t the first time he's done this – it’s not even the tenth time he's dropped off the grid while patrolling about twenty blocks back from the semi-official border of Crime Alley… the border that the Red Hood has made a lot more official in the last few years.

Tim has been ducking into Crime Alley at least twice a month or so since the Red Hood resurfaced after going on a weird – unexpected, unexplained, but totally welcome – hiatus of sorts. The Bat hasn’t figured it out yet because Oracle is covering for stupid jerk, sending Steph to check up on his continued aliveness, and then proactively pretending nothing happened each time Steph catches him slinking safely back out of the Alley.

Tim has also somehow managed to avoid getting caught by Hood on all these stupid
dangerous field trips of his… well, until now, at least.

Steph isn’t sure that something is wrong until almost an hour goes by – she’d found his Red Bird with ten minutes and has been waiting for him to slink back as usual, but … it’s been a pretty long while already and he hasn’t come.

Tim hasn’t intentionally spent more than an hour off the grid since… since he left… since he packed up all his shit and went to find Ass al Ghoul and get Bruce outta time flux because no one else believed his theory.

Admittedly, it was a pretty crazy theory and Steph would likely have sided with Dick, had she been there to provide input… In a quasi-fortunate turn of events she’d been pretty busy being almost dead in Africa with the miracle worker that is Leslie Thompkins – else wise there’s probably no way that Steph and Tim could have maintained any kind of relationship.

They’d already ceased to be dating before Bruce not-quite kicked it, but still… if Steph had doubted him too (like she probably would have, and like everyone else did) Tim wouldn’t have been able to tolerate even being coworkers…

And Steph would regret that more than just about anything.

So, Steph has been a mostly willing accomplice in helping Oracle cover the idiot's ass.

The main reason she doesn’t get worried after about 20 minutes of waiting is that Tim was almost a week overdue for this field trip of his and whatever nonsense he gets up to on the wrong side of the line had to be delicate enough to warrant painstaking and careful attention.

She should call Babs at the half hour mark, but benefit of the doubt (benefit of the ex-girlfriend really not wanting to rock the boat) gives him another fifteen minutes.

And then takes her time using far more words than necessary to relay the issue.

With a heavy sigh that shows Oracle has considered this an inevitable eventuality, Barbara calls it in over the main com connection.

Twenty minutes later, Nightwing radios back with an update: he’d gotten a call from Jason and Tim needed immediate medical attention.

Steph’s heart is caught in her throat as Dick and Babs coordinate everything. She’s all floaty and distant and totally not quite tied to gravity – and then, suddenly, Cass is there with Black Bat’s epic fast motorcycle and she slaps some sense into Steph, getting her back to reality enough to get on the damn bike so they can get to Tim and the Cave…

Steph doesn’t have the mental awareness to process much of the drive.

She’s pretty sure that Cass makes it zoom by – crazy, kick ass ninja girl barely understands
speed limits as a concept on a good day… when one of their own is in crisis?

Yeah.

They make some damn good time.

Steph and Cass reach the Cave mere seconds after Dick throws the Batmobile into park.

Bruce and Jason and Damian are in the midst of rushing Tim – and oh god does he look limp and bloody and pale – up to the med bay when Steph vaults off the bike and charges up after them. She’s probably far too emotionally compromised to really provide any actual help, but habit and ingrained emergency training has her pealing out of the upper half of her costume and scrubbing in to help with demands of surgery.

She’s a fully capable and registered EMT now, they all are.

And, usually, Steph has a strong enough stomach for the work to be able to handle herself when one of her Family members is laid out on the table…

But this is Tim.

He’s not her Tim, not anymore, but he’s still Tim.

With everything that’s happened to him – to them – in the last year or so…

Well…

Steph is barely holding it together enough to follow Alfred’s orders when she’s told to put firm and steady pressure on the massive laceration on Tim’s thigh.

She’s glad that Cass is here, too.

Cass has enough focus to actually be helpful.

Tim needs someone to be helpful.

Babs and Alfred are amazing, but they’ve only got four hands between them, and Tim just
has so many cuts that are still oozing blood… and so many bruises… and Steph has to trust that they’ve already checked for broken bones and internal bleeding and… isn’t Tim missing an organ or something that makes him like crazy prone to infection?

Steph feels like throwing up her guts, but that, at least, is too taboo to allow even the thought to solidify – not while Babs is elbow deep inside of Tim not ten inches to Steph's right.

But looking at how bloody Barbara's getting as she works to repair the damage Tim's managed to accrue… Steph feels like fainting might happen here soon, though. A glance up north confirms it. Yeah, that whole fainting thing… definite possibility there.

Slow breaths. In through the mouth, hold, out through the nose, hold, repeat. It's a pattern trained into the bones of every person who has ever donned a cowl in Gotham.

It helps.

Not enough to make her really feel better, but enough to keep her spiraling thoughts from making things any worse.

Steph still feels jittery, still feels woozy and panicked and wrong, but she can focus enough to follow directions from Babs and Alfred as they move on from patching up the nasty tear in his side to stitching up the cut in his thigh.

They are still moving with urgency, but the vibe they’re giving off now is much more relaxed and calmly procedural than it had felt at first – when the base of their assessment was still just looking at how much blood Tim was losing.

Now, it seems like they’ve decided the spectacular blood loss was more of an illusion than an accurate litmus test. The damage isn’t so bad as they’d thought, so bad as it looks.

Shortly after that revelation sinks in, Alfred tells Steph that she and Cass can scrub out, get themselves cleaned up. It takes all her willpower to step away from the table, but she does it.

And with Cass’s help – and by help, Steph means that Cass basically puppet walks her through the routine by physically dragging her around – she gets all of Tim’s blood out of the nooks and crannies of her skin, out of even the tiniest cracks in her thick callouses.

Then she takes a seat at Tim’s bedside, the chair set back out of the way and positioned up towards his head so that even leaning forward to get a glimpse of his ashy face and the slack exhaustion in his knocked-out expression, Stephanie’s shoulder is a good foot and a half from Alfred’s hip. Cass floats around somewhere behind her – ethereal and surreally calming.

Steph can feel Cass’s attention slipping off of Tim and out into the main Cave and whatever
Ruckus seems to be occurring out there, but Steph is still laser focused on Tim.

She can’t bear the idea of looking away from him for more than a second, and even then, all she can really manage is a reassuring glance at his heart monitor.

There’s shouting outside, but Steph only hears it distantly, distractedly – like the biting words and heated anger are just underwater echoes on a time delay.

It’s not until Alfred squeezes her shoulder, his hands warm and dry against the bare skin still exposed from her pealed down uniform, that Steph realizes that the emergency surgery is over already. That Babs has cleaned up too and, that instead of being fixated on keeping him alive, she is now focused on making Tim as comfortable as possible while he’s out cold.

Stephanie looks up at Alfred, more than a little lost and not quite daring to be hopeful until he smiles slightly and gives a firmly assuring nod.

Relief crashes over her.

She likely would’ve fallen out of her chair, smashed her face into the linoleum floor, and sprawled out limp and limbless like a super drunk sorority chick, if Alfred hadn’t been there already holding onto her shoulder.

The butler gives another reassuring squeeze and then lets her hold herself up under her own power – she sways slightly in the seat, but keeps her tush firmly planted in it.

Then Alfred heads out into the main Cave, hands clasped primly behind him, to give the boys the good news… and then to lay down the Pennyworth Whammy in his deceptively polite verbal smackdown when those idiots take the crisis over declaration as reason to start a brawl.

Steph drifts halfway out of the medical bay to hear Alfred walk them all through Tim’s prognosis – she doesn’t leave the little glass cube of containment that separates the medical bay from the main Cave, but she approaches its door closely enough to easily hear Alfred’s words.

She doesn’t quite manage to process them, but she catches the important parts: Tim was caught in some sort of explosion, he’s currently being sedated, transfused, and given all those vital nutrients and antibiotics that he needs, and he will shortly be able to make a full recovery – he might be back up and about as soon as next week.

She keeps replaying those three facts in her head as Dick and Jason duke it out like the over sized lunkheads they are.

Steph can hear the accusations and bitterness they throw back and forth between them, and though she’s not really processing any of it now, she’ll probably have to talk through some of it with Babs later on – because even as zoned out as she is, it does not escape her notice that a) Jason probably caused the explosion, b) Jason also probably saved Tim’s life by calling in for help, and c) Dick is both an asshole who can’t think before he acts and a well-meaning care-bear of over stuffed feelings who collects emotional baggage like it’s free shit at a college fair.
When the stupid brawl is over – with Dick on the floor like an idiot and Jason backing out of the Cave like a reasonably sane person trying to get out of dodge after crashing the wrong damn party – the air is still tight and tense.

It’s not until Alfred steps up again that the bomb diffuses.

"Well, then," Alfred declares, voice utterly scathing in the way Steph always appreciates when it’s not directed at her, "I think there’s been quite enough drama for one night. Now, if you all would kindly acquiesce without a fuss, I will remain with Master Timothy while you shower and change; and Miss Stephanie may return to the medical bay to sit with us once she has eaten something. The rest of you, really ought to get some rest, don’t you think?"

Everyone knows they deserve the pain that Alfred’s Whammy always delivers, and it takes a moment of internal cringing for anyone to recover enough to respond.

“That sounds agreeable, Alfred,” Bruce manages, eventually.

“Very well, Sir,” the butler responds.

It’s not an agreement so much as a command for everyone to get their butts into gear and get moving on following orders.

Babs gets Steph’s attention by placing a gentle hand on her forearm.

“I’ll stay with Tim while you change and get something to eat,” the red-head assures – a mix of warm understanding and steely resolve. She’ll keep Tim safe for Steph, but she’s also hell bent on keeping Steph healthy, too.

Alfred said Steph could come back to sit with their unconscious bird brain, but first she has to change and eat something. Steph can do that.

It takes a second for Steph's muscles to get the message, and a little coaxing from Cass (and by coaxing, Steph can totally admit that Cass straight up drags her bodily towards the showers until Steph's feet remember how to walk on their own), but soon Steph finds herself lost in the comforting steam of the hot, hard spray in the Cave's showers.

She blinks into a strange kind of full awareness, quite suddenly, at some point as the water runs over her face, and she begins to rush through her post patrol routine.

Once she's clean and dry-ish enough, she throws on some sweats and races upstairs to stuff her face with a serving of that ridiculous, impossibly sugary (but still magically nutritionally balanced by force of modern chemical science) cereal Dick always asks Alfred to keep the Manor cupboards stocked with.

Downing it in under five minutes flat, she wears so quickly she thinks she might puke it all back up if she had to take one bite more than she'd poured herself (but it's a queasy feeling in a very different and more manageable way). As soon as her food's gone she sticks the empty bowl in the sink and heads back down to the Cave.
Mercifully, she doesn’t encounter any of the other Bats in the whole time between leaving Cass in the showers and making it back to Babs and Tim.

The blip of energy and alertness she had felt while frantically moving to complete the prereqs outlined by Alfred evaporates as she steps back inside the med bay. In fact, all her energy disappears and she half collapses into the chair at Tim’s bedside as Babs wheels her way over to one of the bay’s supply bins.

Steph has pulled her knees up to her chest and is trying to muster up the strength to reach out those last few inches, so she can wrap her hand around Tim’s when Babs wheels over to sit beside her. Before Steph has fully comprehended Babs’s arrival, she is already being enveloped in a warm hug (one she sorely needed, and Babs knows her well enough to squeeze tight without having to worry pointlessly about breaking her) and wrapped up with a fluffy soft purple blanket (one she didn’t know she needed and didn’t even know they had available).

She feels the slight prickles of building tears, but nothing substantial makes it to her eyes. Steph isn’t sure if she can’t cry because she knows that Tim is going to be fine, or if… if the tears aren’t crying tears at all, but angry tears because the more she sits with it, the more she realizes that half the reason she needs Tim to wake up is that she needs to yell at him for being a reckless little shithead. Because he scared her today with this asinine stupidity.

Steph is still uncertain of her feelings, and what she wants to do about them, when Babs releases her and repeats for the hundredth time that Tim will be fine.

When Steph nods and does an awful job of trying to fake a calm and grateful smile, Babs pulls in a considering breath and then asks, “Do you want me to stay with you? Or do you want some time alone with him?”

“I—” Steph falters and looks between the boy in the bed who used to be hers and the most amazing big sister she’d never known how much she needed.

Babs waits patiently for Steph to figure out her own feelings. She probably sees the resolve settle in Steph’s expression before Steph even realizes she’s decided, but Babs still makes her voice the decision aloud.

“I— I think want to talk to him,” she manages after a moment, “just him.”

Babs flashes that warmly indulgent smile – the one that, on anyone else, would probably make Steph want to bash their teeth out with her bare fist – and says, “Alright. I’ll be down in the main Cave for a while if you need me.”

Steph nods dumbly with her eyes locked on Tim as Barbara turns around and rolls out of the med bay. At some point, probably a while after the silence would’ve been awkward in other circumstances, Steph heaves a sigh and asks, “What on earth were you thinking, idiot?”

It’s half a whining, baseless complaint built out of fearful frustration, but there’s also something genuine inside the question.

*What were you thinking?*

With Tim, it’s never just an expression of outrage.

With *Tim*… that question has a real answer. It always has a real answer.
Tim is always thinking.

Always, always, always thinking.

Always thinking, always planning, always caught up in some scheme that puts him at least ten steps ahead of anyone else in the game – hell, Tim’s often thinking so far ahead he’s already playing a different game than anyone else on the current board.

And he’s such a god damn little control freak about all of it…

That is the reason Steph and Tim ultimately didn’t work out as a couple.

Tim’s psychotically detail oriented little brain could pick apart a person and figure out what they wanted, what they needed, and what action got them to the mathematical pinnacle of a median between want and need. He was always been able to get the perfect gift, every time.

Able to plan the perfect date, the perfect surprise, the perfect… well, everything.

And he was able to craft most efficient schedule to make sure he could always hit every item on his list with work, school, the Crusade, and date night all planned out with an appropriately flexible timeline sent out to give Steph a head’s up three days ahead of time.

It had been cool, at first.

Steph had liked the feeling such keen attention being directed at making her happy.

And she enjoyed having the confidence of knowing that he knew her well enough to arrange everything their lives to achieve maximum awesomeness without even having to ask her to get it just right… but the whole deal had lost its shine pretty quickly – especially that whole without asking part.

While her input wasn’t strictly necessary, because they both knew that Tim would get it perfectly right, it started to feel stifling after hardly a month. Started to feel like she was being treated like a child or something… like she had completely lost control of her own God damn life.

Yeah. That shit had definitely started to chafe a bit.

And when Steph confronted Tim about how she was feeling, he hadn't understood at all.

Not even a trickle of recognition, no clue at how to handle the validity of where on earth she was coming from… not one iota of understanding that her input was important regardless of whether it was technically necessary.

That was the moment when the spark of compatibility that made them the very best of friends began to fade between them – not enough to diminish their friendship, but enough to make the idea of wanting it to be anything more start to erode rather aggressively.
And, honestly, it wasn't just Tim being a control freak, but that was the big thing – on Steph's side of it, at least. She knew Tim hadn't been as willing to fight for them at the end of it as he would've been had the contentious spat come up earlier.

Steph has never gotten a fully fleshed out answer as to Tim's side of why, but she's gotten enough to know he had been feeling the fade, too.

Still, she cares for Tim, even after everything, far more than she's ever admitted to him in their post break-up existence.

And Steph really does not like seeing Tim look so limp and lifeless in the Cave's med bay.

Which, again, makes her beg the question: what was Tim thinking?

Because she doesn't really know Jason Todd well enough to judge – though she does know he’s tried to kill Tim before and that little tidbit does not sit well with her – but she knows Tim well enough to be certain that he planned for some of this, but exactly how much of it is actually the plan is unclear.

Tim's not quite suicidal… there'd been a few worrisome patches when things had been rough and the slightest brush at Tim's insecurities sent him storming away from the Manor for days at a time, but he'd always kept his trackers on and stayed in touch via com while they all waited for the situation to cool down and resolve itself.

But things have gotten better in the last couple of months. Much better, even… despite the strange field trips he’s been taking into Crime Alley.

Maybe even because of the field trips…

That thought strikes Steph as a very important something that she's not sure anyone else involved has really considered yet.

She knows that Tim is a control freak, and therefore knows that this is definitely not entirely an accident, but she doesn't know what he was thinking – she doesn't know the plan's intended end game, doesn't understand the motivations behind Tim's choice to enact it.

Steph doesn’t know how Jason is involved, but she knows that he is very closely tied to all of it – and that Tim intended for him to be – and she thinks that Barbara may have some of the answers she needs to fill in the blanks.

With a heavy, lingering sigh huffed in Tim's direction, Steph unfolds herself from the chair – keeping the blanket wrapped securely around her – and makes her way down to where Barbara is messing with the Bat computer.
She's skimming through the security cameras trying to locate any hint of what explosion could've caused Tim's injuries – she back-tracking along Jason's course as he carried the already limp figure of Red Robin across the Gotham skyline, clearly more intent on getting Tim to a safe house than on avoiding the cameras. She's probably hoping that Tim was more intent on that too – that he ceased dodging Oracle’s all seeing eyes once he had gotten himself blown up.

Steph hopes that Babs's plan works – actual, concrete answers about any part of this mess would make the bigger uncertainties of it easier to bear.

But the hope she has for the success of Barbara's plan is not the main reason Steph is staring at the screens, transfixed.

What has her rooted in place is the way Jason looks while he’s carrying Tim’s unconscious figure… the way he looks… desperate. Not just confused or vaguely concerned or even irritated at the idiot’s recklessness… he looks desperate and utterly wrecked.

He looks like he’s in pain.

On-screen, Jason’s running across the rooftops with only his domino to guard his face – that signature red helmet of his presumably lying about forgotten on a rooftop, abandoned in his apparent haste to get Tim somewhere safe-ish for assessment.

It makes Steph realize that she’s rarely… if ever, now that she thinks about it, seen Jason Todd with a bare face. Well, she’s seen it in a few of Tim’s old pictures of him, from way back when the little stalker used to be nothing more Batty than a crazy ass kid with a camera, but those shots were of an entirely different person.

Those photos captured the kid that Jason used to be before he’d died, he’d barely even been a teenager back then, let alone the risen from the dead grown ass zombie man he’d come back to Gotham as just a few years ago.

So, Steph has never seen Jason’s bare face.

But Tim… she thinks that Tim probably has.

And Steph doesn’t quite know how she feels about that.

She definitely doesn’t know how she feels about the way Tim looks while he’s limp in Jason’s hold… because he doesn’t look like he’s dying yet, doesn’t look as lifeless as he did by the time they all made it to the Cave… He looks… relaxed, almost.

At least as relaxed as he’d ever gotten with Stephanie, even while they were dating.

She remembers very vividly how she’d been kept up one night by nebulous nightmares that
didn’t make her thrash or scream, but refused to let her rest easy, and she’d used the trick of counting Tim’s smooth cycle of breaths as he lay asleep beside her to calm herself back down enough to get back to sleep. He’d looked soft and peaceful, far younger than he ever did while awake, but at the same time… he didn’t look entirely at ease.

Every now and then a frown would pull slightly at his slack expression, a cute little wrinkle would furrow his brow… Steph had thought it was kind of adorable when she’d seen it then, because it wasn’t real worry, it was more like the kind of concerted befuddlement achieved from facing a difficult sudoku puzzle rather than from untangling a demented scheme from some villain like Ra’s al Ghoul…

But seeing him half dead in Jason’s arms… Tim looks totally content.

Something twists painfully inside Stephanie’s chest and she realizes that she kind of hates Tim for that. Hates him for being ridiculous, for being reckless, for trusting Jason Todd, the asshole who tried to kill him (twice) in a way that makes it obvious that he trusts Jason far more despite it all than he’s ever been able to make himself trust Steph, even as his girlfriend.

She also kind of hates Jason for it.

For not deserving Tim’s trust, and for not recognizing what an incredible and profoundly rare thing it is that he has achieved in having somehow won Tim’s trust over (reckless, ridiculous, and irrational, though that trust might be).

Quietly, though she knows that speaking up won’t startle Babs – because Babs has known she was standing there since the instant she left the med bay – Steph asks, “Who is he? To Tim, I mean. Who is Jason, exactly, to Tim?”

Barbara sighs, leaning back heavily in her chair.

“I’m not sure if even Tim can answer that question,” Barbara explains. “I don’t even know if Tim’s realized he should probably ask that question.”

Steph nods silently.

After a slow, considering beat, Barbara adds, “They’ve always been close, those two. I know you’re not really interested in how it was during the early years, but honestly, I think that Tim is the main reason the ‘early years’ of the expanding Family weren’t the final years of the Crusade as a Family venture. Tim kept everything together, mended fissures before anyone else even noticed they were starting to form.”
Steph nods again, stilted and still silent.

Then she says with painful certainty in the statement, “He did this on purpose.”

“Yeah,” Babs agrees, validating, “Tim did this on purpose. I think his intended end game is to find a way to get Jason back inside the Family fold. I don’t think he meant to get hurt quite this badly, I’m not even sure if he meant to get hurt at all, but none of this this craziness is just a random occurrence. Tim wouldn’t leave anything about the Family to chance.”

With a slow sigh to buy time to fully reorder her thoughts, Steph asks, “Do you think Jason can even come back to the Family? Do you think he even should?”

“Honestly?” Barbara replies gravely, “I don’t know anymore. I have no idea if it’s even possible, let alone if it’s worth the strife and effort of trying. Tim seems to think so, though, and… well, trusting his judgement, seems like it’s been the right call lately, no matter how ridiculous it might seem to accept whatever he’s saying.”

“Yeah,” Steph says, more effectively convinced than she wants to accept, “I guess.”

“Tim’s going to be fine, Steph,” Barbara promises, turning away from her screens to look up at Stephanie’s face – worry highlighted in the blue glow of the Cave’s tech-oriented light. As she reaches out to grab Steph’s hand and give it a reassuring squeeze, Barbara continues, “We can ask him all the questions we having waiting for answers when he wakes up in the morning.”

A beat passes, but after another calming squeeze of her hand from Babs, Steph nods with an almost firm resolve – with accepting resolution, at least.

Babs flashes a slight, but deeply relieved smile of broad approval.

“Now, I think Alfred would say that you ought to go upstairs and get some real sleep tonight,” she mentions – the barest edge of panic makes into Steph’s brain before she can register the sparkle of conspiratorial mischief in Barbara’s eye as she continues, “But Alfred’s not here at the moment, and I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Grateful, Steph nods and gives a weak smile as she squeezes Babs’ hand back.

Barbara pulls her down for a hug and presses a firm kiss to Steph’s temple before releasing her and shooing her back in the direction of Tim’s bed in the med bay.

Steph makes it back to her seat and gets all curled up again before the exhaustion crashes over her. This time, she’s able to reach out and grab Tim’s hand for comfort easily, and with his warm pulse pounding away sedately beneath her fingertips, Stephanie allows herself to drift off into a more than fitful sleep.
She’s still thinking about Jason, and as she drifts and almost dreams, she makes firm plans to go seek out the wayward not so little birdie and give him a piece of her mind.

But for now… she rests, and wills Tim to do the same.

It’s not exactly peaceful, but a fitful sleep is more than she had hoped for.

_ _ _ _ _ _ _

We started to fade ( i know, i wasn’t alone )

Chapter End Notes

Oh, poor, adorable, sweet and snarky, little Steph...

NEXT TIME: Babs reviews the evidence.

_
i was on your side (only waking up)

Chapter Summary

When things settle down in the aftermath of Tim's bloody arrival, and Jason's tumultuous exit, Babs reviews the footage and spends a while in her own head to debrief the situation.

Chapter Notes

Whelp, it has been a helluva a week folks. ^_^

Once again, I just want to thank you all for reading and kudo-ing and commenting! You all make my day every single time, and have made this year feel good despite there being aspects of it that have been decidedly *not* great in the other arenas where life is lived... totally honest, it's been a tough 11 months so far and the last one's not looking any easier, but you guys seriously make the days brighter. <3

Anyway, it's officially Christmastime (which always makes everything better, regardless) and next year should be better!

So, on to Babs, who notices a few VERY important aspects of the conflict over Jay's connection to Tim that need to be addressed by someone with SOME degree of emotional intelligence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5 - i was on your side ( only waking up )

Tim has always been a complicated variable to consider.

Babs had pegged it perfectly when she first decided that Tim was important, that he was *going to be* important… to the Crusade, to the Family, to everything. Tim had been very clearly set up for something special by whatever cosmic comedian had built the universe from scratch.

Almost as quickly as she recognized his general potential for significance within the whole world around the Family, Babs had noted that Tim was going to be *especially* important to Jason… both to Jason as an individual person, and to Jason’s ability to conform to Family expectations and the wide-reaching restrictions to participate in familial convention enacted by the implicit agreement
declared by his continued presence among them.

Tim kept Jason around a lot longer than he would’ve stayed otherwise.

And Tim kept Jason involved and checking in with the rest of them even after he flew the coop intent on ditching B forever.

It was because of Tim that Jason called Barbara when he realized that something didn’t quite feel right about the Sheila Haywood meet he’d arranged for himself out in middle of nowhere Ethiopia… and it was because of that brief phone call that Babs began to start digging, and that she figured out exactly how right Jason’s intuition could be…

It was because of Tim’s influence and the phone call Jason made because of it that Barbara knew right where to send Bruce when things went so far beyond sideways that no amount of brute force or will power or cold hard cash from a billionaire’s bank vault could do anything to change the matter.

It was because of Tim that after…

That after Jason died, Bruce didn’t become a killer himself.

It was because of Tim that Barbara…

That when Barbara got shot, that after she’d been paralyzed, after she’d given up on even being a real person, on being a useful person ever again… that after she’d gotten so caught up in what she’d lost that she hadn’t been able to see any hope or reason in trying to just carry on… it was because of Tim that after all of that, she’d been able to find something new.

That she’d been able to truly become Oracle.

She’d been leaning that way for a while, weaning off of Batgirl’s aerial thrills in favor of the far more productive role she could play behind the scenes… but there’s a difference between choosing to hang up her Batgirl cape, and having the option ripped away from her and Barbara hadn’t coped well with the difference. If she couldn’t choose Batgirl, if she couldn’t choose Oracle over Batgirl… then she couldn’t really be either of them. Or so she’d thought.

Tim had shown her otherwise.

And it was because of Tim that Dick had come back to Gotham, that he’d managed to come out of his own darkness enough to eventually help Damian start stepping out of his.

It was because of Tim that Steph and Cass had been able to carve out legitimate places for
themselves within the Family, and within the Crusade – and because of Tim that they’d eventually come to see how the two were inexorably linked. And how they wholly deserved to feel secure in the promise of their having a solid place in both.

It was because of Tim that Bruce had been rescued from the chaos of the time stream, because of Tim that the Teen Titans had been miraculously resurrected in such a snappy, physics defying correction of the fluctuating space time continuum, because of Tim that the Wayne legacy was still standing, and because of Tim that Jason…

That Jason has decided to fight the effects of the Lazarus Pit – to a degree, at least, enough to get him off the Bats’ active capture list.

He still wasn’t exactly playing nice with the Family, but he definitely wasn’t actively trying to kill them anymore, or even passively allowing them to die in front of him… he’d marked out his own little corner of the sandbox and was content to be miserable inside it all alone, without dragging any of the other Bats into the fray.

Tim was a wild card.

He has always been one, utterly unpredictable in the moment, but so clearly organized when his actions were looked at retrospectively with the end goal clearly visible and already fully accomplished... Whatever his goal is, at the moment, it’s likely that once he inevitably achieves it, his current choices – no matter how insane they seem to her, just now – will all come together to make uncomfortably perfect sense.

Eventually.

Babs has learned that it’s better to just not question his actions than to even offer help… right now, at least, it’s better. He’s still quite sore, and very understandably so, about having been called crazy and unstable in his worst throes of grief – about having had his very sanity questioned when he knew he was right about the things he was saying when Bruce was lost in Time, and when his friends had been actually dead (but not necessarily permanently dead) …

He doesn’t feel valued right now, or trusted, or important, or any of the things Babs knows he absolutely is and that he deserves to feel recognized for being… so instead of offering blanket support in whatever insane quest Tim has set himself up for during these last few weeks of taking field trips into Crime Alley while systematically getting off the grid to go for it… she’s simply backed him up in silence, hoping that he comes to notice eventually that she’s been trying to make it all easier for him on the implicit declaration that he is loved and truly trusted.

That plausible moment of recognition seems excruciatingly far off.
With Tim safe and sedated, and the rest of the Family finally cooling off in their respective corners of the too-small slice of universe they get to call their own, Babs has time to sit down and reflect on all of this past evening’s building (and breaking) insanity.

Because it has been ridiculous, and more than a little unsettling.

Barbara is used to being the Bats’ all seeing eyes as Oracle, but there are some things she prefers to see through the helpful distancing of a camera lens.

Seeing what unfolded tonight… having it play out right in front of her?

That has been… significantly less than ideal.

She’d known that the last few years had made Dick step deep into the darkness, had seen it herself as a third party, observing from a far to make sure he stayed as safe as possible, but she’d never seen it up close – never felt the kind of black fury he could muster.

It was not a mere little bit disturbing.

Barbara's own feelings on the matter aside, seeing Damian react to Dick's raging temper – a temper only Jason could ever draw out of him – was its own kind of heartbreaking.

Damian is still too proud to admit to being at all frightened – by anything at all, let alone by Dick Grayson – but Babs could see it in the tight curl of his shoulders every time Dick spat something heated and nasty and hateful at Jason.

Sitting at the Bat Computer now, as Babs is going over the footage of the altercation from earlier that evening, she can see Damian's fearful alarm plain as day. It's easier to handle when she sees it through a screen, but no less pointed or present.

It's easier to handle Bruce's reaction, too – or rather, his non-reaction.

Bruce shuts down on them as soon as Dick and Jason start trading spiteful barbs.

His face closes off even more than it does with the usual stony Bat façade, his posture goes still and awkward, and the tension clear in his throat as he struggles to swallow makes it obvious that Bruce physically can’t verbally intervene.

And he’s too stiff and still to effectively step in physically.

Babs understands that Bruce has never been able to deal very well with the fact that Dick and Jason fight, with the fact that they would be constantly at each other’s throats if not for someone helping them find common ground… but shutting down like this when his two eldest fight – when they fight and mean it, like they do – that's just irresponsible.
Bruce can't cope with it, and Babs gets that, she does.

It's hard to watch them fight, harder yet when it seems like the one you think is wrong is the one with all the facts on his side. The way Jason operates runs counter to the ideals of the Crusade. Barbara is not above admitting that she understands Jason's point – that she agrees with him, most days even, but she cannot allow herself to give into that urge or she'll never be able to come back from it... Jason walks a line that she could never stay balanced on.

And she knows that Dick feels the same, which is why he jumps so quickly to such raging, vicious fury. He can't rationalize the sweetness in the kid that Jason used to be with the willingness to be straightforwardly brutal to the point of almost unprovoked murder.

Babs knows the cause and effect are still the same in him, that his sweetness is what prompts the viciousness, but Dick just sees the crimes and feels like crossing that line must be hurting Jason the way it would hurt Dick himself. Which means that a significant portion of Dick's anger is the twisted and distorted desire to help save Jason from himself...

So, for Bruce to just shut down, to blank out and step back and just leave his boys to duke the moral standing out between themselves... it's an understandable reaction from a normal person, but from Bruce, it's just an insult to the memories of who Dick and Jason both used to be. Barbara will be having words with him about this, if for no one's sake but Damian's.

And then there are the other reactions – those from the people who were not involved with the fight... like Steph.

Barbara knows that she wouldn't appreciate anyone thinking it of her, but Steph soft on Tim, soft and gooey with an aching concern that runs deeper than her worry for the others. She definitely still considers Tim to be hers in a way that makes him matter more to her...

Steph was so dissociated from the fight that Babs didn’t know for certain whether or not she immediately understood what had happened to so upset Alfred when he’d testily declared that visiting hours were over for the night and brooked no argument against it – though it wouldn’t have been too difficult for her to piece the puzzle together.

And Cass was the opposite.

She started moving in to forcibly diffuse the fight the moment it got started, Babs could track her course as she slunk along the shadows at the wall to get into a good position for a takedown. If Jason hadn't pushed up the timeline, and if Cass hadn't frozen with confusion the moment she spotted Alfred's resigned sigh, if Bruce had given any indication that he considered the brawl to be inappropriate... the fight would've ended very differently.

The way things were though...
Babs isn’t sure what to make of the whole mess. Dick had some valid points when he’d accused Jason of being the person responsible for putting Tim in this position. But Jason’s counterargument had been even more convincing. Both were perfectly valid, but Jason’s...

Besides, Babs doesn’t think Jason is capable of harming Tim anymore – not intentionally, at least. As she backtracks through the night, catching Jason on more security cameras than he has been otherwise sighted on in the last year combined, she sees... fear in him, real and utter terror. She sees anguish...

Yeah. If anything, Tim’s pain hurts Jason as much as it hurts Tim... to think about how it would be if Jason had been the one to injure him to begin with... even as an accident, any hypothetical pain Jason caused him would be crippling to Jason, even if Babs could say for certain that Tim wouldn't hold it against him.

She already knows that Tim could never blame Jason, for anything.

Tim has already forgiven him utterly for the actual, intentional attempts on his life – the pointed and purposeful, attacks that had been deliberately vicious to a truly psychotic extent.

Tim forgave that.

Almost immediately.

He could never begrudge Jason an accident.

Dick probably thinks that’s what this whole thing already is, an accident of some sort where Jason’s at fault – be it a rouge bout of Pit Rage Relapse, or an example of his overly brutal style of crime fighting gone wrong with Tim caught in an unintended crossfire.

Any pain that Jason’s feeling over the incident is likely just proof in the understanding Dick has built of Jason's manifesting guilt.

Babs will deal with that idiot later.

For now, she’s still trying to figure out what happened – and knowing Tim, figure out why it happened. Because Steph is right, Tim did this on purpose... at least partly on purpose.

She truly doesn’t know if he intended to get hurt, and she isn't even certain that the end game is meant to bring Jason back into the Family fold – though it seems pretty damn likely from where she's sitting – but regardless, there are questions here that need to be answered.

Little, detail questions, with concrete data to explore that have to be answered completely before the bigger, philosophical queries can even be posed.

So, Barbara packs away her own worries and focuses on the task she's set her hand to, tracking Jason and Tim backwards through time.

Tim had, very helpfully with an almost direly worrisome convenience, recently installed a
camera of his own construction on the roof just north of the one where Jason liked to take his first break of the evening on Tuesday nights. He’d even obligingly wired the connection into the Cave’s primary mainframe… something Tim rarely did with his own surveillance resources.

(Which is another unnerving thing to put on the back burner of analysis for now.)

The newly installed camera caught the moment when Tim first arrived on the roof – already battered from the mysterious explosion – and it caught how Jason’s first reaction was to point his gun at the intruder… but it also caught how quick Jason was to point the gun away, and how panicked Jason looked at seeing the little bird sway from clear injury.

Babs works her way further back, trying to follow Tim to his origin point.

It's slow going, and she hits a lot of dead ends before she hits the money, but eventually she spots Tim slipping out of a small concrete structure that appears to be a free standing utility closet of some sort. Watching the building and going back further, she can see a tendril of smoke escaping from the poorly hinged door – a moment after a subtle flash of light strikes.

In other circumstances it could’ve been a camera glitch and an employee on a smoke break, but with Tim in the shape he is… Barbara's willing to bet a lot on the idea that the little glitch-like blink of light and puff of smoke in the structure at the corner of Hanover and Sixth was an underground explosion.

Barbara runs backwards a full 72 hours from the explosion, but doesn’t see anything worth looking into for answers. Bookmarks it for further examination, but lets it go for now.

Instead, she flips back to default in frustration and on the live stream she spots Jason – trusty helmet back in place, but sans signature leather jacket. He’s poking around the scene, cautiously digging up what is unmistakably rubble.

Caught up in watching his methodical course, she sees how upset he is by pull in his shoulders – the little twinge of tightness in the urge to curl in on himself and the brutal street kid's grit determination to keep his shoulders firmly back. He's going to be there all night, chipping away at whatever clues are available until he has a definitive explanation for what happened. It'll be an answer that he may or may not choose to share with the Bats, but with Tim at the center of this… Babs has no doubt that Jason will leave no stone unturned.

The chances of his being able to come back to the Family are slim, but it's at moments like this when Barbara believes it might be possible.

And then… and then, Jason freezes. Ducks out of frame.

Seconds later… Damian, shows up… of all possible people it could have been... Damian is there investigating the incident behind Tim's injury… it makes too much sense to avoid breaking Barbara’s heart.
Damian loves Tim, in his own way, and Tim understands – like he understood Jason… he understood that the anger came from fear, that the fear came from hope, and that the hope had been dashed once too many times for trust to come easy.

Jason and Damian were both damaged when they came to the Manor – like fighting dogs, they’d been trained since birth to expect no kindlinesses and they simply didn't know what to do with someone who gave it all away without any shred of reciprocity required.

Without even having any acknowledgement of their deeds be expected.

Tim embraces his Family, flaws and all he wholly accepts them for who they are… and he helps them fill in their cracks and smooth their rough edges and build themselves into who they want to be… and when they even mention that he may have been of help to them, he freaks out like they’re the one acting like a miracle of kindness.

Tim unsettles both Jason and Damian, but does it in a way that helps them heal.

Damian loves Tim as his brother, and he surely feels like he owes Tim for being so dogged about his theory that Bruce was alive and lost in time… and he's afraid of Dick, afraid of how Dick reacts to little brothers that break the Rule and come back ‘bad’…

But Tim understands and, whether he consciously knows it or not, Damian needs him for that – needs Tim to be the bridge between the vicious pit bull that he feels like and the soft bellied Grayson golden retriever.

Barbara is still thinking over how tragic Damian's life has been, how even under Bruce's care things have gotten little better, when Jason drops back into frame on the security camera.

Panic streaks through Barbara for a second – she still too habituated with fearing for her Family's safety when the Red Hood catches them alone and off guard to properly check the reaction on her own terms.

It takes Jason fearlessly, and almost affectionately, ruffling Damian's hair for her stomach to settle. Jason lets Damian join him in the investigation without any fuss at all.

Jason is a good kid, at heart. He is.

Babs does believe it, but she wants her flimsy faith to mean more than it does – more than it possibly can without a willingness to throw away her reputation and trust everything she is to the assertion. Tim trusts him like that, believes in him like that.

And Barbara, for so many reasons at this point, is starting to think there may be a damn good reason to trust Tim's judgment.
First of all, Tim is usually right.

But secondly, though it’s arguably the more important reason, Tim will do anything for Jason, and vice versa – no questions asked, no hesitation, and no regard for their own safety.

They’ve always been like that in regards to each other – from the time they were mere ankle biters, just kids playing hero, and with only Jason in a real cape.

Babs had always known the feelings between them ran deep.

She’d pegged it from almost the first moment that she’d seen them together – thinking that, at the very least, a powerful bout of puppy love would be an inevitable development between them eventually.

But looking at them now, at their reactions tonight…

She skims through the footage she’d collected again, pulling up the rooftop where Tim arrived in a stumble while Jason was taking a break. She watches as Jason aims his gun, points it away, and practically melts when Timmy starts to fall.

But this time, Babs is looking more at Tim’s reaction than at Jason’s.

She’s looking at Tim – at the battered, bleeding little boy who’d just dragged himself ten blocks across the skyline without a single falter in his painful looking steps. She’s looking at how Tim sees Jason – looks straight passed the gun like it isn’t even there, let alone being pointed right at his head. She’s looking at how Tim sees Jason, smiles like he’s made it home, and then lets himself give in to the pain urging his collapse.

Tim trusts Jason, completely – trusts him, trusts in him… trusts his judgement, trusts his compassion, his goodness, his faithfulness.

No matter what he does, Jason can’t disappoint Tim – he just can’t.

Tim’s open and unbreakable faith simply won’t allow it.

And Jason seems to sense that – to sense enough of it to want to be better, to want to live up to the impossible standard of goodness that Tim’s trust imparts.
Jason burned a safe house deep inside his own turf to get Tim the help he needed.

Jason used his own blood bag stock pile to get Tim the transfusion that might’ve been the fine line of emergency medical attention that saved his life… because, while the end result is ultimately survivable for him with a remarkably quick recovery, he’d lost a lot of blood and it easily could’ve gone the other way… if they’d gotten him back here just a little later, if they hadn’t already had everything prepped, if Jason hadn’t pushed the hemo when he did…

Jason voluntarily came to the Cave to see Tim’s treatment through to the end.

Jason willingly bore Dick’s vitriol, Bruce’s icy and suspicious malcontent, bore the weight of distrust and accusations without so much as lifting an eyebrow to defend himself – not even with snark – until after Tim’s prognosis had been confirmed…

Even when he had fought back, it was mostly defending his methods with cleaning up Crime Alley – backed up with facts – and then he’d focused, bizarrely and perhaps a bit absurdly, on protecting Tim’s honor…

The idea that Tim could be stupid enough to get caught in the crossfire from one of Jason’s operations, the idea that he’d let himself be mauled by Jason again, the idea that Tim would ever just mess up in dealing with Jason… it had been too ridiculous for Jason to stomach.

He’d attacked Dick for screwing up with Tim, for ruining the hero worship.

Because they both knew that Tim didn’t make rash decisions – or truly stupid ones.

Whatever the reason behind Tim’s choice to go to Jason for help, it had been a truly cognizant decision. Tim had picked Jason.

Dick couldn’t deny that much and Jason knew it instinctively – neither of them even knew what Steph and Babs did about their little routine of checking in after Tim’s risky field trips into Crime Alley. Steph had only been maybe eleven blocks away from that corner on Hanover, and Tim had to know she would be waiting to reem him out again for being reckless – like she usually was on the nights he ventured out of bounds.

The route to Steph was a block farther, perhaps, but it would’ve been an easier, street level jog for Tim than the skyline crisscross that brought him to Jason.

Tim had other options for emergency care. And he knew it.
And yet, he’d still chosen Jason.

Babs is starting to see that Tim will always choose Jason.

And she’s starting to see that Jason will always choose Tim.

Jason didn’t hurt him.

Not here, and likely not in most of the other incidents that the Bats have categorically blamed him for… Only those two incidents, with Jason fresh from the Pit and riding high on the biting thrill of vengeance… only those two were really Jason’s doing. Probably.

Looking at the faces of her little brothers on that rooftop earlier tonight, Babs comes to find that she’s utterly resigned to fighting for them – to keeping her realizations quiet, but championing them from the shadows and standing on their side in the inevitable Family fights that she has no doubt are about to break.

She will fight for her Family, to keep them safe and to keep them sane.

Sometimes, the two goals seem set at odds, but if Babs has learned anything over the last decade of being involved with the Crusade… it’s how to muddle through the bad stuff until a tolerable result is eventually achieved.

Until they crawl through the muck on sheer grit until they find a shred of sunshine.

Bats are pretty much like weeds, they don’t need much to live – a little bit of water and a little bit of sun, and even the most uncomfortable slab of concrete can become someplace they can truly thrive.

Tim had fought for her – had fought her when she’d been weak and close to giving up.

Tim had helped her become Oracle.

And she failed him the one time that he’d asked for help, for backing, for confidence.

Jason… Jason helped her become the person she is today, too, and he’d never even once
asked for her to have his back – never expected that she might be on his side and more than willing to hold her ground to prove it.

Never again.

Babs will *fight* for her Family.

Even if she has to fight her Family to do it.

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*i was on your side (only waking up)*

Chapter End Notes

Oh Barbie... It’s hard being the only one with sense in Family...

Next Time: Cass is up to bat! And she takes her role as the objective observer very seriously, because if anyone knows the dangers in sitting silently inside your own head when things need to be said, it’s Cassandra Cain.
Cass knows a thing or two about demons, and now that she has a REAL family she tries her best to help her family with keeping the demons at bay – her WHOLE family.

I love Christmastime.
It's just the best. Like seriously. In every way.
I'm more exhausted than ever, and in less sustainable conditions than ever, I can't even pretend to afford presents or anything, but I get to at least SEE my friends and family, and it's all cold and nice and just CHRISTMAS.
Technically, I only call it Christmas because I was raised Catholic. But I think of the whole Holiday season as super awesome and special. From celebrating Korean Chuseok in September/October to the end of Lunar New Year in Feb, I am just automatically 10% happier with EVERYTHING than I would be else wise.

(My favorite example is with Hallmark movies, like they're gooey to the point of annoying for me, but they annoy me so much more in July than in December, and it's the same movies being played at both times in honor of 'christmas'. I can watch like three or four in a row in December with my housemates, whereas in July, you get ONE and then I own the remote... for the rest of the day.)

Anyway, life sucks, but life is also great!
And on to CASS!

She's awesome. Every dysfunctional family needs at least one Cass to stay afloat. ^_~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter Six - no matter where i'd go ( it wasn't alone )

Tim’s hurt.

Things are… different… with Tim hurt.
Because it’s Tim hurt.

Everything is always different with Tim… Cass has always been able to tell that much.

She can’t explain the difference, not with words or actions or any kind of effective communication, but she has always been able to see it.

In the aftermath, when Tim is stable and the brief brawl between Dick and Jason is long played out and the Family is scattered, things might seem quiet and calm to a normal person.

But Cass’s upbringing means that she’s not normal, means that she sees it all much more clearly, means that she can read the ongoing turmoil raging through her Family despite the quiet permeating the air around them all.

Cass knows a thing or two about demons.

Knows how they creep and crawl and stalk a person through the night.

She knows that her Family deals with more demons than most, knows that they each have their own, personal phantoms and dark shadows that can’t be kept banished inside their nightmares – knows that when one of their own is hurt, these nightmares gain life to haunt minds even in the brightest hour of the day.

And when Tim is hurt… it’s just different.

It’s all more, somehow… more painful, more stressful, more personal, more everything; and just plain more, in its own right…

Cass doesn’t have the words for it, not in any of the languages she’s picked up pieces of…

But she knows that her Family is hurting and that letting them sit with nothing but the bad company found inside their own heads will do more harm than good.
She starts with Bruce.

He is their Father, their leader, their coach, their guide… he’s the one who started this Crusade for Gotham, and it’s easy for forget that he started it when he was just a young man – a twenty-something hardly older than she and Babs and Dick and even Jason are right now.

Bruce started this alone.

He started this feeling alone and he still feels that way, sometimes.

Most times, probably… he’s just inhumanly better at hiding it than the others.

He has so many failings – failings that, for the most part, he is distinctly aware of – and yet, when everything comes down to the line, they all still expect Bruce to lead them through.

It’s a lot of pressure – enough to have long ago crushed any weaker man, even another hero. Anyone but Bruce would have faltered, would have fallen, would have lost the will to fight and the ability to make any kind of difference… but not Bruce.

They value him for that in ways they can’t explain – trust him utterly for it.

But they also have so many reasons to be angry with him, and so frequently have fresh reminders of the parts of him that stab and chafe, that it’s hard for them to communicate properly how much they care for and depend on him. How much they love him, how they value what he’s given them – the parts of themselves he’s helped them find and made flourish.

It’s far more comfortable to stew inside their anger and Bruce lets them direct all of their frustrations at him. Because he’ll take it, all of it, and without a word of protest to defend himself. He’ll occasionally explain his choices, but usually that just makes the others see him as even more robotic and impersonal.

When it’s about his kids, Bruce goes cold.

He boxes up everything warm inside him and puts his focus in the logic.

But when it’s between his kids… the logic doesn’t help.
Logic is on Jason’s side. But the Rule is on Dick’s.

Reason is on Dick’s side – Jason’s hurt Tim before, Jason uses lethal force, and Jason runs Crime Alley like a mob boss and a dictator rolled into one. He’s not a good person.

But the evidence is on Jason’s side – Jason could’ve done nothing, could’ve let Tim die, but he called for help and got Tim what he needed and bore willingly with the consequences of seeing his choice to help Tim through to the end. Because he is a good person – when it matters.

Bruce hates seeing his kids fight, hates not knowing how to agree with one over the other when both are in the wrong… And he hates that this is who he has let his kids become...

And it’s Tim that’s hurt. Tim who’s caught in the middle. Tim who was never meant to be in this fight at all, Tim who has gotten the worst of it over and over, and Tim who somehow is the one who keeping pulling everything together – everyone together.

Bruce would not be here, for so many reasons, without Tim.

And Jason has hurt Tim.

But Dick has hurt Tim, too. And Bruce… too often, they’ve all hurt Tim.

All in the past, but never far enough away for it to be forgotten.

Whenever Tim gets hurt in the present, all the old hurts resurface.

And Bruce does not resist it, does not handle that sort of internalized pain well.

Cass finds him in his study, the one on the third floor with the window that looks northwest over the Manor’s estate – over the tree-filled park that hides training grounds, over covered walks that bring peaceful walks and allow for endurance training, over the lake that’s seen hundreds of summertime adventures and that hides the submarines and deep water training facilities vital to the Caped cause… the one that looks over the still-visible culvert where the ruins of Jason’s gravestone stands as barely recognizable rubble…

“Tim safe,” she says quietly, aware that Bruce is already alert to her presence.
Bruce does not turn around from his vigil at the window. “I know.”


“Jason may have been responsible,” Bruce counters tightly.

Cass snorts again, stepping forward with her arms crossed to stand beside the only father figure that’s actually been a father to her. “Jason help,” Cass promises, “Jason always. For Tim.”

The words aren’t quite right. Not complete. Not expansive. Not enough.

They don’t soothe Bruce the way she means them to.

“Jason cannot control himself, especially not around Tim,” Bruce states, definitive and sure. The tightness in the stretch of muscle along the back of his arms testifies to the idea that he’s drawing on concrete examples to support his apprehension.

Cass shrugs. She side eyes him to attempt figuring out what he is referring to exactly – something from before she joined the Family, she thinks. “Jason help. Protect,” she insists.

“He is dangerous,” Bruce retorts.

“Tim, too,” Cass huffs with considerable vehemence.

It’s a point she firmly believes in, despite how Tim is different from the rest of them, despite how he hadn’t once been in a fist fight of any sort until after he’d donned the bright yellow cape, despite how he’d always be the weakest, physically, of the lot – Tim is just as capable of being lethal and indomitably dangerous as any of the others.

“Tim dangerous,” Cass reiterates, more sedately but still just as firmly, “And me. And you. Damian, Steph, Babs – all Bats. Very dangerous. Tim, too.”

Finally turning away from the window, Bruce gives Cass a long look of incredulous, careful evaluation. “You want Jason to come back to the Family?”

His shoulders lift slightly, wondering at the stake she has in this.

Cass doesn’t know Jason, not really.
She has no sentimental reason to want to have the wayward former Robin to come back into the Family fold, and Bruce is uncertain of what could possibly be motivating her to support the idea. He’s not sure that she’s supporting Jason’s return for the right reasons.

It’s a fair point, and truly, Cass does not particularly care whether Jason comes back.

She simply cares about how much the rest of her Family cares about it – how they lean on the issue is how Cass has decided her own stance. And who leans the hardest.

With another shrug, Cass explains, “Tim wants.”

“Tim can be… overly emotional regarding Jason,” Bruce comments, his posture going curly cue and awkward. “He is sentimental, and… invested, but he will come to terms with the distance that must be maintained because of Jason's circumstances, eventually.”


“How could he, even? When he's saying something as ridiculous as that?” Bruce tells her, trying to sound firm as his posture wilts. He doesn't believe his own words.

Cass knows better.


Bruce does not reply aloud, but his posture screams defeat and dismay.

“Jason will hurt him again, regardless,” Bruce states, to be still firm as his posture shift closer to the fretting father he is beneath the emotional armor. “And the closer Jason is to home, the worse it will be for everyone when it happens, especially for Tim.”


“Tim is not infallible,” Bruce tries, one last desperate stab at staying opposed even as his posture takes on a resigned cant.
“No. Just good, very good,” Cass says. “And good heart. Tim and Jason, both.”

“Good hearts may not be enough,” Bruce cautions gravely.

It makes Cass have to hide a smile – Bruce still believes in Jason’s good heart. Convincing him of the rest of it will be easy.

For Tim, it won’t even register as an obstacle to his goal.

No.

Bruce will be easy so long as he still believes that some part of Jason is truly good.

Dick will be the challenge on Tim's mind.

Cass presses her shoulder into Bruce's briefly, in quiet solidarity – a promise and assurance. She waits until he presses back, and then she turns and goes.

Cass finds Dick in his room.

He’s twisted up on the floor in a meditative pretzel that would break the average person’s spine. Cass is used to finding him like this, and she can even copy most of his poses – though this one is a bit too bendy to emulate easily.

And too bendy to make it easy to read anything but tension in his figure.

So, Cass takes a comfortable seat on the floor and then shoves at Dick's shoulder until he falls – landing in a loud collapse of limbs that renders him as little more than a PJ clad heap.

He doesn't move to right himself immediately.

It takes a moment before he finds the resolve to force his muscles into motion, but eventually he mirrors her posture.

Dick lets her read everything that he is – no hesitation or embarrassment or fear, just lets her see exactly what he's feeling. Open, honest, and warm.
He's not great with words, either. He's better than Cass, but that's still a bar too low to pretend has any meaning. But he knows how to communicate with things other than words, and he knows how good Cass is at reading his emotions – he lets his feelings do the talking for him.

Guilt seems to be his primary feeling at the moment.

Guilt and fear. And the self loathing twist of pain and anger caught up in being pulled apart by circumstances well beyond anyone's control.

“Think too hard,” Cass points out. “Not feel enough.”

Dick huffs darkly, “Seems to me like I’m feeling too much. Not thinking at all.”

His back his curled, but his muscles are stiff and tense. He’s all caught up inside his head – over thinking every piece of the puzzle, analyzing and re-analyzing every aspect of the evening’s situation and the wider circumstances that caused it.

“Jason hurts you,” Cass says, eyes filled with the kind of sympathetic warmth she’s only recently begun to understand – that she’s learned from watching him.

Some of the tension in him recedes as he gives a heavy sigh and admits, “Yeah. He does.”


Dick doesn’t have to answer verbally to know that he’s confirmed Cass’s statement, he doesn’t even have to nod. He simply wilts slightly and looks up at her from the side of his eye.


An anguished chuckle claws out of Dick’s throat. “He’s tried to kill Tim; twice, for sure.”

With a dismissive shrug, Cass points out, “Damian, too – tried to kill.”
“He didn’t know what he was doing,” Dick protests immediately. “Talia raised him so he didn’t understand that you can’t just kill someone in your way, or that Family is supposed to be more than a ranking system meant for choosing a successor.”


Damian knew what he was doing when he tried to kill Tim, and he did it with a kind of intentional awareness of the consequences that Jason simply hadn’t had when he’d first climbed out of the Lazarus Pit.

Jason tried to kill Tim because he was blind with hurt and hate and anger, and drugged into making murder feel like his only possible recourse.

Damian was emotionally blinded by his desire to be found worthy and his fear of being found wanting, but he was perfectly aware of the choices he was making and their consequences.

Cass doesn’t quite have the words to convey that.

All she can do is be resolute with knocking down Dick’s excuses.

“Damian’s better now; he’s learned how to be the good guy and he’s come to care for Tim,” Dick tells her, whining note in his voice to match the tension of his posture that confirms an acute awareness of his weak positioning.

“Damian *obeys.* No Kill is Rule. *Bruce’s* Rule. Damian obeys Bruce, does not believe Rule is *right,*” Cass explains, working slowly and carefully through the words. “Values Tim now, yes. Jason values Tim, too. Values *more,* values *always.*”

“Jason does *not*—”

“*Does.*”

Dick huffs, sensing the impasse.

“Damian afraid,” Cass presses after a beat, moving the conversation forward. “Afraid of *you.* Afraid of… he and Jason, same. Afraid of you… see… same… sameness?”

“Damian thinks I’m going to see him like I see Jason?”

Cass nods, relieved as always that her Bats can understand her.

“He thinks he and Jason are at all alike?”

Cass nods again, this time with grave severity. *This* is the important point for helping Dick to
understand the issue at the situation’s heart.


Dick frowns, whole being going stiff from where it had been getting soft and despairing.

“Like Tim?”


Cass scrunches up her nose – frustrated at her lack of words, in any language.

The timid curl of Damian’s shoulders when he shrinks if Bruce or Dick can’t see is something that strikes painfully, straight against her heart. He pretends to be proud and strong and arrogant and haughty and better than everyone else in the room, but he’s so afraid of losing his place when they aren’t there to measure him… so afraid.

“Damian thinks I won’t love him anymore if I realize that he’s growing up?”

Bafflement makes Dick’s shoulders rise, his elbows pulling back in mild affront as his disbelief makes him doubt his understanding.

Again, Cass nods – firm, unwavering, certain.

“Won’t judge as kid, judge as adult,” she confirms. “Judge as wrong.”

“But… Tim and I have mostly gotten over that thing with Robin. It was a mistake, I admit that,” Dick pleads, hoping that Cass can somehow make it be enough to convince Damian. “I fought with Tim, sure, but we’re good again. I still love him. I’ve always loved him and always will and Tim knows that.”

“But not Jason.”

Dick frowns. “I don’t know if Jason can come back from what he’s done,” he admits.

Rocking her whole torso forward, Cass confirms that is the actual problem.

Dick doesn’t know if Jason can come back, doesn’t believe that he’s still got the good heart that made him such a great Robin when he had the role… Jason’s heart is so obviously good, despite
the morals he displays, and Dick doesn’t know… can’t see it, somehow.

   Damian is not as good hearted as Jason, and he knows it.

   He doesn’t care about the general population, much at all.

   In fact, he’s generally disdainful of the idiocy and coarseness, and uselessness displayed by the average civilian and would far prefer to never have to associate with them at all.

   Whereas Jason… Jason loves people. He acknowledges that a lot of them are truly terrible, and the average of them is a pretty shit collective, but still, he loves meeting people, learning about their struggles and their lives and their hopes and dreams.

   Learning their stories.

   Jason protects people because he loves people.

   Damian does it because his Father does. Because it is officially the ‘right’ thing to do.

   If Dick can’t see how Jason’s heart is still so good, still so pure, despite everything, how could Damian expect to be able to recover if he ever does something wrong?


   “I just… I don’t know,” Dick sighs. “I can’t find the little brother I used to know in this new version of Jason, I don’t see how any of him could have survived.”


   Another strangled chuckle escapes Dicks chest as something in his clicks slightly closer into place. “Yeah,” Dick settles on, “You got that down. Tim is usually right.”

   Cass breathes in and out slowly, pleased as reaching a step towards real resolution.

   Like she did for Bruce, she leans her shoulder into Dick’s and waits for him to lean back – the support and solidarity and strength in the gesture doing more to say that it’s okay that he still has a ways to go before he can fully come to terms with what Cass wants him to than any form of language ever could.

   They will be okay.
It may take a while, but they will be okay.

Cass knocks Dick over just for sport as she stands and stretches out her shoulders.

Dick just shakes his head and sighs as he lifts himself into a handstand that moves to place the balls of his feet on the insides of his elbows.

Cass leaves him like that and goes off in search of Barbara.

The Bats’ own Oracle is in the Manor’s kitchen, and she – as Cass expected – is welcomingly easy to assuage, tangled up in worries from which she’s already half managed to cut herself away. It won’t take much to help Babs pull herself the rest of the way out.

Cass takes a perch sitting on the countertop by Babs’s shoulder, curled loosely around herself to let her limbs all balance out and rest on each other with minimal effort. She remains in silence there as Babs stares darkly at the cabinets above her current means of reaching – there is a set of lower cabinets set aside for her, and a nifty claw-like device that can extend her reach above, but she’s not looking at the Cabinets because she genuinely wants anything in them.

She’s looking at them because – on bad days – they remind her of how much she has already lost in the course of fighting the ‘good fight’, and of how much she has left to lose.

Barbara Gordon does not usually wallow, so she is allowed to have her moments of anger and weakness and despair in a way that Cass would never permit from Dick.

Babs is not at risk of self-centralizing – of putting herself at the heart of a situation that truly goes well beyond, or of blaming herself and her mistakes for the entire cause of an unfavorable outcome when the situation was terrible to start with… Barbara does not wallow in her guilt or sadness, she simply mourns.

And she has much to mourn.

She is resigned to the necessity of it, committed fully to the choice that means she will always be at a substantially higher risk of losing her loved ones – she’s accepted that no matter what decision she makes, eventually, Life would still have given her plenty of grief to swallow.

Barbara would prefer to mourn after pouring everything she is into the effort of trying to keep her City and her Family safe – to mourn after a real fight, and honorable, good, and truly human attempt to beat back the darkness for a short while.
Eventually, Barbara sighs – heavy and frustrated, but not lost in the black swirl of regrets and self doubt and fear.

Cass leans forward to squeeze Barbara’s shoulder – careful to moderate her grip, now that she understands the odd need people have to feel the strength in being gentle. Barbara, especially, demonstrates for the Family how potent and crucial the soft side of strong can be.

As Barbara reaches up to grasp Cass’s fingers, squeezing them back in return, Cass assures, “Tim safe. Jason… come home. You… okay… with that?”

“Not exactly,” Barbara admits. “I mean, I want him to come how, and I know it’s kind of an inevitability at this point…”


“But I still… It’s going to be a long road and I just don’t know if the others are ready for what it’s actually going to mean,” Barbara confesses.


“Yes, I know. But I can’t help but feel like it’s still a bad idea,” Barbara sighs, but her worry is topical and her frustration mild.

“Bad ideas… sometimes fun,” Cass counters with a conspiratorial grin.

Babs gives Cass’s fingers another squeeze.

“You and Jason together will be absolute terrors,” she huffs with affectionate horror at the possibilities beginning to open up. “And don’t even get me started on you two colluding with Steph… oh, lord, we really should make a preemptive rule about it…”

She shakes her head in good humor and mock dismay as the first grays of dawn begin to filter through the kitchen window.

“Well, I’m going to head upstairs to get some sleep,” Babs announces firmly, adding with an arched eyebrow, “You coming?”

“Soon,” Cass promises, looking out at the dreary sparkle of morning.

“Soon,” Babs emphasizes.

Cass nods and releases her hold on Babs’s shoulder.

She doesn’t wait for Babs to wheel away before unfurling herself from the counter and going off in search of Damian.
Cass does not find her next target with nearly as much ease as she’d managed to find the first few on her list.

Damian isn’t even at home when she starts looking.

His silent electric motorcycle is not in the auxiliary garage when Cass checks.

In coming back into the Manor proper, Cass finds Alfred taking tea in the East Wing’s first floor sitting room – Cass calls it the Blue Room because all the elegant vignettes embroidered on the plush furniture, and all the geometric patterning on the wall paper, and the soft swirls of the carpet are designs created by varying shades of blue.

It’s not the only room in the Manor that has a singular color defining its decorative scheme, but it’s the only one that Cass likes and one of a select number that manage to catch the weak rays of Gotham’s sunrise and turn them into something magical.

Alfred’s tea has the usual extra place set, in the eternal preparedness for the possibility that one of the Manor’s lost souls might wander in requiring the unique sort of peace and comfort afforded by a good cup of tea.

Personally, Cass is more interested in the pile of cranberry scones Alfred has stacked up on the three tiered tray between the two place settings.

“Would you like to join, my dear?” Alfred asks congenially when he spies Cass loitering at the door. Alfred is the one Family member she is not worried about – well, not exactly worried. She understands that he bears the greatest burden in the Family, but he is perhaps the only one actually prepared for it. He is more than capable of bearing such a toll and can even be trusted to remove himself from a command position on the rare occasion of emotional compromise without the prompt of an outside observer – and he can do it while offering his replacement a neutral lay of the options on the board.

Cass is not worried about him.

It may not be fair to him to not be worried, but Alfred will not begin a self destructive spiral because of the Family’s turmoil.

Even so, Cass doesn’t hesitate to accept when Alfred offers and she promptly folds herself into the chair set angled near off from the butler – arranged so the two occupants may both look out the window over the rapidly brightening park of Wayne Manor’s easterly estate.

She nabs a scone and begins munching away contentedly as Alfred pours her a cup.
Alfred has taught her manners and she swallows before thanking him politely and setting her scone down to take the obligatory sip required to appease him – she has joined him in a specific ritual or sorts, as he’s explained the scenario, and it would be unspeakably rude of her not to properly partake in it.

Lifting the cup with careful hands she gives the delicate porcelain a swirl. The cup’s creamy ceramic body, inlaid with gold accents and blue enamel to compliment the room, makes the tea within shimmer with captured light. The liquid is a vibrant burst of reddish amber and smells of earthiness and sunlight and the complicated floral milky citrus sweet of bergamot and chai that she’s come to know of through Alfred’s other lessons.

It smells good, like the promise of a new days should feel, and it tastes even better.

The tea curls over her tongue with a surprisingly weight gravity, bergamot oils letting the high flavors linger after the earthiness has passed – extending the evolving flavor experience of the sip beyond the first touch of tongue and well into the swallow.

“It’s called a Morning Red,” Alfred mentions in the hush as Cass decides to take another sip and savor the strange experience. “Or more infamously, it’s known as a Mourning Red. It’s a blend crafted of a Rooibus base with a warm touch of heavily oxidized Assam, flavored with bergamot, cornflower, and just a touch of chai. It originates in the mix of cultures at the crux where Africa meets the Middle East, and has the dubious notoriety of being quite popular in Turkish high society as the primary tea served before dawn on days of religious fasting or at the funerals of particularly prominent individuals, hence the Mourning.”

Cass nods, solemnly absorbing the information.

She takes a third sip, breathing in the flavors as much as tasting them.

“It was always Jason’s favorite,” Alfred reminisces, nostalgic in a way that encompasses both an old pain and a new and fragile hope.

Cass keeps her eyes on the tea in her cup, a soft smile gently tugging at her lips.

Jason would’ve liked the history as much as the tea itself.

And… now that’s been mourned, he’d appreciate the mix of aptness and irony even more.

Alfred is willing to appreciate it in his absence, to use it in a subtle declaration of his own unwavering support for Jason’s eventual return.

Yeah. She doesn’t have to worry about Alfred in this, at all.
Alfred may be the only person in the Family who is as prepared as Tim himself is for the now obvious inevitability of Jason’s homecoming.

Cass finishes her scone and drinks the rest of her tea with Alfred in a companionable silence the fills her chest with the balmy contentment of *Family*.

Before she has to figure out the words to make a polite refusal of Alfred’s offer to pour her a second cup, the soft click of the external door down the hall betrays the arrival of someone coming in from the auxiliary garage.

“That will be Master Damian, then,” Alfred supplies, his own relief showing through.

The butler arches an eyebrow at Cass, offering her the choice of going to Damian herself or of leaving it to Alfred to go (and thereby taking de facto responsibility for the tea set).

It’s only the obligatory bones of an inquiry.

They both know she would like to handle Damian, personally.

Cass stands immediately, though without rushing, and takes the time to give Alfred a full 45 degree bow in thanks before she turns to go.

Cass catches up to Damian as he makes it back into his room – she short cut through the main hallways where Dick could have stepped out of his room and seen her pass while Damian resolutely snuck back in through the vents in determination to keep his brother in the dark about his deepest fears.

He pulls off the head covering of his League of Assassins’ gear as Cass takes a cross legged seat on his floor.

She simply looks at him expectantly, immovable, while he glares down at her until he eventually relents and seats himself to mirror her posture.

Damian smells of ash and soot, with a fertilizer tang woven in and the unmistakable smell of mentholated tobacco.

Cass smiles, saying, “You and Jason. Investigate Tim.”

Damian’s glower simply deepens.

“Is good. Help Jason come home.”

“Father and Grayson do not wish to have him return at all, let alone to the Manor.”

Cass shakes her head. “*Do* wish. Scared. Guilty. Their fault. Jason… not *alive* to them, not real person yet. Is… nightmare. Phantom magic… meant to torture… to blame… to make re… re?
“Re… punish and make better?”

“Repent,” Damian supplies nonchalantly and without distraction from her point – a habit that Tim had been the first to develop. He’d slowly taught the others and they’d all acclimatized to it, helping her by lending easy support without judgement and without getting off track by having to explain the full definition.

Cass didn’t need the full definitions. The… taste of the words would fit the feelings or it wouldn’t and no amount of explanation would change that – it would simply derail the more important part in the line of conversation.

With a nod to confirm and thank, Cass goes on, “To make repent. Scared Jason not real, and too, scared he is.”

“They do not want him to come back,” Damian protests, gaze falling away in a rare show of weakness that clearly betrays his own fears.

He rarely opened up like this, even to Cass.

The stress of this is truly getting to him.


Damian doesn’t scoff, though his posture is stiff with disdain he is giving due consideration to the sentiments professed within Cass’s stilted explanation.

“They are not so foolish,” Damian says eventually, words measured in an attempt to beat back the niggle of hopefulness trying to rise up inside him.


Damian’s frown is thoughtful, still tight and worried, but not nearly as fearful.

Cass uses the advantage of her long arms and Damian’s distraction to leap at him and encompass him in a tight hug, giving a smacking, affectionate kiss to his temple.


Damian grumbles incoherently and struggles to squirm his way out of Cass’s hold.

She doesn’t let him escape until she gives his head another kiss.
Then she lets go and hops away before Damian can dole out a reprisal.

Limbs starting to feel the heaviness of stress and exhaustion, Cass makes her way down to the Cave while shaking out her abused muscles.

Steph is still asleep in the chair at Tim’s bedside, burritoed up in a fluffy purple blanket.

Cass simply sighs.

Steph is… Steph is like Jason in so many ways… She’s emotionally driven.

She frets over little things, brashly conquers big ones. She’s crass and mean and scrappy, but only to cover up how much she cares – how much she cares about people, and how much she cares about how the people she loves see her. And she, just like Jason (and just so irrationally), believes that the people she loves might not truly love her back.

It hurts Cass sometimes, looking at Steph – feeling how sharp and significant and how totally present all of Steph’s insecurities are. Feeling how useless Cass herself is at helping her.

Cass decides to let Steph sleep for now, to leave her and Tim alone.

There’s still one more family member to chase down, after all, and Cass is certain that Jason won’t be sleeping – regardless of how pointedly he needs to after the night’s excitement.

Cass doesn’t plan on being subtle.

She grabs the helmet she has with the darkest visor and the loudest bike in Black Bat’s arsenal before streaking off into the dawn in search of the one last Family member she needs to find and set at peace before she can attempt to find her own.

—

no matter where i’d go (it wasn’t alone)
Yay, CASS!

I haven't quite decided how strong I wanna make the Cass/Steph pairing in this... or even will be ABLE to... I tagged it because it's there, but this story is about to get a lot more Jay/Tim centric and the others are getting rather substantially sidelined as those two obsessive, whiny idiots take over... We'll see!

Also... I may be starting a Patreon page in the next month or so... getting some of my original fiction out there in addition to my fanfics and such... because life is kind of super hard right now, and it's looking pretty impossible to keep my head above water (and, you know, like afford food, my mortgage, and enough gas for my daily commute all at once... some days it really is kind of like a 'pick two or have the checks bounce' game show...) ... sooo yeah, what would you guys think of possibly contributing to a fund like that?

Anywho, NEXT TIME: Timmy wakes up... and is NOT HAPPY with what he finds waiting for him in the aftermath...
Tim wakes up. He's not pleased by what he finds. He wants to get straight to looking for Jason, but has to settle for a little reminiscing.

Unsurprised.

Unsurprised by the leaching ache that’s boring into all his joints and muscles, and unsurprised that he’s woken up to have the unique vigilante luxury of feeling it.

Of course, that may have just been Tim.

Tim’s relationship with the concept of physical pain developed in a uniquely singular environment, and he is aware that his viewpoint is not normal and may not exactly be healthy.

The very first time Tim felt real physical pain had been when he’d slipped while climbing down a fire escape after a very successful night of stalking Batman and Robin. He’d badly bruised his hip and sliced open the side of his hand on a rusty shard of what had once been the fire escape’s railing.

Wary of drawing attention to himself – distinctly aware that Batman and Robin had left the area – Tim had grit his teeth, picked himself up, and used his bike as a crutch to get to the nearest neighborhood clinic (he’d memorized the locations of all of Gotham’s legitimate, anonymous, free clinics well before he started going out on these ventures – because Tim was never anything but
perfectly prepared).

He’d gotten six stitches, a tetanus shot, and a stern talking to about being out alone this late at night – and for coming to a free clinic when even his haircut said he could afford to pay.

Worth it.

That had been his only thought as he’d limped home, researched proper follow up care for tetanus ridden lacerations, and sacrificed his entire month’s allowance to anonymously donate twice the average annual gains the clinic earned outside of corporate donors.

He had gotten hurt a few other times in chasing after Robin, and then a few more after he'd befriend Robin (befriend Jason as Robin, obviously), but mostly the incidents of pain were linked pretty intimately with good memories. Some of his best memories.

And then… and then Jason had died.

He died… and then… Tim had…

And then Tim had foisted himself upon Bruce with the demand to let him be Robin.

Tim had made Bruce take him on, despite his being a poor candidate to manage the role… He had been painfully inadequate and the training regime he had put himself through in order to achieve adequacy had been brutal.

Those days were a blur of aching muscles and joints, of cuts and bruises, not to mention the exhaustion… The process had been effective, however, and each bit of pain had gotten him one step closer to competency in a way that felt more than worth it.

Even now, Tim aches through and through on far more days than not.

He barely even registers the sensation of aching muscles or a battered body as pain anymore… at this point it feels a lot more like progress.

So, Tim is unsurprised to wake up feeling awful, and unsurprised that Jason had taken his olive branch and done exactly what Tim had hoped he'd do.
And, honestly, he is unsurprised by the fact that he doesn’t see Jason anywhere in the Cave – he’s probably long gone, for the moment, at least.

Tim is even unsurprised by the fact that the first face he does see when he wakes up is Steph – and she looks pissed. Probably fair.


Tim just takes it – he won’t officially confirm the statement on the record, but he also knows that he deserves it.

“What happened?” Steph demands, running her fingers through her hair – it’s mussed and frizzed, and more than a touch greasy, as if she’s been dragging the oils in her fingers across the strands an awful lot in the last few hours. “What wer—”

She cuts herself off from finishing the question as a muscle twitches in Tim’s jaw.

He’s usually perfect at controlling his emotional responses, at controlling how his face exposes them – especially around the Bats.

As he’s gotten more… involved with the Family side of the Family Business, a few exceptions have developed.

The first one, obviously, is Jason.

He still can’t quite bear talking with the others about Jason – neither Jason now, nor Jason then – not wholly candidly at least… Tim feels very strongly about Jason’s existence, about how he’s changed and how he hasn’t, and it’s impossible for him to bite down on those feelings when another member of the Family professes an opinion of him that’s been built on information that just simply isn’t true.

They’re wrong about him.

They’re all wrong… And it’s hard for Tim to stay calm and cool and collected and actually looking like he’s the rational one in a conversation when the others are just so wrong.

He’s working on getting over it – well, over his vehemence, at least.

Tim is right about Jason, and he’s decided that it’s best for the Family if Jason comes back into the fold, so he has to get better at covering his emotive responses in order to convince the others to see Jason clearly – which he will. Eventually.

It’s a campaign of brute force persuasion if he’s ever attempted one.

But he can manage.
The second thing that now manages to consistently get under his skin, the only other truly big thing is when the others start to question his competency – his sanity even.

*What were you thinking?*

It’s a buzz word question at this point, almost meaningless and yet so deeply irritating that it sparks Tim to irrational anger. He’s even snapped at *Alfred* for asking it – and he *knows* that Alfred didn’t mean it like that… Alfred would *never* mean it like that.

But still… it stings enough to make Tim lash out, regardless.

In the beginning, it had some merit.

Tim took some stupid risks. He had sometimes failed to consider *all* the variables at hand, to plan for *every* possibility that even *might* arise.

He’d only been twelve, though, so he figures he should have a touch of leeway for then.

By the time he was fourteen and actually attempting to take on the Robin mantle… mistakes like that just *didn’t* happen, anymore.

Ever.

Tim didn’t *let* them happen.

Even so… the odds were never in their favor and… and sometimes, Tim lost a gamble.

It was never because he didn’t account for it, never because he failed to predict the possibility or failed to plan and appropriate response… it was just that sometimes… sometimes the game was rigged just a bit too strongly against them for Tim to overcome the obstacles.

What happened with the Teen Titans is an example of that.

Tim fell short.

Tim let his team down and they… they died.

*Kon* died.

Cassie. Bart… his team…

Tim let his team *die*.

It hardly matters that Tim got them *back* eventually – he cheated to do it, and he knows that he will eventually be called to face whatever consequences or karma or *otherwise* indefinable cosmic avenger will get back at him for it, but he’s okay with that – what matters is that Tim fell short in the first place.
And in his grief, he began taking bigger risks – or, at least, what seemed like bigger risks to his Family. Tim knew how to play the odds better than anyone, so even if he could acknowledge that he started playing more aggressively, he never permitted himself to have anything less than perfect control of the board they were playing on.

But after Steph…

And then his parents… Tim can admit that the plane crash blindsided him a little. It shouldn’t have, knowing how often they flew around the world on business – knowing that the statistics were in their favor even if they spent their whole lives on planes, but that the odds were never 100 percent… That hurt. A lot.

Even if Steph had eventually recovered and come back from Africa (it would have been nice if she’d sent a note or something, to confirm Tim’s half incensed hypothesis that she could survive the mortal wounding with Leslie Thompkins’s help)… she had essentially been dead for an excruciating few months.

And even if Tim’s father had technically survived the crash, he’d been in a coma on full life support as he teetered on the edge. His father would eventually get better, but not for a long while and not without a few calls that came far too close to failure.

Yeah, Tim had not been having a good year at that point.

He’d been told that he needed to take some time off, at the very least – it had been strongly suggested that he hang up the cape for good, even.

Repeatedly. Directly.

By everyone but Alfred.

And then Bruce… Bruce died, too.

Except… he didn’t. Tim knew he didn’t. He didn’t have much evidence to prove it to a skeptical audience, but he had enough hard data to be absolutely certain on the matter.

He had hoped… well, he’d hoped that the Family side of the Family, that he’d only just begun to truly trust in having, wouldn’t have to make him prove it. He’d hoped that they would just believe him… that they would simply trust him.

He had been wrong.

That had been the first time in a long time that he’d ever just been wrong.
They thought the grief of the last year had finally driven him crazy or something. And between the debacle that came with the fight over who would take up Batman’s cowl to keep the symbol alive when the man who created it had died – fighting that had mainly been between Dick and Jason, honestly – there was too much mess for Tim to launch a full scale investigation or to frame a truly convincing argument around the case.

Dick didn’t believe him. Didn’t want to listen to him long enough to figure out that it wasn’t just the grief that was motivating Tim’s insistence.

Damian didn’t believe him… Damian openly discussed the fact that he thought Tim had cracked completely. **Damian considered Tim a danger to himself, and to the other Bats as well.**

Steph was dead.

(Essentially, at least… she wasn’t dead but Tim didn’t know that at the time.)

The Titans – even those who’d retired before Tim had joined the team – were dead, or scattered, and none of them would even answer his calls.

Hell, the **Justice League** wouldn’t answer his calls.

Cass was still too new among them to really know, either way. She knew Tim felt that he was right, but she didn’t know him well enough to understand that he would never feel that way, certainly not so strongly that way, without the facts of the matter being firmly on his side.

Barbara was sympathetic, but she couldn’t believe him on faith alone. She thought it was the grief, just like Dick had. She thought Tim truly believed in what he saw, but she thought that was he’d seen was just a product of an overwrought mind being pushed too far.

And… Alfred …

Tim hadn’t talked to Alfred.

He couldn’t.

There was a miniscule chance that Alfred would openly assert that he did not believe Tim’s theory… but if Alfred had doubted him, doubted his ability to cope, doubted his **sanity**…

Tim couldn’t have handled that and he knew it.
So he avoided the risk.

(A fairly convincing move, he felt, to prove that he was still sane and competent and self-aware and wholly understanding of the statistical risk landscape he was facing.)

His next few moves, admittedly, weren’t exactly helpful towards furthering that end, but he’d gotten pretty desperate and he didn’t know how much time he had left before he lost his chance and Bruce got stuck drifting about in the time stream permanently…

He’d gone to Jason.

Who believed him.

Easily. Totally.

Jason had trusted his judgement without question.

(Which had been one of the factors that irrefutably convinced Tim that his hypothesis that Red Hood Jason still had the parts of Robin Jason that made him stand out so particularly as a special kind of hero…)

Jason had believed him.

He just hadn’t cared.

That was a lie.

Tim knew it. And Jason knew that Tim knew it. But between his natural stubborn streak and the Pit Rage pushing him to pitch Tim off a roof for even silently questioning the veracity of his professed nonconcern… Jason had refused to help him.

So, Tim had gone to Ra’s al Ghoul.

Ra’s didn’t care, either way – didn’t care if Tim was right or if he was crazy, and didn’t care if Bruce was alive or dead.

Tim didn’t need him to care.
Tim needed him to help.

And Ra’s would always help Tim.

Ra’s wouldn’t hesitate to help Tim. All he ever wanted in exchange was for Tim’s help on an ambiguous ‘favor’, the chance to pick Tim’s brain, and then a court side seat to just watch things play out as Tim exerted his will on the very fabric of reality. Ra’s deeply enjoyed watching Tim pull strings on the Universe – strings that had taken the Demon’s Head several centuries to find, if his praise of Tim’s abilities was to be believed.

Ra’s ‘favor’ had been… simple. Stealing a bit of innocuous information from a bad guy who deserved the vengeance of a horde of ninja… and it was something Tim refused to look more deeply into, because it wasn’t topically a moral travesty. It had cost him his spleen, though.

Whatever.

His spleen is hardly the most vital organ he’d ever damaged beyond repair… If his current liver lasts more than another decade, Tim will be unbearably shocked. Don’t even start about his kidneys… He’s already got a new set of organs growing in a lab (that he has not yet mentioned to the others, and never will, unless he dies and the auto release on his data streams punt everything he’s ever touched inside the digital universe over to the Cave’s servers).

Still, those are issues to be dealt with another day.

And he’d been right about Bruce.

But the idea of the others thinking that he’s crazy… yeah, that still smarts.

Steph is still adapting to his vitriol over the issue. And the habit of questioning his thought process is one ingrained from the arguments they had while they were dating.

But she’s controlled herself here, and Tim takes a deep breath to force full acceptance of the fact that she’s trying to allow him to remain open to her as the conversation continues.

Tim doesn’t answer her question of what happened, just yet.

He can’t.

It’s too big a question for him to explain without cracking open the casefiles and putting up all his charts and data on a very visible screen.

“He could have killed you,” Steph mentions heavily. “I know you know that.”
“He hasn’t killed me, yet,” Tim counters with a shrug.

“He’s gotten close. More than once,” Steph tells him, her voice quiet in a way that says she knows he doesn’t need the reminder – that she doesn’t need it either – but that it does have to be mentioned, because it is relevant.

“But he hasn’t,” Tim presses. “He could’ve, easily could’ve. But he hasn’t. That’s important, statistically. He doesn’t want to kill me.”

Steph blinks at him, big blue eyes filled with all kinds of twisty little thoughts and overwhelming emotion. “He could’ve just let you die.”

“Yes,” Tim admits, validating her concern slightly before soothing, “But the odds said he probably wouldn’t. Even when he was actively trying to kill me, when he decided not to, he arranged things so that someone else could come help me – and made sure they’d get there in time to save me successfully.”

The ache of more emotion pours through Steph’s gaze, but she stays quiet.

“I know, he could’ve killed me,” Tim validates again, before refuting, “But statistically speaking, it was very clear that he wouldn’t. No matter how it looks to you, I knew he would help me – and he did. That’s what matters.”

With a frustrated, almost distraught little huff, Steph complains, “The fact that he helps you doesn’t mean very much when he’s usually the reason you’re ever half dead to begin with.”

Tim stiffens suddenly, all his muscles going rigid despite the searing pain of the motion as dread curls in his stomach. “What?”

“I get that you’re bizarrely okay with the whole damaged psycho puppy lashing out abuse thing that Jason’s got goin’ on, but even you have to see that it’s not healthy for you. He almost kills you on the regular, and this time… this time it was a lot more almost than usual… If Dick had been half a minute slower in getting you here, if that shrapnel had hit just an inch further towards the back of your thigh, or to the side of your torso… if the blast had been just a bit closer or stronger – even to just crack a rib… you wouldn’t have made it.”

“Jason had nothing to do with the blast,” Tim says sharply, the vehemence in his glare making the breathiness caused by his injuries less undermining to his point.

Steph ignores it and glares back. “It was a bomb in Crime Alley.”

“It was a fertilizer bomb in the Bowery, by New Town – grey area where Jason’s control isn’t absolute. On most days the criminals there hardly even care that Red Hood claims their turf as his,” Tim points out firmly. “Jay only uses det cord and C4.”

This was something he had considered, that the Family would be so dead set on blaming Jason like they usually did that they’d argue. He’d anticipated that they would likely ignore some of the evidence, that they’d initially fight and send Jason off in a huff, but he lived in a Family of detectives for fuck’s sake… They couldn’t possibly all be ignoring so many obvious clues.

Steph frowns with puzzlement – like this is the first moment since this debacle started rolling
that anyone’s even mentioned the possibility of Jason not being responsible for the initial incident of
the explosion.

Which is an unfortunate set back.

Tim had a plan for this, obviously, but would have far preferred to have avoided the need to
fall back on it. He was already working on a back-up plan to begin with – being that the initial
plan did not involve nearly getting blown to bits by the low rent gangsters he’d been investigating.
Initially, Tim’s plan involved bringing the case to Jason – since it was centered around a gang
claiming territory on Jason’s turf – and using the process of working a job with him to slowly
introduce the idea of coming back.

That plan was elegant and slow.

Jason would’ve been halfway back to being inside Family before any of them even noticed
what was happening.

Having Jason save his life was a more abrupt re-entrance, and one Tim knew would cause
friction, but he had hoped that it would be a clear enough good will gesture to make smoothing that
tension over a less drawn out affair.

Apparently not.

Apparently, Tim’s stupidly optimistic belief in the Family had gotten the better of him.

Again.

It’s irksome, but… unfortunately, it’s not entirely unexpected.

Tim knew it was a possibility, he just didn’t like to think of it as quite so plausible.

Even with this idiocy confirmed, Tim can’t help but hold out a little hope that, maybe, this
time they’ll actually believe him when he tries to explain. This time he has a massive case file of
evidence, complete with color coded charts and data sheets, to formally convince them.

Sitting at his bedside, Steph seems to be taking his words with their due consideration.

Her expression is grave, but not entirely closed off.

Tim’s hopeful that she’ll be able to come to the proper conclusion – both because she’s smart
enough to see the cracks in the argument that Jason could have ever been responsible for this, and because she owes him that much to at least attempt just trusting him on faith.

Steph doesn’t manage to reach the end of her internal debate just then, because Alfred appears at the med bay’s door with a tray in his hands laden with Tim’s favorite super food smoothie and a plate of Alfred’s famous miracle of nutrition packed chocolate chip cookies.

“It’s good to see you up, Master Timothy,” Alfred greets warmly.

“Good to be up, Alfred,” Tim returns, eyeing the tray warily and feeling out the potential of his stomach attempting to rebel against the idea of eating any of it.

When his gut doesn’t immediately riot at Alfred sets the tray down at his bedside, Tim decides it’s worth the risk to grab a cookie. He savors in the uncanny deliciousness, and once again wonders what deal Alfred made with the Universe to so be able to defy the laws of physics.

Alfred gives Tim an encouraging smile and then turns his attention to Steph.

“Miss Stephanie, now that you have seen for yourself that our dear boy is awake and well, I believe you are due for a meal and some genuine rest,” Alfred mentions.

“But, Alfie,” Steph pleads automatically, despite knowing that it’s futile to argue.

“Ah, ah,” Alfred retorts firmly, “You agreed to the terms when we made the deal for you to remain here with Master Tim through the night. Now, off to bed with you.”

“Yes, Alfred,” Steph submits, pulling herself up heavily to her feet with the bright purple blanket still wrapped around her – looking no more ridiculous than her original costume from when she first started going out at Spoiler.

A wave of nostalgia strikes Tim as Steph slinks obediently out of the room, a huge yawn shifting her shoulders as her feet automatically point her towards the elevator. Alfred follows, shooing her onward from directly behind, and Tim falls into a contemplative calm as he watches their backs disappear into the Cave’s extensive shadows.

Tim has never been terribly prone to wistfulness, and reminiscing about the good old days is unfortunately tricky when the old days weren’t exactly resoundingly ‘good’. The very earliest days, long before Tim had accidentally fallen into Batman’s field of focus – when he was just an eight and a half year old kid with a camera and a secret obsession – there had been a few high points that were truly high.

Figuring out that Robin was Dick Grayson.

Figuring out that Batman was Bruce Wayne.

Catching the both of them on camera without their notice – snapping some incredible pictures of them that managed to capture their very essence in a way that mixed the human side of what made them want to fight crime with the mystique of the legends they were developing into as symbols of Gotham.
Meeting Spoiler, and seeing how Batman and Robin could truly inspire a city, could encourage a kid in a bad situation to step up and do the right thing, could make someone who had every right to be angry at the world want to try fixing it instead of just tearing it down.

Meeting Catwoman, and learning how grey the grey area could be.

Meeting Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn and finally feeling like he wasn’t a freak because he thought humans were too complicated to make sense of – because humans were so complicated that he barely understood how he was feeling half the time, let alone anyone else.

Figuring out how Robin grew into Nightwing with the Teen Titans by his side.

Figuring out that the new Robin was Jason Todd – figuring out that a mantle as important as Robin’s could be passed down, that the image could be altered, the persona made slightly different, but the Robin-ness could remain.

Figuring out that he really appreciated what Jason brought to the Robin role, what he brought to the hero’s legend rather than the sparkly caricature.

Capturing Jason’s Robin on camera with a poignancy and potency beyond what he’d ever managed with Dick’s Robin…

Tim loved the nights he’d gone out to snap photos of Jason’s Robin.

He’d been better equipped to manage it than he’d been when Dick was Robin.

In terms of his tech, he’d gotten smart about packing light and effective – backpack full of snacks, extra warm thermal layers so he could move around easily but still be warm enough without a coat, and his carefully unimpressive seeming camera tweaked to his exact specifications to best capture what shots he knew he was looking to obtain.

In terms of mental preparedness, he’d also improved over the years – his understanding of how the patrol routes functioned had peaked, and his understanding of how Jason moved and when he would be the most expressive was constantly evolving with each new night bringing in a blast of exciting new information, and his awareness of exactly how taxing the strain of the endeavor would be had reached an equilibrium with his physical ability to accomplish the mission he set for himself.

Those nights had been good nights.
Every glimpse of Jason had made Tim feel utterly exhilarated.

There was just something about Jason… about his roughness and rawness and how he balanced the brute force approach with an incredible intellect and this unbelievable degree of emotional concern for people… that drew Tim inexorably closer to him.

Every night, every glimpse, every cheeky grin… It was always an absolute rush to see him. Even when Tim saw Jason outside of the Robin costume, at a Wayne Gala or on TV at a Wayne Enterprises’ press conference or charity event… or even just as Jason Todd, a kid who happened to wander into to Tim’s favorite coffee shop on a regular basis.

(Jason’s habits had in no way affected Tim’s favor for the coffee shop… not at all… it wasn’t like there weren’t three dozen others to choose from that were set up in place more naturally convenient to Tim’s official schedule…)

At this point, Tim could admit to having had a fairly significant crush on Jason from right about around Day 1…

It took him a while to realize it, a far longer while that it probably should have…

Tim should’ve noticed that much when he started going out every single night to snap his pictures, instead of the three or four times a week he’d gone out when Dick was Robin.

He should’ve noticed it when Jason inserted himself into Tim’s life and Tim realized that he didn’t ever want Jason to leave – not Robin, but Jason.

He should’ve noticed it before… noticed it in time to do something about it before…

Well, not that Tim would’ve done anything about it even if he had noticed.

Tim had been too timid back then to do much of anything.

Honestly… maybe it’s sort of a blessing that Tim didn’t realize exactly how much Jason meant to him until after he’d died.

If Tim had noticed, and done nothing, and then faced having to mourn Jason after everything else… the regret would possibly have been utterly paralyzing.

And Batman couldn’t have afforded that. He had needed someone to step up and force Bruce to see what Batman was becoming, and Tim was the only person in a position to do it.

It had been pretty damn paralyzing as it was, anyway.
Tim had lived in what was basically suspended animation for a month before he’d been drop kicked back into his senses by the culmination of his self abuse – in the form of a hallucination of Jason Todd being disappointed in his uselessness in the face of a very obvious and specific issue that needed to be dealt with… that Jason would’ve been pissed at him for having so carelessly failed to address it.

Tim needed to make Bruce see that Batman had to be the hero Gotham needed.

With Jason’s death, Bruce’s grief was making Batman into a monster, and Jason would’ve hated to see that the legacy of everything he’d lived for was going so rudely to waste.

So, Tim had stepped up.

His Robin days were… not good days. Decidedly not.

He had a few brief moments of good, of feeling like he’d managed to accomplish what he had set out to do, but for the most part it was all a blur of grief, feelings of inadequacy, and the ever present terror of pushing the wrong buttons in a way that would make the rest of the Family realize that he didn’t belong. The Family was just beginning to rebuild after Jason, they were all still too lost to fully comprehend Tim’s degree of intrusion – and each day had been a constant battle to ensure his presence was subtle enough to keep it that way.

While he’d been absolutely wrecked by Dick’s decision to pass Robin on to Damian after Bruce had gotten lost in time, Tim was honestly… relieved that his Robin days were over. He didn’t know how to be anyone else, but being Robin… it had always felt a bit wrong to him.

He’d given it up voluntarily when Jason… had come back.

Steph had taken up the mantle briefly while Cass had come in as Batgirl – neither suited their roles and each had moved on to their current positions before Damian had even come into the picture, well before Bruce had almost died.

But Batman needed a Robin, so Tim had taken up the yellow cape again.

Mostly for the Titans’ sake – which had just gone swimmingly…

And then Bruce had almost died, and Damian’s grief had led him to acting out more than usual, and Dick had been desperate to do something to keep the Family from falling apart when he needed to focus on beating Jason in the fight for Batman’s cowl…

It had hurt then, but Tim more than understood now.
And he was relieved that his Robin days were definitively over.

He liked being Red Robin now, though he was still trying to figure out both his role in the Crusade and his role in the Family.

Mostly, he was focused on trying to figure out Jason’s role in the Family.

That was the more important thing.

Jason was still good, still just as sweet and heartfelt and concerned about people as he’d been when he was Robin. Red Hood’s methods were more aggressive and dramatic than any of Robin’s had been, but the heart of the matter was that the concern was still there – that the brutal methodology had evolved out of a desire to protect.

Tim could tell.

And he needed to make the rest of the Family see it.

Jason’s death had torn them apart.

His rebirth via Lazarus Pit was no less affecting – it was far more so, even, especially as his return wasn’t simply a one off event that needed to be accepted and dealt with, but rather was an ongoing series of painful reminders that continually rent the status quo asunder.

Tim had self assigned himself the mission of reengaging Jason in the Family business.

He’d snuck into Crime Alley and stalked Jason through his new routines, learning everything he could about the person Jason had become. It was… it was a lot like the old days, the pretty damn decent ones from before he was on the Bats’ radar.

And just like in the old days, Tim felt a rush with every single new tidbit of information – with every glimpse and glance and every incident when Tim could confirm something to prove that Jason was still Jason, Pit and everything else, aside.

Jason needs the Family as much as they need him, though neither side can see it.

Tim knows that the challenge will be that much harder to surmount with Dick and Bruce currently blaming Jason for Tim’s immediate injuries.

His injuries aren’t even that bad. It wouldn’t have even been an issue at all if he’d been just a bit closer to home. Tim would’ve been patched up, and given a stern talking to, and possibly a blood transfusion – though, if he’d gotten home quickly enough and Alfred had been irate enough, he may
have been denied it intentionally for the purpose of being kept too weak to get out of bed for at least a few days.

Speaking of too weak to get out of bed… While Tim’s been lost in his rare bout of reminiscing, he’s been munching on Alfred’s cookies and sucking down his superfood smoothie… and he’s beginning to feel the effects of whatever sedative Alfred put into them.

He’d known the drug was coming.

There was exactly zero chance that the butler would’ve ever let Tim get out of bed today.

And he never would’ve walked away from his charge without verbally acquiring contractual consent to the circumstance unless the point was moot.

Tim knew he needed Alfred’s miracle food to get better quickly, so skipping the meal was impossible, and he knew he needed rest, but he also knew that if he were to attempt to get rest without a chemical aid… he’d only get frustrated and antsy and attempt to get out of bed too early. So Tim was moderately resigned from the onset – an implicit agreement to be drugged that they both acknowledged as necessary.

Tomorrow, though, Tim wouldn’t roll over and give in.

Tomorrow – or tonight, rather, as soon as the others were out on patrol – Tim would be healed up good enough to attempt figuring out his range of motion and the limits imposed by his condition. And soon enough, he’d be back on the streets working to get Jason back into the fold.

This spat with the Family over his current condition is a minor obstacle, one Tim already has a plan to counter – he just needs to be on his feet to do it.

Tim will get Jason back.

He needs to, so he will. Simple as that, simple as ever.

It’s as much for his own sake of sanity as it is for theirs…

Before Tim gives in completely to the chemical sleep coursing through him, he spots Jason’s signature leather jacket folded neatly and unobtrusively in the corner. It wouldn’t have been at all easy to spot if Tim hadn’t been looking for it expressly.
He had a vague recollection of Jason wrapping him up in it, and had hoped that – if Jason had to be chased out by the almost inevitable friction of the Family – he would’ve left it behind as a sort of souvenir for Tim to smile over while he waited impatiently to recover.

Jason would never come back for the article of his own accord.

Which meant that Tim would simply have to bring it to him when he got out of medical.

Tim could do that.

36 hours. 40 max.

Tim smiled to himself and settled down – meditating his way into a deeply recuperative sleep with the aid of the sedative. He needed it to be as restorative as possible.

He was working on a clock, after all.

Tim dreams, obviously, of Jason – and the rush he feels from getting close enough to have an easy conversation with him, even if it’s only in his dreams, makes him smile in his sleep.

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i just need to see you – need to feel that rush (again and again and again)

Chapter End Notes

Please note, that again, Tim's head space is DRAMATICALLY unhealthy, and if you find yourself setting such high bars for your own achievements and then beating yourself up if you do not manage to achieve those goals, PLEASE find someone to talk
to about all of it.

NEXT TIME: Jason investigates what happened to make Tim wind up all beat to hell and encounters a few unexpected visitors.
standing on the corner (in the rainy hot night)

Chapter Summary

Jason digs into the reasons behind why Tim was in New Town to start with, and he's NOT a fan of the answers he finds.

Chapter Notes

^_^

It's been a VERY productive week!
This is the longest chapter yet, and I've even got a good buffer going to ensure regular updates.

I've upped the rating because, in addition to Jason's /constant/ cursing, the themes and head spaces we're diving into here get real dark, real fast after this. I've also added a character tag... because it was supposed to be a five minute phone call... and yet, three chapters later, Roy still hasn't gone home...

Anywho, on to Jason's little spiral into some hella heavy angst!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 8 - standing on the corner (in the rainy hot night)

Jason waits.

He’s actually pretty good at waiting.

Despite his reputation for rushing in with guns blazing, Jason’s perfectly able to pull back and be patient and wait for the right moment before he acts.

Jason knows how to read a situation, how to play it all out from different angles in his head before committing to a course. And he knows when his data is bad, knows how to identify the prickles of unease that lets him know that he doesn't have enough information.
Sometimes though, *that* aspect is not difficult to recognize.

When Cassandra Cain roars up to where Jason’s chillin’ out after an exhausting few hours of attempting to excavate some usable evidence from the blown out shell of what seems to have once been a meth lab, it’s very obvious that she both knew he would be there and had come looking for him, specifically.

Jason hardly knows the girl, but he’s picked up plenty on how she's got enough League of Assassins training to know that she could be a real threat if he's not careful. And he knows right off the bat that he doesn’t have the information to *effectively* be careful.

So, when Cassandra roars up on Black Bat's motorcycle, sans Black Bat's costume, Jason waits. He stays leaned up against the low wall that surrounds the concrete public park area of the municipal square on the corner by where the Replacement got himself blown up and just waits for her to explain – or to *do* something that explains… because Jason has also picked up on the whole no-talking thing she’s got goin’ on.

Cassandra just hops off the bike and plants herself down cross legged on the low wall’s wide, flat top – staying just out of reach for hand to hand combat, and too close for a throwing blade to be effective. Jason shifts to keep her fully in his eye line, and then just *waits*.

She settles in and waits, too.

Jason’s not to terribly bothered by it.

He can do this, can be patient enough to wait it out.

Jason’s not bothered by the quiet.

And he’s not bothered by her staring.

With his signature Red Hood presenting a blank slate of emotionless armor, he’s not even a little worried about the possibility of her provoking and then reading some sort of micro expression that could expose his emotional core or whatnot.

Jason can control the rest of his body language – enough to make his style of movement unrecognizable to the *World’s Greatest Detective*. To that whole *Family* of detectives who could usually identify a person and read the last eight months of their history by nothing but the god damn thread of the hem on their jeans.

If he could fool *them* for over nine months, he can keep himself and his inner feelings disguised from Black Bat for the next hour, or however long she decides to keep this up.

Jason can handle this weird sit and stare extravaganza the frickin’ mute assassin chick Bruce somehow accidentally *acquired* wants to pull.
The only thing about it that has the potential to get under his skin – and only even has that potential because of how recently Jason got blind sided by the realization that he couldn’t allow himself to let his Replacement die – is that the feeling he gets from the way Cassandra sits and stares… Because the way she does it, the way she just sits and stares and sees is an act imbued with a unique kind of oddball focus that is uncomfortably reminiscent of how it feels to be scrutinized by Tim’s crazy little robot brain.

It makes Jason feel like he’s being carefully vivisected, delicately inspected from the inside out… like his skin and bones and armor aren’t so much barriers as they are lenses.

Cassandra, like Tim, seems to stare at him like he’s a puzzle rather than a person.

And he gets the feeling that Cassandra, also like Tim, is frightfully good with puzzles.

Jason doesn’t hate the itch of feeling vivisected.

He definitely doesn’t like it, exactly, but he doesn’t hate it – a consequence, he thinks, of how innocently Tim-like the sit and stare phenomenon seems.

The Replacement and he still have some major issues to work out, and Jason sincerely doubts that they’ll ever genuinely be friends – or anything close, really… even if the kid does seem determined to make things between them civil – but he does… remember.

Jason remembers Tim, and how they used to be – and, even more so, how Tim used to make him feel. He remembers Tim more clearly and more affectingly than he remembers just about anything else from before he died.

Well, technically, Jason has a blunt but nearly perfect recall of everything from Before, but inside his head it seems more like it was a movie of someone else’s life.

Tim is one of the few triggers that makes him feel all of it.

That makes him feel at all like any of that old life, that life from Before, was actually his.

Which is just one of the reasons Jason has for repeatedly trying to kill him.

It is one of the very few reasons that don’t seem to be going away, though, so it's probably pretty relevant – and likely to remain relevant until he gets that shit sorted proper.

The other big factors have eased, a bit. Shifted, significantly, at least.

The blame Jason put on the Replacement for existing was misplaced – he’d come fairly quick to the conclusion the blame and vitriol he harbored should’ve been focused squarely on Bruce’s shoulders. And even that… while Bruce certainly didn’t help, he’s not the one who actually killed Jason… The bat brained asshole might’ve pushed him into acting rashly, and might’ve shown up too late to do shit about any of it, but still… The Joker killed him.
He blames Bruce for a lot, blames the Joker more, and knows he shouldn’t really blame the kid who replaced him for much of anything.

Jason’s even starting to get over hating Tim for simply being so successful at filling the pixie boots. That much of it was always rooted in Jason’s own insecurities, anyway.

It had never really been about the Replacement himself.

And even with the generalized hatred he bore for all things Bruce themed, the blinding force of Pit Rage was also beginning to ease as he learned more and more about how to successfully force the fire and fury and fight inside him to just simmer down a second.

So, all of that is great, and means he doesn’t want to kill the Replacement – well, honestly, he never wanted to kill him, he’d simply felt like he needed to kill him… felt he was compelled to erase the pain of his past by removing the reminders of it in his present.

But, still… the anger he holds against Tim is special – not Tim as the kid that replaced Jason, but against Tim himself, specific to him and his own idiotic doings.

And the vague sentiment of feeling that being around Tim provokes… well, it ain’t exactly conducive to the ‘staying calm’ thing that routinely not killing him requires.

Jason huffs at the irksome thought – refuses to acknowledge the thought hiding just behind it regarding a vague worry over Tim's current status of probably not dead.

He eyes Cassandra suspiciously, half concerned that he should be wondering if she came as the bearer of bad news… though it is far more likely that big blue would be the one out looking for him if Tim had kicked it – out looking for his blood, at least.

As Jason's gaze roams warily over Cassandra's relaxed posture, the girl breathes in slowly and opens her mouth to break the silence.

“You… hurt Tim,” she states brokenly. Before Jason can get huffy and defensive, she adds, “When die. You hurt Tim… very… very…”

“Very much,” Jason interjects on autopilot – more focused on trying to smother the roar of fury threatening to turn this strange conversation into a straight up fist fight than on anything his mouth was saying (because a fist fight with Cassandra Cain would not go well for Jason and he knows it, despite the rage urging him to attempt using his size to just over power her).

Cassandra nods enthusiastically, bright eyes practically beaming at him, strangely enough – though the rest of her expression stays as blank and placid as the Bat’s best.

“Hurt Tim when die, hurt Tim different when came back – try to kill,” Cassandra says, her
tone taking a chilling cant of disapproval. She pauses long enough to glare the point home before going on much more brightly, “Tim live. Tim forgive. Happy to see you – so happy.”

Jason’s not quite sure what to do with this monologue, so he kinda just lets it roll.

He’s also not quite sure how to take her words, so he pushes the rising roil of sentiment that’s rearing up in the back of his brain forcefully aside.


“No shit, Sherlock,” Jason snorts. “You figured it all out by yourself didn’t you, no help at all from Daddy Bats. That bastard probably still thinks I set the damn explosion, don’t he?”

Cassandra nods gravely.

“Fabulous,” Jason bites, gritting his teeth together as green flicks briefly over his eyes – the reaction being mercifully hidden by his Hood.

“Tim knows,” Cassandra promises, gesturing widely to sweep Jason’s concerns away with a dismissive hand wave. “More important.”

“Sure, it is,” Jason huffs, cutting a snide glare at her. “You’ve never been on the Bat’s bad side, have you? ‘Cause it ain’t fun.”

Cassandra shrugs. “Tim more important.”

Jason snorts. ‘Pretty sure it ain’t Timbers’ little logo on all the fancy toys, and it ain’t his house the big bad Cave is under, and it ain’t Red Robin makin’ any crims quake in their boots.”

Cassandra shrugs again, this time with a cutting cocky smirk pulling at her lips as she repeats, “Tim more important. Will see. Tim… bullies.”

“Tim bullies Batman?”

Tipping her head to the side in a move of question that suggests the answer is obvious, Cassandra doesn’t say anything and lets her smirk pull harder.

Apparently, she thinks the baby seal Jason once knew actually does bully Batman.

Before he can stop himself, the thought that he would probably like to see that shit roots itself deeply in his brain. He would probably really like to see that.

A snicker from Cassandra makes him blink back to the present.

“Will see,” she promises, like the creepy ass ninja side of her training means she can blatantly read minds, “Will see, when come home.”

A pang strikes hard behind Jason’s ribs and he shuts down fast on any thought of what the
sensation might be – snarling, “I ain’t goin’ back there.”

Cassandra isn’t startled by his switch to vitriol.

Doesn’t even bat an eye.

“Will see,” she affirms steadily, with a mysterious glint in her eyes that makes her smirk seem even sharper. “Will see. Soon.”

Before Jason can fully process her response, Cassandra unfolds herself and slides off the wall without further ado. She leans into Jason’s personal space and punches at his shoulder with a smile that seems bizarrely affectionate considering how hard the actual contact is (Jason is definitely going to bruise from that shit, armor doing fuck all against the god damn ninja girl).

((He doesn’t rub his shoulder against the throbbing though, at least, not until after Cassandra has disappeared around the corner.))

Once she’s gone, and the rapidly rising sun has begun fighting to chase Gotham’s shadows away, Jason picks himself up and meanders his was over to a safe house – one he has not compromised in the last twelve hours.

It’s not exactly pretty, but it’s got a working shower with piping hot water, and a comfy couch to crash on, so it’s more than good enough to serve his current purposes.

Jason showers and settles down to sleep, planning out the specifics of his next move as he kills time until the first step of his vague plan can be taken.

It’s an irksome timespan to wait, but Jason had resigned himself to the trial before Cassandra Cain had rolled up. He’d resigned to it right after he’d finished up picking through the rubble of the meth lab in the municipal basic utilities hub unit – helped out with getting into the tiniest little crannies by the Demon Brat, of all people.

(Which is something Jason doesn’t want to think to hard about, and instead turns his focus entirely onto the work to be done.)

There was a case here, clearly, and Tim had been working it.

What that case was, nobody knew… According to the Bat Brat, Tim hadn’t logged any new case files on the Batcomputer’s server for over a month – and he’d only done bare bones updates on the active records for the other cases he had running.

Which means he’s been pouring at awful lot of focus into this, working it entirely off the grid and keeping it quiet from right under the noses of the Bats’ brightest brains.

Of course, Jason hadn’t noticed his forays into Crime Alley, either, and this shit hole neighborhood is supposed to be his god damn turf.

So, finding the idiot’s case files – because no Bat Brat could ever run a case without keeping files on it, even Jason’s never managed to kick the habit – is now Jason’s priority.
He waits eleven whole hours, until 6 pm on the day after the Replacement got himself blown to shit on his turf, before he slips out to investigate one of Tim’s most frequented safe houses.

6 pm is the sleepiest hour of the day for vigilantes.

Especially, vigilantes with daytime personas to maintain.

It’s the time when they’re all eating supper and taking naps, and generally not being terribly alert about anything at all that isn’t immediately world threatening.

It’s the only time when Jason has much of a chance at getting into one of Tim’s apartments without being immediately noticed.

The baby bird’s security set up is pretty ace and it’s gonna take a significant snatch of time here to get through it all without setting off every alarm in the Cave and GCPD – well, he’s pretty sure he’s gonna trigger a few, but with the Bats all sleepy and shit, he should be able to get it to turn off and register as a faulty signal before anyone actually looks at it.

And to lay his own alarms within the signals so he can know ahead of time if anyone does decide to take a look.

Because this isn’t just a smash and grab.

Jason knows that Tim’s got a twisty little mind and he’ll have taken pains to have hidden any case files he’s created regarding whatever he’s working on at the edge of New Town.

Working as quickly as he carefully can, Jason slips into Tim’s apartment via the conveniently located skylight that Tim had gotten installed as soon as he’d bought the place – under the guise of it being important to maintaining his delicate rich boy skin care routine and to his sleep schedule to have plenty of natural lighting.

This is one of the safe houses that Tim owns openly, he even had it registered under his real name – it stands as a legit apartment more than a bolt hole like the one Jason had dozed away his afternoon – and it actually had made the god damn news when Tim had elected to renovate the place. Granted the story only appeared in the pop pages of the Gotham Gazette, but still… Jason thought it was ridiculous, regardless of how it meant he conveniently knew the new layout – and could make solid guesses at the extra tricks and snazzy security boosts.

It takes about eight minutes to get inside, and he has to leave his tablet running a constant loop of interference signals to counter act against the alarms trying to determine whether or not the skylight is actually open. He’s also got it running protocols to counter any alarms that might be triggered after he gets inside – like from pressure plates under the expensive tiling splayed in elegant patterned across the main room’s open floor plan.

The floor’s actually a pretty cool, an oddly modern revisioning of old world Greco-Roman mosaics. Away from the main room, the flooring spreads out into more Asian inspired designs – flat wide planes of dark hardwood, for the most part, and down the hall Jason glimpses at least one room covered with traditional tatami.
Yeah, not a single slide of hidey hole potential had been ignored in the renovation of this frickin’ place… Good thing Tim’s just the seventeen year old co-acting CEO of two of the nation’s biggest corporate technology conglomerates, with more money than god, a genius IQ, and the kind of moral grayness usually attributed to Bond villains… Yeah, not like this kid could be a good damn spy or anything… And all Jason’s glanced at so far is the frickin’ floor.

This could fucking take a while.

With just one more grumbled complaint about Tim’s chronic deviousness being exacerbated by close contact with Bruce’s frickin’ paranoia complex, Jason begins a systematic perusal of Tim’s potential hiding places.

While he goes about it, he can’t help but also assess Tim’s interior design skills.

There’s a shit ton of rich boy pretension and entitlement in the décor, but at the same time there’s a certain subtlety to how the layout flows and how the individual aspects all complement each other that makes it work without feeling artificial or gaudy.

It’s very clear to Jason as he shuffles through the place – digging up more honey pot slicks than a Bornean bee cave as he goes, though he sadly doesn’t have time to peruse the contents of these stashes beyond determining that they’re not about the New Town meth lab – that Tim made every single design choice in here.

And just like Tim, it’s a mix of everything he’s ever come in contact with – the things he’s encountered and decided were useful enough to just steal and make work for him.

It feels a bit to Jason like he’s picking through Tim’s brain, and in many ways the analogy rings true, but more than that… he’s combing through Tim’s brain as Tim sees it.

Honestly, that’s the part that’s disconcerting.

The general slobbery Tim’s adopted in half of the house, the pristinely kept condition of his camera space and dark room, and chaotic, but clearly organized arrangement of the desk set up with his central tech array, the intermixing of new and old and East and West… It’s an odd look at Tim’s awareness of himself.

Jason’s not sure he likes poking into it.

And considering how he was raised by the world’s greatest detective to be unbearably and insatiably nosy, the disquiet he feels seems achingly out of place.

Jason tamps the sensation down like it’s just as misinformatonal as whispers from the Pit, and keeps his focus on the work.

Two hours in, and nada.

Jason’s still got nothing to show for it.
And while he’s not exactly out of places to check, he’s done a once-over of the whole apartment and now needs to isolate a few places that might have a higher likelihood of being the spot where Tim would store this particular file, so he can dig deep into the potential slicks.

But Jason’s confused.

By all appearances, this incident isn’t linked to anything important. It’s just a low rent drug case, maybe tied into an overly ambitious gang – at worst with a few ties to the New York mob. Not even rating Falcone levels of interest.

Nothing worth keeping so secret.

And since it’s currently Tim’s primary active case… Jason would’ve thought he’d want it to be easily accessible.

It’s a frustrating road block, and a solid reminder that Jason doesn’t really know Tim anymore – if he ever could pretend he did, to be honest.

He ends up standing in the disaster zone that is Tim’s bedroom – between several different piles of clothes in various states of uncleanliness, and several different piles of technology in various states of dismantled – with his hands on his hips and a vague notion to start just digging through the disarray to just clean the place up. Maybe even leave finding the right file on the back burner of things. Alfred would be ashamed of the baby bird for this shit.

The dark side vigilante is still undecided when he hears a low click from the main room – the sound of someone coming inside through the door to the balcony, someone with the proper codes and permission for entry authorized by Tim directly.

Jason lets his hand drift to the holster on his left hip, but only lets his thumb brush the handle as he creeps silently towards the bedroom door. The Bats don’t use lethal force – even the Demon Brat sticks to maiming, now – so Jason doesn’t have to have his finger on the trigger to be ready to brawl and if he keeps his threat level low, he might be able to get out of here without making relations between them all too much worse.

He’s worked way too hard at carving out this survivable equilibrium to throw it out now.

And, some niggling part of his brain reminds him, if he’s not a threat, he might possibly get a voluntary update on baby bird’s condition – those first twelve hours after the crisis resolves are still pretty dang dangerous, after all.

Jason slides along the wall to get an angle on the main room from the sliver of open space he’d left in the doorway to the bedroom.

When he gets a glimpse of Batgirl’s bright purple cape, he carefully nudges the door open further and searches for signs that any of the others came with her.
Seeing none, Jason steps cautiously into the hall and gets halfway down to where she’s standing before she even manages to look up. They both freeze when she does.

“What are you doing here,” Batgirl asks, voice loaded with the kind of resigned and unsurprised vitriol usually attributed to people on the wrong side of the tracks when talking about the rats they’re forced to co-exist with.

“Could ask you the same thing, Blondie,” Jason snarks back, adding, “Ladies first.”

She straightens up and crosses her arms – loosely, so that she’s still combat ready, but in a gesture to say that she’s not looking to pick a fight. And to further support that sentiment, she relents to answering his question before getting an answer of her own.

“I’m here trying to figure out what the hell happened last night,” she asserts, glaring at him with a clearly foregone conclusion in her head.

“You ain’t the only one with questions,” Jason presses as he rests the heel of his hand on the butt of his gun, pushing it deeper into its holster to return Batgirl’s loose gesture of faith.

They stare at each other in silence for a moment, measuring each other up across the ground between them like the good ol’ kids of Gotham grit they are. Jason knows enough of Stephanie Brown to know she’s from a not so great tract of town – not quite as bad as where he’s from, but not so far removed to be all that better off.

They might not be siblings in squalor or whatnot, but they’re definitely cousins.

Of all the Bats that joined up with the Crusade after Jason had kicked it, she’s definitely the one he’s got the most in common with.

They speak the same language, harbor the same innate distrust, chafe under the same restrictions, and possess the same kind of stubborn, aggressive determination to protect the few people they’re willing to call their own. And more than that, they can both consciously and unabashedly recognize the substantial list of similarities that resonate between them.

Which is why they never skip the posturing, but always skip the small talk.

“This is your fault, you know,” Stephanie states, voice full of certainty and confidence, but intriguingly absent of any venomously barbed accusation. “I don’t care what Tim says about this shit with the fertilizer bomb and whatnot—”

“He’s awake?”

Jason’s mouth interrupts the girl before his brain even fully processes his question.

It has to be true though, because Tim was out of it well before he got to the Cave.

There’s no way he could’ve been yappin’ away about fertilizer bombs or any of it unless he’d recovered consciousness.

“Maybe,” Stephanie confirms petulantly.
It still makes something tight and thorny inside Jason’s chest loosen up the hold it had on his heart and lungs. He nods absently, accepting her response and the truth it implies.

Stephanie huffs. “This is still your fault, though.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with the god damn bomb,” Jason retorts.

“Even if you didn’t, which I’m still not entirely convinced of, b. t. dubs,” Stephanie says, gesticulating dramatically as she cuts to the aside, “It’s still your fault that Red Robin was even on your side of town to start with – that he’s been going over there at all without his bio trackers turned on or any way for us to follow him.”

“How the fuck is that idiot’s dumbassery my fault?”

“He’s only doing this because he wants you to come back to the Family,” Stephanie states, like the facts of the matter should be obvious.

“Like hell he is,” Jason growls. “He’s the one who first suggested the whole plan where I stay in my own shitty corner of the god damn sandbox.”

Batgirl’s hands find her hips in an exasperated snort of superiority. “He did that to prove that you could be reasonable. He did it to get you off the Bats’ active capture list. The rest of us all thought you were still Pit crazy, detox with the Outlaws or not, but Red Robin said you could be bargained with – and held to the agreement.”

Jason’s glaring, but his brain is too gummed up with attempting to process her statement to respond. Tim convinced the rest of the Bats to let him hold Crime Alley? To ignore his means of controlling it unless he took his methods outside of his allotted neighborhood?

How the fuck did that happen?

The last time Jason saw Tim, before last night, was the night before he’d called Roy and Kori in a half crazed throw of desperation. The night before he’d left to marathon a series of off-world missions with the Outlaws, and to try to get his head on straight.

They’d kicked a whole bunch of alien ass and then spent a long few weeks regrouping on their own private island in the South Pacific. Roy and Kori had their own issues to work through, and all three of them had used the time to get their inner demons out and laid bare – their own special version of an AA intervention away-stay summer camp…

But instead of for alcohol it was for a genius war-vet with anger issues, a drug problem, a dissociating robotic arm, and a new daughter, an alien princess trying to come to terms with what happened to her when she’d been sold into slavery, and a zombified former street kid dealing with the consequences of giving his knot of insecurities and anger issues a dip in a demonic swimming hole so vile it had a 100% success rate in driving survivors insane, and only a 4% success rate for not instantly killing the people subjected to it.
It had been about four weeks of continuous off-world badassery, and then almost five months of methodically working through the downsides of being that kind of awesome and learning to control the inescapable consequences of what made them that way.

He’d gone with them for that express purpose, intentionally; he’d gone because he’d realized how deep the Pit’s claws had dug their way into his psyche – because he’d started having trouble with being able to tell what it was that he wanted and what it was the Pit wanted.

He’d gone because he’d almost killed Tim again, because he’d made a third attempt on that god damn idiot’s defenseless little life.

Jason hadn’t killed him, obviously, and he doesn’t even think the other Bats even know about the third attempt – it had been pretty spontaneous and hadn’t involved a weapon other than Jason’s bare hands, so it could possibly have been passed off as an accident if Tim had chosen not to level the blame at him (Jason doesn’t know why he ever would, but Jason’s also rarely ever known what’s going on inside that ridiculous robot brain of his).

But still… it had been a moment of weakness, a moment when Jason lost control in a different way… Like it wasn’t just the Pit putting whispers in his head to make him want and need and simply urging him to follow those desires… That time, it had felt almost like he’d lost control of his physical body altogether – like the Pit had taken his brain out of the equation and just worked him over like a human meat puppet.

He’d almost killed Tim the last time they’d been within a hundred yards of each other, and with that as his last impression before Jason went off detoxing, before seeing Jason come back to reclaim Crime Alley for the Red Hood under only slightly different parameters, Tim had decided to advocate for letting Jason stay unmolested in his own little corner?

When the negotiations had first been struck up and it had been mentioned that it was Tim’s idea to create a rigid boundary, Jason had thought it was because he hadn’t wanted to risk being caught anywhere near Jason – especially caught unaware.

But… Stephanie is saying something else, something that changes the framing…

Significantly.

He’s not sure how to sort that.

Stephanie seems unsure as well.

She’s staring at him from behind her cowl, trying to rationalize whatever she’s seeing.

“You didn’t know,” she states eventually, quiet – like it’s a revelation she thinks might be best kept secret. “You have no idea how determined he is to get you back into the Family.”
Jason’s mouth runs away with him again, “Well, why the fuck would he be?”

Stephanie deflates. Shrinks. Shows the human hiding inside the vigilante costume.

Jason doesn’t understand it, and isn’t sure he actually wants to.

She stares at him like she’s seeing him for the first time all over again, like she’s found a new point of reference to evaluate him with – to use in comparing herself to him – and like she’s both unsure she likes what she sees and relieved that she sees it.

It grates at Jason’s relative calm.

Before his antsiness can build beyond reckoning, Stephanie sighs.

“Oracle thinks he’s been trying to look into some low rent gang trying to push into Gotham from New York, using some sort of drug connection on the edge of New Town,” Stephanie states, switching into work mode. “Have you found his hard copies, yet?”

The question spikes another thread of frustration, but it’s a different enough road block to make the transition smooth without allowing them any chance to compound together.

“Nope, I got jack shit,” Jason admits. “I’m about to start ripping up floor boards here, unless you’ve got a better idea.”

She ponders the question for a moment, looking at Jason, looking at the apartment, looking back at Jason… “Have you tried the refrigerator?”

Jason blinks. “Qué allí?”

Stephanie shrugs. “Well, he doesn’t keep much food in it.”

“Fair point,” Jason responds, an involuntary chuckle escaping.

With a nod, Stephanie goes on, “And he’s only got a real kitchen to begin with because apparently like to cook – he’s got a spot in here designed for everyone. He only uses like three things in the kitchen, maybe four… the coffee maker, the microwave, the sink, and… the fridge is more like a local forum of his current favorite Family photos. That’s why it’s so big despite the fact that it usually only has a single case of some sort of Asian energy drink in it.”

Jason’s not sure why Stephanie suddenly feels all yay sharing, but he decides to roll with it as they start moving towards the refrigerator.

Honestly, he hadn’t noticed that the fridge might seem so over sized to the average person. It looks almost exactly like the kind of thing he would want inside his own kitchen.
But stepping back and looking at it as an object in space, rather than an appliance with a given degree of utility, it is rather over large in the surface area department – something that goes easily unnoticed due to the well designed layout of the photographs posted on it.

It’s an artful display.

Very Tim; tasteful, elegant, and laced through with a deeper commentary meant for him alone to read and reflect on… And something… something about it makes Jason pause.

He nudges Stephanie’s elbow to hold her back from opening the fridge right away and shifts his stance to stare at the array of pictures. Two things bother him.

First, and most obviously, there’s a picture of him there – a recent one, from two weeks ago, at most. He’s sitting back on the rooftop where Tim found him last night, relaxed in the heavy heat of a summer evening, blowing smoke rings with his cigarette. It’s a playful, calm, and very human photograph, rendered in a dramatic interplay of light and shadow and color.

It makes Jason look like a very different person than he sees himself as being.

It makes him kind of want to meet the person Tim thinks he is.

It also makes him wonder how the hell Tim got that shot.

Before he can sink too deeply into that consideration, he notices the pattern with the photographs that’s been niggling at him – inching its way into his awareness.

“These look grouped funny to you,” Jason asks, making the final sorts through his head about why the arrangement looks off.

Stephanie pauses. Assesses. “Not really. It’s not much different from his usual.”

“You got a black light in that belt, right? Pull it out for a sec, I wanna check something.”

Confused, but compliant, Stephanie pulls out her black light as Jason hits off the over heads and switched his Hood’s lenses through the various filters he has set – rotating through all of them in a brute force assessment.

He lands on one with less surprise than he’d anticipated – overheads off, black light on, lenses set in a red blue split shift like it’s a cereal box decoder ring… bright purple writing in Tim’s signature scrawl of shorthand flares to life, with some additional notes in red and blue.

It looks like… percentages. And some random letters. Several sets of number letter pairs, running data together in a multivariable comparison. The photos are grouped by their numbers – the combined average of their statistics being used as something like inverted coordinates.

“Oh.”

Stephanie’s slight exclamation makes Jason look sideways at her.

“You got any idea what this shit means, or has the baby bird just straight up cracked?”

“It’s a running odds board, on a long con. Tim’s whipped them up for a couple of cons
we’ve done when specialized, coordinated undercover work is necessary,” Steph explains.

Gesturing to the elements in turn, she elaborates, “These are the different players, this number is the priority of convincing them of whatever you’re trying to pull, this one’s the percentage of how far along you are with convincing them, and this one’s listing out what game plan you’re running on them and what phase of it you’re at…”

Stephanie shakes her head as Jason tries to process that, going on in building disbelief to say, “He’s got more than just the Family here, he’s got the Titans, too… and the Justice League.”

“What the hell for?”

Taking a slow breath, Stephanie turns towards Jason with caution and says, “For you.”

“Bull. Shit.”

“It’s definitely for you, it’s in the kitchen,” Stephanie points out, extrapolating, “I think it’s a running count of where he is on course for getting you back into the Family. Holy hell, man, he’s been playin’ this since you got back the first time – I think he pegged you as you when Red Hood was still just a body dropping ghost story.”

She sounds impressed – and a touch sad, for some inexplicable reason, but unsurprised.

Jason’s just reeling.

Because seriously.

The fuck is going on?

Tim’s got a game set against his own god damn Family – and the idea of having a family at all is something Jason knows Tim’s been pretty damn desperate for since Jason first met him.

And he’s supposedly got this game runnin’ for Jason’s sake?

He’s risking the Family’s wrath to push a play on getting Jason back involved?

And he’s been running it from way back when Jason was still actively trying to kill him?

The fuck is that shit?

“Frickin’ psycho robot,” Jason breathes, shaking his head.

Yeah. No. He cannot take this shit.

Baby bird can throw away his own life if he really wants to, but no way is Jason gonna contribute to that shit. He doesn’t want to go back to the Bats and they don’t want him there anyway
– he doesn’t belong and doesn’t want to.

End of story.

Tim’s not gonna gain any ground by risking his own spot in the nest.

And Jason ain’t about to encourage it.

Which means that this whole working more or less amicably with Batgirl on a quasi-mutual case revolving around Tim’s idiocy has got to stop. Right the fuck now.

“You know what?” Jason rasps, a building venom in his voice as he feels the Pit’s fury start to surge and whole heartedly embraces the heat. “Fuck it. Just fuck it all. I don’t even care anymore. You wanna know what happened to the shithead Replacement? Have at. Just leave me out of this crazy ass shit. And stay out of Crime Alley, or you won’t be walkin’ home, got it?”

He doesn’t wait to see if Stephanie nods – or reacts at all, really.

Jason just spins on his heel and jogs back to the main room.

He shoots his grapple gun at the sunlight and rappels up to it as fast as possible – snatching up his tablet as he passes through the gap and rolls over through his landing.

He takes off running and is in the air again, swinging back towards Crime Alley, before the alarms begin to blare.

Jason doesn’t even slow down until he’s more than safely within the bounds of Crime Alley’s border. He doesn’t stop until he hits the river on the far side of his turf, until he’s at the furthest point he can get from any of the reasonable access routes.

Ironically, this curve of mid-rises right along the river between two sketchy little warehouse districts is the closest point inside Jason’s turf, geographically, to Wayne Manor – and Jason finds himself facing that way as he stops pacing long enough rip his helmet off and struggle through the effort to light a cigarette.

Getting the damn thing to burn is a challenge as the sky opens up with a downpour, but he gets it done eventually, and takes a long drag on it as he stands on the corner jutting out furthers towards the mainland.

He takes another one immediately after huffing the smoke out from his first breath.

If it hadn’t been so important to his sanity, if he hadn’t been doing it for so long already, and
if it wasn’t helpful to have to focus on controlling his diaphragm, Jason would’ve been hacking up a lung after the first two breaths.

As it is, he makes it to the filter in about three minutes and he’s still wired up like a fuckin’ kite, but at least he’s in slightly calmer skies.

His second cigarette takes over five minutes, and after it, he’s calm enough to just breathe for a minute.

His throat is still tight, and his heart’s going a mile a minute, and his gut’s still churning away, but he’s detached from the worst immediacy of it.

Jason lights up another cigarette and scrubs his fingers through his hair – staring towards Wayne Manor as he takes a drag. He can’t see the Manor, can’t even see the echo of a hint of lights from it. Can’t tell if he’s glad or not.

Briefly considers sneaking out across the river to get a clear look at the place, to see if he can glimpse a light in the window he knows belongs to Tim’s room – wondering if they’ve moved him up there from the Cave’s med bay yet…

Just as quickly, Jason dismisses the thought.

He doesn’t care anymore, he *doesn’t* – refuses to if it means giving Tim a reason to act out like such an idiot.

“The fuck you think you’re even *doing*, asshole?”

Jason’s not quite sure if he’s asking Tim, or asking himself… He remains unclear as he takes one last drag and turns his back on the Manor to head for a safehouse.

He can’t bring himself to wonder if it even matters.
standing on a corner in the rainy, hot night ( wondering if you were at home )

Chapter End Notes

Poor Jay... but we've reached the edge of a tipping point folks, we'll have a very brief pause of calm as Tim schemes while pretending to play nice in recovery, and then as Alfred reflects on the situation, and after that... well... drama ensues.

NEXT TIME: Tim begins to push an agenda. Rather Aggressively.

—
my pocket's full (of someone else's cigarettes)

Chapter Summary

Tim has a plan. And he's GOING to see it through. No amount of treading carefully will make the impact of the choices he makes here any less explosive.

Chapter Notes

Happy Christmas, everyone!

I've just gotten home from work, and it's just on 2am, which means it's officially Christmas Eve!!

In my household, that usually means you get to open one present, or eat one special treat, or do one extra special thing, and since I don't have anything else to give all of you, here's another chapter, up just the slightest bit early!

You guys have been so incredibly supportive and wonderful, it's definitely kept my spirits up tremendously, and kept me tethered to something VERY important to my sanity. There have definitely a few times this year when even the part of me that loves to write more than anything else in the world started to shrivel up, but you guys made me feel that I'm actually pretty good at it, and that it's definitely worth continuing to pursue, if for no other purpose than to make myself (and possibly some of you) just a little bit happier. So THANK you. All of you.

Happy Christmas, y'all.

Cue an /Eye of the Tiger/ montage with Timmy getting down to business! TW: Jason reacts poorly to Tim showing up, and they both get a bit battered - both physically, and mentally.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9 - my pocket's full (of someone else's cigarettes)

Timothy Drake does not like waiting.

At least, not when the factor at the crux of the equation is him.

He can wait for basically ever if he's waiting on someone else, or waiting for an external
piece to fall into the place he’s slotted for it. He’s been called frightfully, obsessively, patient.

But if he’s the thing he’s waiting on… Tim demands immediate results, instant perfection – or at least as quickly as is possibly conceivable according to the laws of physics. And he’s perfectly willing to attempt bending even those purportedly immutable rules.

He expects himself to perform to a par he sets himself – expectations that have been called ‘unreasonable’ by many, but none of those who would think so have ever made a truly convincing argument against them. Mostly because they all can perform up to that par easily.

Fourteen hours after getting himself blown up, Tim wakes up and takes stock. Makes a schedule.

36 hours, he decides. 40 max.

Reasonable.

Perfectly reasonable, considering how all that’s wrong with him is a little bit of blood loss. He’s had three transfusions (a massive amount, to be sure, but he’s always taken well to them, and having had two of them be with his own natural blood stores helps) and he has all his immune supplements and mineral supports, and the nutrient boosts Alfred sneaks into the IVs.

So what if the average civilian is down for two weeks from something like this?

The average cape is up after no more than two days.

And Tim’s on a tight schedule. Tighter than usual, even.

He’ll throw a couple naps in and take it easy over all, but he’s gotta be up and out of bed before something happens that sends Jason back to ground.

The ideal schedule would have him out of the Manor in 10 hours, but Tim is realistic.

As soon as he gets himself settled and sorted after his disconcerting chat with Steph, Tim hunkers down and sleeps for almost 11 hours – the sedative in Alfred’s cookies helps.

After that he’s given real food and detached from all the wires and tubes keeping him in the hospital bed. Unfortunately, his rush on reputation means that as he’s given more physical freedom, he is simultaneously moved back up to his second floor bedroom – just far enough away from the Cave to make sneaking down to get an early work out in extremely implausible.

It’s irksome, but not unprecedented or unexpected.

Tim allows himself to nap another two hours after the exertion of getting up to his room.
When his alarm goes off, he forces his muscles up and out of bed.

He drinks an entire bottle of his special hyper-nutritional slurry, wraps his injuries in plastic, and takes a careful shower – with a hot water yoga routine helping to coax his muscles back into a reasonable semblance of functionality.

The effort is exhausting and afterwards he has to take another two hour nap.

When he wakes up from this nap, he’s already 17 hours into his schedule – not behind, exactly, but running on a very slim margin of error.

It’s around 1 am and the others will be in the thick of Patrol, at the moment – possibly even thinking about starting to wrap up and head home if it’s been a quiet night. He’s running out of time to make substantial progress and with that pressure in mind, Tim forces himself up and works through a basic exercise routine.

The set is one he designed himself, based on the most simplistic martial arts kata he knows and combined with elements of the conditioning Pilates routines Bruce had taught him (and elements he’d picked up by hacking into the Batcomputer’s secure files to investigate what he’d taught the others before him). When performed in his room, under circumstances of restricted space and the need for his movements to avoid triggering the motion sensors hidden in his room, the Pilates routines effectively go back to their roots as PoW regimens meant to keep imprisoned soldiers from driving themselves insane with inactivity.

Tim is not a prisoner, per se, but he certainly cannot afford to be noticed in his stepped up activities – another bout with Alfred’s special cookies is not something that could possibly fit into the schedule he’s outlined for himself at the moment…

Running on easy through his routines, Tim works his muscles systematically for the next three and a half hours, but as 5 am approaches and the summer sky starts to grey, the risk that his Family’s impending return home will result in his being checked on begins to outweigh the benefits of another set of repetitions.

As he’s taking another shower, this one, moved through with a carefully acted carefulness, Tim’s precautions are validated.

Dick comes in to check on him, and waits outside his bathroom door until he emerges in a spray of steam – that worried puppy dog pout in place as he sits curled up in Tim’s reading nook armchair. “You should still be resting,” he points out, his concern annoyingly genuine.

“I felt gross, Dick,” Tim protests, pulling on some fresh pajamas. “I haven’t had a shower since I got blown up by a fertilizer bomb in a meth lab and I’ve been laying in the same clothes for two days. I know you grew up in a circus, but I grew up in the wonderfully hyper sterilized conditions of first world high society luxury.”

Tim feels a touch guilty for pulling the ‘crappy childhood he didn’t realize was crappy’ card on Dick, especially in combination with the jibe at his own unconventional childhood, but the comments are distracting enough to help start desensitizing Dick’s big brother worry meter to the flare of irrational emotion that strikes at the comment of how Tim had gotten caught unawares in an
explosion that nearly killed him.

It’s a brutal kind of mind game – one he didn’t have to learn from Bruce.

His Mother taught him well enough, at that.

It’s also one that Dick has never really grown into a conscious awareness of playing, and as such it’s still proving temptingly effective – though, Tim has enough self control to only utilize it when the circumstances call for drastic action.

Emotion and conflicting concerns compete for dominance in Dick’s head, the flutter of his feelings showing plain across his face as Tim maneuvers himself into bed. He settles on concern for Tim’s health, but not fixed solely on his physical health or even on his mental health in regards to his apparent recklessness with Jason – he’s also clearly considering Tim’s irksomely deep seeded need for Family connection in general.

“You know, it’s been a while since we watched a movie together?” Dick offers, suggesting hopefully, “Maybe that Star Wars interlude you like?”

Tim sighs. He and Dick have their issues, but Tim still considers the acrobat to be an extremely important person in his universe. “I’m pretty much always up for Rogue One,” he relents, adding in a slow admission, “I’ll probably fall asleep halfway through.”

“S’okay,” Dick promises, deeply relieved that Tim hasn’t refused him, “You’ve explained it enough times that I can probably keep track of what’s going on all by myself.”

Tim settles into bed and sneakily sets his alarm to go off in about six hours as Dick gets the movie queued on Tim’s smart TV before settling in under the covers with him. Tim lets Dick cuddle up close, knowing that the caution Dick’s displaying in being affectionate is less a newly developed respect for Tim’s less than enthusiastic reciprocation and more a fear response that’s fixated on the fact that they’d only very recently moved passed the Robin issue.

Officially, at least, things are still not entirely smooth regarding that (because emotions of that scale are not exactly things that can be reasoned with or negotiated over), but they are much better – and Tim would like to keep them that way.

Accepting the octopus hug now is the most effective method Tim has found to give Dick a solid assurance that they’re still good – good enough to definitely still be Family, to still be brothers in life and bothers in arms without question.

Tim does fall asleep halfway through the movie. And he stays asleep when Dick eases himself out of Tim’s bed and shuts the TV off before heading to his own room.

He rests, mostly peacefully, until his alarm goes off at 10am.

24 hours in.

The others are already at work or school, and Tim can head downstairs to get something to
eat without anyone but Alfred throwing him any concerned glances.

Alfred isn’t subtle about his concern, but he also isn’t abjectly disapproving.

Especially as Tim eats his breakfast, and drinks his nutritional slurry, with an obedient willingness that’s offset by his complaints of being bored and babied.

He spends two hours downstairs, settled into the library with Liu Cixin’s *Three Body Problem* – carefully pretending the object isn’t plastered with coded case notes on his plot to get Jason back into the Family, the physics problem proving too perfect a metaphor for him to resist especially in how the novel’s plot of false accusations and dramatic, emotional intrigue complicates the matter in concert with the problem he’s observing inside the Bat Family.

Two hours of ‘reading’, another two hours upstairs performing his clandestine workout routine, and then two more hours taking yet another nap.

By 4pm, Tim is allowed to be downstairs for six hours at a stretch.

He eats dinner with the Family, a tense affair where very little of significant note is discussed – just light discussion of some banalities from the Family’s daytime lives.

By the time the others are getting ready to go out on Patrol, Tim’s wheedled his way into permission to come down to the Cave after he takes yet another nap.

Tim makes a show of taking it easy as he works through a gentle tai chi routine while Alfred checks in with everyone on coms – being subtle enough about reporting on Tim’s actions that if he didn’t *know* Alfred would never deny the others his keen assurances, Tim could almost believe that he wasn’t being watched at all.

Afterwards, he heads upstairs for the night. Runs through three hours of a much more strenuous workout, and then throws himself into sleep.

At 40 hours, he’s awake and eager to hit the streets.

Unfortunately, it takes another three hours for a reasonable opening to arise.

Summer schedules are notoriously dynamic and Tim berates himself for failing to adequately plan for the fact that Damian’s supplementary classes would give him a random delayed opening on a Wednesday. Not to mention, for failing to confirm the scheduling of it.

He won’t make that mistake for tomorrow.
Damian wouldn’t mind if Tim ran himself to death, but he would likely tattle on him to Dick the moment he left the Manor, so Tim spends and extra three hours fighting hard not to show his antsiness, confirming every single minute detail of everyone’s schedules for tomorrow, and mentally working through the most likely places to which Jason could possibly have retreated post Cave debacle.

Five minutes after Damian leaves, Tim’s hits the Cave – fully dressed, and ready to go.

He doesn’t try to BS Alfred into thinking that he’s just going to do yoga, or catch up on some case notes, or anything. He doesn’t talk to Alfred at all.

Tim simply heads downstairs.

With a brief detour through the Library to collect one last piece to set the dominoes he’s laying, Tim’s first stop is the Med Bay. He heads straight to the corner where Jason’s leather jacket is still neatly folded up and tucked into an out of the way nook.

He buries his face in the article and breathes in deeply – an indulgence he allows himself simply because he knows that there’s no possibility for any legitimate satisfaction regarding the aching crush of half acknowledged want behind the urge. He breathes in the scent of leather and gun powder and cigarette smoke and musky grime and, of all things, bacon, without any burst of guilt at the selfishness of it.

The smell of this jacket is all Jason, Jason now, Jason as Red Hood and the young man who’s clawed his way back from the dark edge of oblivion by sheer force of will alone – the innate goodness of his heart beating back the venom of Ra’s al Ghoul’s vile insanity.

He’s not the kid that Dick and Bruce and even Barbara miss, but Tim… Tim thinks he’s more impressive now than he was as a brash kid with anger issues and a sweet heart. Tim thinks that the person he’s become is an elegant maturation of that kid, shaped by direct intent and an incredible determination to flout all expectations in a refusal to be broken by his circumstances.

One long breath in, a pause to savor it, and then Tim slips the jacket on – it’s more than large enough on him to fit over his own leathers, and while it will be rather uncomfortably warm to wear two coats in the height of summer, he needs his own gear to be protected on a motorcycle (while not exactly cleared to ride safely) and he’d only give up the privilege of wearing Jason’s jacket for the brief moment he has to do so if trading the indulgence meant Jason was willing to come back to the Family immediately.

Since that is not a possibility, Tim snuggles into Jason’s jacket, grabs his slim red daytime Ducati (because Red Bird is just a bit too much beast for him to handle at the moment; he’s reckless, not delusional), and streaks out onto the streets towards Crime Alley.

The first apartment he tries is empty – it’s definitely still an active safe house, but it’s not the one Jason’s currently staying at. Same with the second.
By the time he makes it to the third, he’s a full four hours behind schedule – meaning that he only has about an hour, hour and a half, until he’s missed at the Manor. If Jason isn’t here, he’s only got time for one more shot, and even if he finds Jason at the next place he’ll only have about ten minutes to convince him of his honorable intentions.

Even if Jason’s here, he’s only got about twenty minutes to be truly safe with his timings for getting back unnoticed by anyone but Alfred – and Tim’s pretty sure that Alfred will proactively tell on him if he’s not home in time to cover up his own absence.

Tim’s already halfway through picking the obnoxiously difficult series of locks on Jason’s door before he hears signs of life from inside the apartment. It’s just a slight shuffle of boots, but it sends such forceful relief through Tim that he nearly drops his picks.

Only nearly, though.

Actually dropping them would waste too much time.

Tim makes it through the last few locks as quickly as he can and then swings the door open in one motion, quick and smooth, as he raises his hand in surrender.

The barrel of Jason’s cocked Glock is right in his face.

Looking passed it, Tim can see a flare up of the green in Jason’s eyes that had helped send him running off from the Cave to begin with.

Jason’s biting down so hard on his words that a vein pops in his forehead.

Without breaking eye contact, and still ignoring the gun completely, Tim says, “You know, I considered bringing a fruit basket, but I decided not to because I figured you would just end up throwing it at me and being pelted with oranges is not exactly a useful means of acquiring vitamin C.”

The joke makes the green in Jason’s eyes flare, but it also pushes him to grab Tim and drag him bodily inside the apartment. Point to Tim.

His back hits a wall as the door slams, and Jason’s gun is still in his face, but Jason’s hand is still on his shoulder – an indication that he’s keeping his mind in the present and isn’t in the process of a physical or even a mental distancing. It’ll probably mean more bruises, but he’s less likely to get shot and more likely to get his point across.

“What the hell are you doing here, Replacement?”

Okay, so there’s a mild mental distancing occurring, but that’s fine.
“Looking for you, obviously,” Tim retorts.

Jason yanks on his shoulder, wrenching it around in its socket as his back slams against the wall again. “Cut the sass, shithead,” Jason snarls, adding with a dramatically increased pressure in the grip on his shoulder, “Why the fuck are you even out of bed?”

There’s the concern he was hoping for. Another point to Tim.

“You saved my life, Jason,” Tim says firmly, calm and honest. He feels a tremor run through Jason’s arm as he resists a shudder before Tim continues, “I wanted to thank you.”

Jason’s hold shifts on his gun – like he’s considering the benefits of bashing Tim’s skull in with the hand grip. There’s an 87% chance he won’t do it if Tim stays silent.

That drops to 48% if Tim goes through with his next follow up statement, 23% if he times it wrong and just so happens to speak as an inopportune thought crosses Jason’s mind.

Tim doesn’t hesitate. He braces himself, syncs his breathing with Jason’s, and then says clearly as Jason’s gaze wavers in its vitriol, “And I’m not the only one.”

The snarl snaps into place instantaneously, consuming the rest of Jason’s expression.

The impact of a gun against Tim’s temple doesn’t come, but the hand on his shoulder moves to his throat – not as tight as Tim would’ve guessed it would be under these circumstances, but still more aggressive than is comfortable to sit with.

“Ain’t nobody was thanking me when I dragged your half dead ass into the Cave, you psychotic son of a bitch,” Jason roars with the kind of pained viciousness of hurt that makes Tim’s heart ache – to the point that it’s a fortunate excuse to have Jason’s hand on his throat to explain away the sudden prickle of tears. “Next time, I’m just gonna leave your sorry ass on whatever roof you fall on, maybe stick a note with my regrets on your god damn lifeless body before I ship it off to those asshats you call Family.”

The pressure on Tim’s throat increases as the green flares up again and, with something frighteningly close to desperation, Jason growls, “Might as well take the credit, since I’ll definitely be taking the blame regardless, ‘cause they certainly ain’t about to wanna thank me.”

It breaks Tim’s heart completely.

He didn’t mean to make this so much harder on Jason.

This was supposed to make everything about it easier, for all of them.

And Jason’s confidence in his statement about how none of the Manor’s residents wanted to
thank him for the selfless act of rescuing that he’d performed is flawed.

Missing a key character.

“Alfred,” Tim forces out, pushing the syllables roughly through his highly constricted airway in a distended effort.

Jason’s grip goes slack and Tim carefully resists the fight in his lungs to gasp.

“It’s a lie, but also not. Alfred has never stated such, but Tim also knows it would be true.

Jason doesn’t seem to believe him, but also can’t imagine anything less of Alfred.

His hand is still resting on Tim’s collar bones, but his grip is nonexistent – he’s frozen, brain glitching out like Tim’s has done before.

Giving him a long few seconds to digest the information, Tim waits before he says with slow and steady invitation, “Alfred would like it if you came by for tea.”

“Not gonna happen, scamp,” Jason growls – it sounds vicious, but the hand on Tim’s throat is still slack, more than loose enough for him to breathe perfectly easy.

Unsurprised, Tim gives a careful half shrug that doesn’t jar Jason’s hand enough to remind him that he’s kind of in the process of threatening Tim’s life again.

“I figured,” he admits, “But I had to try.”

Jason’s snarl twitches, lip curling further up to reveal just a touch more of his teeth.

“You blew your Med set, and dragged your frickin’ half dead ass all the way out here for that?” Jason growls. Unconsciously, he adds pressure to the hand on Tim’s throat – not squeezing or threatening, just leaning into it a bit, which makes the heel of his hand press hard into the point where Tim’s ribs fuse together.

“And to return your jacket,” Tim points out, using a small twitch of his hands to gesture at himself and the over sized leather article he’s wrapped up in.

It makes Jason realize what he’s wearing for the first time and he yanks his hand back as if the sight of Tim wearing his jacket made his skin burn.

The hand that had been on Tim’s throat becomes a fist at Jason’s side.

Moving slowly, and broadcasting his intent, Tim slips out of the jacket – ignoring the pang of reluctance to part with it he feels as it slides off his shoulders.
Proffering it up without revealing the ache inside him, Tim says, “Thank you, Jason, for saving me. I know it put you in an unpleasant situation. If the others… if they said something to you… if they… They’re upset. Irrational.”

With a snort, Jason huffs, “They’re irrational, alright… But you ain’t much better, asshole. The fuck were you thinking?”

Tim resists the full flinch, but to someone as observant as Jason, he doesn’t delude himself into thinking that he hid the reaction well enough – the pull at Jason’s tightening posture indicates that he definitely noticed, and definitely disdains it.

Which is unfortunate, but derailing this conversation to explain the particular sore spot would be far more unhelpful than just ignoring it at risk of letting the wound fester.

“The gang activity in New Town was unconfirmed until that night,” Tim informs him, adding, “I was going to bring the case to you as soon as I had something actually solid.”

Jason bites down on his teeth, grinding them viciously together.

“The fuck you were,” Jason manages eventually. “How long have you been sneaking onto my turf for shits and giggles?”

“Since the day you got back,” Tim replies, honest.

Jason would be able to tell if he lied. Jason had always been able to tell when he lied.

No answer meets Tim’s reply. Jason simply maintains his glare.

Tim’s still holding out Jason’s jacket, but its owner is making no indication of wanting to take it from him, so Tim drops his arm as the muscles start to vehemently protest the strain.

He folds the jacket over his forearms in front of him, eyes dropping to stare at Jason’s shaking fists – his gun having been slid back into its thigh holster without attracting Tim’s direct notice… Probably a good sign.

“All Alfred wants to see you,” Tim reasserts. “Desperately.”

Jason doesn’t make a verbal response, but a strong tremor runs through his stiff frame.

“The Manor will be empty tomorrow, almost completely,” Tim mentions, explaining slowly, “I’ll be back on bed rest, but Bruce and Dick and Damian and Cass and Steph and Babs will all be away at work or school between 10 am and 4 pm. All of them. And I’ve checked their schedules, confirmed that it’ll be like that every Thursday for the next two months. By next week I can arrange to be gone, as well.”

Jason hasn’t interrupted him, or hit him again, so Tim counts it as a win and suggests cautiously, “If you wanted to drop by, you wouldn’t have to stay – or see anyone else. And Alfred would be very much appreciative.”
And, Tim thinks but doesn’t add aloud, I think it would be good for both of you.

He’s weighing the odds of what would happen if he did say that bit out loud.

The most likely outcomes are not good.

Jason is not inclined to react well to someone suggesting that they know what he needs better than he does. And the last thing that Tim wants is to spook him or make him turn against the course Tim’s set for everything because of simple spite.

With a glance to the side, Tim spots the arm of a couch he can almost reach. He gives a slow, gentle toss to the jacket in his arms – taking half a step towards the door as he deposits the jacket on the plushily upholstered arm. Straightening up, with another step towards the door that Jason does not react to, Tim sighs heavily.

“Please, Jason,” he asking, undisguised pleading in his voice, “Just think about it.”

With that, Tim slips out the door – leaving Jason standing stiffly in his foyer – and makes his way back to the Manor.

He barely makes it back before the exhaustion crashes and he tumbles into bed with barely enough awareness left to squirm into comfy clothes that could pass as pajamas.

Tim manages to have his field trip go unnoticed.

The others might be set to be arriving home in a mere few minutes, but Tim knows he’ll be completely asleep – and looking like he’s been that way for several hours – long before any of them make it up the stairs to check on him.

He’s calculating the odds of Jason’s decision possibilities as he drifts on the edge of oblivion and he’s resigned to the fact that they aren’t quite what he’d been hoping for…

43% Jason comes over tomorrow.

Better than it could’ve been, but worse than it should’ve been – than it would have been if the absolute idiocy of the Family hadn’t gotten in the way.
And there’s only an 11% chance that Jason will come over next week if he doesn’t come tomorrow… and the odds of another issue arising, of some other fissure flaring, in the intervening days are just too high to make it plausible to think that Jason will still want to come by then if he decides to wait on it instead of coming tomorrow.

Tim has a contingency for that, and he’ll be in good enough shape next week to enact it, but for the moment, the frustration of having to resolve this stage on a 43% possibility of phase success is irksome. Grating.

It would’ve have kept him antsy and awake all night if it weren’t for the bone deep exhaustion of having pushed his body harder than he should have.

As it stands, Tim’s out cold within forty seconds of settling down.

He doesn’t dream, and feels his sleep is probably better for it.

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my pocket’s full of someone else’s cigarettes (i don’t even smoke)

Chapter End Notes

Oh Timmy...

And, once again, I would like to mention that Tim's head space is NOT HEALTHY. He pushes too hard, and negotiates with himself over the provision of basic needs and self preservation (which is straight up abuse, peeps, seriously... this isn't just an unhealthy thought process, it's a proactively self destructive one...) if your thoughts have ever aligned with Tim's here, PLEASE talk to someone!! SOONER rather than Later!! I can't promise I'll answer immediately, but if you need ME, because I dunno, you don't wanna disappoint your actual friends or something (I been there, too, so lemme just say THAT shit is self supported BS and also unhealthy and also needs to be discussed) I swear I will answer within about a week. <3

Anyway, once again, Happy Christmas!
And I will see you all back right here next week for New Year's Eve!

NEXT TIME: Alfred Pennyworth is the Bat Fam's backbone of calm. That doesn't mean he never fusses, and it also doesn't mean he can't ever be shaken by something. He, too, is Human.
come on over (and mend my heart)

Chapter Summary

Alfred doesn't ask for much.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

From where I'm sitting, it's still pretty early on the last day of 2018, but there are some places in the world where 2019 is quite literally on the horizon already.

New years mean new beginnings and new adventures. It's certainly true for how my 2019 is shaping up and I hope it's true for all of you as well, and I hope for all of us that those adventures are exciting and fun and pan out well in every way!

As a last post in 2018, I have a quiet moment with Alfred for you! (Look at me, resisting the urge for a cliffhanger... I would say I'm maturing, but honestly 2018 has been filled with enough drama and tension on its own that a quiet moment before starting 2019 seems desperately necessary).

So, on to the best butler in the Universe attempting to soothe the woes of the most overly dramatic and angst ridden Family in the Universe!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 10 - come on over (and mend my heart)

Quiet is a mixed blessing inside the halls of Wayne Manor.

On some days, the quiet does indicate a tentative peace.

Some days, it means calm and peace and safety. But those days are few and far between lately, and it has been quite a long while since quiet in this House meant calm.

These days, quiet usually means defeat… means hopelessness and guilt and woe.
Quiet means a moment of pause because the fight is too much, or too hard, or the participants are too injured to make a fuss. Quiet these days most often means that his youngsters are brooding under heavy weights their shoulders were never built to bear.

Alfred is aware that he is not guilty for their suffering, that he is not inadequate for being unable to truly help relieve their woes, but still... he cannot simply accept that. He cannot sit impassively and view their pain without wishing that he could do something more for them.

He’s spent a fair few days this month needlessly polishing the silver.

Today is not a bad day, not compared to other days this very week, but that is little enough consolation to make Alfred consider finding something to dust.

Master Timothy is restless.

He is the only child currently at home, and Alfred knows he would be out and about himself if it weren’t for his present condition – a grave state of injury that he had not lightly exacerbated with his reckless excursion yesterday.

Master Tim is feeling the isolation of being kept at home while the others are out more than he’s consciously aware of, being that his usual state of being alone is typically a proactive choice of getting away rather than being left behind. Alfred isn’t certain if Tim is aware of how particularly sensitive he is to that notion, but the butler has always taken pains to remind him of his own presence in the Manor – and to assuage his worries with assurances that being kept at home to recover is a very different action than being proactively shut out.

For the moment, Master Tim is an adequate distraction from Alfred’s own worries.

The butler has whipped up a pot of tea – the red tea Jason once favored, the only variety of morning beverage outside of his unholy blend of coffee that Tim seems at all taken with – and he has a tray of scones in hand as he seeks the boy out in the Library.

Timothy has been growing more and more anxious over the course of the afternoon, and in the last hour or so he has been especially fretful. It’s almost to the point of making Alfred consider lacing his next meal with something to help him rest – though, outside of the moments immediately following significant medical procedures, the butler is reluctant to force a drug into one of his charges... Particularly a charge with a history of acute sensitivity to such drastic measures – both in terms of a mental and physical aversion.

Alfred finds Master Tim standing at the window – gaze trained firmly on something only solid enough for his eyes alone to see. “He should be here, by now.”

Master Tim’s muttering is not loud enough for the boy to be consciously aware of it.
The low sound is hardly loud enough for Alfred to interpret the syllables, though he remains unable to conjure viable meaning from the words.

Alfred sets the tea tray down on one of the Library’s more central tables, in hopes of drawing Master Timothy away from the windows and his current fixation beyond them.

“You would like to join me for tea, Master Tim?”

His voice is firm. It’s a tone he perfected long ago: warm with the assurance that the invitation is one the boy may turn down without offending him, but also pressed with a strong encouragement to accept.

Timothy turns around with a sad, guilty look flitting across his countenance, but he doesn’t work up the coordination to respond before the landscape shifts.

Alfred feels the alteration as the Manor’s close is nudged aside – an intuition honed after years of learning how to look after children with the skills gained via training with literal ninja – and feels a prickle of nerves.

This feeling is not due to a sheepish young Bat sneaking home after an outing they know Alfred would frown upon – this gentle break in the Manor’s seal is the result of someone standing on the front stoop.

This sensation is due to someone who **knocks**.

It’s a soft sound, singular and hardly audible despite how the hall is arranged to encourage such echoes to find a staff member’s ear.

Alfred’s face remains impassively reserved, though he feels a pull of disquiet beneath it.

The Manor is not expecting visitors today, and **rarely** are the moments when an unexpected guest is considered truly welcome on these grounds.

Before the wariness can solidify inside the butler, he glimpses an expression on Master Tim’s face that he has not seen in far too long – has far too rarely witnessed in him at all.

There is **hope** shining in Master Timothy’s gaze, and a baldly joyful relief that makes Alfred’s heart swell.

“I’ll be in my room, getting some more rest,” Timothy declares, breaking into a quick shuffle to escape – hobbled by stiff muscles and the sharp pull of his still healing injuries.
Alfred does not chastise his abuse of his body, knowing it to be futile and distracted by the awareness that Master Tim has been planning for – has been hoping for – the arrival of the guest still waiting on the front porch.

With all due haste, and no small dash of wariness, Alfred approaches the door.

It’s a well-practiced motion for him to unlock the massive object and swing it inwards – honed to a quickness that gives little warning of his presence to whomever is waiting beyond.

The mysterious visitor does not jump, but he does freeze up – muscles locking into place with a stiff sheepishness, tinged heavily with the twin weights of shame and fear.

“Master Jason.”

Alfred’s greeting is quiet, breathless with disbelief and a nearly crippling wash of joy.

This is the first time Alfred has witnessed proof of Jason’s miraculous resurrection from within arm’s reach of the dear boy – the first time in three years that he has seen the rambunctious boy he helped raise without the red mask of his new persona.

Alfred has seen Jason on surveillance footage.

And Alfred has seen him occasionally in the Red Hood costume, from across the Cave on the few times that his visitation was utterly unavoidable…

But this… this is the first moment Alfred has seen Jason since he died.

He’s gotten so much taller, so much broader.

Like Bruce honestly – though Alfred isn’t certain even Bruce showed such mass in his physique while there’d been any youthful gangliness left for his frame to grow into. At just under twenty years old – and dear lord, Jason is nearly twenty now – the young man still seems like he’s got a good few inches of growing left to do.

Master Jason looks… tired, worn. Exhausted and hunted in a way that pains the butler.

But at the same time, he looks like he’s been getting enough to eat, regularly, and like he’s simultaneously getting enough sleep to meet the needs of a growing boy.

He’s standing up straight, his eyelevel just above Alfred’s, but the butler can see the urge to sheepishly curl in on himself that Jason is consciously resisting – like he's still the same fourteen year old kid who has just ruined his dress shoes by running through the gardens again.
“Hey, Alfie…”

And Alfred melts.

It takes all his will power not to place a hand on Jason’s shoulder, not to draw his wayward boy in close enough to hear his heart beating.

“Won’t you join me for tea?”

Jason gives a full body flinch, the ‘kicked puppy reaction’ as Jason himself termed it when he’d been grumbling about young Timothy’s resistance to the Family’s kindnesses.

Alfred aches to see it, but he does not press the issue or indicate any awareness of having observed the flinch reaction.

“Nah, Alf,” Jason manages, hands shifting in his pockets. “I just… I came by to, uh, to give this back,” he explains, pulling his fist out of his pocket wrapped around a statuette.

Alfred holds out his hand to receive the object and blinks when a marble horsehead is deposited in his palm – a knight from the chess set in the Library.

Before Alfred can summon up the breath to ask how, Jason blows out a heavy breath.

“Uh, Timbers must’a nicked it before he brought my jacket back yesterday,” he admits stiltedly, “I found it in my pocket this morning. Figured you’d be wanting it back.”

“I sincerely appreciate the gesture, Master Jason,” Alfred promises.

The butler is tempted to ask him for a game – it’s been so long since they’d last played and none of the Manor’s other residents took such pleasure from the simple logic of it that Jason did. Alfred has enjoyed playing with Miss Barbara and Miss Cassandra, but neither truly has the patience for it – and Master Tim is simply too skilled to enjoy a game, much like Bruce had been at just a few years his senior.

*Jason* had always loved the game for its own sake.

Its richness, its complexity, its clear focus on a singular goal… Jason took to playing with tremendous enjoyment and significant skill. He may never be a grandmaster, but he can pull pleasure out of the game without requiring the match to be intense or genuinely competitive.

It would be so lovely to play Jason again.

It would be unbearably wonderful to even have Jason willing to step across the Manor’s threshold… an act it seems painfully clear that Jason is determined to avoid.

Even so, even with all Alfred wishes could happen, he is still overwhelmingly grateful to see
Jason here at all, under any circumstance less dire than his last visit.

Speaking of his last visit…

“Master Timothy is resting upstairs if you would like to check up on his recovery,” Alfred mentions, “Excursion yesterday aside, he’s been a model patient – well on his way to healing.”

Jason gives an unconscious nod, tension uncurling from his shoulders.

It still warms Alfred’s heart to see the concern Jason carries for his Family being worn so plainly in his being – brutalities and disagreements aside, Jason is still Jason, and he still loves his Family with every fiber of his being.

And Master Jason has always held a particularly soft spot for young Timothy.

“Would you like to see him?”

The answer is yes, clearly.

There is nothing Jason would like more than to see Tim, to confirm with his own eyes that the boy is healing as well as Alfred claims – it’s obvious that Jason’s instincts are screaming at him to take up Alfred’s offer.

But Jason trusts Alfred’s judgement on the matter, trusts him well enough to believe his words at face value.

And his resistance to setting foot inside the Manor is stronger than the urge to see Tim.

“Nah, Alf,” Jason says, fidgeting as his feet begin to twist away from the threshold, “I should prolly be getting’ outta here anyway. Wouldn’t be too good ruffle any extra feathers, eh? Bet Timbo’s already in pretty hot water about getting’ me involved to start with.”

“Nonsense,” Alfred scolds firmly. “Master Tim is only alive right now because of that decision, and because of your choice to help him, and I’ll not hear another word otherwise.”

Jason bows his head under the chastisement, but his chest rounds out with a warm breath as he resists, and yet simultaneously rejoices, in the praise inherent in Alfred’s rebuke.

“Either way,” Jason huffs after a strained moment, “I should be shovin’ off.”

Jason’s words have barely hit the air before his feet start carrying him away.
“Master Jason,” Alfred chides, reaching for the last straw he has to grasp. “It would be remiss of me to allow a child of this House to leave without a proper meal. At least, let me provide you with a spot of something to take with you. We have the leftovers from a lovely four cheese chicken lasagna; always a favorite of yours, as I recall.”

The temptation of a favorite food sways Jason back to facing towards the foyer.

It solidifies a steel determination within Alfred.

Young Timothy has worked tirelessly to present this kind of opportunity for reconciliation to the Family, and Alfred seeks to capitalize on his efforts as much as possible – despite the risks inlaid in the potential of rewarding Timothy’s recklessness.

Timothy has been a vocal proponent of Jason’s ability to return to the Family from the very beginning. Master Tim has maintained a consistent belief in Jason’s permeating goodness when even Alfred has to confess to having had doubts – it’s nearly impossible to have any degree of faith in such things when the horrors of a Lazarus Pit are involved.

Alfred never doubted Jason, but he does have to admit to having wavering concerns over whether or not the Pit’s influence had changed him beyond reckoning.

After all, it was not the fault of the rabid dog that it was sick, being at the mercy of an illness was not an act that accrued any blame or any need for accountability – but no amount of guilt or innocence could make the rapid dog less dangerous, and Alfred is ashamed to admit he considered the analogy relevant.

He had wanted so desperately for Jason to find peace in the next life, he’d been so distraught to learn of his brutal reanimation, and so heartbroken at the impact of it all on his Family, that for a moment – for just a moment, but still far longer than his conscience could abide – he had doubted Jason’s potential to return to the Manor.

Master Tim has never once even wavered, never lost faith – never even let it dim, though he had more reason than any of them to doubt Jason’s ability to recover from the Pit.

He has always believed in the inevitability of Jason’s return home like he believes in the in the eventuality that the sun will explode. It will take a long time, and plenty of circumstances around the matter might seem like they impart dramatic change, but in the end, no human influence will change the outcome in any way.

Timothy has arranged scenarios over and over again for the rest of the Family to participate in helping Jason return to the fold, testing the waters to see if both sides are ready while simultaneously steering them closer to finding common ground, and Alfred wants to help.

Getting Jason to voluntarily cross the Manor’s threshold is probably a critical step.
If Tim’s presence in the Manor is not already temptation enough, a home cooked meal will have to do the trick.

“You simply must allow me to pack you up enough for a good dinner,” Alfred insists, adding lightly, “It won’t take more than a moment.”

Without waiting for Jason to make any kind of response, Alfred turns on his heel and heads deeper into the Manor – leaving the heavy front door open, swaying lightly on its hinges.

He’s hoping that two ingrained habits will have Jason coaxed to follow him: firstly, the muscle memory of the firm chastisement that came whenever a child of Wayne Manor left the door open while they ran amok (particularly in seasons of heightened disparity between internal and external temperatures), and secondly, the carefully cultivated habit of following Alfred like sweet little ducklings whenever the promise of good food was on the table.

It truly won’t take him more than a moment to pack up a cooler for Jason to take with him as he leaves this afternoon to head back to whatever sub par location he’s currently residing at, so Alfred believes he should be able to provide the comfort of a home cooked meal even if Jason remains standing at the threshold.

If Alfred remembers correctly, Jason only begins to feel so awkward that he would leave rather than obtain leftovers after a solid ten minutes or more of waiting.

A tragic, but currently beneficial consequence of his spending so much time during his childhood without proper nutrition – and with an acute awareness of the lack.

Even so, Alfred is hopeful that Jason will cross the threshold.

It might not seem like much, but it would be a literal first step towards bringing Jason home permanently – and a significant one at that.

Jason has always been particularly sensitive about the bounds of Property, and about the possible implications and repercussions of being present on someone else’s property… So, if he steps into the Manor of his own volition, it will be an act imbued with much greater significance and potential than it would be coming from almost anyone else.

With bated breath and an anxious flutter laying well-concealed inside his chest, Alfred makes his way to the kitchen and begins methodically removing containers from the area’s primary refrigerator. He arranges them in neat stacks on the island and pulls a large cooler from the cabinet below – quickly calculating the best possible means of maneuvering the three dimensional shapes to make the absolute most of the space available.

Alfred knows he won’t ever be able to convince Jason to take more than one cooler, but he hopes to pack as much food as he possibly can into the one he can get the poor boy to carry away with him when he goes.

He’s in the midst of hastening through the process of packing when he hears the low impact
Hope leaping to his throat, Alfred slows his actions.

It is a long, achingly tense few seconds before a cowed and cautious Jason appears in the kitchen, but it makes Alfred’s heart sing to see him – even looking as pained and uncomfortable as he currently does.

It is going to be a very long road ahead, but this is the first step to healing and it makes a rare sort of calm contentment fall over Alfred as he works.

The Family is still fractured and shall still face many difficult trials regarding Jason’s return and permanent involvement with both sides of the Family business, but Alfred is confident that time and patience, and the gritty stubbornness inherent in every youngster raised within Wayne Manor, will be able to mend all wounds eventually.

It is a tense feeling, but still a good one – still a bright and hopeful one.

And for that, Alfred is supremely glad.

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come on over ( and mend my heart )

Chapter End Notes

I sincerely hope that 2019 pans out perfectly for all of you.

We're ending out a crazy decade and gearing up for a new 20's cultural revolution, not to mention how we're starting off on a month with an aggressive Wolf Moon (Native American lore, regarding a January with 2 low angle [and therefore orange] full moons indicates great potential for luck, but does not specify whether that luck is good or bad), a domineering sun cycle (according to both Western astrology & numerology, a time of
upheaval, also neutrally charged with the potential for Luck in dramatic happenstance, possibly good possibly not) AND it's about to be the Year of the Pig (Eastern astrology comments on it as a time of bounty and great potential) so it's an auspicious year, no matter what you believe!

[compare to 2018, a year for which basically every version of prediction, be it cached in mysticism or in the statistical analysis of societal shift, pretty much just said 'brace yourself'... so for 2019, I'm QUITE optimistic!]

So once again, Happy New Year, Thank You All for EVERYTHING, and Best Wishes for all your 2019 endeavors!

NEXT TIME: Jason is coerced into confronting some issues, and a new sort of tipping point is reached.
i just wanna be (in your light)

Chapter Summary

Jason's encounter with Tim sparks off a series of considerations he never really wanted to confront, making a face to face with Alfred inevitable. Of course, Jason's never been the kind of lucky that lets a heart to heart go uninterrupted.

Chapter Notes

Happy 2019 everyone!

Since I made you wait an entire 11 days for this one, it's an extra long chapter. We're jumping back to when Tim hauled his stupid half dead self out of bed to watch the encounter from Jason's PoV, starting from right after Jay leaves Steph in Tim's apt after his little freak out.

Warning: this one does end in a little bit of a cliffhanger. Also, Jason gets super angsty over having repeatedly nearly killed Tim.

^__~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 11 - i just wanna be (in your light)

When Jason leaves Stephanie in Tim’s apartment, when he gets far enough away to calm down and then gets enough feeling back in his limbs to move, he heads for a bolt hole.

The idea of being in a safe house with any degree of comfort in it chafes almost as much as the disquiet he feels at the implications of being at the crux of Tim’s current focus – of having been at the crux of Tim’s focus for so long already.

It’s unnerving, unsettling, and it makes Jason want to hit things.
He doesn’t go out patrolling right away – even though it’s dark enough by now to be the midst of prime patrolling hours. Instead, Jason attacks a series of weighted training dummies, the kind that can be hit *hella* hard, and can hit back with just as much force – when a few different varieties are all set in a close arrangement (each with different return speeds and resistance levels) it makes for a solid workout…

One that’s distracting enough to get his focus pulled back together.

It’s not quite enough to make him feel truly *calm*… but it should be enough to ensure that he doesn’t straight up *kill* the first bastard who pisses him off while he’s making his rounds.

Though… the thought *does* cross Jason’s mind that if he goes back to murdering folk almost indiscriminately, it’ll be that much harder for Tim to convince himself that Jason’s capable of being dealt with rationally.

Because Jason will have *no* part in letting Tim think that it’s a good idea to risk his position with the Bats just because the idiot thinks Jason is still somehow redeemable.

Jason spends all night beating up on gangsters and drug dealers.

Some of them don’t even need reminding that Red Hood is the one in charge here, but he lays down the law again regardless. He’s not the kind of brutal that wounds egos, just bodies, so he’s not worried about sewing any extra malcontent within the ranks of those few miscreant groups he allows to continue operating on his turf. And he’s not too worried about reprisal from the Bats because he successfully manages the feat of not killing anyone – it’s a close-ish call a couple times, but nothing that an ER won’t fix, and with Jason’s control securely established, ambulances will actually venture into the Alley nowadays to pick the battered suckers up.

When he gets back to his current bolt hole from that excitement, the sun is already quite high above him and nearly all the shadows have been chased away.

The observation of that alone is exhausting.

By the time Jason’s washed off the worst of the grime from patrol in a cold shower, scrubbing harshly at his skin under the unsteady spray of an ancient, rickety bit of hardware, he’s half asleep at standing. He barely makes it to the couch after pulling on a decently fresh change of clothes – collapses gratefully into oblivion.

His last thought before it all fades away is that he’s *very* glad he has routinely made the decision to invest in big ass comfy couches instead of in beds of any sort. This shit is just so much comfier than any mattress could be to him, comfortable in the physical immediacy and comfortable in the mental capacity of being a temporary, transitory respite.

Jason’s only got a couple places in the city with a proper bed in them, and at the moment, that lack feels spectacularly comforting to him.

None of these shit holes are ‘Home’, but they all feel terribly more welcoming for that fact
than any mere hint of the Manor imparts on his psyche (not that he still connotates the Manor as home in any way… ).

Falling pleasantly into oblivion, Jason keeps his brain centered on the ache within his muscles – not pain from an outside source, but the ache of self inflicted progress. It’s not the feeling of being hurt, so much as the satisfying feeling of personal effort – a good day’s work.

It’s enough to keep the worst nightmares at bay, for once in a blue moon – the ones about the Joker and the warehouse and the hazy green hurt that came after.

It’s not quite enough to keep Tim out of his head…

Just vague shadows, thankfully, but still haunting hints of how Jason’s impact on his life has pretty much just straight up ruined it from the very beginning. There was probably a blip of improvement, when he got Dick and Babs involved at the start of shit and managed to get Tim a smidge of reasonable social interaction and the actual care-giving a kid needs, but Jason’s nightmares generally ignore the bright spots.

They’re brief enough anyway to have hardly made a difference over all, regardless.

The worst dream of the night, however, isn’t about how Jason has accidentally ruined Tim’s life on a regular basis, but how he’s actively tried to kill him on an equally regular basis… how there’s still a part of him that’s hurt and angry and that still actually wants to kill him.

He wakes up rested enough, but angrier than optimal.

Breakfast is gonna be an adventure then, something requiring mental and physical effort to create – more distraction than genuine endeavor for something edible.

Strudel.

He hasn’t baked anything in a while, and he’s got the shit to sort it here, so the repeated pounding and acute attention required to make a candied cherry strudel is very appealing.

It’s a bit after noon by the time he’s got everything set, and the stack of fruit mash and pastry is just about ready to go into the oven when there’s a click at his door.

The kind of click that says someone’s trying to pick his locks.

The kind of click that says someone’s successfully trying to pick his locks.

Which narrows the field. Dramatically.
Whoever’s out there is almost definitely a Bat.

Jason has a Glock out and cocked before he even takes a step towards the door, and he’s got it leveled at the approximate point of the would-be intruder’s head as the door starts to swing outward to admit them into Jason’s space.

His glare and growl freeze in place when he sees the person trying to break in – all the vicious grumbling about privacy and respect, and the god damn agreement he’d been ready to scream about gets caught in his throat.

It’s Tim.

Tim, who should still be tucked up in bed.

Tim, who shouldn’t really be able to stand yet after sustaining the injuries he had.

Tim, who should probably be put on a frickin suicide watch here soon.

Jason just freezes up and glares at him as Tim rises from his knees to his feet with his hands up in carefully broadcast surrender.

Tim’s not even looking at the gun Jason’s got cocked and pointed at him. He’s looking passed it, right at Jason – meeting his gaze head on.

It’s infuriating how blatantly Tim is ignoring the threat Jason poses – so infuriating that it takes all of Jason’s will power to hold himself back from reminding the idiot of it.

“You know, I considered bringing a fruit basket,” Tim snarks with a smirk, still completely ignoring the gun. “But I figured you would just end up throwing it at me and being pelted with oranges is not exactly a useful means of acquiring vitamin C.”

Green flares in Jason’s vision at Tim’s flippancy.

He manages not to shoot the psychotic moron, but he can’t resist the impulse to grab at Tim’s shoulder and wrench him forward. Dragging him bodily into the apartment in order to slam his back against the nearest wall.

Jason’s gun is still cocked, drawn back to keep it out of Tim’s reach in such a way that would probably blow Jason’s ear drum out if he fired it – but that’s hardly a consideration on his mind as he fights the urge to just blow the damn kid’s brains out for the spite of it.

Because Tim has the gall to look smug.

He keeps his face smooth, his expression perfectly placid, but Jason can see it in his eyes.
Itty bitty bastard needs to lose a few teeth in that perfect evil genius smirk of his.

“What the hell are you doing here, Replacement,” Jason grits out.

“Looking for you, obviously,” Tim snipes back, painfully blasé.

Jason gives him a rough shake, banging his back into the wall again and keeping his grip on Tim’s shoulder so tight that he knows it’s painful.

“Cut the sass, shithead,” Jason snarls viciously, “Why the fuck are you even out of bed?”

Another flash of that smugness in Tim’s eyes nearly makes Jason move to strangle him then and there, but it vanishes quickly – replaced by something warm and sad that’s almost equally unbearable in a very different way.

“You saved my life, Jason,” Tim said, his voice as firm, honest, and unwavering as his gaze. “I wanted to thank you.”

The way Tim says his name alone is enough to make him want to shudder, but the way he says thank you is what draws the tremor through every cell of Jason’s body.

His grips shifts on the Glock he’d half forgotten he was holding as the Pit flares up to remind him that Tim is being an absolutely arrogant bastard by being here like this, risking himself with this ridiculously unfounded confidence that Jason isn’t going to kill him.

Tim has no real reason to think he’s safe here.

And it is not a small piece of Jason that wants to remind the idiot of why that is.

A flicker of calculation creeps across Tim’s expression.

Then he visibly steels himself and keeps his gaze locked with Jason’s as he says, “And I’m not the only one.”

The blatancy of the lie is what pushes Jason over the edge – just how obviously wrong, how clearly untrue the statement is, that grinds against Jason’s tenuous hold on sanity.

The snarl snaps viciously into place with all the venom and vehemence Jason can muster without just snapping the kid’s neck without thought.

“Ain’t nobody was thanking me when I dragged your half dead ass into the Cave, you psychotic son of a bitch,” Jason roars, tightening his hold on Tim’s throat until he winds up
squeezing tears from him like he’s little more than an especially annoying, prickly, grapefruit.

“Next time, I’m just gonna leave your sorry ass on whatever roof you fall on, maybe stick a note with my regrets on your god damn lifeless body before I ship it off to those asshats you call Family,” he hisses, muscles trembling with the sheer force of effort it takes to not kill him.

In a growl directed mostly towards himself, Jason finishes, “Might as well take the credit for killing you, since I’ll definitely be taking the blame regardless, ‘cause they certainly ain’t about to wanna thank me for anything.”

“Alfred,” Tim croaks out with a pained gap between the syllables.

Jason’s grip goes slack immediately – though he’s reeling too much to remove his hand altogether. Alfred wouldn’t blame him, right? Jason had never really dared to ask the question.

But… that night in the Cave. Alfred didn’t blame him.

Alfred had given every assurance Jason needed to feel confident in the idea that Tim would be able to survive his injuries. His gaze had been just as warm and bright and supportively calm as he ever remembered it being.

Beneath Jason’s hand, Tim breath shudders through his lungs.

“Alfred wants to thank you, in person,” Tim says in a carefully dispensed measure of air.

Jason flinches, physically recoiling from the idea of trying to deny that Alfred wouldn’t want to be so polite – but equally strained to attempt believing that Alfred would want to be anywhere near him for any reason.

Tim is insistent.

“Alfred would like it if you came by for tea.”

“Not gonna happen, scamp,” Jason grinds out.

Seeming unsurprised, Tim gives a shrug as he admits, “I figured, but I had to try.”

So nonchalant, so blasé, so… mind numbingly, idiotically reckless.

Jason’s snarl twitches and he leans into the hand on Tim’s throat as the rage begins to boil with an energetic violence. “You blew your Med set, and dragged your frickin’ half dead ass all the way out here for that?”

The pound of his pulse inside his ears is almost loud enough to drown out Tim’s overly casual response, but Jason’s brain manages to parse out the words as Tim defends his decision to come here by adding, “And to return your jacket.”
Tim gives a small twitch in his limbs, indicating himself and the article he’s wrapped in.

Namely Jason’s jacket.

The one he’d tucked around Tim in order to attempt keeping his temp up, the one he’d totally forgotten about having left behind in the Cave when he’d fled.

Jason whips his hand back like it’s been burned.

Seeing Tim wearing his jacket… standing there in what’s become his vigilante uniform, essentially, again… Jason hasn’t been this close to killing someone blindly since before he’d left to detox with the Outlaws.

It’s just a searing burn of flashbacks and rage and the hateful fear of being replaced and he has never hated anything the way he hates Tim right now.

And it’s worse, so much worse, because… because it’s not just the straightforward hate of seeing Tim in his uniform again. It’s complicated by the way the jacket’s not really a uniform, by the way it’s just a jacket… by the way something strange reacts from deep inside at the sight of Timothy god damn Drake wearing Jason’s clothes.

Jason isn’t seeing straight – feels like a sneeze could fucking kill him at the moment.

Tim’s blurry in Jason’s line of sight as he uses slow, broadcast movements to slip out of his jacket – as he holds the article out on offer. Jason can’t move to accept or reject it.

“Thank you, Jason, for saving me. I know it put you in an unpleasant situation. If the others... if they said something to you... if they... They’re upset. Irrational.”

That.

That’s a concrete rage, a direct conflict with clear sides.

Jason latches onto it.

“They’re irrational, alright,” Jason snorts. Then his brain loops back around involuntarily to apply the sentiment to Tim in a huff, “But you ain’t much better, asshole.”

Jason shudders, fists squeezing painfully tight at his sides as he growls viciously, “The fuck were you thinking?”

He’s not sure if he means what was Tim thinking in getting himself blown up, in coming to Jason once he was dying, or in coming back now that he’s slightly less dying.
Tim flinches.
It’s not quite a full body reaction, but it’s visceral – deeply rooted.

Jason can’t tell what triggered it, not for certain. But he can guess.

There’s a painful swirl of guilt that hits with the vicious satisfaction of having scared him, of having wounded him in some way beyond the physical – of having reciprocated the hurt that Jason’s felt in having been forced to face Tim’s mere existence.

His complicated, frustrating, ridiculous existence.

Tim goes oddly sour, sounding cold and brusquely clinical as he answers Jason’s question, “The gang activity in New Town was unconfirmed until that night. I was going to bring the case to you as soon as I had something actually solid.”

Now that is some fucking bull shit.

Sounds like Tim is trying to convince him that this was a one off, that the first time Tim came nosing into Crime Alley was just this week, just for this case. Which is just not even close to true. Jason saw that photo of himself on Tim’s fridge – saw the evidence that said he’s been coming deep in to Crime Alley frequently enough to learn the region’s schedules.

“The fuck you were,” Jason accuses, demanding, “How long have you been sneaking onto my turf for shits and giggles?”

“Since the day you got back,” Tim admits, open, honest, and willing. And he’s not even trying to disguise that he means from the first time Jason got back…

Which is better than the bull shit attempt to convince him that he hasn’t been meddling in Jason’s shit from the beginning, but it still feels utterly disconcerting.

Jason can’t process what he’s feeling or thinking nearly well enough to select an appropriate response – so he just maintains his glare.

Tim’s arm begins to tremble at the strain of holding out Jason’s jacket and he slowly lowers the offer – folding the pliant leather over his forearms and letting them rest in front of him for a moment like he doesn’t want to let go.

“Alfred wants to see you,” Tim reasserts, “Desperately.”

The undeniable Truth of it makes a vicious shudder run through Jason’s core.

“The Manor will be empty tomorrow, almost completely,” Tim mentions, quietly pleading –
somehow managing it without sounding pathetic. “I'll be back on bed rest, but Bruce and Dick and Damian and Cass and Steph and Babs will all be away at work or school between 10 am and 4 pm. All of them. I've checked their schedules, confirmed it. And it’ll be like that every Thursday for the next two months. By next week I can arrange to be gone, as well.”

Jason can’t move, can’t quite tell if he wants to hit the kid or if it’s just the Pit trying to make him do it, but either way he wants Tim to shut up and isn’t capable of being anything less than lethal if he goes about insisting it.

“If you wanted to drop by, you wouldn't have to stay – or see anyone else. And Alfred would be very much appreciative,” Tim finishes, gaze digging into Jason for any sign of a potentially affirmative reaction.

Jason doesn’t give him anything.

A moment later, Tim sighs heavily and reluctantly shifts the jacket in his hold. He gives the article a gentle toss to let it land on the arm of the couch Jason had crashed on last night and taking a few cautious steps towards the door.

“Please, Jason,” he says, pleading laid out undisguised in both his gaze and in his voice as he wraps up, “Just think about it.”

Jason can’t respond and with that as his closing, Tim slips out the door.

A moment later, Jason hears the sound of a motorcycle tearing off down the road.

Jason doesn’t move for a long while.

When he does, it’s to throw his strudel in the oven – though his stomach churns at the thought of eating it… Alfred taught him the recipe for it, after all.

He stands in front of the oven, hands pressed against the lip, head bowed low between heavy shoulder. He’s leaned over enough to be able to watch the pastry rise as it bakes – stares at it blankly for the entire duration of the process.

Mechanically, Jason pulls it out and lets it cool, then eats the whole thing despite the ashy taste each bite leaves in his mouth – because Jason was raised better than to waste food, and his life experience had compounded the lesson into an ingrained habit.

After that he falls back onto the couch – feet towards the jacket Tim returned – and slips back into a fitful oblivion. His rest is unsettled, but no clear nightmares form to jolt him fully into wakefulness... he stays on the couch drifting in and out of a vague half-sleep.

Jason almost wishes he’d chosen a safe house with a TV rigged up, but the back of his mind is glad he didn’t because he’d feel even more pathetic if he had the option for TV available and still couldn’t muster up the effort needed to turn it on.

He stays like that most of the day.
By early evening, he manages to gather up the energy to run in to grab a cheap burger and some fries before heading out on the sloppiest, laziest patrol he’s ever walked.

Jason spends the night roaming around, breaking up bar fights and a few attempted muggings, but nothing substantial. He doesn’t do any legitimate work to forward any of his ongoing cases, and he stays well away from the grey area of New Town and the far side of Burnley – certain that the region will be crawling with uninvited Bats that he simply does not have the stamina to deal with right now.

About an hour before dawn, Jason pays for a large pizza with a hundred dollar bill, doesn’t take his change, and heads back to the safe house where Tim found him earlier that day.

He’s not entirely sure why he doesn’t move base.

He could. He should.

He has before.

But he doesn’t.

The jacket Tim returned is still laid across the arm of Jason’s couch.

He hasn’t even touched it, yet. Probably wouldn’t ever, if it weren’t one of his favorites.

By the next morning, Jason’s back to business. Mostly.

He’s resolved to just ignore the situation and focus on his own shit.

He takes the jacket with him when he moves ten blocks southeast – to a crumbling penthouse that used to be a high end suite in the luxury of Park Row. Now, it’s got a basic bit of cable and functioning hot water, but that’s about it of the luxury left – well, that and the pretty sweet view it has over the highway that borders Sheldon Park. The park ain’t a nice place anymore, not really, but it’s still a bit a green in Gotham’s endless grey and it’s got a nice set up of lit pathways that look mysterious and magical in the dark (at least, it does if you can ignore the awareness of all the hookers and drug dealers populating the shadows).

Pancakes for breakfast, a few hours on active case files – though still none even tangentially related to New Town.

He’s antsy though, antsy enough to decide to take a smoke break in the park.

In an attempt to prove to himself that he doesn’t care about anything that happened yesterday, Jason wears the jacket Tim returned. It’s a bit warm for a jacket of any kind, but it’s always breezy by the harbor.

He’s camped out on the piling under the base of the Kane Memorial Bridge before he crams
his hands into his pockets in search of the smokes he always keeps on him.

The pack in the jacket is still there – which kind of surprises Jason, being that Tim had always been vocally disapproving of his smoking habit, almost from the day they’d formally met – and his lighter’s there, too.

But there’s an additional object.

A little marble statuette – a chess piece.

He’s not sure if the white knight is Tim’s way of attempting to make some kind of flawed commentary, but the piece is an elegant horse head carving – one Jason has always been enamored with and one he’s intimately familiar with…

This piece is from the chess set in the Wayne Manor Library, the one that he used to spend hour and hours playing with on Sunday afternoons with Alfred.

The weight of it in his hand makes the world sway slightly beneath Jason’s feet.

He’s halfway through the instinctive motion to chuck the knight straight out into the ocean before he catches himself. Jason’s definitely an asshole, but he’s not that kind of asshole.

This chess set is worth twice what his current safe house goes for on the market, and it would be a cryin’ shame to ditch a single piece – besides, one of the first few simple, superfluous pleasures Jason learned that he enjoyed was the warmth and awe he felt at the sight of a complete and intricate chess set. The one in the Library had always been his favorite.

The pieces were about twice as large as in most chess sets, and weighty with both a physical mass and an intriguing gravitas of Art.

Before he’d even learned to play the game properly, Jason had enjoyed moving the pieces around in his own imaginary scenarios of epic clashes and fantastic battles.

It wouldn’t be right to break up the set because Jason’s on a bender…

He should mail it back to the Manor, or… or something… Like maybe just walking across the bridge he’s camped under and taking the easy, twenty minute jog through Bristol to just deliver it in person… It would be much more efficient that way.

At the risk of knowingly falling prey to Tim’s obvious machinations, Jason considers it.

He knows that Tim did it specifically to manipulate him – how he knew about the chess set, this one in particular, Jason doesn’t know and doesn’t want to – but still, Tim asked him to just consider stopping by, he wouldn’t have to stay, and Alfred…

Alfred may not want to see him, exactly, but he also wouldn’t turn Jason away and Jason is kind of… well, he hasn’t really seen Alfred since he got back.

And he’s not a good enough liar to pretend to himself that he hasn’t wanted to…
Jason’s on the Bristol side of the bridge before he even realizes that he’s wavering enough to stand up as he considers the option.

By the time he recognizes that he definitely wants to see Alfred enough to risk being caught by the rest of the Family, Jason’s approaching the curve of uber wealthy estate grounds that make up Bristol Heights. Beyond that is the Drake Estate, the Gotham County Forest National Park and Nature Reserve, and Wayne Manor.

If Jason were in any less perfect shape than he is, he might’ve had time to reconsider his decision to visit the Manor, but as it is, he makes it to the main drive in fifteen minutes. He uses the long curve of asphalt to run the variables one last time, hesitating with each step.

Tim said no one but him and Alfred would even be home.

Jason doesn’t think Tim would lie about that, but he could be misinformed – even if he fact checked the schedules, Jason is just that kind of lucky to know better than to expect anything this risky to go smooth.

To mitigate the risk of being ambushed as much as possible, Jason walks right up to the front door – ironically, the most obvious and traditional route inside is the one with the least aggressive security measures in place. Wayne Manor doesn’t get many legitimate visitors, but the ones it does get are frequently reporters that would have a field day with the scandalous potential drummed up by being faced with any of the Bat’s more creative security measures.

He marches right up to the door and knocks before he loses his nerve – just once, and just firmly enough to barely scrape by to count as anything, but it’s a knock, none the less.

Jason vows to give it no more than fifteen seconds before he just drops the white knight onto the porch railing and kicks it back to Crime Alley.

His hands are clenched fists in his jacket pockets as he waits, every heart beat a nerve wracking throb of sensation.

And then the door opens.

Jason’s half curled away, refusing to make eye contact, but he can clearly see the rest of Alfred revealed within the doorway. There’s a stutter in his motion, from when he first cracks the door to when he pulls it wider and greets, “Master Jason.”

There’s a hint of breathlessness in the words, surprise and something else that Jason’s too afraid to analyze.

He takes a breath, braces himself, and peeks up sheepishly to reply, “Hey, Alfie…”

Alfred draws a sharp breath and Jason forgets any words he may have wanted to follow up with. A ripple of emotion runs through Alfred, far more visible than Jason is used to seeing from him, but still stoically reserved enough to make reading the exact emotions impossible.
“Won’t you join me for tea?”

The question comes after a distended quiet, but it doesn’t feel awkward or out of place.

It feels natural.

Jason is terrifyingly tempted to say yes.

“Nah, Alf,” Jason manages eventually, hand wrapping around to pull the knight out of his pocket as he continues, “I just... I came by to, uh, to give this back.”

Alfred dutifully holds out his hand and allows Jason to hand over the chess piece.

A clear wave of nostalgia washes over the butler as he looks over the knight and Jason doesn’t think he’s imagining it when he notes a brief flicker of a soft smile.

Before Alfred has to ask, Jason explains preemptively, “Uh, Timbers must’a nicked it before he brought my jacket back yesterday. I found it in my pocket this morning. Figured you’d be wanting it back.”

“I sincerely appreciate the gesture, Master Jason,” Alfred promises.

It makes a wash of peace flood through Jason, makes him feel like, for once, he made the right call on doing something.

Another beat of silence hits; not quite awkward, but definitely not easy.

After a moment, Alfred side tracks to mention, “Master Timothy is resting upstairs if you would like to check up on his recovery. Excursion yesterday aside, he’s been a model patient – well on his way to healing.”

Almost suspiciously so, if Alfred’s tone is anything to go by.

Jason doesn’t blame him, Tim’s a slippery little bastard.

But he’s glad to hear that Alfred thinks he’s behaving well and actually trying to heal himself up at this point. Jason figures the compliance won’t last long, though.

Also figures that his appearance wouldn’t help matters – especially if he can’t keep his temper perfectly contained, always a risk in general, but always a higher risk around Tim.

Still, he hesitated with Alfred offers, “Would you like to see him?”

Because he would.

Jason trusts Alfred’s assessment, but a first person view would make him feel better.

He still hates Tim, more than ever in some ways, but he still doesn’t want the kid to die.

Or even to be hurt.

And Jason definitely doesn’t want to be the factor that complicates his recovery.
“Nah, Alf,” Jason refuses, leaning physically away from the temptation as he begins to think about how logical it would be to start backing off before anything else happens to run the status quo. Again, Jason knows he’s just *that* kind of lucky and he doesn’t want to ruin shit any more than he already has.

If the others come home early, if they realize Jason’s been there… it’s gonna be a fight, which will upset Tim, which will send him tumbling off into another idiotic bout of recklessness.

“I should prolly be gettin' outta here anyway. Wouldn't be too good ruffle any extra feathers, eh? Bet Timbo's already in pretty hot water about getting' me involved to start with.”

Alfred huffs, chiding firmly, “*Nonsense. Master Tim is only alive right now because of that decision, and because of your choice to help him, and I'll not hear another word otherwise.*”

Warmth blooms in Jason’s chest – a dangerously comforting sensation.

“Either way,” Jason presses after a strained moment, “I should be shovin’ off.”

Jason’s already moving to walk away when Alfred’s voice stops him in his tracks with an undeniable rebuke, the kind to which Jason will never out-grow reacting. “*Master Jason. It would be remiss of me to allow a child of this House to leave without a proper meal. At least, let me provide you with a spot of something to take with you. We have the leftovers from a lovely four cheese chicken lasagna; always a favorite of yours, as I recall.*”

*A child of this House*, Alfred called him.

*Always a favorite of yours*, Alfred remembered.

Jason doesn’t know what he’s feeling, but he’s *hella* sure that he doesn’t like feeling it.

“You simply must allow me to pack you up enough for a good dinner,” Alfred insists, adding, “*It won’t take more than a moment.*”

Without waiting for Jason to make any kind of response, Alfred turns on his heel and disappears into the Manor – leaving Jason stiff and awkward and unsettled on the porch.

He can’t just *leave* now…

Alfred’s getting him food. *Good* food.

And he’d be horribly insulted and upset if Jason were to refuse it.

But Jason also can’t just *stand* here, out in the open like this… it’s too vulnerable a position, too awkward a pause point, too… *close*.

Jason doesn’t belong here.
Doesn’t fit here, shouldn’t be invading the lives and space of those who do fit…

But he can’t just stand here, and he can’t just leave…

Jason hasn’t set foot in the Manor in… almost three years, at this point. He’s been back to the Cave – more than once, even – but he’s never ventured upstairs.

To the place he used to think of as home.

Crossing the threshold of his own volition will be different than if he were dragged inside – say by a returning Bat Family member with a chip on their shoulder and a grudge against an easy bad guy to blame. But still… Jason’s tempted.

He doesn’t want to go inside.

He doesn’t belong here, never really fit here, and doesn’t want to have to feel all that angst at the disparity again…

And yet… Alfred’s chicken lasagna is one of his very favorite meals, one he’s never managed to perfectly replicate. So he also doesn’t want to leave.

In the end, it’s the dual pronged pressure of it, the combination of the tempting promise of food and the painful ache of standing outside so exposed, that pushes him inside.

He gently closes the door behind him and shuffles awkwardly across the foyer, trying not to look at anything long enough to feel the crushing weight of suppressed memories.

Jason hovers at the edge of the kitchen, watching Alfred work in silence – his movements efficient and methodical as ever, and just as easy to find comfort in watching.

It is far, far too easy to fall into the calm of it, to lean up against the island’s counter top and just watch Alfred work. It’s too much. Too nice, too easy.

He can’t be here.

He doesn’t deserve this… this peace. Not here, not now… not ever, not after everything else he’s done and had done to him since this place last felt comfortable… He didn’t even really deserve it then, he just got lucky – and it took a while for the Universe to realize it.

Took the Universe a while to course correct.

Jason doesn’t exactly think he deserved to die, and certainly not the way he did, but still.

Being back here shouldn’t feel like this.
“Master Timothy will be pleased to hear you stopped by,” Alfred mentions suddenly, startling Jason out of his thoughts.

Running on rote, Jason snorts and snarks, “Idiot prolly already knows.”

Alfred hms an agreeing response.

The tension inside Jason suddenly snaps, flooding him with a welling distress and the kind of uncertain malcontent that makes his muscles tense and his skin itch.

“How’s he doin’ this, Alf?”

“Doing what, Master Jason?”

Alfred’s voice is soft and soothing, but it makes Jason take a step backwards as he fights to keep from curling in on himself with an admission the vulnerability he feels.

Gesturing around at the Manor, at the cooler, at the white knight set on the island’s counter top, Jason just flails to explain, “This. Just all of this.”

Jason rakes his fingers roughly through his hair, adding, “He’s risking his place here, and taking stupid risks with his god damn life, and for what?”

“For you, dear boy,” Alfred assures instantly, without even chastising him for his unbecoming use of such foul language. “And his place here is not in jeopardy, it never will be. He’s doing this because he wants to help you see that. And to see that your place here is still open for you, as well, should you wish to return to it.”

Jason stiffens, fists squeezing at his side – hateful words burning on the tip of his tongue as he resists the urge to grab the white knight and bash it through the nearest china cabinet.

“All families have their fissures, their moments of internal strife,” Alfred sighs as if he doesn’t see Jason struggling not to break things. “This Family has more than it’s fair share, certainly, but the heart of the matter is that we are a Family. You may disavow us, but no matter how feeble our claims on you may be, you will always have unbreakable claims on us.”

Alfred zips the cooler and smooths the strap across the top as he adds, “Master Timothy believes in you, Master Jason. As do I. Master Timothy simply wishes to convince you of it.”

“Alfie, no… I…” Jason chokes out.

He can’t handle this.

But Alfred wouldn’t lie.
And Timmers might be sly as shit, but he’s never shy about it… when he wants something, he says so, and then moves the fucking Universe to get it.

But this… this doesn’t work.

He wants to think Jason’s still redeemable, still good somehow…

It’s wrong.

Not just impossible, but wrong.

Jason’s not good, not even kinda good. And Tim’s almost getting himself killed because of this stupid delusion of his. And no matter what Alfred says, no matter how much the butler means it, the baby bird’s place here IS at risk.

There’s only so much friction a guy can take and getting on the Bat’s bad side is a sure fire way to ratchet up the pressure, and with Dick and the Demon Spawn against him, too…

Tim’s risking way too much.

And Jason does not deserve it.

Can’t ever hope to deserve it, can’t even fathom why Tim, of all people, thinks he does.

“Why would he,” Jason croaks. “I tried… I almost… I killed him, Alf…”

“You chose not to,” Alfred replies simply.

“That’s… That’s not… If that’s what he said happened…” Jason’s snarl is turning vicious and the venom of the Pit is sizzling with the awareness of how that jackass is just upstairs and about as defenseless as he’ll ever be.

Before Jason can do anything about that revelation – before he fights between the possible reactions of pushing down or following through on the urge to go find that asshat and teach him a lesson about speaking for Jason when Jason could do his own damn explaining – the situation is changed by the sound of the door to the main garage being flung open.

Jason’s eyes flick to the clock over the stove as the rage settles in a sudden whomp.

4:17 pm
Tim promised the Manor would be empty today – but only between ten and four…

Which means Jason’s time is up.

His muscles are tense and he’s ready to bolt – to fight his way out if he has to – when Alfred speaks up. “Master Jason,” he says quietly, pushing the cooler of leftovers toward him.

Jason hesitates for a long second before he grabs the strap and slips it over his shoulder.

He doesn’t deserve this, but he’s taking it.

Maybe that’s always been part of his problem, but he can’t make himself say no to something so good as Alfred’s home cooking – can’t imagine himself growing into any kind of person that could manage the feat.

Before Jason’s taken more than a step away from the island, Dick bursts into the room from the far side – a strangled, whining complaint on his tongue that dies in his throat with a horrible gurgle as he freezes up when seeing Jason.

It takes his brain a moment to process the sight – a moment Jason should have used to kick start his escape, but failed to as his own body seized up.

“Jason.”

Shock, pain, guilt, fear – the rapid swirl of Dickie bird’s vibrant emotional storm is uncomfortably easy to read, as always. And the fury that comes after the initial shock of impact smooths it all down to a singular, pointed sensation that Dick can funnel into action.

His fists clench at his sides as his body instinctively adjusts into fight mode as he grits his teeth together in demanding, “What are you doing here?”

“Fuck off, dickface,” Jason snarls.

“Language, Master Jason,” Alfred chides sharply.

Neither Dick nor Jason look away from each other.

The cautious, infuriated standoff lasts until a loud, clanging thunk sounds from the direction of the stairs, and Dick’s attention darts off towards it.

“Tim,” he whispers fretfully in his second of distraction.

Jason exploits the moment to get a head start towards the door.
Dick’s always been faster than him, so he’ll need every advantage he can get to escape without having to beat Dick’s ass again so he can have a real hope of getting away.

“What did you do to him?” Dick demands venomously as he charges after Jason.

Jason barely makes it to the edge of the kitchen before Dick manages to latch onto his elbow in an effort to hold him back.

“Saved his fucking life,” Jason snarls, ripping his arm free, “And for all the trouble it’s gotten me, next time, I ain’t gonna bother with it.”

“But what the hell are you doing here, now,” Dick demands, squaring up as Jason turns to face him ready to fight.

“Nothin’ at all, dumbass,” Jason retorts.

Before a pause could settle into place, Tim appears at the kitchen door closest to the stairs and shouts Dick’s name with a pleading that makes the golden boy break focus.

As Dick looks away, Jason whips back towards the door and sprints out of the room. A crash sounds behind him, and the sound of breaking china, and Dick’s voice shouting Tim’s name in alarm, but Jason doesn’t turn around.

Jason feels a pang in his chest, but… he’s pretty sure it’s not from worry.

He can recognize the sounds of a distraction when he hears them – and he can grit his teeth through the insult of Tim’s realizing that he needs a distraction and focus on the getting away part of this debacle…

And he can push himself to sprint hard enough on the way back to Crime Alley to keep his thoughts in order on a narrow line of focus that’s fixed entirely on keeping his limbs moving in decent coordination.

And when he gets to his safe house, Jason keeps himself focused on packing Alfred’s offerings of delicious food into the fridge – and setting the metal container filled with Alfred’s special blend of red tea in the very back of his highest cabinet.

Then grabs a bottle of Jack, plops down on the couch so hard it creeks, and clicks on the TV – channel surfing until he lands on a mid day marathon of Airport Security New Zealand.

As Jason curls up and lets the drone of idiocy in neat accents from people stopped by New Zealand customs drip through his brain, Jason very carefully does not think about how Tim didn’t have to do that with Dick… how he didn’t have any good reason to distract the asshole to let Jason get away successfully.

He very carefully does not think about how much he does not deserve this ridiculous good
fortune of somehow being in the god damn baby bird’s moderately good graces…

_ _ _ _ _ _ _

...i just wanna be in the Light (light that surrounds you)

Chapter End Notes

Poor Jason. Dickie bird is being an asshole, and I have to warn y'all he still gets a lot worse before he gets better... I know, it's hard to see how that's possible, but it is. And then Babs gets involved and knocks a bit of sense into him.

It takes a while though, and a few very tough conversations.

NEXT TIME: Tim suffers through Dick's absolute asshole-er-y. (And no spoilers, but it's pretty damn bad. I legit had to keep myself for making someone punch Dick while writing the crap he spews...)
'cause i don't wanna (wait)

Chapter Summary

Tim is forced to face the consequences of his actions, and he does not handle it well.

Chapter Notes

The awesomeness promised with the start of 2019 is beginning to take effect for me, and I hope the same can be said for all of you amazing readers!

WARNING: this one gets pretty angsty, and there's a complete disregard on Tim's part for what constitutes acceptable tolerances of recklessness (there IS a line between reckless and suicidal, and Tim openly states that he considers the point moot).

Also, Dick is an ass. But this is the start of him acknowledging that and trying to be better, so if you love dickiebird like I do, don't fret, I won't let you wallow in his idiocy much longer... well, at least not /utter/ idiocy. He does put his foot in his mouth a few more times before he really figures things out.

^_~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve – 'cause i don't wanna (wait)

When Jason shows up to the Manor later than Tim had hoped he would – when he doesn’t arrive until 3:36 pm – Tim knows right away that there is a significant possibility that someone would arrive home to interrupt before Jason was ready to leave.

Damian, Steph, and Dick were all usually free by 4 on Thursdays, though most of the time they didn’t head straight back to the Manor.

If anyone had to show up early, Tim has to hope it would be Damian.

Hilariously enough, for all that Damian got on Tim’s nerves, he strongly suspected that the gremlin would be the least alarmed of any of them to find Jason in the kitchen with Alfred.

The little Demon would not be pleased to see him, certainly, but he would not be very likely to react emotionally, and or do anything drastic to disrupt the cautious peace that merely being in Alfred’s presence could generate for a Bat in turmoil.
Steph… *might* be okay.

She would not be happy. But if she fought with Jason, it would be a verbal argument at worst – and while that could turn pretty damn nasty between them, both Jason and Steph were scrappy enough folk to be able to walk an insult off eventually, even one that might strike straight to the bone.

If Steph showed up before Jason left, they’d fight, and it’d be rough, but they’d recover.

Eventually.

Honestly, a straightforward fight between them here might be enough to start building up a kind of mutual respect. Some sort of street wise Fight Club *cred*, or something.

But if it was *Dick*…

If Dick gets home first, Tim knows a physical altercation would be almost unavoidable.

Dick and Jason were both just such tactile people… even for how Jason could mortally wound with a single word, he had always been, and certainly still is, a person who interacts with the world as a physical entity. Even his words, which Tim would rarely consider objects in any kind of physical context, are utilized in the same way as a different person would loft a stone.

Jason pulled the metaphysical into genuine physical space and used it to launch the kind of mental blow that could actually do serious bodily harm.

So… when Tim hears the unmistakable sound of Dick’s motorcycle pealing up the long curve of the Manor’s back driveway… his stomach squeezes tight in trepidation.

Not only is it unfortunate that *Dick* is the one arriving home first, but circumstances are even worse for the fact that Dick himself is already emotionally compromised – he only uses the back driveway when he’s been out riding around in the countryside to blow off steam from some emotional high he already knows would not be beneficial to bring home.

The adrenaline high of tearing over asphalt at insane speeds helps, but Tim knows it doesn’t actually *calm* him so much as it displaces the negative energy into something more positive… which means that if a negative circumstance pops up – say stumbling unawares into finding Jason in the kitchen – he’s gonna spin all that energy right back into something bad.

Something with the potential to do real harm.

Tim is on his feet and hobbling to his bedroom door as fast as he can – which, tragically, isn’t all that quick, even when he’s using the stupid crutches he’d been given after having nearly torn his stitches out while visiting Jason yesterday, and even when totally ignoring how all this rushing about is pulling dangerously hard at those same stitches, which are already tender.

He’s pretty damn sure he tears them completely when he vaults down the stairs, angling the
jump from the second floor landing to use the sweeping curve of the railing below as a stepping stone to propel him towards the kitchen.

Tim lands hard and rolls through the inelegant crash with his teeth gnashed together in hopes of smothering the pained groan that jars his lungs.

Before Tim regains his feet, he hears Dick’s voice shout, “What did you do to him.”

Black fury at his body – for not letting him move quickly enough to get down there in time to warn Jason of Dick’s impending arrival – rises in Tim and his movements stutter with an additional weight of spiteful resistance that has not been helped by the impact of his fall.

Tim makes it to the kitchen door just as Dick manages to latch onto Jason’s elbow and demand, “What the hell are you doing here, now?”

“Nothing at all, dumbass,” Jason snarls back as he succeeds in ripping his arm free – without disrupting the heavy cooler Tim is deeply relieved to see slung over his shoulder.

The good vibes gained from Alfred’s cooking might even be enough to mitigate the worst of the bad vibes from this run in with Dick – as long as Jason gets away now, before it escalates.

Tim calls Dick’s name with the kind of desperate, innocent pleading he knows Dick is physically unable to ignore. It makes the oldest of the Wayne wards look away long enough for Jason to seize the momentary glance as a viable opening for escape.

Dick’s not distracted for long though and he whips back around as he registers Jason’s movement – fully prepared to stop him by any means necessary.

But Tim’s prepared for drastic measures, too.

His hand darts out to snatch up a coffee cup and he hurls it at the island, on an angle that will make the spray of ceramic shards hit Dick’s back with substantial speed – probably not quite hard enough to pierce the leathers he’s still sporting from his bike ride, but still more than hard enough to make him feel it.

On impact, Dick wheels around – confused, concerned, and caught between the pull of disparate urges he can’t effectively use any kind of logic to choose between.

Jason successfully makes use of the distraction and the Manor’s front door slams closed on his exit before Dick manages to get his brain to process the situation.

Pained with the ache of an imagined betrayal, and deprived of the actual object of his current fury, Dick winds up glaring at Tim – with big blue eyes screwed up with unshed tears.

“What the hell was he doing here?”

“I invited him,” Tim returns, glaring right back.

“Invited? Wha— how could you be so reckless? He could’ve killed you, Tim! He could’ve been here just to finish what he’d started with that god damn explosion,” Dick shrieks.

“He didn’t have anything to do with the explosion, Dick,” Tim shouts right back.

Tim is completely done with this bullshit today.

DONE.
He’s on back up plan number 47 – forty fucking seven – because of how far Dick’s head is lodged up his ass, and he’s not keen on playing nice any longer. “He saved my fucking life, so stop being such a freaking asshole about it. You know, for all the grief he’s getting for fucking helping me, he’s probably just going to let me die next time, so thanks for that.”

That wounds Dick, exactly like Tim meant it to.

He’s been watching Jason long enough to have learned how to hit hard without landing a single physical blow and he’s not concerned about pulling any punches. Between Jason’s sharp example and his own mother’s pointed teachings, Tim could probably do enough mental damage to genuinely kill a person with nothing but his words.

If this were a physical fight, Dick would destroy him – he’s barely wining against gravity, at the moment – but in a game of mental manipulation, Tim’s always got the upper hand.

He’s crushed the smoldering remains of the almost nonexistent souls belonging to the kind of business negotiators that have made Bruce go crying to Lucius Fox for help with corralling. It means that obliterating the fight inside a gooey golden retriever gone rabid like Dick is literal child’s play – something he can manage easily, even while half dead and working with his vision going blurry and black around the edges.

Dick sways back onto his heels, physically recoiling from the idea of Tim being so unapologetically vicious with him.

He might continue to sway, but that could also be Tim starting to lose the tenuous grip on balance he’s been clutching. Consciousness alone is pretty much all he can reasonably manage right now, and even that’s starting to feel rather overly ambitious.

“Timmy,” Dick breathes, immediate concern bowling through the anger.

“Master Timothy,” Alfred chides gently, arriving in a mysterious blink of existence right at Tim’s elbow. “You appear to have torn your stitches. Let’s get that seen to, shall we? I’m sure Master Richard can handle cleaning up this mess without us.”

Tim gives a nod – well, at least he thinks he does – and Alfred’s hands on his back and elbow begin steering him towards the mudroom near the Manor’s spacious West Patio. The room intended to store only gardening tools has been retrofitted to hold everything necessary for minor and non-emergency surgery while still keeping adequate room maintained for the gardening supplies, holding everything from sterile scissors and hazmat bins to the shears Alfred uses to prune the rose bushes and the most massive leaf rake Tim has ever seen.

It doesn’t seem plausible that the room could possibly remain genuinely sterile in the way needed for an operating theater – even one meant only for minor bodily repairs – but Alfred is magic, and no one would ever think to question his ability to keep a place clean.

Alfred starts prepping the supplies needed to touch up Tim’s dressings while Tim fights back a pained wail at the effort of pealing off his shirt. He’s definitely torn his stitches and he’s bleeding rather significantly though the wrap of bandages that had been covering them.

He can’t feel the wound on his leg – but he can’t really feel that leg, at all – so it’s safe to assume he tore those stitches, too.
He’s gonna need Alfred’s help to get the flannels off, though. Coordinating two limbs to get the shirt tossed aside has been trial enough to prove that he’s not gonna be able to manage anything more complicated on his own.

Alfred doesn’t seem to mind.

He certainly doesn’t comment as he helps Tim lay back to provide access to the wound on his torso. With the old bandages removed, Alfred makes quick work of repairing the damage Tim’s done to himself – with a remarkable painlessness that Tim hopes he can attribute to some topical anesthetic he must’ve missed seeing Alfred apply.

It’s unfortunately far more likely that his brain had just lost the ability to process the sensations and has just cut off the feedback from his nervous system entirely.

Tim tries to help Alfred get his pants off by raising his hips as much as he can when he feels Alfred tugging at his waist band, but he’s not entirely sure how successful he is at it.

He slips into the black of total unconsciousness before he feels the soft fabric of his pants begin to pool around his ankles.

It’s dark when Tim wakes.

The kind of dark that says he’s late for Patrol.

Panic streaks through him for a full second as he tenses his muscles to attempt pulling himself from the warm comfort of his bed. The panic is quickly replaced by pain, which reminds him of his current injuries and the whole, ongoing debacle with Jason – and the immediate complication of yet another wrench being thrown into his plans for dealing with that debacle.

What happened downstairs is a complication that is bitingly unnecessary, and it grinds painfully against Tim’s reasoning abilities, making it seem like acting rational and kind and careful is just too much work to stomach.

Especially since it will never be acknowledged at all, let alone appreciated for its psychotic degree of difficulty.

He hopes it was today that the horrible interaction in the Manor’s kitchen took place – that it was just this afternoon that it happened and he hasn’t already missed an entire day (or more) because he needed to push himself too hard to stop the fight between Dick and Jason from escalating to a
As long as he didn’t lose a whole day, Tim counts the over exertion as totally worth it.

It sucks that exacerbated anemia hurts so much, but, whatever.

Tim’ll live.

Probably.

Definitely live, actually – he’s in the Manor.

He wouldn’t be waking up in his bed room if he were at any real risk of dying. He would’ve been in the Cave’s med bay, at best, and a clinic or even a legit hospital at worst – if the whole possibly dying thing was actually still on the table.

He can’t resist a groan as his muscles protest the attempt he makes to stretch, and the sound of fabric rustling near his feet in response alerts him to the presence of someone else in the room before he even opens his eyes.

It makes him really not want to open his eyes.

He does anyway, but he savors his last few seconds of peace before he does.

Dick is perched in the cozy arm chair at the foot of Tim’s bed, and he’d probably had his socked feet up on the mattress before Tim began to show signs of waking.

“You’re benched,” Tim deduces by his presence, feeling slightly, irrationally smug about the circumstance. Dick deserves to be benched for his idiocy.

Dick’s slow breath in and out is more than enough confirmation.

“You’re under watch,” Dick counters.

He has the winning hand here, and he delivers it with a sad, flat tone, and all the gravitas of a Reaper at the Gates.

Tim’s stomach drops, the whole world slides out from under him.

He’s on a suicide watch. Officially.
For Dick to be camped out here, it has to be an order laid down by Bruce directly. Apparently, he can’t be trusted to be left alone for any reason, even for a second.

“What for?” Tim demands, outraged.

Pained concern floods Dick’s expression.

“Tim,” he breathes. “You were hardly cleared to get out of bed, and the first thing you did was run off to find Jason. Alone. You’re picking fights, tearing stitches, being reckless…”

“I’m fine,” Tim huffs, a titch irked by the way Alfred apparently tattled on him.

Dick doesn’t respond for a beat.

When he does speak, it’s not a direct rebuttal to Tim’s point, “We’re worried about you.”

“Worried?” Tim scoffs, “Like you were worried about me the last time I was right?”

He gets an immense satisfaction out of the way Dick flinches at the wholly relevant accusation. It doesn’t make the situation better, but it makes him feel better.

“Tim, it isn’t like that,” Dick attempts. “This is different. You’re not grieving like you were before, but you are behaving just as erratically.”

“I’m fine,” Tim reiterates.

“You’re not, Tim.”

“Yes, I am,” he retorts sharply. “Everything was going reasonably to plan before you and Bruce ruined everything by blaming Jason for this stupid injury to start with—”

“It was part of the plan to get yourself blown up?”

Dick’s worry for him chafes for its legitimacy and Tim gives an exasperated sigh. “Getting blown up was not the plan, but working the case connected to the lab that was apparently rigged to explode was part of the plan. And I had contingencies in place in case something happened.”

“Contingencies like going to a man who tried to kill you?”

Tim rolls his eyes.

“Why is everybody so hung up on that?”

“Tim, he tried to kill you!”
“But he didn’t, and not because I was in any shape to fight him off or because anyone else showed up to help,” Tim points out. “He didn’t kill me because he chose not to, while in a full on Pit rage, and barely capable of making any kind of decision, let alone a rational one.”

“He’s still dangerous, irrational, and more than capable of hurting you,” Dick returns vehemently, gaze flicking down to Tim’s neck.

He must have bruises from the less than warm welcome he’d received when he’d finally found the right pick of Jason’s safe houses – and he must be dressed in a shirt with a collar that’s low enough to expose them. An unfortunate circumstance on both counts.

Feeling petty and pissy, Tim counters, “That could’ve been Damian.”

“His hands aren’t that big, and he wouldn’t attack you while you’re injured. He wants to prove he’s better than you when you’re at your best,” Dick snipes back.

It’s an unfortunately fair point.

The gremlin is an asshole, but he is an honorable asshole.

Tim didn’t say it because he really meant it, he’d only gone down that route because he’s pissed that Dick is so upset over Jason hurting him, but completely okay with Damian doing it.

Dick’s obvious bias shouldn’t surprise him at this point.

“He didn’t mean it, I surprised him,” Tim defends weakly, starting to feel the aching exhaustion of the anemia again. The adrenalin and aggression of fighting with Dick had helped him ignore it for a while, but Tim knows that he’s not going to be able keep this up for much longer… He’s already losing ground on the logical arguments side of things.

“That doesn’t make it better,” Dick tells him, voice soft and sad.

Tim doesn’t have a retort ready. And his brain is behaving too sluggishly to find one.

Dick sighs with a heavy sympathy and says, “I know you miss him. I get it, okay? I do too. And after getting the Titans back, after getting Bruce back… and with Jason come back to life… I get that you want him to come home. But it’s different. He’s different.”

“He’s grown up, Dick,” Tim challenges. “You just miss the kid he used to be too much to see how he’s still the same person in all the ways that actually matter.”

“The Jason I know would never have tried to kill you,” Dick whispers, “Not you.”

“He didn’t try to kill me, he tried to kill the Robin that replaced him,” Tim delineates firmly. “It just happened to be me who was wearing the pixie boots.”
Dick’s pained expression doesn’t change.

Tim resists the urge to huff openly again, and he barely manages to keep his glower from darkening dramatically to reflect the swirling storm of his thoughts – plainly revealing how dark his mood has turned will not be helpful in terms of attempting to get off the suicide watch.

“If you believe that, if it could even possibly be true,” Dick says slowly, looking down at his fingers. They are tangled together in a concerted effort to keep himself from physically reaching out to Tim, which actually lends legitimacy to this stilted attempt to keep an open mind as he asks, “Why can’t you just take it slow? Test the waters more gently. Prove to us why you think that Jason is… that he can… Why can’t you wait for us all to be on the same page?”

It’s more of an effort to understand Tim’s ongoing thought processes and his current feelings and his unfolding plans than Tim has seen from Dick since before Damian showed up.

It should make Tim happy – because, his plan to convince the two most stubborn members of the Family is apparently starting to impact at least one of them…

But… right now, with the anemic exhaustion, a throbbing headache, and the painful swill of a failed attempt to push a plan forward all stacking up to crush him, Tim finds that he doesn’t particularly care how genuine Dick’s current attempt is to truly understand.

“I don’t want to wait anymore, Dick,” Tim sighs, shaking his head and letting his gaze drift out the window to skim over the alluring nightscape.

His room is on the Manor’s south side and over looks the front lawn as it curves down towards the heart of Gotham, the expansive cityscape just barely visible as it glitters in the distance. He can’t see Jason’s grave from here, but he knows the grounds well enough to walk a mental map around the back to stand at the untouched ruins of the once pristine burial site.

“I’ve been waiting, and I’m tired of it,” Tim elaborates. “I’ve been trying to tell you all that Jason needs you, and that you need him, since the day he got back. Nobody’s listening, and I’m done playing the slow game, trying to convince you when you don’t want to be convinced. I had a plan to show you that Jason’s still important to the Family, and you just keep ruining it.”

Tim realizes belatedly that he’s settled back heavily into the pillows, that his eyes have squeezed closed. He’s not sure if they’re being pressed closed against an upwelling of emotion or if he blinked and he’s just too tired to force them back open again afterwards, but either way, he chooses not to fight the issue. A nap seems like a very nice idea at the moment.

“Tim.”

“I’m tired, Dick,” Tim says, shutting down Dick’s response before he makes it. “And Alfred says I need to rest, so just go away, okay?”

“I can’t leave you alone,” Dick whispers.
Tim can feel the heartbreak in the statement, but he doesn’t have the energy to unpack all the nuance in the sensation of it. He thinks, however, that Dick wants to leave the strain of the atmosphere here as much as Tim wants him to go.

But he’s also loyal, obedient, and genuinely concerned about Tim’s current mental state.

It’s grating, but not unexpected.

“Then just… be quiet.”

He doesn’t have the fortitude to open his eyes, or even listen to hear if Dick makes any sort of response. Tim is out cold immediately, almost before his words have cleared the air.

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even if we’re gonna (break)

Chapter End Notes

Oh Timmy...

Once again, I’d like to mention that Timmy's thought processes are NOT healthy ones. And you are all too awesome to let that kind of self destructive thinking get the better of you, so please, if you resonate with any of Tim's points, TALK TO SOMEONE. <3

NEXT TIME: Dick needs an emotionally competent human to help him work through all the shit inside his head.
you get me (high enough)

Chapter Summary

Dick Grayson is an emotionally constipated stick figure of a human, but at least he kinda understands his shortcomings and knows when he is out of his depth. And he knows just who to go to for some help with it.

Chapter Notes

It's SNOWING!

And it's so pretty and lovely that I almost don't even care that my horrible, negligent neighbor let his washing machine explode and then didn't tell us about it for over 24 hrs and now my beautiful wood floors are ruined and I have huge fans in my living room. 90% of the time townhomes have the best benefits of single houses and condos combined, but that last 10% is killer...

Anywhoooooo, on to Dickie Bird! Being a stubborn ass, but acknowledging his assholery and attempting to be better about it by talking to a reasonable human being!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirteen – you get me (high enough)

Dick Grayson has never been terribly good at dealing with conflict.

And conflict that’s been caught up in such deep rooted emotions as what this god damn ridiculous Family can manage is just… it’s too much. Far too much.

Dick can’t handle any of this, and he knows it.

He has not been coping well… with anything, really. Hasn’t been coping at all, not really; not for a long while, if he’s honest.
He’s just been putting on the smile, pulling off the cheer, faking all things he needs to… and he knows that he’s only getting away with it because the rest of the Family is also struggling.

Which just makes it that much more important for him to find a way to pull himself together, so he can be strong enough to let the rest of them feel safe in feeling weak.

It hasn’t been going as well as he’d have liked, but he’d thought it was working well enough to keep the Family sane enough to hold together.

These last few days have done a lot to prove him wrong.

At this point, Dick is struggling to keep his own head above water.

He can’t possibly hope to be strong or steady enough to give his Family the comfort that he so desperately wants to provide.

He can’t even begin to count the ways he’s failed.

And with Tim injured, being kept on forced bed rest and under a suicide watch, Dick can’t even summon up the strength just begin attempting to set things right.

To even soothe himself enough to figure out how to try.

Friday morning sees Cass coming up to take his place at Tim’s bedside.

She doesn’t say anything, and her eyes are dark with both sympathy and disappointment.

Dick doesn’t try to defend himself.

He just slinks out of the room and heads up to his own bed on the third floor.

It’s cold, and uninviting, and Dick hasn’t worked his body hard enough to sink into oblivion without registering concern over those details.

He’s spends an hour or two trying to sleep, just tossing and turning until his covers are a wreck and he winds up staring aimlessly at his ceiling.

By the time the sun is streaming fully through the cracks in his blackout curtains, Dick gives up on trying to get any rest.

He needs to talk to someone about this mess.
The only person he thinks he could bear confessing it all to is Babs, and she should be at the Clock Tower around now. She will likely be working on the stuff for her second Phd (this one in computer forensics) rather than any Bat case work, but she’ll be in the Clock Tower to do it.

The Clock Tower is her space, the place where she works best, the point from which she can run the entire operation behind the evolving franchise of what looks like it might become Batman, Inc. It’s amazing that she can handle all of that, in general.

It’s more amazing that she can do it all and somehow still be a functional person, too.

Dick takes his Ducati on the scenic route to Old Gotham, swinging through the City Hall District and the edge of the Diamond District before settling in the newly retro fitted parking garage deep beneath the Gotham streets where the historical landmark of Old City Hall stood as the last piece of the building, preserved for posterity by the generosity of the Gotham elite – led in their effort, as always, by Bruce Wayne.

The Clock Tower is surprisingly accessible to the public, with a café of sorts populated by carts of street food vendors in the wide marble atrium of the entryway that curls up and around the mezzanine and tours led by Gotham Museum Association Docents through the lower levels.

There’s even an elevator that operates on the standard government schedule from 9am to 5pm that takes tourists up to the room that’s supposedly behind clock faces where the bells are located. It’s actually about thirty feet below the room with the actual clock faces, which is the place where Babs has taken the historic architecture and made her own elegantly super-modern mission control center that somehow plays well with the original industrial design elements.

Dick takes the elevator up with the tourists.

He likes watching them; likes the calm distraction of it. Damian’s scoffed that he’s ‘preposterously enamored of their ignorance and banal excitement’, but Dick thinks he’s starting to win the kid over in terms of light hearted people watching. Not everything they do has to be fixated entirely on gathering clues and finding evidence and sussing out secrets for the Mission.

Up among the false faces of the clock tower, there’s a hidden door (that’s not terribly hidden, it’s labeled ‘maintenance’, after all… but it does look like it was worked in subtly to blend with the décor) and inside the closet behind it is another, much more thoroughly hidden secret door, with a five part mechanical and biometric access code that leads to a landing at the bottom of a narrow staircase that twines around the outside of the Clock Tower.

At the top of the stairs is another door with an even more complicated locking mechanism, but this one is usually triggered to unlock and swing open from the inside as Babs welcomes her visitors inside.

The multitude of doors is mostly to keep out the insanely curious tourists out – which seems like overkill until it’s pointed out that if you handed Tim Drake a puzzle box at eight years old, he’d probably have decided to hack NASA with it. And he likely would’ve managed the feat.

Tim might be exceptional, but if a kid within even half as much potential ever wanders up into the Clock Tower after hours… if they’re curious and smart and just happen to get lucky with the lighting conditions or something… Well, unexpected visitors would be a Problem.
When dealing with the Public, being extremely over cautious is the only viable option.

Most of the Caped visitors come in through the roof, or the elevator Babs uses from the basement directly, so those have different kinds of security prepped. Fewer obvious barriers, but they’re all arranged so as to make the entry points no less secure.

But Dick always likes taking the stairs when he shows up during business hours.

Babs pops the final door for him as he approaches, and he strides into the Clock Tower feeling the welcome sensation of peace and security the place represents swirling around him.

He finds her, as always, in the center of the action.

Today, he finds Steph curled up in a cozy armchair beside her, half buried in one of the infinite number of blankets Babs has tucked away in the strangest places to make it so that the comfort they provide is never out of reach.

It’s not quite disappointment that swirls through him at seeing Steph, but a touch of the ease found in privacy and security does slide away.

“Am I interrupting anything?” He asks with his usual wide grin of greeting. “I can come back later if you two are have a ‘girls only’ chat or something.”

Steph snuggles deeper into her blanket and says nothing, but Babs mentions, “You’re not interrupting, and I suspect that you’re here for about the same reason.”

Resigned, Dick sighs heavily and asks, “Jason?”

“And Tim,” Babs confirms.

Dick feels a stab of the aching regret he has for not being able to help Tim the way he should have, but his self pity is quickly superseded by concern for Steph's current state of mind.

Dick hasn't checked up on her at all, not once since they first found out that Tim was hurt – an enormous failing on his part. He knows how much Steph cares about Tim… knows that she loves him more than she'd ever admit, even if their brief romance didn’t work out.

In the last few days, Dick's little sister has watched the boy who was her first love get blown up and put on a suicide watch. Dick has been so caught up on his own useless worries for his little brother, that he's forgotten that his little sister is likely taking these events even harder.

Turning to face Steph more fully head on, Dick promises, “He's been resting well, and Cass
is with him now.”

Steph doesn’t mean to nod, but the unconscious little bob of her head that follows Dick’s words in relief proves to him how worried she’s been – and how clearly he should have been able to do more for her.

“We’ll keep him safe, Steph,” Dick promises, pulling up his own comfy armchair to camp in, “We’re going to help him get through this.”

Steph looks up from her knees at him, but she doesn’t seem very comforted by his words.

Before he can puzzle through why, or hope to figure out how to say anything more helpful, Babs mentions quietly, “This isn’t just something to help him through, Dick.”

Looking over at her with trepidation, Dick waits for her to elaborate, “The issue with Jason won’t just go away if we ignore it hard enough. Tim isn’t suicidal, he’s just desperate.”

“Desperate for what?”

“For us to listen to him,” Babs explains, still using that softly patient tone, “For us to really listen – not just to hear what he’s saying, but to understand why he’s saying it.”

“He hasn’t been willing to try talking to me in a long time,” Dick confesses.

“Yes, he has,” Steph announces, speaking for the first time since Dick arrived. Her voice sounds cracked and fragile – very unlike the usual trademark of the brash Stephanie Brown he’s grown to love. “He has been trying to talk to you, because he’s known that you would be almost as difficult to convince as Bruce. He’s been talking and none of us have actually heard any of it.”

Babs nods an agreement. “It started with the idea of letting Jason run Crime Alley.”

“And stay there,” Dick presses. “He’s been scared of Jason, and he didn’t want to end up running into him unexpectedly when Jason had free range of the City. Keeping him in Crime Alley at least made him more predictable.”

“That’s what Jason thinks it was for, too,” Steph mentions.

Dick frowns, confused.

Both at what Steph means, and at when she would have had the chance to learn that Jason has viewed those tense negotiations in the same way Dick has.

“That’s not what he suggested it for,” Babs clarifies. “He did it to prove that Jason is capable of being rational.”

“Barely rational,” Dick protests.

Leveling an unimpressed stare at him, Babs retorts calmly, “More rational than you’re willing to give him credit for being, even now.”

Dick reins his temper back to keep from snapping something stupid.

“Even if he can be rational, it’s not Jason, anymore,” Dick manages after a moment.

“Tim thinks he is,” Steph counters.
“And he has a track record of being right, even when what he’s saying sounds absolutely insane to us,” Babs contributes.

Dick shakes his head slowly, unable to accept the idea of wrongly disregarding Tim’s hypothesis about something impossible again – and yet, equally unable to believe that Jason… that the sweet, scruffy, soft as a sugar drop, kid that had been his Jason, his little brother, his cohort and fellow trouble maker, his partner in crime… Just unable to accept the idea that his Jason had turned into the cold hearted killer parading around as Red Hood…

“The Jason I knew would never hurt Tim, couldn’t even even dream of it,” Dick tries.

Dick’s not sure if the others ever figured it out, if Bruce or Babs ever really noticed (though he thinks the odds are pretty good), but as a kid, Jason had been crushing so hard on the boy next door that Dick half expected heart shaped doodles with their initials entwined to start popping up in Jason’s school books.

“…I think…” Stephanie starts, voice so tight that she has to cough to clear it and then start again, “I think that’s why he hurts Tim, specifically Tim.”

Quizzically, Dick turns his full attention to Steph as she fiddles with an imaginary loose thread in the purple fluff of her blanket. She came along after Jason died. Well after.

She has no reason to understand the bias Dick knows Jason should have against the idea of hurting Tim, of letting anyone hurt Tim.

“He’s gone after Tim harder than he’s gone after any of us,” Steph explains, keeping her eyes on her knees. “Even harder than he’s gone for Bruce. It sorta makes sense if you’re thinking that he’s going after the Robin who replaced him, but Tim’s not the only one of us who did that.”

Dick tries desperately not to frown, wondering if Steph has been hurt by Jason somehow and then simply not told the Family about it. He’s never really worried about Jason going after her because of his vendetta – about Jason going after her, or after Damian.

“Technically, you replaced Tim, not Jason,” Babs says, making Dick’s own point more calmly and eloquently than he would have done. “You’re a problem, but beside the point.”

“But still… I think the reason he hurts Tim more than everyone else is that he’s just so angry that Tim’s put himself in such danger, that he keeps putting himself in danger, that it just kinda overloads Jason’s ability to respond… and the Pit kinda takes over for him,” Steph says.

It doesn’t make much sense to Dick.

Jason hurts Tim because he’s worried about Tim getting hurt?

Seems pretty reaching, in terms of logical reasoning…

Seems pretty much like it’s just a lame attempt to excuse the violence.

“Cass has confirmed that the explosion that Tim was injured by while on Patrol Wednesday
night was caused by an unplanned detonation of an unstable fertilizer bomb that Tim was in the middle of disarming,” Babs mentions after the moment of silence between them all stretches past the point of comfortable. “It wasn’t Jason. He saved Tim’s life. And we’ve given him nothing but grief for it. But he knew we would, and he saved Tim anyway.”

Dick isn’t sure if he wants to believe it, but can’t…

Or if he already sort of does believe it, and doesn’t want to.

He’s not sure which would be better. Or who it would be better for…

His head feels a bit floaty – thoughts swirling in a dizzying spin that makes him feel like he did as a young kid, still learning how to properly spend long periods of time upside down.

“We need to start seriously thinking about how we want to handle having Jason come back into the Crusade as an official ally,” Barbara says carefully. “Before we even try to open up negotiations, we need to figure out what we would need from him to make an agreement viable.”

Neither Dick nor Steph responds.

“Do you really think it’s possible for that to even happen?” Dick wonders eventually.

This time, it’s Babs that has to pause.

“I think it doesn’t matter if it seems possible,” she replies after giving the answer a careful beat of consideration. “Jason is back. He’s a player on the board. Either we pull him back into the Bat fold, or we relinquish the idea of total control over the city. Gotham is hard enough to keep civilized with the Rogues convinced we’re metas with absolute control and a united front that nothing could possibly penetrate. Right now, they’re still kind of hunkering down as they try to figure out what side Red Hood is really playing for, but eventually… well, if Jason isn’t going to be one of the good guys, he’ll either be a weak link to us, or one of the bad guys.”

Dick is vehemently against all three of the options, and all for different reasons.

And regardless, he’s still hung up the fact of how Jason hurts people; hurts lots of people, but especially those in Dick’s Family… in what is supposed to be Jason’s Family, too.

“We can’t just let him come back,” Dick protests quietly. “Not after everything he’s done.”

“We won’t be just letting him do anything. Circumstances have changed, and we either change with them and adapt to let Jason back in, or we deal with the fact that the world has left us behind in this respect,” Barbara reiterates.

Speaking up again, this time more confidently than before, Steph adds, “Tim’s not going to stop this until we accept that Jason’s coming back. And we’re not gonna be able to stop him.”
“He’s under watch, he’s safe,” Dick counters. “We can protect him, even from himself.”

“No, we can’t. You have no idea, Dick. He’s been complaining to me about how you underestimate him for years, and you’re still doing it. He is patient and relentless. He might be playing at compliance right now, but this has never been a short game for him. The moment you relax or look away, he’s gonna be right back to putting himself in danger,” Steph declares.

There’s stress in her voice, but absolutely no uncertainty.

And then Babs mentions, “And if we push too hard to keep him safe, we’re gonna push him right out the door. He’ll run away, Dick, and I’m not sure we’ll be able to find him if he runs, let alone be able to drag him back.”

It makes Dick feel sick to contemplate, to even let his thoughts barely brush the idea.

The result is a long drag of uncomfortable silence as all three of them attempt to wrangle their disobedient thoughts regarding their personal fears for dangers inherent in the impact of the baby bird’s stubborn streak.

“Tim had a binder full of possible negotiation conditions under the lining of his freezer where he keeps your ice cream,” Steph manages to say eventually. “I’m pretty sure that means it’s what he thinks are the most important points for you to accept his plan of bringing Jason back. I don’t know what he thinks Bruce needs, I couldn’t find a binder with his name on it anywhere, but I’m guessing you and Bruce are pretty close on this.”

Wary, Dick asks, “What conditions?”

“No Killing is the top thing on the list, obviously. Though Tim suggests rubber bullets rather than no guns,” Steph lays out.

“Jason could still kill people with rubber bullets,” Dick points out.

“But it substantially reduces the chances of a kill being accidental, which allows for more direct accountability,” Babs refutes diplomatically.

Dick doesn’t like it at all, but now is not the time to quibble. He hates all of this, hates that he’s even considering the idea of letting it happen.

“What else?” he asks.

“Tim thought you’d need to have regular check ins be required,” Steph explains, “He suggests alternating between having Jason come to the Cave and having one or two of us meet up with him somewhere in Crime Alley.”

Dick shakes his head but doesn’t say anything.

He still doesn’t like it. If anyone’s going venturing into Crime Alley, which he thinks is just a terrible idea, they’re going to be in pairs at the very least. He’d prefer trios, but even that still seems too risky to swallow.

Steph goes on without direct prompt to say, “Another thing that Tim mentioned was the need
for Jason to wear a com, and all the gps and bio trackers we usually do.”

Dick would’ve thought that would go almost without saying.

If Jason was going to be a Bat (which Dick still can’t rationalize the fact that he’s apparently considering the possibility of happening), then Jason would need to be a Bat – which involved having the rest of the team informed on your status, and able to inform you on the status of the others, so that they could always arrange for efficient back up when necessary.

“Jason won’t submit to that,” Babs cautions. “Maybe the com, but the rest… not likely.”

Steph nods and then glances over at a bright blue binder set on the edge of Babs’s desk before she says, “Tim had that underlined. He circled the com part and wrote ‘start small’ in the margin. I think he put a time frame on introducing more, but I don’t remember exactly.”

With a nod of her own, Babs asks, “Anything else?”

Dick wants to shout that there’s about a hundred more things he’d need from Jason, need proof of and not just promises for, before he’d truly be willing to accept the notion of having the infamous Red Hood wear the Bat symbol.

(One of them being that he actually wear the Bat symbol, which Dick doesn’t think Jason would ever accept doing again, not so long as Bruce is the man behind the cowl.)

But Steph doesn’t say anything like that.

Instead she shrugs and says simply, “The only other big thing he noted was that Jason would have to put all his files on the shared server. And keep up to date on a detailed activity log like the rest of us.”

It’s another thing that Dick thought should go almost without saying. It’s just another standard part about being a member of a team as diverse and complicated as the Bats, especially when it comes to how they all have separate cases and individual specialties that may prove useful to one another as complications in the detective work arise.

It’s an imperative order to keep everyone connected and involved with each other, to keep tabs on how each of them is fairing in facing down the stresses and dangers of the job.

That rule came into being after Jason died.

Tim instituted the practice. By forcibly hacking into the others’ project files.

Before even bringing Babs and Dick, himself, back to the Crusade, Tim had put hardware in place to give him guaranteed back doors into their systems, and once they were actively involved again, he had them all linked up to the Cave’s super secure shared server before they had any idea what was happening.

After the other losses they’d faced in the last few years… the practice of constantly checking in and checking up had become much more dramatically pressing and important – automatic in a
way that’s crucial to maintaining the Bats’ sanity in the face of all they fight.

It’s the kind of system that should’ve been able to let them notice that Tim was starting to tip off the edge in pursuit of this idea he has of bringing Jason back to the Family.

It failed in that.

But being a system of Tim’s own design… He could likely find ways around it – hell, he’d likely built in ways to get around it, right from the initial onset. So… Dick supposes he shouldn’t feel too horrible about how wretchedly useless his attempts to monitor the system were at catching Tim’s drastic and evolving recklessness.

But still… they should have seen this, should have stopped it before it went this far.

He says as much to Babs and Steph, and neither can respond immediately.

And then Babs sighs. “I think we passed the point of no return on that one before Tim even got his feet into the pixie boots… Tim built himself up to be Robin on grit alone and that’s not a trait he’s just gonna grow out of because we want him to.”

Steph murmurs an agreement.

A moment later a shrill beep from her phone breaks the somber tension.

“I’ve gotta head to class,” Steph explains.

She casts one last look at the binder she’d apparently brought here from Tim’s place and then heads out via the direct to ground back elevator.

Dick stares after her for a while before Babs says, “For what it’s worth, I don’t think Jason’s half as irredeemable as he wants to seem. I think he’s still just so scared of us pushing him away that he’s trying to push us back first – just like when he was a kid… Only now, he’s a lot better at hitting our exact sore spots.”

Dick heaves a sigh in response, unable to find any words big enough to encapsulate the raw feeling that’s trapped and writhing in his chest.

“Are you… are you going to be okay?”

Babs is asking in earnest, and it takes a careful breath for Dick to keep himself from pulling on the bright smile and assuring her he’ll be fine.
“I don’t know,” Dick admits when he can force himself to be honest.

“Talk to me, Dick,” Babs implores.

She knows he won’t talk to anyone else, and knows just as firmly that he needs it.

“I don’t want the Red Hood anywhere near my Family,” Dick admits, simple words coming slowly but steady enough to stick. “And I don’t see how Jason could possibly have grown up to be the person under the hood. It’s upsetting, and… I just don’t know if he can come back from what he’s done… if bringing him back is really something we should try. Even if… if he could be helped, somehow, is that really the best way to do it?”

“But you are open to the idea that he can be helped?”

Dick blinks. He hardly even realized he’d said it until Babs latched onto the idea.

“I don’t know,” Dick sighs honestly, shaking his head. “I guess so, maybe? I mean… if… if he can be helped, I’d like to help him… I’m just not sure he can be helped.”

“It’s always okay to not be sure,” Babs tells him.

She reaches over to grab his hand where it’s resting on his knee, and then gives a gentle squeeze as she adds, “I’m just glad that you want to help, if someone shows you that you can.”

“Jason was my little brother, Babs,” Dick huffs with a heavy touch of desperation, “Of course I want to help him, if it’s possible. I’m just worried that it’s not.”

“First off, anyone can be helped, and everyone should be,” Babs states firmly. “Secondly, Jason still is your little brother, whether either of you want to think about it or not. And most importantly… I am entirely certain that Jason has no idea you would ever want to help him.”

Dick lets his breath slide out through his teeth.

He can see why that last statement would be true. He hasn’t exactly been charitable with regards to his treatment of Jason since he got back from the dead and started dropping bodies.

Jason hasn’t really given him any kind of reason to think of the Red Hood as anything other than a villain, but Dick also hasn’t given any indications that he might be willing to think of Jason as anything separate from the Red Hood’s public persona.

There’s a part of Dick that does believe that Jason simply is the Red Hood now, and also believes that the Red Hood belongs in Arkham.

There’s another, bigger part of him that knows how Arkham fails utterly as a psychiatric facility, that knows how it doesn’t actually work to help the inmates heal and atone – a part of Dick that wants to find Jason some other place, somewhere he might stand a genuine chance of being helped and rehabilitated.

But there’s also the part that doesn’t think Jason can be rehabilitated.
It’s a smaller part of him than it was yesterday, Dick notes with a degree of surprise.

He wonders if Babs can tell that just by looking at him. He wouldn’t doubt it if someone told him she could. The way she’s stayed quiet over the last few… well, however many minutes have passed while Dick’s gotten lost in his thoughts, how she’s got that slight, but warm and sympathetic smile on… Dick thinks she probably does know.

“It’s okay if you’re not okay with everything about the idea of having Jason come back to the Family,” she tells him, confessing, “Honestly, I’m not exactly okay with it all, myself.”

Self doubt and a touch of fear make him less than perfectly kind as he latches onto that concern and says with half an accusation, “You seem awfully dedicated to advocating for it, if you really aren’t entirely okay with it.”

Babs, being Babs and therefore an actual angel or some such divine creature, doesn’t even blink at the possible interpretation of hostility that could be pulled out of his words.

“This thing isn’t going to be stopped just because I’m not okay with it,” she points out with laborious calm. Resignation and regret lace her tone as she adds, “This is going to happen somehow whether any of us like it or not, it’s been inevitable since Jason got back, and it’s been doubly unavoidable since Tim decided to make it that way.”

She sighs and offers up a weak, sardonic smile, “It’s like a rip tide at the beach: trying to fight it will only make us drown faster… if we swim sideways, along the beach and across the tide… we might end up in New Jersey, but we should be alive enough when we get there.”

Dick sighs too, giving her hand an almost accepting squeeze.

He can’t respond with words, right now – at best, they’ll misinterpret his complicated feelings and at worst, voicing them wrongly will gum up his own limited understanding of how he actually feels at the moment.

“Just try to remember that you do want to help him,” Babs instructs, “Focus on that instead of the question of whether or not we can possibly succeed in helping him.”

“I’ll try,” Dick promises.

“That’s all anyone can ask of you,” Babs returns.

She gives his hand another squeeze, and he reciprocates before saying, “Well, I’ll let you get back to whatever you were working on before Steph and I showed up to make you play Family therapist. I’m sorry it always seems to be on your shoulders to help everyone.”

“I’ll admit that it’s sometimes stressful, but we’re Family. If I can be of help to any of you, I want to do as much as I can for it,” she tells him firmly, releasing his hand.

Dick unfolds himself and stretches as he stands.
Then he leans forward to give her a kiss on the top of her head.

“'You work miracles, Babs,'” he assures her.

It earns him a soft, genuine smile.

Dick makes his way down from the Clock Tower using the civilian route again (you can’t go up on camera and never go back down again, even not so savvy detectives would be able to notice something that glaring pretty quickly), and then takes his bike on a leisurely tour of Gotham City’s variegated neighborhoods.

He just loses himself in the ride, letting his mind wander as far away from this mess as it can get. The afternoon of people watching allows his mind and nerves to settle.

At least until he ends up on the edge of Crime Alley on his way back home while he weaves through Robbinsville.

Dick stops on the border.

Pulls over and looks into the shadows of the neighborhood policed by a vicious vigilante in a red helmet…

Staring, Dick feels floaty and drunk – almost to the point that he considers going in to find Jason and just have it out with him.

To fight it out and then leave it on the mat like they’d managed to sometimes when they were much younger people.

It would be cathartic, to say the least.

But it would not be a good idea, and likely not a survivable idea.

Dick can clearly picture how it would go.

He wouldn’t make it far into the Alley before a bullet bounced off the asphalt by his feet – if Jason even bothered with a warning shot, at least.

Jason would have the high ground, and security in distance.

It wouldn’t make Dick feel any better, and it would make it just that much harder for him to remember what Babs said about this thing with Jason coming back to the Family as being inevitable… make it that much harder to focus on how he does still want to help Jason in some deep down part of himself where he still thinks of Jason as his little brother.
Dick stands astride his bike on the edge of Crime Alley for a solid twenty minutes.

But in the end, he does the smart thing and heads back to the Manor without venturing across the line. It feels like the wrong choice as he speeds across the Kane Memorial Bridge, but it also seems like all the other choices would’ve turned out far worse.

Dick doesn’t know what’s going to happen, or what he could actually live with happening.

But he’s at least been reassured that he’s not the only one who feels a little lost in all of this insanity. They’ll just have to muddle through as best they can.

After all, they have gotten through worse.

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you get me high enough ( i'm over the edge )

Chapter End Notes

Oh Dickie... slow progress is still progress, but /damn/ boy.......

^_^

And NEXT TIME: It gets worse. BRUCE decides to take an active role in helping Tim's recovery... Obviously, he's not exactly helpful.
searching high (and low)

Chapter Summary

Bruce gets involved with the debacle unfolding between Jason and Tim.

Chapter Notes

Bruce is an emotionally constipated asshole... but he's trying. So hard. He wants to help his kids, he just has a fundamental misunderstanding of all the concepts around how he should go about doing that...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fourteen – searching high (and low)

Bruce does not take a shift at Tim’s bedside until the sun is rising on Saturday morning.

The rest of his Family are taking advantage of the weekend’s lack of daytime obligations to catch a few good hours of the rarely achieved deep sleep they all sorely require, and deserve.

They need as much as they can get right now.

The lives they lead are hard, and the last few days have been especially trying.

He doesn’t understand how things have managed to go so wrong.

Doesn’t understand what Tim was doing, why he placed himself in such unnecessary danger without letting anyone even know about it – about the case he was working or the risks he was taking or the reasons behind any of it.

The system they have in place to keep tabs on each other, to allow for them all to provide aid and support and anything they might need, is a system of Tim’s own design.

Tim should’ve been the last person Bruce needed to worry about.
He was so smart and so strong and so utterly competent… Tim knew his abilities, and knew how to utilize the others’ abilities, better than anyone. He should’ve known exactly when he needed aid, and know exactly who to ask for assistance with whatever he was doing…

And Bruce should’ve been able to recognize that Tim wasn’t checking in like he should have been, with as much detail and frank honesty as he should have known was needed – as had been his usual prior to the lead up towards this incident.

Bruce should’ve seen that the quietest of all his sons had gotten even quieter, that he had something heavy on his mind.

Bruce is aware that he is not the sort of parent that could ever be awarded accolades.

But he had hoped, that with his recent near miss, with the still fresh circumstance where never seeing his children again had been a legitimate possibility, that he would have been able to recognize how precious to him these kids were – been able to invest more of himself in proactively expressing that to them directly, to invest in convincing them of his concern.

Dick and Cass had wholly embraced the idea. Even Barbara had approved enough to start spending several nights a week at the Manor again, despite their disagreements.

Damian had finally found something to agree with Stephanie on when she called it ‘creepy’, but they’d both been warmer towards him for it in these last few months.

But apparently, he’d missed the mark with Tim entirely.

It has been quite distressing to realize that Tim has been concealing his concerns, and his activities regarding them, from everyone; even Oracle didn’t know precisely what he’d been up to – and even Alfred had been intentionally (and successfully) kept entirely in the dark.

Bruce doesn’t know exactly what he could have done to prevent this, but clearly there is something in his care taking that has been so lacking he didn’t even recognize that Tim might be in danger – let alone that he might be a danger to himself…

It has been a while since any one of his children has been on a suicide watch.

And most of the previous incidents involved some sort of outside element intervening, either fear gas or joker venom or some other mind altering drug… something prompting their thoughts and fears and insecurities to turn on them and twist into something truly dark.

This is different.
This isn’t fear gas driving Tim to do anything to make the screaming stop, or venom making each breath hurt so much that a separate self-inflicted pain is the only thing he can put his focus into that will let air into his lungs. This isn’t a bad trip on some drug making him see threats in every shadow or to hallucinate horrific phantoms.

This is Tim throwing away any hint of self preservation he ever had.

This is Tim choosing to disregard his health and injuries, repeatedly, in a way that’s nearly killed him more times than Bruce could ever care to count in the last three days alone.

This isn’t just Tim being reckless, or ruthlessly dedicated to the cause.

This is a kid stepping out into the street without looking, a kid attempting to cross a six lane high way with his eyes closed.

This is something different, and Bruce doesn’t know how to handle it.

He doesn’t even know what went wrong to start with.

Or how far back he has to look in order to find out.

Tim won’t tell him – won’t even speak to him, to anyone.

He won’t even look at most of them.

He’s being blatant in how he’s shutting even Alfred out.

Right now, he couldn’t talk even if he wanted to…

He’s been sedated – only slightly, but the gentle push is enough to keep him sluggish, is enough to let the apparently massive sleep debt he's wracked up claim its due.

It has always been easy to forget how young Tim is, easy to fall into the trap of trusting his judgement like he would trust a respected adult… easy to ignore how impossibly unhealthy it was that this child would successfully accomplish more in a single 24 hour cycle than most adults would even attempt to tackle in a week. It’s been far too easy for far too long…

Bruce doesn’t know how he lost sight of Tim, lost sight of the boy as his son rather than the young man as his business partner.

All Bruce knows at this moment, is that his little boy is not alright.

And that he is partly, significantly, to blame for letting it go on like this until the situation became utterly untenable.
He knows that Tim is not alright.

And he knows that if anyone will know anything about why, it would be Jason.

Tim has always been… uniquely fixated on Jason.

It would not have taken a detective to notice how… attached to Jason Tim had been from the very beginning.

Initially, Bruce had considered it a reasonable response to having gone through a series of traumas and been rescued each time by Jason directly – a theory that made even more sense when considering that Tim knew who Jason was under the Robin mask right from the outset.

And then… after Jason… died… Tim had forced his way into the Crusade with the express purpose of protecting Jason’s legacy. He hadn’t allowed himself to mourn and he’d grown obsessed with perfecting himself in order to live up to his self assigned goal of being the perfect Robin so as to avoid letting Jason’s memory down.

It had not been healthy, and Bruce had known that, but because the crippling loss of Jason was so fresh to him, Bruce hadn’t, at that time, yet allowed himself to grow close enough to the poor boy to take an active role in providing for Tim’s mental well being.

In fact, he had – quite erroneously – assumed that if he could crush Tim’s spirit, he would quit the vigilante business, which would be better for him in the long run, even if it was clearly damaging in the short term.

Obviously, Bruce’s attempts to drive Tim off had backfired spectacularly.

In part, Bruce is glad for it.

Tim has been a crucial part of what has kept the Family together for years now, he’s probably the only reason that neither the Family, nor the Crusade, has crumbled entirely…

Not to even mention his contributions to preserving Wayne Enterprises and all of the philanthropic ventures that the company supports… Tim had wrested control of WE out from under Ra’s al Ghul before anyone else even realized it was under threat, let alone a threat from someone like the Demon’s Head.

It was likely due to Tim’s existence, to the entirely false attribution of Tim’s skill set as being the result of Bruce’s teachings, that Ra’s al Ghul had given up his grandson to Bruce’s care with such little resistance. Bruce would have fought for Damian until he tore down the world in doing so, but it hadn’t taken anywhere near such strife to win and that could only mean the immortal – in his own, creepy way that was horrifically out of touch with modern reality – had consented to the idea of allowing Bruce to raise the boy.

Tim had never so much as acknowledged that he played any part in it, certainly he hadn’t ever told Damian that he’d been involved at all.
Tim had quietly taken Damian’s abuses until he’d earned the child’s grudging and secretive, but clearly undying, respect – genuine admiration, even.

Perhaps his bland willingness to take such blatant abuse should have been a red flag.

From the beginning, when it was Bruce attempting to tear him down and crush his spirit.

Or when it was Dick, trying his best to enact the very same ‘cruel to be kind’ policy while training him in the gymnastic art of aerial maneuvering.

Or when it was Barbara, attempting to lock Tim out of the Batcomputer’s systems for his own good once they’d realized how far he would push himself to finish a case.

They had all, at one point or another, attempted to hurt Tim in some, direct and concrete way to make him back off – pushed him too hard, dismissed his efforts and potential, refused to acknowledge even the most smashingly impressive of successes.

It all ended up just pushing him harder, driving him to make himself even better.

They were all guilty of it.

But no one pushed Tim as hard as he himself did.

And nothing motivated him to do so like Jason did – Jason’s legacy, Jason’s memory, and now, it seemed, Jason’s approval.

Jason had been unbearably cruel to Tim when he’d come back to life, crueler to Tim than he was to even Bruce. Not only had Jason brutalized him, beat him repeatedly to within an inch of his life, but Jason had also been quick to declare Tim an inadequate replacement – confirming every one of Tim’s deepest insecurities directly, and when coming from the person he’d been doing all this work for, whose standard he’d been attempting to live up to…

They should have realized that it wouldn’t make Tim back away like a rational person.

They should have known that it would simply motivate him to try harder.

Bruce doesn’t know how to fix this.

But he does know that finding Jason is probably the most important first step – finding Jason and figuring out exactly what has happened between the crime lord and Tim lately to have made Tim
so determined to win his predecessor’s approval.

It’s an excruciating wait through the whole of the day that Bruce has claimed to watch over Tim. Alfred brings in a meal halfway through, just as Tim is waking up enough to eat something… it’s another plate laced with just a hint of sedatives.

Tim can taste them and glares sullenly at his plate as he eats, but he does eat and that relieves a smidge of the tension in Bruce’s chest.

It is not long before Tim is pulled back into a deep, restorative sleep.

This time, Bruce can’t simply stare at the unconscious face of his middle child – can’t look at the slackness without still seeing the lines of tension that mark his sleep as induced and less than perfectly relaxed.

This time, Bruce has to occupy himself with something else.

He chooses to go through the binders of photographs that Tim keeps under his bed at the Manor – binders with each of the Family’s names on them. They aren’t the most private collections he’s created – those binders are in a floor vault under the bed in Tim’s private apartment in Chinatown, locked up so tight that no one has ever gotten inside to see the shots that Tim considers to be his most precious – but the relatively accessible ones here are the Manor are a curated, evolving narrative of those lucky few that Tim considers Family.

Dick’s binder has the most variegated shots, the most growth and the clearest timeline, but it’s still Jason whose binder contains the most pictures in terms of raw volume.

Even with the unfortunate interlude of Jason’s death… with the tragic, and mysterious gap in his history that is the year and a half that Jason was assumed to still be deceased… Tim has significantly more pictures of him than he has of Dick. Tim has more pictures of Jason than he has of Steph and Cass and Damien, the three siblings who came along after Tim, combined.

Bruce flips through the binder of Jason’s photographic history, watching him through Tim’s camera as he developed as Robin – and even as he evolved through phases as Red Hood.

Without Tim’s painstaking attention to detail, Bruce would’ve been hard pressed to believe that the Red Hood had changed in any way since coming back to terrorize Gotham when he was still fresh out of the Lazarus Pit.

But looking at Tim’s photographs, at the narrative he’s crafted of Jason’s return, it’s clear that there have been several points of transition – some of which Tim has brought to the Family’s attention, and some of which it seems he intentionally neglected to mention.

It could be that those points he did not bring out for the Family to scrutinize were irrelevant to the argument he’d been making at the time, but even outlier data that could muddy the water in an analysis is data that’s important to the validity of the conclusion.

While Jason has certainly seemed to have taken far more steps in moving forward from the Pit towards being a reasonable person again, he has also taken some clear steps backward.

Bruce is very concerned about how hard Tim had been pushing for Jason to come home when he’s had such a clear picture of why that feels so impossible still. Why it’s so objectionable.
Jason isn’t Jason anymore and they have to accept that – they all have to accept that.

No matter how much they might want to have Jason get involved with the rest of them again… It doesn’t seem… He can’t… Jason may be able to work with them in the Crusade – to join back as a proper Bat, even as implausible as that alone currently seems – but there will always have to be a line between allowing that and letting him step truly back into the Family.

No matter how sorely Bruce misses having Jason be his son, he has to think of his other children and the constant, unavoidable risk that Jason poses to them.

Eventually, Bruce puts the binders of photographs back into their box beneath Tim’s bed.

He pulls up *Moby Dick* on the tablet Tim has resting on his bedside table and begins to read aloud, allowing his voice to sink into that especially smooth, deep timbre of the storyteller.

It seems to help Tim relax, if only marginally.

Bruce is half a dozen chapters in when Stephanie appears at the door to relieve him of his term on watch. She stands frozen in the doorway for a full minute – simply staring at Tim’s slack expression with her own twisting up in turmoil – before she looks at Bruce, who continues reading without interruption until he reaches the end of the segment and Stephanie takes an unpressured step inside the room.

When Bruce closes the book and looks up at her, he mentions in a whisper, “You do not have to do this, Stephanie. We can ask Cass, or I could stay, myself, if this is going to be too hard on you. I understand how difficult this situation must be for you.”

As testament to that fact, Stephanie doesn’t even grow defensive at the statement.

Instead, she sighs and admits, “I wouldn’t be able to focus on Patrol. I may as well do something useful.”

Bruce nods acceptingly and sets Tim’s tablet back on its table.

He stands and places his hands on Steph’s hunched shoulders. He is still more awkward than he should be with delivering physical signs of affection and support than he should be as a parent of seven – good lord, he has seven children now – but he’s far better than he once was and pulls his daughter into a brief, but heartfelt hug.

She needs it so much that she hardly even seems embarrassed as he releases her and she shuffles over to the plush chair he vacated.

Bruce calls a farewell that is not returned and then heads into the hallway. The sounds of Stephanie’s voice picking up where he left off in the story of the white whale soothes enough of his worries for Bruce to head down to the Cave without proactively compartmentalizing.

Cass is already dressed and readying to head out to the South Side of the city. Dick and
Damian are also nearly finished with their preparations to Patrol the East Side. Bruce will be taking everything else and while he expects it to be a quiet night, he has no intention of shirking his duties – despite being determined to spend significant effort in tracking down Jason once he has finished with his usual Patrol.

He impresses on the others the importance of remaining diligent despite the distractions at home and then leaves them to their own, well trained and carefully honed, devices.

Bruce trusts his children – with his city, with his life… with everything he is and has.

He suits up alone, gives a curt farewell to Alfred, and an equally curt greeting to Oracle as he signs onto their active communication network, and then sets out for Patrol.

The night goes quickly and is as quiet as Bruce supposed it would be.

He is able to turn his focus onto finding Jason just after 2 am.

Bruce has only just set foot inside of Crime Alley when Oracle pings him over a private com connection. He taps his ear to accept – knowing that if he doesn’t, she’ll just hack it and be pissed off when she gets through.

Or more pissed off, as it were.

She sounds pretty pissed already.

“Of all the stupid ideas you’ve had lately, B…” she starts off.

“Jason needs to be found,” he points out.

“Not now,” Oracle refutes, “And not by you.”

Bruce does not respond aloud, because he does not agree.

It has to be him that finds Jason.

He cannot let himself, even by happenstational negligence, foist this responsibility onto one of his children.

It will hurt enough to find Jason himself and have to face the brutal reality of the monster that has taken root inside his son.

Confronting such head on, in uncontrolled circumstances, could very well shatter any of his children – especially those who had once counted themselves among those closest to Jason.
No.

It has to be Bruce, himself, that does it. Alone.

And it has to happen soon.

Soon enough for Bruce to manage the feat before any of his other children get the same idea to attempt to handle it themselves.

Which means, essentially, that it must happen tonight.

Bruce knows that his children will not sit idly by for long, and while he may be the only one to have yet seized upon the idea of seeking Jason out for answer, he is very certain that the others will not be long behind.

In the face of Batman’s silence, Oracle sighs.

“You can’t do this, Bruce,” Barbara tells him, voice heavy and almost imploring, “You can’t just go punish Jason for all of this. Tim did it to himself, and he knew what he was doing, what he was risking, when he did it. You can’t ignore that.”

“I am not ignoring it,” Bruce replies harshly. “But Jason needs to know what happened, and he needs to be brought into a controlled environment to be debriefed – to get to the root of the matter that caused this.”

“We know what caused it. And Jason won’t have any more answers than you do,” Barbara tells him firmly. “Tim is the only one with any legitimate agency in this.”

“But Jason will know why Tim is enacting this plan of his now, Jason will know what he’s done to cause Tim to act,” Bruce counters.

“He’s alive, Bruce,” Barbara sighs. “He’s alive. That’s it. That’s what he’s done to prompt Tim to act. And the real question isn’t why is Tim doing this now, it’s why haven’t we noticed that he’s been doing this until now. Tim didn’t start this recently. Based on what Steph has found, Tim has been working on this from the moment he found out Jason was alive.”

Concerned about ensuring that he fully understands the implications of Barbara’s statement, Bruce comments, “The Red Hood was still trying to kill him when we found out.”

“Yeah,” Barbara huffs in a manner that is not reassuring at all, “And Bruce? We’re pretty sure, at this point, that Tim figured it out before you did. We think he might’ve known on day 1.”

Bruce freezes on the rooftop, glad his feet touched down before the words sunk in.
Tim had known?

He’d known that it was Jason who was trying to kill him, who had eviscerated him while he’d been ensconced in what was supposed to be the unparalleled safety of Titans’ Tower.

“Jason didn’t know, either,” Barbara says after a long sway of silence. “Jason didn’t realize that Tim recognized him immediately. He’s been just as surprised, and feeling just as lost and cornered, as the rest of us. Finding Jason isn’t going to answer any questions for us… if anything, it will just push him further into hiding – maybe make him leave Gotham altogether.”

*Maybe that would be for the best.*

Bruce doesn’t speak the thought aloud, but he doesn’t have to for his silence to be more than telling of his feelings on the matter.

“We have to deal with this, Bruce,” Barbara huffs, exasperated. “If Jason runs off, it’s only delaying the inevitable and it will just make Tim that much more desperate and determined to make it to his end game immediately the next time Jason swings into town.”

It’s a fair point.

But it does support Bruce’s argument for finding Jason now, for bringing him back to the Cave tonight for a thorough questioning in a controlled environment.

It would be for Tim as much as it would be for anyone else inside the Family.

If Bruce brings Jason in, they could hash everything out once and for all, could clear the air and make definitive evaluations regarding Jason’s potential for being part of the Crusade again – for being part of the Family again.

Bruce wants him to come back so badly that it hurts.

But he’s also entirely convinced that his boy has been entirely corrupted by a force outside of himself, has been made a monster by the unholy processes that somehow brought him back to life when the sweet hearted, brash and hopeful, little boy who had died tragically before his time should still be safely in the ground where his kind soul could rest in peace.

This brutal caricature of Jason has none of his humanity.
Bruce has almost brought himself to terms with it, but if he has to have it proven before the Family, to set their minds at ease with the idea of distancing themselves from this Red Hood, from this empty, spiteful mask with nothing but a phantom inside – with nothing but the ghostly vestiges of Jason’s reanimated character come back to reap vengeance on Bruce because he so deserves it, inside – then so be it...

Bruce will bring him back.

Even if it will crush what’s left of his heart to do so.

He cannot allow his Family to risk themselves on an impossible dream, cannot allow Tim to maintain this heart breaking, and painfully endearing, delusion of his that Red Hood is truly the Jason they all once truly cared for...

Tim is on suicide watch because of this chaos and the Red Hood must be held accountable for that. His mere existence is painful enough to hurt Bruce with every breath, he does not have to hurt the rest of the Family, as well.

Digging into that resolve to make his feet begin to move again, Batman resumes his search of Crime Alley for the infamous crime lord in the expressionless red helmet.

Oracle is still protesting to the course inside his ear, and she tries one more method to reroute Batman’s steady aim: “Tim is on a suicide watch. He’s on a watch because he tore his stitches after a life threatening injury, and he tore them because he wanted to let Jason escape the Manor without letting you and Dick subject him to an interrogation. Bringing Jason home by force will not help Tim. Dragging him back will only make you feel better. You’ll really just be pretending that it’s actually for Tim’s benefit when it could really set his recovery back weeks.”

“The Red Hood must be found,” Batman refutes darkly. “He must be held accountable for what he’s done, and he must be brought to justice for it.”

“Not tonight,” Oracle repeats in a heavy, resigned sigh. “And not by you.”

She cuts the com connection after that, but Batman has no doubt that she’s still watching his every move as he combs the repellant neighborhood for any trace of his crime lord quarry.

Oracle doesn’t understand why he has to do this – why it has to be him that bears this burden to protect his children from it.

Barbara is not a parent, so she cannot possibly understand, and Bruce doesn’t truly hold that against her despite his frustrations with her resistance.

That line gets harder to maintain as he continues his search without uncovering any fruitful leads. He has no direct proof that Oracle is helping Red Hood elude him, but he also is entirely certain that she has no inclination to help him be found.
Batman is forced to give up the search that night just before the sun rises on Sunday morning. While the unfortunate result is disappointing, it is not entirely unexpected.

If there was anyone in Gotham with the skills, determination, and capability needed to hide from Batman, it would be the Red Hood.

Especially if he had Oracle’s help.

They would have to discuss her probable intervention eventually, but for now, Bruce can table the issue in the interest of maintaining the Family’s limited harmony while Tim is in the midst of crisis. While one son central to this incident is a lost cause, the other is not, and Bruce is determined to help him through this. And that takes precedent above all, at the moment.

Bruce divests himself of Batman’s cowl and armor, works himself through a cool down routine and then cleans himself up in the Cave’s showers before taking up his place at the Bat computer to input his notes from the evening.

Then he heads upstairs to the Manor proper and checks in on each of his children.

When he finds them each no worse off than he last left them, Bruce makes for his own bed and collapses into a dead sleep the moment his fingers gain purchase on the covers.

Six and a half hours later, he rises as usual in the luxurious calm of a weekend.

He has made arrangements to allow both himself and his son to be excused from their daily duties at Wayne Enterprises for the next few days – and Tim is off for the next two weeks, at least – but there are still a few details that always need to be handled, even on Sundays.

As soon as that’s all taken care of, he returns to Tim’s room to relieve Cass of the watch she took over from Steph after a mildly abbreviated Patrol. He picks up Moby Dick where Steph left off around halfway through, making a concerted effort to control his emotions.

Bruce will fix this.

Eventually. He will. Nothing else could ever be acceptable.

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searching high and low (but nobody knows)
*Sighs* Oh Bruce... you idiot. T^T

NEXT TIME: Tim decides that he's had enough of this waiting around nonsense. And acts accordingly.

–
high (on hope)

Chapter Summary

Tim takes offense to being put on a suicide watch and elects to remove himself from it in favor of finding Jason and dealing with the /actual PROBLEM/ at hand... Step One works perfectly. Step Two does not go nearly as well as desired...

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is so late!
I admit, Valentines Day distracted me, but I have also had a fair share of chaos lately: a Family friend came from out of state, and at the same time my associate human has gone out of state so the care of our little gremlin has fallen to me alone (and she's a vicious tiny feline who would make Damian proud)... not to mention the insanity of having my floors ruined because my neighbor's washing machine exploded and dealing with insurance and all that jazz... yeah...

It's been a hot minute since I've had time to write...
And now my computer is acting funny so getting this done is taken ten times longer than usual...

Anywho... on to angsty little Timmy being... well, rather angrier than usual.

WARNING: bit of a cliff hanger, here. We're about to start a pretty long run of them to be honest.
And again, I want to reaffirm that neither Tim nor Jason (nor anyone else, really, except maybe Alfred, Cass, and Barbara) have healthy reactions to the issues they're about to face...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifteen - high on hope ( or high on fear )

Tim waits two whole weeks.

Fourteen days, six hours, and thirty seven excruciating minutes.

He waits for his wounds to heal enough for him to be entirely certain that he won’t risk legitimate damage by exerting himself to a significant extent.
It’s also long enough for the bruises on his throat to fade away.

Tim decides that he’s done waiting on a Monday morning.

He hasn’t spoken to anyone since he fought with Dick, and as such, he’s officially still on a suicide watch – insulting as that may be in all respects.

Still, the restrictions have relaxed a bit and Tim is allowed to shower in the peace of genuine privacy – which means he can prep a minimalist go-bag to help get him to one of his isolated, secret safe houses, from whence he can facilitate an actual endeavor to go to ground.

Tim is running away.

And he is not at all ashamed to admit it.

Dick has gone downstairs to grab them both a bite to eat and Tim uses the time to dress in his usual thermals and some comfy looking sweats – far warmer than strictly necessary, but not to an extent that Dick would notice while he’s distracted with trying to play mother hen.

Tim’s go bag is extremely light – being that anything he’d take from the Manor would be absolutely covered in trackers that would be irksome and time consuming to disarm.

It’s literally nothing but a few hundred bucks in untraceable cash, a clean phone that Tim rebuilt himself, and a pair of EM pulse electrodes that he can put behind his ears – serving both to trick his brain into thinking he’s still perfectly warm for the half dozen blocks he’s planning to walk without a coat, and to shield his signal while he rides into town while wearing a tracker invested leather jacket…

(Because he is not an idiot and won’t forego the protection of leathers while on his motorcycle just because of a few inconveniently placed trackers. Especially not when the bike itself will have a few dozen trackers of its own.)

He also pulls high frequency ear plugs, a sonic transmitter, and a contact adhesive patch with enough sedative to drop a small horse out from behind a tile in his bathroom in the corner tucked behind the toilet. Tim’s not worried about them having been found or tampered with – the only person besides him who could even get back there without significant construction damage is Damian and that psycho is not about to go poking around Tim’s bathroom for kicks.

He’s full dressed and his hair is almost dried – damp strands hanging loose and covering any hint of the low profile ear plugs he has in place – long before Dick returns with breakfast.

It’s a massive, sugary bowl of cereal for him, and a nutrient enriched chocolate chip muffin for Tim. He’s even brought a cup of coffee up, along with the two big glasses of milk.

The coffee almost makes Tim want to feel bad about what he’s about to do.

Only almost, however.

And only enough to almost make him want to feel bad.
He couldn’t actually ever be genuinely made to feel bad about this.

It’s mostly Dick’s own fault anyway, and since desperate times call for desperate measures, Tim’s not keen on pulling any punches.

Especially, not when he’s working on a deadline.

A very tight deadline.

Jason cannot be allowed to sit alone inside his head for too long.

Or at all, really, but circumstances have made it rather unavoidable.

Even so, he can’t be left to his own devices for too long because every minute he’s alone with himself is another minute that Tim’s careful work can be undone. He’s spent heaps of time establishing an intricate thread of logic to implant in Jason’s psyche to help weave a specific understanding of the current fabric of reality, and every second that Jason’s brain and insecurities and the claws of the Lazarus Pit have to rip and tear at that fabric is a second that risks a nail catching on Tim’s delicate thread.

He’s already wasted more than enough time.

And he’s not too fearful of offending Dick’s trusting, brotherly sensibilities.

Tim wouldn’t have to do any of this shit if it weren’t for Dick’s head being up his ass.

When Dick settles onto Tim’s bed with the breakfast tray perched between them, he flashes Tim a bright smile and relays an elaborate narrative about how he had to ninja sneak around Alfred to acquire such a reasonably sized breakfast.

Tim relents slightly and allows Dick to see a slight smile on his face in response to the ridiculous tale, but he still refuses to speak. He does give a silent toast of thanks with his coffee.

And he lets that leniency bleed over into allowing Dick to finish his cereal and even get a brief hug in before he puts his plan for escape into action.

It’s nothing flashy, nothing that displays any kind of dramatic fighting prowess, but he uses the sonic emitter to distract Dick, to make him wince and writhe and frantically look around everywhere but where he should. Then Tim gets the contact sticky flush against Dick’s carotid artery and keeps the man’s scrabbling hands occupied long enough for it to take effect.

Dick crumbles slowly into a heap on Tim’s bed.

And the only comfort Tim sees to ensuring before slipping silently out the door is to check that Dick can breathe in his slumped position.

After that, Tim heads downstairs without looking back.
He only pauses in the mudroom to swap out his sweats and pull on his leathers. He does not look up when Alfred appears at the door with a dramatic sigh.

“I would not wish you to feel imprisoned, but I would rather by far to have some convincing means to keep you here,” the butler admits.

Tim sighs in reply, but he doesn’t look up and he doesn’t pause in his preparations.

“Please, Master Timothy,” Alfred says quietly, “Come home.”

This time Tim pauses.

He still doesn’t look up, but he makes a few words crawl up his scratchy throat.

“One without Jason.”

A moment passes in silence.

And then Alfred accepts sadly, “Very well then, young sir.”

Tim still isn’t looking, but he feels Alfred nod and he nods in return as he gets back to getting ready. It’s only another few seconds before he’s dressed to head out.

He sticks the electrodes behind his ears and activates them to envelope himself within an electromagnetic field. Then he grabs a motorcycle without any fancy electronic components, kick starts the analog engine, and tears off down the tarmac.

He heads to the City Hall district, ditches his bike and his leathers in the alley across from the Old Post Office, and walks three blocks to the subway. It takes two hours to ride back and forth and jump between lines in a way to make his course utterly impossible to follow – while he picks up odds and ends from stashes he’s cached throughout the system.

It’s all theater gear, which means he can change his entire outfit and appearance in the space of half a second as he swings around a blind corner – through a long passage where the shadows and narrow angles make cameras ineffective – and then whips around and heads right back where he came from.

Tim’s most secretive safe house is right below Oracle’s nose, a rented office in the building across the street from the Clock Tower. From there he can regroup.

He snatches a couple of hours in a nap – running from Batman would be exhausting even if he wasn’t still riding the ache of catastrophic blood loss – but after that, he’s all business.

Collecting his kit, Tim makes himself anonymous, and treks across the city towards Crime Alley. It’s still before noon, if only just, but Tim knows that finding Jason is going to take the rest of the day – even if he gets lucky.

He’s not quite to the point of randomly knocking on doors, but he’s pretty close.

There’s fifty buildings in Crime Alley with a reasonable power draw to serve as secure cover
for a pseudo-Cave set-up… Tim isn’t entirely certain that Jason’s still running a sophisticated comp set, but he doesn’t think Jason’s gone entirely underground yet. There are still steady reports of the Red Hood patrolling as usual and keeping his turf secure, so he likely has something tech heavy running.

So, fifty buildings.

Getting close enough to each to scout security measures takes time, and isolating the two dozen with the kind of security a Bat could upgrade, takes time. Getting into those buildings without being noticed and clearing each floor for any specific units with exorbitant security takes more time. And then getting into those units, checking to confirm that they do belong to Jason, and evaluating the time span that has lapsed between his Tim’s arrival and Jason’s most recent occupancy takes more time.

Not to mention the issue of running around town while dodging all of Oracle’s surveillance vehicles…

He’s not even halfway through his list when the last vestiges of sunlight fade.

He’s about two thirds through when the sun starts coming back up.

Tim’s gone through all but five plausible options when he stumbles on one with a window left open over the fire escape – secured by an outrageous number of alarms and motion sensors, that are an absolute bitch to get around – and a slow cooker ticking away with something flavorful (definitely meat, probably pork) degrading into mush inside it.

_Bingo._

Now, all that Tim has to do is find Jason.

Being nearly 10am, Tim’s first thought is that he’s gotten back from Patrol already and is out cold in the bedroom down the hall.

Tim dismisses the thought quickly, though.

No Bat would be out cold enough to ignore the sounds of someone breaking into their safehouse – not unless they happen to be on the problematic side of half dead, at least, and Tim doesn’t think Jason will have gotten in any fights big enough to get himself seriously injured, because it would also have been a fight big enough to draw the other Bats’ attention and Tim is reasonably certain that Jason will have been maintaining a very low profile recently...

Besides, if he’d gotten home already, Jason probably would have closed his window – unless he was expecting guests, which is unlikely, but not entirely impossible…

But also, the pork in the slow cooker is… not meat shaped anymore.

It’s been there a while, like he put it on before heading out, and Tim doesn’t think it’ll be an even partially solid substance if Jason leaves it in while he crashes post Patrol.
No, it’s much more likely that it’s a meal planned for Jason’s post Patrol binge and he just hasn’t gotten back yet to devour it.

It makes a certain amount of sense for Jason to have shifted his Patrol timings in order to ensure he was working with the maximum potential to best avoid the other Bats’ poking around to find him.

And if there was ever a neighborhood in the universe that would’ve gotten so desensitized to the idea of masked men toting weapons walking around in broad daylight that no one would bat an eye to see Red Hood on Patrol, it would’ve been Gotham’s Crime Alley.

So, Jason is like still out pounding the pavement (and pounding in people’s faces).

Which leaves Tim in a bit of a pickle…

Now that he’s here, and can see that Jason is not, Tim feels that it may not be the best plan to have Jason come home to find Tim sitting in his living room.

But also can’t just leave and wait for Jason to come back before making a soft open approach. Getting passed Jason’s beefed up security measures had taken a significant bit of finagling and it’s fairly likely that Jason will notice someone’s messed with it.

Acceptable alternative options fail to present themselves as Tim’s brain tries to spin the problem enough to work out a viable solution.

And after just a short moment of attempting to figure out the best approach, the possibility of choosing how to initiate this meeting is taken out of his hands…

Jason moves so silently across familiar ground – so quick and quiet and smoothly – that Tim’s first hint of his presence is the sound of a pistol being cocked.

Tim freezes.

Hands up, fists open in complete surrender; duffel bag strap still hooked over his elbow.

Spots Jason with his peripheral vision, already standing in his kitchen after having slid soundlessly through the still open window over the sink.

Jason’s figure is blurry at the edge of Tim’s vision, but Tim doesn’t need to see his expression at all to feel the fury radiating off of him.

Hypothesis confirmed: Jason finding him just standing here inside his safe house is… markedly ineffective towards getting on Jason’s good side…
“You got any kind of reason I shouldn’t shoot you right now, *Replacement*?”

“Not really,” Tim admits. “But I’d prefer it if you didn’t.”

There’s a low burst of garbled static from the Hood’s voice processor – like Jason’s muttered something under his breath that the Hood’s mic can’t quite capture well enough to reproduce as a valid output signal.

Tim very carefully does not react.

Or move at all.

Jason just stares at him, gun cocked and steady.

The silence stretches on so long that Tim is tempted to tell Jason to just get *on* with it, already – he’s on a schedule, after all.

But that would open him to questions about what the hell kind of a schedule Tim’s got set for himself that involves coming *here* while he’s still supposed to be on bed rest.

Which is *not* the best place to start this conversation.

Why he’s here is an inevitable question, but keeping the idea of a schedule out of it would be helpful – Jason’s not the type of person to react well to the idea of someone attempting to control his life, to manipulate his very psyche to achieve a give end.

Even if that end is good for him.

So, Tim waits.

Plan A is to wait, totally frozen, until Jason decides how he wants to play it.

But Tim is still pretty solidly anemic, despite waiting two frickin’ weeks to do this.

And his duffle bag is heavier than optimal in the given situation.

The muscles in his arm begin to tremble eventually.

The tremors start out in concealable, local bursts, but far too quickly turn into a generalized and visible weakness that makes the arm holding his duffle descend.

It clicks against the floor when the muscles in Tim’s arm give up entirely on holding it.
The click triggers Jason into speaking.

“The hell are you even doing here, shouldn’t you still be in bed or some shit?”

“I ran away.”

“The fuck?”

“I ran away,” Tim repeats, doing his very best not to sound too patronizing.

Jason snorts. “I heard you the first time, dipshit. I’m just havin’ trouble buying the idea that you flew the fuckin’ coop.”

Tim shrugs.

The motion moves the strap of his duffle, and Tim can feel Jason’s eyes on it.

“I’m clean,” Tim mentions. “No trackers or beacons or hackable tech or anything. The bag, and everything in it, s’all clean, too. You can check it if you want.”

Jason doesn’t respond.

Tim’s not sure if it’s because he’s thinking about checking Tim’s bag, or if he’s still trying to decide whether or not to shoot him. Probably both.

And Jason’s probably considering the idea that even if he decides not to shoot him right now and checks Tim’s bag, if he finds anything he doesn’t like, the question of to shoot or not to shoot is gonna come right back up again…

It’s actually pretty likely to come up again a lot in the next few twists of conversation… regardless of how much Tim does not actually want to be shot.

Still in Tim’s peripheries, Jason adjusts his stance.

The gun in his hand is still steady – still cocked and pointed at Tim’s head – but Jason’s over all posture is more relaxed.

Tim takes this as permission to slowly shift his own posture so he can actually see Jason, and carefully shift his muscles to prevent his knees from giving out in the same way his arm did.

Jason still has his Hood on, and Tim’s movement rachets up the tension in the air, but Tim still feels reasonably confident in his odds of surviving the next few minutes.
The silence lingers heavily again, but this time Jason breaks it well before Tim begins to entertain the thought that he might honestly prefer being shot.

“What made you run?”

Tim shrugs.

“It was suffocating,” he admits, blunt and candidly.

It would be true enough to validate his choice even without the ridiculous excess of the suicide watch being leveled against him.

Tim may have submitted to three weeks in bed under other circumstances – scenarios where Jason wasn’t a flight risk and it was only the usual mix of worry wart procedures to deal with – but no matter how much he might’ve wanted to stay, Tim would’ve had to bolt eventually.

He chooses not to mention the suicide watch to Jason at the moment, thinking that it’ll just complicate things and add another, unnecessary layer of tension to the already rather strained atmosphere.

Instead, he glosses over it to say, “I just needed to get out of there, get somewhere I could breathe… you know, find somewhere to exist without feeling like I’m being watched.”

Jason couldn’t possibly do anything but empathize.

Tim watches his chest expand with a heavy breath – one that may have been a sigh if his helmet’s mic was rigged to relay that kind of sound.

“So, why the fuck you come here for?”

Tim shrugs again.

“I wanted to apologize about the others being assholes,” Tim tells him. “And about me being an asshole about getting you to come talk to Alfred.”

It’s not strictly true.

It’s not why he came here.

But it’s still a legitimate point.

The rampant asshole-er-y of the last few weeks warrants an apology.

Well… it truthfully warrants much better than an apology, but an apology’s all that Tim has really got on offer at the moment. He’s working with a very limited pool of resources.
“Meh, them’s the breaks, kid,” Jason accepts – accepting the inevitability of the situation instead of pulling any merit out of Tim’s apology.

It makes Tim’s mouth twitch towards a frown.

He’s waited too long to get his ass out here, Jason’s internalized too much of this shit as nothing more than the Universe holding a god damn grudge against him

He’s not even really angry at Dick or Bruce for being such vicious assholes to him after he saved Tim’s life. He’s just accepted that it’s the inevitable way things are.

Tim should’ve gotten here sooner, while Jason was still angry.

He could take the bruises.

It would’ve been wholly worth it if it meant that he could’ve gotten in the apology while Jason still felt like something was wrong with how things played out.

Then the apology might’ve meant something.

Instead, it feels like he’s apologizing for the rain – like it’s nothing more than ‘sorry that the thunderstorm flooded the basement of your restaurant and now your home and livelihood are threatened, that sounds awful. Poor you.’

It’s cheap and useless now, and Tim fucking knew that waiting was a risk.

*Fantastic…*

Whelp. On to Plan M… Or rather to like M-90.3 or something.

Tim’s lost track of the exact instance in the naming convention of his systematic strategy adjustment theorem he’s reached with this utter idiocy – this long term plan of Familial reintroduction he’s been trying to enact for frickin’ years now… like he’s some god damn ornithologist bent on bringing back some sort of feisty, angry zombie bird species (that’s probably venomous and probably from frickin’ Australia and definitely out to kill everyone) – to reestablish the endangered venomous robin species safely in its natural habitat, but he’s not an ornithologist and he doesn’t have decades to do this slowly because the Wayne-forest habitat is rotting from the inside out and it needs it’s red breasted venomous robin back…

“Yo! Earth to Timbelina!”
Jason’s shout breaks Tim’s spiral, the shout more than the gun being waved in his face – than the gun’s hand grip being tapped against his temple.

The shout is all Jason’s voice, his human voice unprocessed by the Hood.

Tim blinks and looks up at Jason’s face – his bare face. His hair is mussed up from the sweaty hours spent inside the helmet and the skin around his eyes is a touch splotchy from where he’s ripped at the lingering bits of adhesive for the domino he wears despite the Hood.

It’s Jason.

It’s Jason, and something in Tim relaxes dramatically at the reminder – despite not knowing exactly when Jason got so close, despite the gun still being cocked, still pointed at his head, still more than ready to just blow his brains out.

It’s Jason, and he’s alive, and that’s important – that Jason is here at all, that he’s alive and still him in all the ways that matter, and that’s the thing that’s most important.

Tim can fail a thousand times, but because it’s Jason there’s always room for one more chance to try again. It’s just how Jason is, how he’s built, how he’s wired.

It’s pretty amazing when you consider where he came from.

Growing up in the rough of Gotham worst areas, on the cold and bitter and vicious streets of Crime Alley and the Narrows is not the kind of back story you would expect to instill a tolerance for second chances – let alone hardware in a capacity to continuously reinvent them.

But Jason does that.

He’s more than tolerant, he’s indulgent.

Like a big service dog – like one fresh out of a war zone, letting an angry, impotent little kitten beat on him because what the hell could it hurt?

So, Tim can fail.

Over and over again, Tim can fail.
The rest of the Family isn’t so great at second chances, but this is only about them in the barest sense – they don’t have to be willing to give chance after chance, they have to be worn down enough to just give him one. Just one shot, a chance to let them really see Jason.

Because *he’s* the one being wronged, here.

They just need one freakin’ second without pejorative judgement to just see him and everything will work itself out on its own. Not super smoothly, perhaps, but even so…

Tim can deal with it.

*Everyone* can just deal with it.

And Tim can almost accept the failures.

Because as long as he keeps getting back up, Jason will keep letting him try again.

Until something sticks, until it works.

“Oh~kay, Timtam,” Jason drawls suddenly, rolling out the syllables as far as they can stretch. “You are *clearly* very high on something hard and heavy, and I think it’s time for you get your scrawny ass outta Oz.”

“What? But— no, wait, I—”

“Wait what? Apology delivered, Timbit, so go annoy somebody else while you ride out the painkillers,” Jason huffs with a gruff and growly undertone. “Just go out to one of your own safe houses if you can’t take being at the Manor.”

“Can’t I stay here?”

“No.”

“I won’t be annoying, or eat your food, or anything, I’ll just stay on the couch for a little while and then… and then I’ll leave,” Tim promises, mind frantically grasping at the shorn threads of his initial plan to try to salvage some actionable objective.

Nothing progressive can happen today if he gets kicked out this quickly.

He needs a couple minutes to get a real dialogue initiated. Something Socratic and philosophically simulating… Something Jason would find interesting and homey.
“No,” Jason reiterates. “You’re fucking high, idiot – making even more dumbass decisions than you usually do. This ain’t a safe place, and you are hella zonked to think it is.”

“It’s safer than the streets,” Tim says, clawing desperately at the comment for any kind of purchase he can make. But he’s slipping, and he knows it, and it’s hard to make the words come out audibly, let alone firm, “It’s safer here than trying to walk all the way to China Town.”

It’s day light out, and Tim probably looks like a penniless drugged up college student on a bad ride, so even in Crime Alley, he’ll probably go unmolested for a good few hours.

“You got places closer than China Town to hide at,” Jason points out, irksomely accurate. “But—”

“Na-uh, I don’t want you here, asshat. I’mma eat my fuckin’ pot roast and crash in peace and that last bit ain’t about to happen with you here, so out.” He gestures roughly at the apartment’s door, with the gun that still in his hand.

“But—”

“I ain’t playin,” Jason warns, tone dramatically darker than before. “Out.”

Tim sighs.

“Fine.”

He drags his duffle along as he backs towards the door and then takes his time undoing all the bolts and chains and locks that really can’t be picked.

When it’s open, he shuffles slowly out across the threshold, a harsh shove from Jason to his shoulder propelling him the last few feet into the empty hallway.

The door is slammed behind him before he gets a chance to even turn around, and the rhythmic rumble of locks being re-secured echoes through the hall in loud, disheartening thuds.

Tim sighs again as he stares at the door.

The hallway around his is utterly void of life, the other apartments on this floor are very likely kept vacant so Jason doesn’t have to deal with nosy neighbors.

If Tim just stays here, he probably won’t be bothered by anyone.

That CCTV camera in the corner at the hall’s far end is tech that way too nice to be part of the building’s pretense at security, so no door man will see Tim on it and come up to oust him from a squatter’s nest. That cam has got to be for Jason.

Who may come oust him, but probably won’t bother with the hassle of it.
And anyway, Tim’s too tired to care just now about a future possibility of mild annoyance – particularly when it would mean he’d have another opening to attempt to talk to Jason.

He could probably walk to one of his own safe houses, to crash there and regroup, but he’s feeling stubborn. He doesn’t want to leave yet.

His goal for today was to find Jason and talk until they found some solid common ground to stand on – started off well with the whole Manor as a black hole of suffocation via repressed angst and shit… but he lost Jason when the apology fell flat, and then he lost himself in his own stupidly intrusive thoughts.

But he can’t just leave.

Jason has every right not to want to have Tim bothering him, but Tim…

Tim wants to stay close, has to stay close.

His chest is already tight and panicky with the idea of going elsewhere, of not being close enough to keep himself remembering that Jason is alive and that all of Tim’s failures won’t matter once he finally gets it right…

And the lingering anemia combined with the drain away of adrenaline is making him feel woozy enough want to keep his hand against the flaky wallpaper opposite Jason’s front door.

The wall’s support is helpful.

Too helpful – comforting, almost.

Enough to make him lean his shoulder against it when the muscles in his arm give out again. He probably could have leaned up against it with his other arm, but that one’s hand is shaking rather violently, and he isn’t quite sure why.

His shoulder that’s been leaned against the wall slides, transitions into his back being pressed against the grubby wall paper, and then his knees give out in slow motion and his slips in scraping jolts down to curl around his duffle on the floor boards.

He can hear Jason moving around in his apartment.

Can hear the scrape of plates and cutlery and the thrum of music being cranked up.

He falls asleep like that, in a sudden breath of there and then not that should probably be concerning, but Tim’s out cold enough to keep from having to care.
His throat and chest are so tight it hurts, even in the swirl beyond oblivion, and Tim’s not quite sure why, but equally sure he shouldn’t poke the sore spot to figure out why he cares.

The rest of the world can just wait a god damn minute while he sleeps the worst of it off.

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*high on hope or high on fear (we were heartbreak of the year)*

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Timmy... stubborn, sweet, STUPID Timmy...

NEXT TIME: Jason faces down Tim’s stubborn streak head on... with his own stupid stubbornness. Because that’s a GREAT idea, an absolutely flawless plan... right?
we were stackin' up (to fold)

Chapter Summary

Jason deals with the Bats’ reactions to Tim's idiocy and his own questionable choices in responding to it.

And when Tim shows up in his space all over again... Jason makes some choices that surprise even himself.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long! I'm still dealing with my floors (or, rather, the current lack thereof) and I'm working on getting a new thing started for a possible podcast thingamajig, which could turn out to be super cool, but is a lot more time consuming right now than I was really prepared for... And then I'm also facing a terrible bout of writer's block...

But y'all have been so awesome and understanding, and I just wanna let you know that your support means the world to me!

Anywho, on to Jason being adorable and getting himself overly invested in Tim's welfare without realizing what's happening... he just can't say no to Tiny Timmy... >u<

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Sixteen - we were stackin' up (to fold)

By the fourth day after the shit fest that came with having gone to chat with Alfred, Jason is just about ready to give up.

Give up on what exactly, he’s not particularly certain, but still…
Well, giving up on maintaining his Patrols while avoiding the Bats seems a plausible first step, but it feels like more than that – like it’s all a lot heavier than that. Like giving up on that is really part of giving up on something else entirely…

It’s frickin’ weird.

The Bats have been pissed at him before, been actively hunting him before, but now… he thinks they feel a lot more determined, a lot more desperate.

He doesn’t have any idea why, he didn’t hurt the fuckin’ baby bird – didn’t even see the idiot until the last second, and even then it was only for a second – so he’s got no clue as to what’s with the ridiculous vehemence here… but that’s just apparently how shit rolls for him.

Fuck it.

He doesn’t give a damn anymore.

Jason simply adjusts his Patrol – he can stay out later in Crime Alley than the Bats can in the rest of the City, both because his costume is a lot less dramatically out of place than the others’ full on circus get ups, and because the people in his neck of the woods just don’t fucking care anymore. The god damn Bat himself could probably stroll through at noon without a fuss.

So Jason just starts going out way late.

Coming back well after the sun’s up.

By Day Seven, he’s started on a plan of switching safe houses every three days.

By Day Eleven, he’s jumping house every other day.

Two fucking weeks after the shit storm at the Manor and Jason just cannot deal.

He clears out before dinner time, buys a pork shoulder at the butcher’s shop on the corner of the old place, sticks it in a slow cooker in a new spot, sets it to roast forever and doesn’t head out on whatever his Patrol’s become until almost four in the morning.

He’s planning on coming back for the meat, crashing for a couple hours, and then jumping ship again. If he can’t get far enough ahead of them this time to feel like he’s got a comfortable lead, to feel like he can sit the fuck down for five minutes without worrying, he’s gonna have to dial up Roy and Kori – maybe bribe his way into another semi-permanent invite to the island with the promise of his ‘gourmet’ cooking for dinner every night.

He doesn’t want to impose on one or both of them again, not so soon after the detox insanity… he was hoping to go for at least a year away, a measly little year of being a god damn self sufficient grown ass person… Whelp, he tried.
Maybe next time he’ll get all the way around the calendar before he runs out of gas.

Jason’s a sap – and despite knowing it, he’s never been able to change it – so he holds out hope that he won’t have to get his ass out of Gotham right up until he gets back for his pork shoulder and finds that his safe house window has been very skillfully breached.

He wouldn’t have noticed it at all if he weren’t looking for hints of intrusion, or if the shadow of his trespasser had been standing any further inside the apartment than at the edge of his living room. Jason knows the ground better than any intruder could, and he moves with the advantage of silence as he slides inside.

His gun is in his hand, cocked and leveled at the intruder’s head, before he registers that the person standing in his living room is Tim.

Not Red Robin, but Tim.

Tim Drake, in civvies.

Tim, being as sensible as could be hoped for considering where the idiot is standing right now, freezes – hands raised and palms flat and every muscle perfectly still to prove he’s not here for a fight like any of the others would be.

The fuck is he doing here? Stupid, reckless, dumb ass little shit.

The fury radiates so tangibly through the air around Jason that Tim takes a nervous swallow. Jason almost pulls the trigger on that offense alone.

“You got any kind of reason I shouldn't shoot you right now, Replacement?”

He doesn’t really need a good reason, just any reason – just something to shut the Pit’s whispers down as it howls at how intentionally irritating it is that Tim has even fucking found him, let alone that he’s broken in and made himself at home … worming his way into Jason’s life and sweeping it all out from under him. Again.

Replaced in his own fucking safe house.

Little shit just doesn't know when to fucking quit.

And to make matters worse, he’s got zero self preservation instincts because, instead of supplying Jason with even a bullshit answer to latch onto, Tim says flippantly, “Not really. But I’d prefer it if you didn’t.”

He’d fucking prefer it? Seriously?
That is the only god damn defense he’s gonna muster?

Jason is very literally threatening to kill this moron, and all he says is that he’d rather that Jason didn’t shoot him?

God damn it.

Tim was trained by the frickin’ Bat. He should have something better than that useless flimflam ready to spin when something like this comes up.

Jason is gonna kill this kid just to teach him a lesson in preparedness.

It’s ridiculous.

Utterly ridiculous.

And Tim’s not reacting to the threat at all.

Or.

Well. Maybe he is.

The HUD on the inside of Jason’s Hood shows that Tim’s heart rate is currently through the roof. And the HD visuals are catching the subtle signs of tremors running through Tim’s muscles – either he’s bleeding out again or he’s scared enough to wanna piss his pants.

Option A is far more likely.

Especially as the tremors start to spread and the weight looped around one of his arms makes it start to sink… a duffel bag.

Dumb ass brought a duffel bag.

Jason taps his visor’s read outs through every scan he has available, searching for any hint of Bat tracker or bug or even a watch that’s a little too smart in a way that could let frickin Oracle get her nosy eyes inside his place.

The scans all come up clean, but paranoia’s got sharp teeth and it doesn’t let go lightly.

Jason grinds his jaw around a much more colorful and vehement response as the duffel sinks down far enough to click against his floor boards before he grits out, “The hell are you even doing here, shouldn’t you still be in bed or some shit?”

Cool as ice, the idiot replies, “I ran away.”
“The fuck?”

He… he ran away? Wha— how? How is this place not swarming with worry warts in capes and costumes? Why the hell would he leave? Why the hell would he come here?

“I ran away,” Tim repeats, still cool as a fucking cucumber.

All smarmy fresh and crisp.

Jason snorts. “I heard you the first time, dipshit. I'm just havin' trouble buying the idea that you flew the fuckin' coop.”

Tim shrugs. Asshat.

The movement jars the strap on his elbow connecting him to the duffel bag.

He brought a bag.

A clean bag.

He flew the coop, went to ground with a go bag hidden from fucking God, and then… and he came the fuck here. The hell is goin’ on inside that scrambled up noggin?

Tim clearly knows that Jason’s concerned about the bag.

But he tries to soothe the wrong fuckin’ worry when he speaks up, saying, “I’m clean. No trackers or beacons or hackable tech or anything. The bag, and everything in it, s'all clean, too. You can check it if you want.”

Yeah.

Jason knew that.

He’d already checked it, for starters – at least virtually, anyway. He’d still like to rifle through it to make absolutely certain nothing’s hiding from his helmet’s sensors, but that’s a different worry altogether. Assured enough for now that the bag is clean, Jason’s mostly concern with the fact that it’s a bag.

Tim brought a bag.

After bolting from the Manor.

The bag is concerning.
Because Tim’s not the first little birdie to flee the nest.

It’s concerning in a different way that he brought the damn thing here, but it’s also just concerning because run away birds don’t have the greatest track record with flying safely south and the bag Tim’s brought is not light. This doesn’t look like a sabbatical for sanity. It looks like he’s not really planning on going back to the Manor – not soon, at least, possibly not ever.

“What made you run?”

Jason’s not entirely sure why he asks.

He’s also not sure why he falls back to lean his weight over his heels in a slightly more relaxed stance – or why that tiny gesture is enough to make Tim feel comfortable enough to make a slow shift to face Jason more directly.

Jason’s still got a gun pointed at his head, but it may as well not be there at all for the blunt disregard the weapon gets from Tim.

Tim shrugs again, and then says with a candid rawness in his tone, “It was suffocating. I just needed to get out of there, get somewhere I could breathe... you know, find somewhere to exist without feeling like I’m being watched and judged and... and just... smothered.”

Jason can’t ignore how similar he felt the last time he’d left while he’d still been considered to be living there – how he felt before he ran.

He pulls air slowly into his lungs. Forces it out again just as slowly.

Then he asks the important question: “So, why the fuck you come here for?”

Tim shrugs, yet again.

Somehow, it’s still not quite annoying.

“I wanted to apologize about the others being assholes,” Tim tells him. “And about me being an asshole about getting you to come talk to Alfred.”

Okay.

Not what he expected.

Kid looks sheepish enough about it that it’s probably true.

True-ish.
Mostly true-ish. Probably.

Kid’s still a pretty crap liar, but he’s learned a lot while playin’ in the pixie boots.

It’s just enough for Jason to be certain it’s not totally a lie, but not quite sure how much truth he’s actually getting from the kid.

Either way, though, Jason doesn’t really care about the whole shit storm of assholery that is the crazy ass Bat Clan. Isn’t quite sure why Tim even thinks he still has any dogs in that fight.

With a shrug of his own, Jason accepts, “Meh, them’s the breaks, kid.”

Inexplicably, it makes Tim’s mouth twitch towards a frown.

Objectively, his expression doesn’t change much, but subjectively, it grows dramatically darker over the course of the next few seconds – alarmingly so.

“You okay there, Replacement?”

No response.

Nothing to even indicate that he heard.

And his eyes start doing that god damn flicker thing that Jason recalls from Before, the one that means the idiot is thinking too hard about some shit and his ridiculous robot brain is starting to overheat itself.

Jason sighs heavily – a mix of fury and nostalgia mixing through his frustration.

A heaviness sweeps through him, different from exhaustion, but somehow it still makes him want nothing more than to sink into the comfy black oblivion of his bed.

This is one of the very few safe houses he maintains with an actual bed and he’d been looking forward to sleeping in it after gorging himself on pork shoulder – especially since he’d been concerned about being chased out of Gotham because the Bats were catching up to him and might soon be able to find his current safe house while he was occupying it.

It has been a valid concern, apparently, if the kid on bedrest could find him…

The others must’ve suspected something about this place and been circling – possibly only driven away in time for him to make a clean approach by the rising sun and their much more distinctive and ridiculous costumes.

Feeling the weight of existing dragging down his shoulders, Jason takes a few steps further into his apartment. He keeps his pistol in his hand – just a little Beretta M80, built to be light and fast and easy to handle – but he reaches up to undo the traps worked into the clasps on his helmet. The haptic feedback system triggers with each correct input code and Jason makes a mental note to tone it down a bit – he’s never really taken it off in a hurry before, at least not without something significant
to distract him as he nearly rips it off his head – and the mild hurry he’s in right now to get his head exposed to open air makes the feedback feel like it’s gonna vibrate his teeth right out of his stupid thick skull.

Tim’s still caught in ‘flicker shock’ when Jason pulls the helmet free.

The idiot doesn’t blink when Jason sets the helmet down on the counter of his breakfast bar with a solid *thunk* and simply continues to stand there, stuck inside his own brain, as Jason uses his thumb print to clear the security of his domino. The mask gives a small beep and releases the chemical compound designed specifically to dissolve the special, industrial strength adhesive that keeps the thing on his face.

Or at least, dissolve most of it.

Working on his own means he doesn’t have the tech advantage of Bruce’s billions or his pet brainiacs to make sure all the bugs get worked out of his systems.

The lingering smudges of half dissolved adhesive make the mask sting when he pulls it off, but the inevitable splotchy redness on his face is not much of a concern, honestly.

The prickle just wakes him up a little after a long Patrol.

Jason’s taken at least three solid minutes here to mess around with his gear and Tim’s still caught up in his stupid genius head – hasn’t even noticed the inattention Jason’s been throwing his way enough to take a single step towards the relative safety of making a quick exit.

Jason could have easily killed him ten times over, at this point.

Tim’s paying so little attention to what’s happening around him that Jason could probably have gouged out his flicker happy baby blues with a god damn teaspoon.

This time, noticing Tim’s lack of self preservation instincts makes a bitter bark of anger rise up in his chest and he shouts, “Yo! Earth to Timbelina!”

It seems to do the trick.

Kinda.

Tim’s flick stutters to a halt and he blinks up at Jason with those big blue eyes all wide and innocent and awed in a way that makes Jason think uncomfortably of the way Tim looked at him when they were kids… That makes Jason think about the way Tim looking at him like that made him feel – made him *want* to feel more, and made him want to *deserve* it.

It makes Jason’s lip curl up in a vicious snarl that Tim doesn’t seem to see.

Tim’s pupils are blown wide, and he’s still got little tremors running through his muscles that no longer look like fearful little quakes. He’s looking dead at Jason, eyes perfectly still and flicker free, but he’s just as zoned out as he was with the flicker.

He looks…

He looks *high*, honestly.

Like he’s running on nothing but caffeine and some hella powerful painkillers.
Whelp.

That at least explains the new degree of bad decision making he’s achieved.

It’s a little worrisome that the Bat whose currently out of his brain on opiates is the one that managed to figure out how to find Jason’s current bolt hole, but whatever.

Tim’s a genius without chemical enhancement, take a little something that makes logic and whatnot a lot more flexible and, sure, makes sense the kid could somehow mathematically calculate Jason’s gps coordinates by measuring his stride length or some shit.

But still, Tim is high and standing in Jason’s living room and staring up at him like Jason is the best damn thing he’s ever seen. Not blinking. Like he’s afraid that Jason’s gonna disappear if he even thinks to close his eyes for half a second...

Fuck.

Jason can’t tell if he wants to just slap that dangerously sappy look off the moron’s stupid trusting face, or... if he kinda wants to promise that he’s not going anywhere – except he is.

Tomorrow afternoon at the latest, Jason’s gonna blow this popsicle stand and skedaddle his way right out of Gotham – get his ass into gear and not slow down until he’s on the other side of the god damn planet.

And it’s partly Tim’s fault that he’s so hell bent on doing it.

Actually, it’s largely Tim’s fault. And entirely Tim’s Family’s fault.

But really, more Tim’s fault than anything, at least directly…

Stupid punch drunk idiot.

Why’d he have to go and get himself blown up like that?

Why’d he have to come to Jason once he had?

Why the fuck did Jason have to bother shit with saving that scum sucking moron?

Nothing makes sense anymore and Jason’s due to get out of Dodge ASAP.

But he’s spent twelve hours cooking this pork shoulder and he is damn well gonna enjoy his last supper. And he’s gonna relish one last crash in Gotham, sprawled out on his bed with the silk sheet habit Alfred got him hooked on while he lived at the Manor.

Which means that Kid High as a Kite here has got to go.

Now.
“Oh—kay, Timtam,” Jason drawls forcefully, rolling out the syllables with a heavy, lilted growl, “You are clearly very high on something hard and heavy, and I think it's time for you get your scrawny ass outta Oz.”

Tim blinks.

Brought back to the present in a startled rush of realization and alarm that makes him look like a deer in headlights – makes him look like Jason remembers him as a kid, like he looked the first few dozen times when Jason found himself wanting to smack some sense into frickin’ Bambi… a thing Jason hasn’t felt since before he got himself killed.

Makes him want to smack a bit harder now, since the first few dozen lessons don’t seem like they managed to stick.

Tim stutters back to life, spluttering, “What? But— no, wait, I—”

“Wait what?” Jason growls, tamping down on the growing urge to wrap his hand around Tim’s tiny little throat and just *squeeze* until the frightened little seal *stops talking* like that, like he wants to stay... Or maybe to just short cut by smacking him hard with the M80’s hand grip.

“Apology delivered, Timbit, so go annoy somebody else while you ride out the pain killers,” Jason huffs gruffly, hunching his shoulders to hold himself back, “Just go out to one of your own safe houses if you can't take being at the Manor.”

Desperate baby seal eyes meet his and Tim pleads, “Can’t I stay here?”

*Fuck* no.

Never.

*Neither* of them would survive that shit and Tim’s a sheep brained little runt on horse sized hallucinogens if he has any crazy kind of illusion that says otherwise.

“No.”

The single syllable is as much as Jason can manage without giving leave to his muscles to simply step up and strangle the moron.

“I won't be annoying, or eat your food, or anything, I'll just... stay on the couch for a little while and then... and then I'll leave,” Tim promises, because, *obviously*, those are the only possible objections Jason could have concerning this ridiculous venture.

But Tim’s straight up *begging* in a way that makes Jason feel distinctly uncomfortable – a hot swirl of *something* in his gut he does *not* like.
Even if Tim just sits there without speaking, or moving, or breathing, Jason will be too aware of his existence to even pretend that he’s relaxed. Or even just not uncomfortable…

“No,” Jason reiterates, feeling a tremor start up in his own arm muscles as he fights down the urge to just grab the kid and shake until he sees how ridiculous this is. “You’re fucking high, idiot – making even more dumb ass decisions than you usually do. This ain’t a safe place, and you are hella zonked to think it is.”

“It’s safer than the streets,” Tim leaps to saying. He’s clawing so desperately at straws here that he’s willing to go for the low blows to attempt getting Jason to let him have his way.

At the mention of the streets, at the idea of sending a drugged up Timbit out onto them to fend for his fucking self, Jason’s hand ball into fists.

He’s pretty damn surprised he somehow avoids pulling his Beretta’s trigger.

Because that shit is still cocked with the safety off and it sits heavy in his hand. It’s not pointed directly at Tim anymore, but its aim’s only off his feet by a few inches.

And Tim’s talking again, trying to convince Jason to let him stay, “It’s safer here than trying to walk all the way to China Town.”

China Town is where Tim’s got most of his official safe houses, and at least one semi-official apartment – though not the one he owns as the illustrious Timothy Drake-Wayne.

It’s not the greatest defense.

It's day light out, and Tim looks like a penniless drugged up college student on a bad ride, so even in Crime Alley, he'll probably go unaccosted for a good few hours.

And besides, Jason knows Tim’s got bolt holes all over this damn city.

He’s probably even got one in the friggin’ Alley – because Tim is just stupid and stubborn like that and would set up shop on Jason’s turf just to prove he could, on nothin’ but a dare he made while talking to his own damn self at four in the morning.

Coldly unmoved, Jason points out, “You got places closer than China Town to hide at.”

“But—”

Jason doesn’t let Tim speak.

And he definitely doesn’t let his gaze focus on how scared and sad the kid looks, as he refutes, “Nah-uh, I don't want you here, asshat. I'mma eat my fuckin' pork roast and crash in peace, and that last bit ain’t about to happen with you here, so out.”

He makes a shooing gesture at the door with the Beretta.

Tim wilts, but doesn’t make a move to leave.

“But—”

“I ain’t playin’,” Jason snarls, leveling the gun at Tim’s head again. “Out.”
Tim sighs in pained defeat.

“Fine,” he mumbles in a despondent squeak.

He drags his duffel along as he backs towards the door and then takes his time undoing all the bolts and chains and locks that grace the inside of Jason’s seldom used front door.

When it’s open, he shuffles slowly out across the threshold, a harsh shove from Jason to his shoulder propelling him the last few feet into the empty hallway.

Slamming the door the moment Tim’s clear of it, Jason spends a moment re-securing all of the locks he has installed. Then he leans his back up against the heavy, bullet resistant polymer of the custom built door and just *breathes* for a few seconds.

Eventually, he flicks the safety on his gun, works the hammer back down to neutral, and then holsters the damn thing. His hand is shaking so hard he has to make three attempts to get the gun to slide inside it properly.

Then he methodically works through the mechanical process of prepping his meal for consumption, acquiring a plate and silverware and even a proper glass of milk, before he cranks on his music – nothin’ like a little distraction in the form of *Bohemian Rhapsody* – and then camps himself on the couch.

He pulls up some open case files on his smart TV in order to give his eyes something to look at, but he does really see any of the scanned in pages he puts up in front of his face. He’s just staring blankly and occasionally scrolling aimlessly.

It’s irksome that he doesn’t get to savor the pork shoulder the way he wants too, but it *is* a damn good cut of meat, so even with his brain set to run full on fog machine, he can appreciate on some level of base instinct that it’s *delicious*.

That note is almost enough to bring him back down to earth.

Not enough to make him consider staying in Gotham, but enough to make him prep a bag to take with him when he goes.

He’ll probably call Roy tomorrow morning, from New York, or LA, or frickin’ Houston… wherever he ends up when he takes a chance on a random flight out of Gotham International Airport whenever he wakes up, but he doesn’t feel the need to get his ass to the Island *tonight*.

He can stay here and crash as planned.

He washes up his dishes, stores the left over pork for breakfast or what not, and packs a light carry on to take with him to wherever random bus and flight selection will make him drift.

It’s the middle of the day at this point, but Jason’s never had trouble sleeping with the sun up, he’s got curtains to kill off the worst of the glare and honestly, he likes sleeping with a little bit of light… Keeps the nightmares back a bit, keeps the flashbacks of waking up six feet under from hitting quite so hard.

One last night in a bed in Gotham.

A weird transposition of certainty that he’s about to leave making the permanence felt in
owning a bed feel less restrictive – to the extent that sleeping in a bit of luxe is actually *nice*.

Jason’s calm enough to be looking forward to it as he wraps up.

He’s changed into comfy flannels and a time-softened t-shirt and is closing down the case files on his system when a wrench gets thrown into things. Again.

The habit of a cursory perimeter check, just a skim of the cameras, is too ingrained in him to disregard, no matter how calm or safe he feels. And that habit leads to him spotting the balled up figure of a tiny, brain dead *moron* curled up in the hallway outside his front door.

It looks like Tim’s been there since Jason kicked him out, and a zippy rewind of the captured footage confirms it. Kid collapsed a few seconds after Jason kicked him out and hasn’t moved more than a few inches since he curled up on the floor.

Jason’s cams are HD enough for him to see that Tim’s still breathing – a mixed blessing, considering that it means he can also see how unsettled Tim’s sleep looks.

Which bothers him a whole helluva lot.

It bothers him *because* it bothers him, but it *does* also actually bother him.

He doesn’t quite know why.

It’s not that he’s worried about Tim. Not exactly. The kid could get himself to a safe house, pretty easily. Even one that’s way off the grid.

He’s high, but not like *high* high. He’s functional high. Maybe not allowed to legally operate machinery, and obviously, he’s making terrible decisions, but like… He could definitely get himself somewhere comfy. He’s choosing not to. He *wants* to be uncomfortable.

Which, Jason supposes, is like totally his right if he wants it, but still…

Jason doesn’t like it.

He stares at Tim’s image on the screen for a solid five minutes.

Not really thinking, or puzzling, or *deciding* anything… just staring.

Jason wants to ignore him, to just turn the feeds off and head to bed as planned.

He’s not genuinely worried that the kid would try to break back in or anything.

The ‘at home’ setting on his security system is damn near impenetrable, it would take the kid a long while to get back in and he’d have to do it by going out and around to the fire escape to even attempt it – because unless he brought some *serious* gear, the locks on the door are impervious to
picking (there’s at least three mechanical latches made out of differently blended varieties of heavy
duty carbon fiber and plastic polymers that can’t be affected by even the strongest electromagnet).
And even if he got into the apartment again, Jason’s bedroom is insulated within an entirely distinct
layer of security, that’s just as hard to crack.

So Tim’s pretty solidly locked out.

And he doesn’t even look like he might try breaking in again.

He’s just curled up there on the floor like he’s given up entirely on the idea of getting in.

Which is weird and unsettling, because Tim is a determined little prick – like a god damn
little *ferret* in the way he pokes his nose into places it doesn’t belong and then *somehow* gets the rest
of him to follow through tiny cracks while it shouldn’t be physically possible for him to fit through…
The fact that he’s not even *trying* here, that he’s not plotting or scheming or anything is unusual and
rather disquieting for its strangeness.

Jason finds that he can’t just let it go.

He is physically incapable of turning off the screens and ignoring that he saw Tim camped
out in the hallway. He can’t shove it out of his head long enough to crawl into bed and conk out in
any kind of comfort. If he even tries, he suspects that the itch beneath his skin will lead to some
aggressively epic iteration of his very worst night terrors.

Eventually, Jason does manage to shut his system down so he’s not staring at Tim through
his security camera anymore. But even with movement regained, it seems he only has real control in
his upper body – his feet walk him over to his front door without permission.

He stares blankly at the door for a long time, as well.

And then he slowly starts to open it, one lock at a time… Moving slowly enough that he’s
not entirely sure the decision to open the door is really a decision at all – it’s more like an
accumulation of muscle memory, habit, and distraction making him perform a familiar action while
he’s under the influence of something heady and consciousness altering.

Once the door swings open, he stares at Tim’s prone figure for another indeterminable stretch
of time. The kid looks even more uncomfortable than he did on the security cam.

Jason had thought, in some part of his brain, that it could be a ploy, that Tim could be faking
it to gain sympathy or something. But Tim’s not that good a liar, and he’s too smart to think that he
could play the kicked puppy card any better than Dick Grayson ever could. With Jason’s immunity
to Dick’s version, Tim would probably have to kick an actual puppy to draw out any kind of real
reaction from Jason – and even then, it would most likely be anger.

You don’t kick a god damn puppy, man.

You just *don’t*. 
And even at his coldest and most calculating, Tim would know that. Probably.

But Tim’s not playing kicked puppy here.

He’s not playing at all.

He’s likely not dying kinds of messed up, but he does have a bit of the shakes.

Jason can’t tell if the tremors or just muscle contractions as the adrenalin ride wears out, or if they’re a side effect of whatever meds the idiot is on, or if he’s shivering because he’s cold.

Regardless, Jason’s not a fan of seeing it.

“Fuckin’ hell, man,” Jason huffs under his breath as he tries to get his chaotic rush of thoughts in order well enough to get any kind of audible speech out.

Tim doesn’t even stir.

“Hey, yo,” Jason finally manages, adding in a gruff shout, “Replacement!”

At that, Tim jolts.

He blinks owlishly up at Jason; confusion, hope, and terror in equal measure bleeding out of him through the unguarded gaze of his sleep-blurred eyes.

“Get your ass up,” Jason commands.

Tim doesn’t move. He sort of collapses slowly in on himself like a deflating yard ornament, but he doesn’t actually move.

Jason grinds out a heavy sigh and then he states explicitly in a vicious bark of biting syllables, “I’ll let you camp your ass on my couch for a few hours if you get the fuck inside.”

Hope so bright it looks painful contorts the kid’s expression and he opens his mouth to spout some surely ridiculous nonsense.

Jason cuts him off. “Ah-ah, no talking. You can come in, you can camp, you can pull yourself together, but you ain’t gonna talk, a’ight? If you bother me, you’ll be back out on your ass in a second, got it?”

Tim’s mouth closes so abruptly that Jason hears his teeth click before he nods.

Jason backs away from the door, turning towards his bedroom. He hears the kid scramble inside behind him as he growls, “Lock the fucking door behind you.”

The door closes quietly, and Jason hears the locks being reset. The sounds stop before he makes it to the threshold of his bedroom, but no footsteps attempt to start to follow Jason deeper inside the apartment.

At the door to his inner sanctuary, Jason turns to glare at his unwanted house guest.

“‘I’m setting the alarm in five minutes,” Jason warns, “You get yourself comfy on the couch
before then and if you move more than six inches after the motion sensors are activated I *will fucking shoot you*, got it?"

Another silent, singular nod from Tim – this time with a disproportionate degree of what almost looks like straight up *joy* radiating from the infuriating little bastard.

Jason ignores it.

Slams his door closed.

And if he takes five minutes and forty two seconds to finish his bed time prep and set the alarms to armed, he very carefully does not consciously acknowledge it.

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*we were stackin’ up to fold ( but we can’t just let it go )*

Chapter End Notes

Oh sweet, sweet Jason...

Hopefully, I’ll be able to get back to a slightly more regular posting schedule in the next week or so!

NEXT TIME: Tim's attempts to win Jason over in a sort of 'morning after' affair... and it's a pretty botched endeavor from the get-go...

(Prepare yourselves for cuteness and adorkable idiocy! It's a slight reprieve from the worst of the angst as a 'thank you for your patience' present.)
just wanna be here (tonight)

Chapter Summary

A ‘morning after’ moment between Tim and Jason as Tim attempts to keep Jason in a good mental place, or at least keep him in Gotham so he can help get Jason TO a good mental place, and flails desperately at straws to do it.

Chapter Notes

Tim makes some stupid decisions in this one, so like there's a mild element of dub-con in the negotiation attempt at the end of this one... but nothing major. It's mostly that this is NOT a healthy mindset with which to approach things and Tim's logic pattern does a pretty good job at disguising that.

Also, it's mostly cuteness, but... there's a cliffhanger. Ish. You'll see it coming a mile off, but still. You can't stop a train that's runnin' off the tracks...

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Seventeen – just wanna be here (tonight)

Tim has never been happier or more comfortable with sleeping somewhere that is not his own bed than he is right now with the prospect of sleeping on Jason’s couch.

And that says a lot, because only about 19% of Tim’s weekly sleep average is accrued in an actual bed of any kind – and less than half of that is usually in his bed.

He has literally slept inside the casing for a rooftop industrial air conditioning unit, while it was operating, and considered himself fairly content and comfy.

So, saying that he’s never been happier to crash on a couch means something.

Something significant.

Because the act itself is significant – because it means that Jason is handing out a good will gesture to him despite still being proactively pissed at him. Which is kind of amazing.

Tim would never have predicted it.
Then again, Jason has always been the closest cognizant entity he's ever found to a variable acting at true random. Not matter how good Tim has gotten at predictive algorithms, or at reading people and intentions, Jason always managed to stay just out of reach of his understanding – in retrospect his choices usually made perfect sense, but if Tim were presented with two equally plausible options for Jason to take, he usually guessed wrong.

So, Tim is surprised when Jason opens his door and gruffly offers his couch up for the night, but not surprised that he is surprised – he's so not surprised by it that he doesn't waste a second with disbelieving that Jason's offer is genuine.

He’s on his feet and shuffling inside as soon as he manages to get his feet to hold him. Jason barks about having five minutes before he arms the place to the teeth and disappears into his bedroom with a slam of his door.

The overt unwelcome of the gesture should make Tim feel awkward about imposing, but all it does is make him feel even more convinced that he can get things back on track. He missed any window to set things right in the immediate moment, but Jason has granted him solid means of securing a new window in the near future.

And that thought makes him giddy with relief and honest to goodness hope.

So, Tim spends the night on Jason’s couch (well, the period of sleep he gets that morning while it transitions into afternoon) and spends it in absolute comfort – to the point that he falls into a true REM cycle rather than his usual, stunted and abridged version.

Because of that, he almost misses his second opportunity to talk with Jason.

Tim usually wakes at the slightest provocation; but caught in the tail end of a REM cycle, he almost misses hearing Jason wake up.

Well, actually, he does miss Jason waking up, but he catches the sound of him undoing the locks on his bedroom door and tromping across the apartment towards a quick exit.

He’s got a bag slung over his shoulder and that wakes Tim up like a triple shot of espresso.

Jason’s leaving.

Leaving leaving.

Leaving the apartment, and leaving Gotham, at least… possibly even leaving the country.

Tim would probably be able to track him down and chase after him, eventually, but it would take a while… and it would be a lot harder to make it seem casual, to convince Jason that he’s not literally stalking him for some nefarious purpose.
But Tim doesn’t want to have to do that, for a plethora of reasons, but primarily because of how long it will take to get things back on course.

The Bat Family is in the midst of a meltdown, one that goes wider than just the tension caused by the compounding incidents of the last few weeks. It’s one that’s been happening in slow motion over the last few years, one that started off with catastrophic speed the moment Jason died at the hands of the Joker.

Tim’s intervention, his forceful occupation of the Robin position, had stopped the worst of the downward spiral. His efforts with bringing Dick and Babs back into active, collaborative roles had helped reverse some of the damage. And the arrivals of Cass and Steph, and even the vicious little gremlin, had helped to mitigate many of the factors attempting to destroy Tim’s progress... but entropy is an inexorable process and without Jason, it has always been just a matter of time before things began to break down again.

And with Jason’s return, with his evolution into the Red Hood…

That process was kick started up again like a nuclear fusion reaction.

With Jason alive but still lost to the Family, the Bat Clan’s ability to cope with everything is being rapidly eroded. Especially when combined with the pressures of all the near misses – not to mention the actual losses – they’ve all suffered through recently...

They don’t really have the luxury of allowing Tim to take his time with this.

So, when Tim wakes up to seeing Jason attempting to sneak out before he notices, Tim jumps into action – literally. He holds himself back from tackling Jason outright, but he vaults off the couch in an unsteady tangle of limbs that puts him standing face to face with Jason as he startles the second Robin forcefully enough to make him turn away from the window.

It doesn’t make Jason draw a weapon, though by the position of his hand at the lip of his pocket Tim surmises that he’s only inches away from it.

Still, inches away is leagues of progress.

“You’re leaving?”

Jason arches a skeptical eyebrow, huffing, “What’s it to ya?”

“I don’t— I… Let me cook you breakfast,” Tim scrambles to suggest, expanding, “To thank you for… letting me stay on your couch.”

“You? Cooking breakfast?” Jason snorts. “No offense bird brain, but uh, I’m not sure I trust your culinary abilities enough to have any faith that I won’t die of food poisoning if I let you cook anything.”

Desperate, Tim tells the unedited truth: “Alfred taught me how to make your favorite kind of cinnamon pancakes.”
The skeptical eyebrow flattens out into a glare.

“He did what now?”

“I asked him to,” Tim explains, “To teach me how to cook something easy that you liked.”

“And why the hell would you do a thing like that?”

“For this, because I wanted to have something I could do to thank you if it ever came up… because… because you like food. You like food like Dick likes hugs, or Cass likes music, or Steph likes shiny new toys,” Tim tells Jason, keeping his eyes locked with Jason’s gaze. “I just wanted to have something to thank you with.”

Jason squints at him.

Tim resists the urge to squirm or look away.

Jason deserves to know without a doubt that Tim is being honest… Though, when Jason’s squinty glare does not let up, Tim starts to wonder if he made a mistake.

But, he knows that Jason would be able to tell if he lied – and that Jason would be pissed at him for even attempting to bullshit him about something like this.

“And Alfred let you in his kitchen for that useless shit?”

Tim nods, biting back a retort that it wasn’t useless – that it was extremely useful, because it was already the only reason he currently had a hold on any of Jason’s attention.

“He said that it was important for me to have a means of feeding myself that didn’t involve a half gallon of MSG, exorbitant risk of salmonella, and an excessive delivery fee.”

Jason snorts again, but this time it’s an amused sound instead of derisive.

“Well, he ain’t wrong about any of that,” Jason admits.

Tim waits for Jason to say more – for Jason to decide more.

If he doesn’t let Tim cook him breakfast… Tim doesn’t know what he’ll do. He has contingencies, but they’re vague contingencies. Basically, the plan all comes down to follow Jason, the how and where of it to be determined later – and the exact timing… he could just follow Jason straight from here, literally just walk with him to wherever he’s going.

It might risk pressuring Jason to run even further and even faster, but Tim doesn’t want to let him leave Gotham without putting up a real fight to keep him here.

And allowing himself to be parted from Jason’s side for even a second would be a sub par effort at convincing him to stay.
Tim is here now, he has this opportunity to talk Jason out of this plan he’s got to run… and letting Jason go off without him would be such a waste of that opportunity.

Yeah. Tim’s decided now. If Jason doesn’t decide to stick around and let Tim cook them both breakfast, he’s just going to trail along at Jason’s heel until he gets chased off – at which point, he’ll just start trailing from a distance.

But he’s not throwing in the towel on the first plan yet, not until Jason explicitly rejects his offer outright. Which is probable, but hasn’t happened quite yet.

Tim waits, the pressure in his chest constricting his lungs.

And then the strap of Jason’s duffel bag slides off his shoulder, and he kicks the heavy article up against the base boards of his breakfast bar.

Air slides out of Tim’s lungs in a punch of relief.

“Well, fine then,” Jason accepts, “Let’s see if Alfred managed to beat something useful for being a person into your stupid thick skull.”

Tim nods, trying not to faint or stumble with the flood of chemicals rushing though his bloodstream – the endorphins and adrenaline making his limbs feel shaky and stiff.

And now he has to actually cook pancakes.

Great. He is mildly adequate at making pancakes – something he is irked by, but has never had enough time to truly correct.

He doesn’t know how to cook anything else, except for Ramyun and a few kinds of rice based dishes (things his dad cooked occasionally with the nostalgic claim that they were once the comfort foods of a young Janet Lim while Jack Drake was courting her on their first archaeology dig, in Greenland and far away from the rich Korean flavors of Janet’s heritage).

But Tim doesn’t know how to cook much, and doesn’t really care to learn to cook more, so he really should obtain perfect mastery of the one thing he truly does want to cook.

Honestly, he should have known to work on that before now.

Whelp. No use regretting it now. Later he’ll have plenty of time to lament and reflect.

But right now, he has work to do.
Right now, he has a totally unfamiliar kitchen to navigate and Jason’s settled down on the far side of the breakfast bar from the main cooking space with a smirk on his face like he’s going to enjoy watching Tim flounder through a scavenger hunt.

Tim doesn’t bother to ask if Jason will tell him where things like the griddle or the outlets, or even the flour and cinnamon are hidden. Jason wouldn’t tell him.

In fact, it’s quite probable that Jason doesn’t even have the things required to make pancakes properly… which would mean that Tim would have to adapt. Alfred taught him a few techniques to manage, but he’s only mildly adequate at making them the right way, he’s got a tragic little confidence in his ability to work under altered conditions.

Butter, eggs, milk, and maple syrup are in the fridge – surprisingly well stocked considering how transitory this safe house seems to be for Jason, at least surprisingly to Tim. He consciously, logically knows that Jason likes to cook and therefore should have lots of food, but he somehow thought… well he was pretty certain Jason wouldn’t want to be so wasteful as to leave it when he jumped ship, but maybe this fleeing Gotham thing is a less well planned excursion than optimal for responsible food preservation.

The griddle is tucked up in the cabinet above the fridge and Jason gets a good snicker out of watching Tim struggle through clambering up onto the counter beside the fridge and leaning over to reach the damn thing. Tim manages it, feels the action pull his tired muscles out of sorts, but most of his stitches came out four, nearly five, days ago – so nothing is actually harmed by the not quite horrifically awkward tumble.

Hunting down the baking soda, the salt, the baking powder, and the cinnamon takes a bit longer, but Tim can at least reach them without fuss.

It’s the flour that proves the trickiest.

Jason has a cabinet stocked with three different kinds.

Because, obviously.

And to make matters worse, they’re not labeled with any kind of conventional terms that Tim’s made himself familiar with. They’re in small-shop brown bags, constructed of uniform waxed paper, with a number scrawled on one side: 45, 55, and 80.

Which make total sense.

Tim opens each bag and rubs a pinch of it between his fingers.

They’re all noticeably different, but Tim can’t quite nail down what it is about them that makes the feel of each into distinct sensations.

He can, however, rely on the wonders of an eidetic memory to match the feel to that of the one he used with Alfred. Brown bag 55 is apparently super fancy all purpose flour.

Jason arches an eyebrow when Tim plops the bag up on the counter, but he doesn’t say anything to indicate whether it’s an impressed eyebrow, or a skeptical, deridingly amused one.

Tim chooses to ignore it and get on with attempting to actually whip up the meal.

Large bowl, whisk, ladle – Tim collects the last of what he needs and gets down to work, ignoring the pressure of feeling Jason’s keen attention on him.
This is a test, and Tim knows it.

But he’s always been a faultless test taker.

And as long as Jason’s willing to keep giving him chances, Tim will do whatever it takes to capitalize on them.

He has to focus on the cooking to make the pancakes up to par, but not quite so hard that he can’t start considering options for how to bring up what he needs to talk to Jason about regarding the issues currently driving him towards fleeing Gotham. It’ll be a tricky thing to manage without simply spurring him onward to get out of the city immediately.

Tim exerts considerable effort to thinking up some ploy to get Jason to stay, but he’s failed to land on one with reasonable confidence before he’s finished crafting his stack of cinnamon pancakes.

He doesn’t come up with anything as he plates two servings and hands one of them off to Jason – who nibbles skeptically before digging in with a distracting enthusiasm that Tim finds deeply rewarding. But the flare of pride in Tim’s chest is not enough to smother the fearful ache.

“You ain’t totally shit at this, Replacement,” Jason comments explicitly when he finishes scraping his plate clean. “Should get Alf to teach you more.”

Tim shrugs. “I don’t really want to know more.”

Jason simply shakes his head and mutters something about Tim being ridiculous.

Then he pushes back from the breakfast bar, hooks the strap of his duffel with his foot, and shoulders the pack as he says, “Thanks for breakfast, asshole. Now get the hell out of here.”

“Please don’t leave Gotham,” Tim blurts before Jason’s even finished speaking.

Jason’s demeanor hardens immediately.

“I do what I want, dipshit,” he snarls, taking a threatening step towards the window – and glaring viciously as Tim instinctively steps to block him.

Tim didn’t mean to bring it up like this, but he can’t let Jason leave without trying to get him to stay and Jason’s less likely to resent the direct approach than any subterfuge.

“I don’t want you to leave Gotham,” he admits frankly. “Please. Stay.”

“I will stab you, Replacement,” Jason grits out.

He takes another heavy stomp forward to drive the point home.
Tim doesn’t flinch. “Okay.”

That makes Jason blink. “What?”

“If stabbing me will make you feel better, if it will make you stay… then okay,” Tim replies with a shrug, spreading his arms and relaxing his muscles. “Go ahead.”

It feels like familiar territory, and that is somehow enough to lift a weight off Tim's shoulders. It's a negotiation, an open court of offers and counter offers. And – even though the offers being played with are not exactly optimal, even though he's bargaining on degrees of pain that he will have to suffer – there's no one else who's better at this game than Tim.

He's willing to trade an awful lot for the chance to keep Jason here, and all he has to do is show Jason that he's serious.

“I will kill you,” Jason warns, fists visibly shaking at his sides, “You smug little bastard.”

“If that will make you stay, then I would probably be okay with that,” Tim tells him.

Tim's nonchalance, and the ring of truth that permeates it, breaks Jason's self control.

He lunges at Tim, grabbing his shoulder and throwing his weight around to slam Tim against the wall by the fridge.

The hand on Tim's throat is not quite crushing his larynx, and as a further point in Tim's tally, Jason's move to attack him made the duffel's strap slide free of his shoulder – it's been left forgotten in the middle of the kitchen.

“You don't get to decide that,” Jason snarls, teeth bared and gnashing right in front of Tim's face. “It's isn't up to you. It affects more than just you.”

“It's my life,” Tim retorts calmly. “If that's the way I want to use it, then that's my own damn business. I’m not throwing it away for nothing. I’m trading it, for something I want.”

“Fuck. You.”

“If you want to.”
Tim only says it because he knows that Jason would never... he would never even genuinely threaten to do that to him, to anyone. Pit rage or not, Jason would never...

But Tim needs to show him how serious he is about this – to prove to him that he means business to any extent required.

“If that's what it takes to make you stay,” Tim says slowly. He pauses, takes a deep breath and lifts one of his hands to fold around Jason's forearm. “I want you to stay, Jason. Please.”

Jason makes a guttural, snarling sound that is probably an attempt at language.

The hand on Tim’s throat closes around him, squeezing tight against collar bones while still allowing air to pass into his lungs. Tim can feel Jason’s muscles trembling, resisting the urge to simply shatter Tim’s collar.

He knows this is a constant struggle for Jason, and he hates how he keeps making things even harder for his predecessor to manage, but Tim would rather it be him making things harder than any of the other Family members. The less antagonism between Jason and the others, the less frequently refreshed that antagonism, the easier it will be for Jason to reintegrate – and he has to reintegrate.

Whether or not the others will admit it yet, they need Jason’s passion and his complete, soul-encompassing love of the average person to keep their focus where it needs to be.

Jason hates Tim in a way that’s perfectly understandable, considering the unavoidable twists in their history, but the friction between Jason and the others is largely built on misunderstandings about the fundamental motivations that drive them all to action.

Misunderstandings that can be cleared up.

That need to be cleared up.

Because Gotham needs her Bats united, needs them strong and healthy in mind, body, and spirit to stand against the shadows of the city’s darkest corners.

They can’t hope to successfully hold back the city’s demons when they’re too caught up in fighting their own – too lost in their own darkness to chase away anyone else’s shadows.

Jason fleeing Gotham now would be a huge setback, a massive road block requiring a detour that Tim’s not sure that Gotham could withstand. She’s been teetering as it is.

“Please. Stay,” Tim says, words quiet but steady.

Jason drags Tim away from the wall by the hold on his throat, throwing him across the kitchen. His feet catch on Jason’s duffel bag and he ends up sprawled across the floor.
On the upside, he’s so tangled with the strap that Jason doesn’t even bother trying to collect it. He probably has another bag stashed elsewhere in the city packed and all ready to go, but it’s still a brief delay in his immediate departure.

As Tim rights himself on the floor enough to look up at Jason, he answers Tim’s plea with a single, vicious word: “No.”

He then launches out the window, leaving Tim alone on his kitchen floor with a hollow ache behind his lungs and a pained chill seeping into his bones.

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just wanna be here tonight ( right beside you )

Chapter End Notes

...Yeah. Jason's running away. (Don't worry. He doesn't go too far, and he phones a friend in his moment of need and that just makes me cackle with all the inevitable hilarity of the Outlaws).

NEXT TIME: Jason's version of the morning after, and as he attempts to work through processing it all, he comes to a few dramatic revelations...
Chapter Summary

i don't wanna (feel)

Jason attempts to flee Gotham. With mixed results.

His view of the breakfast debacle with Tim and his attempt to phone a friend for sanity in the aftermath...

^_~

Chapter Notes

. Beware the Ides of March people! Crazy things tend to happen when you look for them.
^_~

A dose of adorable before the angst, but then the angst gets pretty heavy, FYI.

Jason is NOT in a good head space right now, but he's not so far gone he doesn't realize it himself (and take some appropriate and awesomely helpful action towards being healthy about it).

WARNING: there's another cliff hanger here... Not quite as severe as the last one, at least in terms of it being gut wrenching, but it's still a sudden stop with an awful lot left unfinished...

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eighteen – i don’t wanna feel (this mess)

Jason wakes up feeling better than he has all week.

A real bed does a body real good, no doubt about it.

He wakes up refreshed and ready to haul ass across the country to whatever quiet corner he can find to hide out in for a much needed vacation from Gotham’s perpetual insanity.

Jason’s actually feeling good enough to think that he might not need to flee all the way to the Outlaws’ Island to get out of this funk. Just get his ass out to a cabin in Colorado or something and
camp out for a couple weeks – long enough for things with the idiot Replacement to settle down again, but not so long that Crime Alley goes to shit without him.

Thinking of the Replacement, Jason finds the idiot still crashed out on his couch when he ventures back into the apartment’s living area.

It’s a surprise.

Jason hadn’t forgotten that Tim had shown up, but he’d figured that eventually the idiot would come to his senses and skedaddle.

Apparently not.

The sight of Tim on his couch – curled up around his duffle without a blanket, just like he was in the hallway outside his apartment – makes Jason pause.

The kid at least looks more comfortable on the couch than he did in the hallway – his expression slack and calm, and his breathing is deep and smooth. He looks younger like this, a lot younger, and the deep exhaustion inherent with his brand of existence is more evident.

It almost makes Jason want to find a blanket or something to toss over the idiot. Very almost.

He actually takes a step towards doing it before he heaves a sigh and pulls himself together. Encouraging Tim’s ridiculous, irrational behavior won’t be good for any of them.

Unfortunately, it seems Jason’s quiet huff has been enough to wake the moron.

Tim attempts to vault off the couch, an inelegant tumble that lands him face to face with Jason – whose hand has twitched instinctively towards the knife in his pocket.

Tim blinks owlishly up at Jason, his face a picture of… not surprise, but close. Alarm.

“You’re leaving?”

Jason arches an eyebrow at the edge of panic in his voice. “What’s it to ya?”

“I— I don’t— I…” Tim scrambles to arrange his thoughts, blurtling in a hurried huff, “Let me cook you breakfast.”

The suggestion makes Jason blink.

“To thank you,” Tim elaborates, “For let me stay on your couch.”

“You? Cooking breakfast?” Jason snorts, shaking his head to attempt to clear the vague images of the domestic comedy skit that’s begging to be imagined. “No offense bird brain, but uh, I’m not sure I trust your culinary abilities to have any faith that I won’t die of food poisoning if I let you cook anything.”
The amusement dies as Tim declares, “Alfred taught me how to make your favorite kind of cinnamon pancakes.”

“He did what now?”

It’s not exactly a sense of betrayal clawing at his throat, but it’s something that’s uncomfortably close to that sensation – made all the more disquieting because it’s Alfred.

Before Jason can sink into wallowing over that possibility, Tim leaps to explain, “I asked him to… To teach me how to cook something easy that you liked.”

“And why the hell would you do a thing like that?”

“For this,” Tim tells him, hands waving around wildly with another touch of desperation as he elaborates, “because I wanted to have something I could do to thank you if it ever came up… because… because you like food.”

The anger starts to settle as Tim flails, though Jason’s not entirely sure why.

It seems to bolster Tim’s confidence as he goes on to explain, “You like food like Dick likes hugs, or Cass likes music, or Steph likes shiny new toys.”

Tim keeps his gaze locked sincerely with Jason’s as he trails off in a statement that falls just short of a whimper, “I just wanted to have something to thank you with… just in case…”

Jason squints hard at him, searching for any sign of deception.

He doesn’t let up even when he finds nothing.

Because the sentiment is too ridiculous to be anything but a bald faced lie…

Except… if there’s anyone more dedicated than Bruce to the super-sized vigilante version of the Boy Scout always be prepared BS, it would be Tim.

It’s totally plausible that he’d want to have some means of legitimately saying ‘thanks’ to Jason… ‘just in case’… Even without his ridiculous notion of getting Jason back involved with the rest of the Bats.

There is a part that’s confusing him, though.

“And Alfred let you in his kitchen for that useless shit?”

Tim nods, biting his lip in a way that Jason finds bizarrely, intensely distracting, and then says with a curl of embarrassment, “He said that it was important for me to have a means of feeding myself that didn’t involve a half gallon of MSG, exorbitant risk of salmonella, and an excessive delivery fee.”

Jason snorts again, deeply amused this time rather than derisive, and has to hold back an actual laugh as he admits, “Well, he ain’t wrong about that.”

Tim doesn’t reply.
He’s waiting for Jason to make the next move – weight shifting subtly between his feet and his sharp white teeth worrying that lip of his again.

He’s waiting for Jason to decide if he’s allowed to follow through on his request to make breakfast and it’s clear that he’s deeply anxious about the answer.

Jason knows this is a bad idea, knows it can’t possibly end well.

But he shrugs anyway.

He’s still got those vague images of a bright, domestic comedy skit flitting about in his head. He's tempted by the gut wrenching potential for adorable... by the twist in his belly at ache of something more... tempted enough to give in.

“Well then,” he says, letting the strap of his duffel slide off his shoulder. He kicks the bag against the foot of the breakfast bar as he accepts, “Let's see if Alfred managed to beat something useful for being a person into your stupid thick skull.”

Tim nods and begins a ridiculous, hilarious scramble through the kitchen in a mildly panic-ridden scavenger hunt that Jason finds unbearably amusing.

It’s like watching a drunken imitation of Disney’s Bambi on Ice crossed over with the most ridiculous version of Iron Chef Junior ever created. It’s fantastic.

Way better than the vague comedy skit Jason had imagined.

It’s the longest stretch of time he’s been truly amused by something in a long time…

A helluva long time… Probably since from before the Pit. Before he Died.

It doesn’t even bother him to think about that bit.

What does end up bothering him at all is that the enduring amusement of watching Tim attempt to cook is the sense of a spiky warmth of some sort pushing up behind his lungs.

It’s a feeling he doesn’t have a word to name, and he’s pretty sure he doesn’t like feeling it squirm around inside his chest… but at the same time, he must admit the warm inside it actually feels pretty comfortable – unsettling, maybe, but… also kinda nice…

Obviously, that nice bit was doomed to fading pretty quick after Jason came to notice it.

He gets to bask in it for far longer than he would’ve expected, though.

It lasts until well after Tim’s finished his hilarious mad dash of cooking, until after Jason’s nibbled on the final product and found that it actually tastes pretty damn good – until after he’s scraped his plate clean and had ten whole seconds to steep in the contentment bred by that strange
warmth of something and the slightly more familiar satisfaction of a full stomach.

“You ain’t total shit at this,” Jason admits. “Should get Alf to teach you more.”

Tim shrugs. “I don’t really wanna know more.”

Of course not, Jason thinks shaking his head. The little idiot is just that fucking ridiculous, learns to cook one thing in case an impossibly unlikely ‘thank you breakfast’ event comes up, sure thing… but the idea of learning how to actually feed himself? Yeah, he’d never do something so obviously practical. Why on earth would it even be a question?

Jason pushes up from the breakfast bar with a heavy sigh and speaks in an almost affectionate growl as he says, “Thanks for breakfast, asshole. Now get the hell out of here.”

Before Jason’s even finished speaking, Tim’s hopped up to his feet like a panicked little bunny rabbit and frozen in place while blocking Jason’s route to the easy exit of the kitchen window, blurtling desperately, “Please don’t leave Gotham.”

Jason’s good humor evaporates, and he glowers at the snotty, presumptuous Replacement as he growls, “I do what I want, dipshit.”

Taking a step towards the exit, Jason makes certain the idiot understands the veracity of the threat laced inside his steps. Tim’s whole body tenses in anxious preparedness, but he doesn’t back down – if anything, he shifts to more effectively block Jason’s course.

“I don’t want you to leave Gotham,” the bunny rabbit states, “Please. Stay.”

He’s being about as open and transparently honest as it’s possible for a Bat to get, and that alone is alarming enough to make Jason reluctant to even process his words – let alone to fairly consider the plea inside them.

“I will stab you, Replacement,” Jason grits out.

It’s not even going to be up to him in a few seconds here, the green rage of the Pit’s fury has been shocked to swirling up inside him by the blindsiding hit of Tim’s whiny desperation.

Jason takes another heavy stomp forward to drive the point home, fists clenched at his sides and teeth bared like a rabid animal.

Tim doesn’t flinch, doesn’t blink – doesn’t even draw a sharp breath.

He just jumps straight to flat acceptance, saying simply, “Okay.”

That’s another shock to Jason’s system, one that’s unexpected enough to make him pause – to beat back the green haze long enough for him to ask for clarification.

“What?”

Tim shrugs. Opens up his posture with defenseless invitation.
“If stabbing me will make you feel better, if it will make you stay... then okay, go ahead.”

Jason recoils physically at the suggestion. His body aches with the effort of staying still and his muscles begin to tremble. Because no. Hell no.

What the idiot is suggesting is just... not... not reasonable.

He can’t be sane to suggest something like that, not while looking so dead serious.

It’s just... ugh, Jason can’t even wrap his brain around how wrong it is for Tim to be willing to get hurt by him for this ridiculous flight of fancy he has regarding that utterly absurd hope of getting Jason to agree to stay in Gotham.

“I will kill you,” Jason snarls, “you smug little bastard.”

The Pit’s green rage is clawing forcefully up his throat like he’s hacking up another lungful of its vile, corrupt and polluting waters. Like he’s about to spill his guts across the floor.

Or about to spill Tim’s guts... which will probably make him puke regardless...

“If that will make you stay,” Tim starts, his voice quiet but unwavering, like he’s just coming to the realization of the full Truth that resonates openly in his words himself, “I would probably be okay with that.”

The nonchalance, the unbridled Truth of it, the way Tim just means it... the way he would really rather that Jason fucking kill him than leave Gotham... it breaks Jason’s self-control down by dissolving the mortar in a wash of acidic green.

He lunges at Tim, grabbing his shoulder and wrenching his weight around to slam his back against the wall by the fridge – knocking the air from his lungs and pressing hard enough on his throat to make it a struggle for him to draw in more.

Jason’s torn between just wanting to crush his trachea completely, and wanting to rip the kid’s arm off as a warning. But Tim’s so pliant and accepting beneath his fingertips that he probably wouldn’t be able to make a warning stick.

How on earth is a super genius, who was raised by the frickin Batman, still so stupid?

“You don’t get to decide that,” Jason snarls venomously, from right up inside Tim’s personal space. He’s all over the kid – towering above him, wall of muscle pressed against him, arms and legs blocking him in until Jason is the only thing he could possibly focus on.

And still, he doesn’t seem to register the threat.

It hurts.

It hurts like nothing Jason’s ever felt before.
It burns and tears and makes him shudder with … with fear almost. With a fear more potent and painful than anything Jason’s felt since before he frickin’ died.

“It isn’t up to you,” Jason continues, raging at full force, “It affects more than just you.”

“It’s my life,” Tim retorts calmly – with this infuriating kind of suicidal awareness of how what he’s saying is not improving his odds of survival at all. “If that's the way I want to use it, then that's my own damn business. I'm not throwing it away for nothing. I'm trading it, for something that I want.”

He means it.

He just means it so damn much.

Jason cannot cope with that. Cannot comprehend it.

His muscles feel stiff and achy, his bones feel molten.

“Fuck. You.”

“If you want to.”

Jason blacks out for a beat, leaning into Tim with too much of his weight to make the swaying go unnoticed. He just can’t. Can’t process that, can’t rationalize it… can’t deny that there’s part of him that wants it… and he can’t even say whether it’s just the asshole that he is naturally who wants to leap at Tim’s suggestion, or just the Pit’s whispers that seem so eager to make Jason press up harder against him. Or even something else entirely.

When the next heartbeat pushes fresh oxygen into Jason’s brain, he wakes to find Tim’s slim fingers wrapped around his forearm.

“If that’s what it takes to make you stay,” Tim says, slow and quiet and earnest.

He means it, and he wants Jason to know he means it.

“I want you to stay, Jason.” Tim pleads, “Please.”

It’s not consent.

It’s not.

Jason knows it’s not.

But it doesn’t feel like it’s not.

Jason wants to kill him for it.
If it were anybody else here, Tim would not be getting out of this okay.

Hell, he might not even still…

But… no.

NO.

Just no. Not ever.

Not with Tim – not with anyone, but definitely not with Tim… not Tim.

Jason’s done some questionable things, some downright deplorable things.

But that… that is too far over the line.

He kills people for that. He kills people for way fucking less than that.

“Please,” Tim whispers, steady and certain in a way that makes Jason want. “Stay.”

His fingertips give Jason’s arm a gentle squeeze, one Jason isn’t sure is an entirely conscious action – enticing towards his conscious offer though it may be.

Jason drags Tim away from the wall by the hold on his throat, throwing him across the kitchen. His feet catch on the duffel bag that Jason only just then realizes he’s long abandoned and the kid winds up sprawled across the floor. Looking up at him with hurt in his big blue eyes. Looking up at him with pleading.

Looking up at him with undiluted desperation.

Jason gives a full body shudder and squeezes a guttural snarl out from between clenched teeth in a breathy, blood growl, “NO.”

Without another glance at Tim, without allowing Tim to say anything else to compromise his judgement or control, Jason dives out the window and sprints across the rooftops until his lungs feel like he’s torn them out and ground them into the filth of Gotham’s streets with the steel capped heel of his combat boots.

He runs a little further, then, until he actually collapses – falls flat on his back on some grubby rooftop somewhere in the god damn city close enough to the harbor for the stink of fish to strongly make him question whether drawing in any more oxygen is even worth it.
His body’s reflexes don’t actually allow him any leeway in the decision making process, but the frustration of it helps keep his mind off the rest of this undeniable clusterfuck.

He can’t handle this.

Any of it.

Can’t trust himself to attempt processing it alone… Inside his own head, the warped situation is only gonna get more and more pathetically twisted.

His phone – thank fuck – is in the pocket of his cargo pants instead of in his duffle or a coat pocket, and he fishes it out with trembling fingers.

It takes three tries to fumble through his contacts, and then five full ring cycles for Roy to pick up, but the moment Jason hears his voice – muffled like his tongue is wrapped around a screwdriver while his hands are full of something metallic and heavy – Jason feels his lungs relax enough to let the panic ebb.

“Jaybirf, halz ik?”

“Roy,” Jason croaks out feverishly.

There’s a heavy thunk as Roy registers how serious this call is and reacts appropriately by setting down whatever mad experiment he’s messing with.

“I need to get out of Gotham.”

“I’m in the burbs around Starling City,” Roy replies immediately, mouth clear of any muffling from the impediment of tools. “Give me three hours and I’ll pick you up.”

Jason grunts an affirmative and listens to the sound of Roy puttering about to ensure that he’s not leaving anything actively on fire or in a state of potential explosion or such.

As Roy grabs his keys and sets out from whatever hidey hole he’d crashed in, the mad mechanical genius starts up a banal stream of conversation detailing his latest project – attempting to super charge a diesel engine with some sort of scummy algae substance that eats the pollutant byproducts of a normal engine to make the engine run better, harder, and faster as well as running exponentially cleaner.

It’s a conversation meant mostly to keep Jason’s mind on the present – he has to participate, Roy pauses periodically to force him to answer small, easy questions, but he doesn’t have to actually think about much to keep his end up.

The distraction technique is one that’s worked for them both over the years, and they’ve
perfected the art of working it on each other… of noting exactly how well it’s working.

Or not working.

“—So, I fucked Ollie’s little sister on their sweet new kitchen table and knocked all their fancy food stuff all over the floor—”

Jason chokes on whatever vague imagining his mind had drifted darkly off towards when it had started to slip away from the main conversational stream.

“There we are. Lost you for a second helmet head. What happened?”

“Nuthin’ ” Jason huffs, staring blankly up at the grey sweep of clouds hanging low above him. “Just… stuck on shit. Lotta crap has happened in these last few weeks.”

“Wanna tell me what I’m dealing with? Since you’re not playin’ ball with the whole not talking about it?”

It’s less innocent suggestion than it is a careful, probing nudge.

Roy has literally zero clues about the potential minefield he’s driving towards, and with the Bats, they both know that Gotham’s always a probable warzone if not handled carefully.

“The Bats are all just being especially pissy because the Baby Bird got himself hurt.”

Roy pauses a beat.

“On your turf?”

“Yeah.”

“You do it to him, or..?”


He takes a long breath to pump oxygen into his brain and reorganize his thoughts. “He just… he keeps pushing. He got hurt, got better, and then… then he came by… to say thanks and shit, and to apologize for how the others got all pissy like usual and chased me out of the Cave when I brought him back there to save his stupid life in the first place.”

There’s a lot to unpack with that.

Roy starts with the obvious: “You brought him to the Cave?”

“Yeah.”
Roy waits patiently, hoping for Jason to give him something more than that.

“He was really bleeding, already lost a lot – too much,” Jason sighs. “I couldn’t even tell if he had internal injuries or anything because he didn’t have enough blood in him for swelling.”

“You just found him after the fact? Or did you have to deal with the assholes responsible before you could assess him?”

There’s an unspoken acceptance of the fact that ‘deal with’ could just as easily mean ‘kill’ as it might mean ‘chase off’. Roy doesn’t care that Jason kills. He’s an army vet from a part of the war that’s never made it to the news cause nothing decent ever happened there. He understands exactly how the lines get blurry. That’s not the problem right now.

The panic attack, and how it seems to be still firmly ongoing, is the problem.

And Jason’s reluctance to speak about it, or the incident that’s caused it, directly.

“He um… he found me.”

“He what?”

“Yeah, um, he found me,” Jason admits, trying not to get lost in the flashback of that moment when he realized who’d disturbed his break, when he realized Tim was hurt. “He’d limped his frickin’ ass half way across Crime Alley. Collapsed when he hit the roof I was on.”

Roy doesn’t respond immediately.

Probably can’t.

Or maybe he does, and Jason just can’t hear him.

“Okay, sure,” Roy mutters eventually, “Tim found you. Passed the fuck out. You assessed, found he needed serious meds, and… then what? You piggy backed him to the creepy ass Cave you weirdos call an HQ?”

“I called Dick.”

Jason has to close his eyes and pinch the bridge of his nose at the admission.

It sounds like an even worse idea than it was.

“You… Really?”
“Yeah. I called Dick,” Jason affirms. “He and the Demon Brat came with the Batmobile to transport Tim to the Cave. I got in the car first, pulling Tim in after, and before I realized I couldn’t back out, I was in the Cave with all of ‘em.”

“How bad?”

Jason considered it – thinking over everything that happened before drumming up an answer. “Well, no one died. Tim’s the only one who was even bleeding – and that wasn’t even because of the stupid fight. Honestly, it was really not the worst brush up we’ve had play out this year. Not by a long shot.”

It’s a surprising revelation.

This fight really wasn’t all that bad.

It was just that it was a fight over Tim, over Jason hurting Tim… which made it sting, made it sear, made it scar… Made it all feel more relevant and dramatic.

If it had just been another dust up over his methods… he probably would’ve walked away and never given it another thought. It wouldn’t even be worth mentioning.

Roy gives him a moment to digest that, probably takes a second to swallow it himself, and then he presses on, asking, “So, you got chased out of the Cave, leaving the pricks with nothing sore but their egos, then what? What made it escalate?”

Letting out a sharp breath, Jason growls, “Kid’s fucking suicidal, Roy, seriously. Like a day after he got himself blown up he shows up on my doorstep, picking my locks like it’s any old case, and says he’s doing it just to say thanks, to apologize, and to return my fucking jacket.”

“Jacket?”

“Yeah, I needed something to keep him warm when he hit the chills in hypovolemic shock. Must’ve left it when I got chased out.”

Roy takes another second to swallow the information.

“Okay, so he drags his ass out to return your jacket. How’d he know where you were?”

“No fucking clue.”

“Fair. We’ll table that shit for later. How’d he even get there?”

“Snuck out on his bike, which is totally an approved method for recovering from and explosion. He had to sneak back pretty quick before the others noticed he was gone… but he… he
got it in my head that Alfred wanted to see me,” Jason rambles on.

“Did he convince you do go to the Manor?”

“No. No, I wasn’t… I didn’t… I wasn’t gonna go, but the dude’s a slick little thief, Roy, nicked a piece off Alfie’s favorite chess set and stuck it in my jacket pocket. Everyone was out, and I just wanted to drop it off…”

“God, you’re an idiot. And Pretty Bird is clearly singing your siren song,” Roy huffs, the teasing judgement not indicative of any deeper condemnation. “Who showed up?”

“Dick, obviously,” Jason tells him.

It’s a soap opera; repeating characters, exorbitant plot twists, histrionic emotional drama. Of course, it would be Dick who showed up.

“What happened?”

“It was gonna be a fight… but Tim, ripped the gold boy a new one. Dude vaulted down two stories on crutches, pretty damn sure he tore his stitches, but I didn’t stick around to see.”

“Good plan.”

Jason mutters a bitter agreement, thoughts drifting over questions he hadn’t yet let himself ask about what had actually happened to Tim in the interlude after that but before last night… It’s been about two solid weeks of dead silence, Bat vigilance, but…

“It’s been quiet. Two weeks of quiet,” Jason says, thinking out loud. “The Bats have all been everywhere… but like they’re rushed or something. Like… like there’s less of them out at night than there should be.”

“Well one is probably tied to his bed at this point,” Roy points out, adding with a too-amused snicker, “Kid seriously sounds like he needs a leash.”

“It has been suggested,” Jason mutters back distractedly, thinking over Roy’s point.

It’s valid. Tim shouldn’t have been out of bed, let alone on Patrol.

But… with Tim capable of sussing out Jason’s bolt hole… they would have had to do more than just tie the idiot down… They’d have had to drug him. And keep him under a constant monitoring rotation. It had been a sarcastic comment at first, but Jason’s realizing it has to be true… Tim is… he has been…

“They had him on a suicide watch, Roy,” Jason realizes aloud, “They had to’ve. It’s the only thing that could have kept him down for two weeks between showing up then and showing up again today with that god damn bag. He was legit suicidal.”

“Okay wait. Back up,” Roy huffs, trying to unpack it all while Jason’s brain is still attempting
to spiral with his new realization. “He came back?”

“Sorta, new place.”

“New place number what since the first time he found you?”

“Uh… nine, I think. The Bats have been circling. A lot.”

Roy sighs, but lets it go. “So, he found you again? And you said… you said he brought a bag with him? That for real?”

“Yeah, said he ran away and needed a spot to crash.”

“You let him stay?”

Jason huffed, seriously regretting it now as he admits, “Not initially. I kicked him out, but he just curled up on the floor of the god damn hallway.”

“Oh, Jay, he’s like a puppy!”

“Not funny, Roy,” Jason barks, reflexive anger just enough to kick through the panic for a moment. The moment doesn’t last long as Jason’s thoughts hit their stride.

“Kid’s half dead, lying in my front hall, freezing his shit for brains ass off… I should’ve let him in sooner, should’ve checked on him, made sure he detoxed alright… Clearly he didn’t… I mean with what just went down, but… God, Roy, I left him alone on my floor. I— Santa Madre, lo maté. Estoy loco. El chico está solo, y es suicida. Lo maté.”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP YOU CRAZY SPANIARD, I don’t speak any fucking Spanish, bitch, so slow your fucking roll and codeswitch back to Japanese or some shit I can understand. Like Russian, how about Russian? Russian is a good angry-sounding language and I speak Russian. So, your fucking rant might actually be helpful,” Roy screams across the distance, voice clipping in his microphone.

The sound of angry horns blaring wildly accompanies his yells.

Jason’s on his feet at this point, trying to figure out where he’d gotten to in Gotham, calculating the quickest route back.

“Jason! ANSWER ME, you god damn butter butt biscuit head!”

“Yeah, Roy,” Jason answers, “Sorry, I just… I gotta get back. I gotta… he might—”

“Slow down a sec. Okay? Talk to me, Jase,” Roy says, legitimate worry laced through the reasonable demand. “Just. Stay on the line, a’ight? Tell me what happened before you called.”

“He was still there when I woke up, curled up on the couch. Hadn’t even grabbed a blanket,” Jason relays, starting towards the couch in question at a hard jog. “And he… he cooked us breakfast. Pancakes. Alfie’s pancakes. My favorites. And he didn’t ruin them. Like Alfie has definitely taught
him kind of good. And it was… it was nice. Like almost Pre-Joker nice.”

“So that’s good right?”

“Kinda. Maybe? It was… weird. And then…” Jason’s lungs squeeze tight and he uses the excuse of having to jump a wide gap to give him a second to refocus his thoughts. “He asked me to stay in Gotham.”

“Okay?”

“No. Not okay. We argued. He… I threatened to stab him and he… he said that if that would make me stay, he wanted me to do. Said he’d be okay with me killing him if it made me stay here, Roy,” Jason relayed, voice still canting towards desperate.

“That’s a little creepy maybe,” Roy mentions, “But not exactly news. I mean, seriously, it’s kinda par for the course, man. Little dude’s got a complex or somethin’, but I think it’s mostly that he just doesn’t want to be the reason behind you getting chased away from home.”

“No. Roy. He… would’ve… he wouldn’t have resisted, at all if… if I… God, Roy, he offered sex,” Jason explained brokenly.

“And you turned that sweet ass down?”

“Roy, don’t be a piss head. It was under duress,” Jason snarls.

“I’m just sayin,” Roy says suggestively, sobering to explain, “You turned him down, Jason. You did. Or you’d be callin’ me with a lot less you left in ya. You sound wrecked, man, but you don’t sound gone.”

Roy’s words are a comfort, if only a small one.

And Jason runs out of room to respond as he arrives at the window he’d fled through… probably less than an hour ago. Sees the lights on, hears movement inside.


“Stay on the god damn line, Jason or so help me I’ll get Kori to whoop your ass and put that shit on Youtube,” Roy threatens, dead serious despite the joke.

They don’t joke about this shit. Not the important part.

Jason called. Jason put out the life line, asking for help.

Roy answered that call, because that is what they do.

And Roy is on his way here right now, keeping the line open, keeping the connection live – keeping the one whose lost and drifting tied down to something solid.

Jason won’t hang up.
But he will put the phone in his pocket. “Eavesdrop quietly, asshole. Don’t spook ‘im.”

“I won’t spook him you big lumphead, this is way too juicy to miss,” Roy replies as Jason slides the phone gently into his back pocket.

Then Jason gingerly eases his way back into the apartment.

He finds his duffel untouched on the kitchen floor and carefully sidesteps around it as he stalks towards the shuffling sounds coming from the living room – ducking down below the edge of the breakfast bar, because whatever Tim’s doing is keeping him close to the floor and Jason isn’t sure how on guard he should be as he approaches.

He’d rather get the lay of the land, see the shape Tim’s in, before he makes a firm call.

In the living room, he finds Tim squirming into his Red Robin suit – he’s on the floor, writhing on his knees as he struggles with the last zipper, and seeing him makes every muscle in Jason’s body go tight.

He might make a strangled noise, or maybe not, but either way, Tim straightens up and turns around, though he stays on his knees as he reaches casually for his duffle.

He freezes when he sees Jason.

They hold position until a staticky Roy shout-whispers, “Jay? You alive? It’s been 78 seconds, already, and no one’s said anything? What’s happening with the whole Bird sitting sitch? Did you fucking leave me on the window sill or something? Jay!”

“You came back,” Tim whispers, awed with disbelief.

Jason frowns. Takes a deep breath. Tries to stifle the roil of anxiety.

And then admits openly, “Yeah. I guess. Kinda.”

Tim pulls in a long breath, absurdly looking like he might tear up here. “I’m glad.”

“I’m not.”

Jason doesn’t mean to say it, but he’s tired. He’s all kinds of screwy inside and the crazy mess of chaos and confusion and emotion is exhausting, and he just doesn’t have the energy to keep his thoughts and feelings sorted well enough to bullshit anymore.
This conversation very well may kill him, but with his emotional state wrought into such a fragile, twisty figure… he can’t bring himself to extend another tendril to care.

He’s just glad that Tim’s still breathing, and all he’s concerned with right now is figuring out how to keep it that way when the baby bird seems so determined to dig himself a grave.

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you get me high, love… i don’t wanna feel ( this mess )

Chapter End Notes

Poor Jay… but I adore Roy, man. He is just an epic best friend to have.

NEXT TIME: Tim’s got some explaining to do… but a crisis with a group of Rogues gets in the way of it… and creates a particularly problematic landscape for the emotionally compromised and constipated Bats to navigate.

^_~<3
if we're gonna tumble (in the gunfire)

Chapter Summary

Tim does not cope well with what he perceives as his own dramatic shortcomings in terms of getting through to Jason, but he's still a Bat and that means when Duty calls, he's willing to give his all in answer...

Jason does not cope well with THAT...

^_~

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter's up so late! Midterms kinda snuck up on me, and the difficulty of managing Grad School with a real-person job is more dramatic than I'd anticipated. (Also, I still don't have a floor, insurance peeps and construction contractors are hell spawn incarnate and I hope they spend their initial afterlives being forced to listen to it's a small world on repeat for at least a thousand years of penance... *fumes* _-_-')

Anywho. CLIFFHANGER WARNING. Pretty significant one this round. Birdies in immediate peril and whatnot...

Also, once again, Tim's headspace is NOT a healthy one. If you resonate with any of his attempts at logic, please check in with friends, family, random human on the street or in the netscape... He argues well to defend his unhealthy state of mind, but that only makes it even less healthy. Self loathing is a perfectly natural occurrence. So is a stroke. Yet people call an ambulance on one and just ignore the other... Don't be people. Redeem the Human species, please.

And now, on to angsty, angsty Timmy birb.

^_--<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nineteen – if we're gonna tumble (in the gunfire)

Tim doesn’t move.

For… for a long time after Jason leaves the apartment, Tim doesn’t move from where he’s sprawled across the floor in Jason’s kitchen.
He knows it’s his fault.

He pushed too hard, moved too quick, leveraged too much pressure.

He *knows* he didn’t do this right… that he moved too quickly, too aggressively…

He chased Jason away.

Tim thought it would be best to keep him in Gotham by any means necessary, was perfectly willing to sacrifice *everything* to make it happen.

But…

But maybe…

Maybe, it would’ve been better… would’ve been smoother and easier, if he’d let Jason leave… and maybe it would’ve been better if Tim had simply followed Jason, like he’d planned to in his first contingency, but silently – as nothing but a shadow of support with the occasional comment about how Gotham *needs* Jason…

And maybe even the extremely rare comment on how the *Family* needs him…

Or maybe not.

Maybe that would still have chased him away…

With Tim having waited too long to get out here to apologize, maybe it was inevitable that Jason had to leave.

Tim doesn’t like thinking in terms of inevitabilities, he likes the inherent flexibility of variables being able to alter outcomes, but sometimes… there are some things that… that he *can’t* control, or adjust… And Jason is usually a good bet for being the one to find those things.

But that doesn’t make the outcomes any easier for Tim to accept.

So, when Jason leaves, Tim doesn’t move.

He wallows.

He knows he’s wallowing, knows it’s useless, and stupid, and deeply unhelpful… but he doesn’t care. He wallows anyway and lays on the chilly linoleum of Jason’s floor and curses himself for having waited too long to get out here.

And then for having pushed too hard after he’d lost his real chance.
Tim wallows for… for at least an hour, probably, in real time – though it feels like it could easily have been as long a week, or as short a hellish eternity as five minutes…

He’s not planning on moving for a while longer yet – not really planning on moving ever, if he’s honest – but Gotham, being Gotham, soon disrupts his pained lethargy.

An alert goes off on the tablet tucked inside the duffle he’d brought with him.

An alert set to override the settings keeping most of the device’s notifications on silent.

Tim can’t muster the strength to stand, so he simply crawls over to where he’d left his duffle abandoned by the couch and fishes through it for the one piece of tech he’d brought with him. It’s not a terribly powerful tablet, it’s just a little home made thing that’s only marginally too big to be considered a rather large cell phone.

It’s only wired in to a few auxiliary systems he’s hooked up to the command center of the Cave’s shared server. It doesn’t actually have access to the server, and therefore that server has no access to this device, but it’s got a close enough watch on the servers streams to note when something significant happens – it’s like a finger on the pulse to track a heart attack, if you will.

Still sprawled on the floor, Tim lies on his back and hold the tablet up over his face as he skims through the data readouts – parsing the disparate blips of information into an organized understanding of the evolving situation.

It’s just about sunset, at this point, shift change for police officers and guards, a sleepy part of the day for Bats, and a prime time for the baddies to be gearing up for something big.

Like an Arkham break out.

Tim can’t quite tell who all is involved directly, but Killer Croc, Clayface, and Mr. Freeze are all popping by name already, and it seems like there might be some Scarecrow and Black Mask connection in play. It’s a disparate group that Tim wouldn’t normally suspect of working together, but that actually makes it more dangerous…

If there IS collusion, it’ll be an unexpected and difficult fight to suppress them.

But if the attack is not a coordinated venture… if the separate parties all wound up selecting right now to launch their attacks by pure happenstance… It will be a lot harder to identify their immediate goals and corral them away to prevent public harm.

It’s an ‘all hands, on deck’ scenario if Tim has ever seen one.
He spares one more moment of regret to lament having chased Jason away, and of having run himself so ragged in being ridiculous (and in failing while being ridiculous) that this mission is going to be a brutal effort for him to even join the fight, let alone to properly contribute to it… but then he forces himself to focus.

To get down to business.

Because… It’s not like Tim could ever just not go or something…

The others will be risking their lives to save the city, and Tim can’t just let the odds stand even more starkly against them simply because Tim is feeling shitty about himself right now. His presence won’t even the odds by much, but it could still mean the difference between life and death for a member of the Family. And that matters, little as a thing it is, that matters.

So, with lead limned along his limbs, Tim drags himself mostly upright and digs through his duffle for his spare Red Robin uniform. With grueling, laborious effort, Tim wriggles out of his street clothes and into the skin tight armortec. This uniform, like the one he ruined in the explosion nearly three weeks ago, is still technically just a prototype mock up, so it has hardly any traps or secret catches that need to be dealt with.

It should be a quick change, but it feels like it takes another full hour for Tim to swap outfits. The illusion isn’t helped much by the point they’ve reached in the evening – that brief moment of time where the light of the sinking sun is starting to race through the city to escape the building shadows of the night in a rush that feels visceral and abrupt.

Tim has just finished with the last zipper on the main suit (one that’s irksomely difficult to reach and will need to be adjusted in the next iteration of the damn thing), and is turning to dig his gauntlets out of his duffle when he comes face to face with Jason.

It’s a fever dream, or hallucination, or Tim’s had a heart attack and died, or… something.

Because Jason Todd is crouched on the floor… less than ten feet away from him.

The very same Jason Todd that Tim had just chased out of Gotham an hour ago…

Tim didn’t hear him come in, has no idea when he got there (or when Tim’s brain finally cracked… because this would not be the first time he’d hallucinated Jason Todd back into his god damn train wreck of a pathetic little life), and he’s not entirely certain what to do now.

He probably should check to see if Jason’s real.

He’s not quite sure how to go about doing that, but it should probably be a priority.

However, before he wraps his brain around any possible test for Jason’s real-ness, a burst of muted static from one of Jason’s pockets breaks the silence.
Tim can’t quite hear the words clearly enough to glean any meaning from them, but he’s certain that he hears Jason’s name come up once or twice. And somehow, the idea that someone else (Roy, by the sound of it) knows that Jason’s here, confirms that Jason’s real to Tim.

Shock, awe, and a gut wrenching relief punch the words from Tim’s throat before he has any other rational thought, “You came back.”

Jason frowns.

He doesn’t quite glower, but his expression is still dark enough to make kittens quake. He takes a slow, deep breath that Tim instinctively, desperately mirrors.

“Yes. I guess. Kinda.”

It’s not resoundingly conclusive confirmation, but it’s more than enough to make Tim woozy with ecstatic disbelief.

Tim mirrors Jason through another careful breath, feeling his eyes prickle sharply with the excess of overwhelming emotion currently coursing through him.

“I’m glad,” Tim breathes.

“I’m not,” Jason huffs immediately in return.

It’s an open, honest statement, and although it nearly crushes Tim’s heart to hear, he’s still glad of two key details: the trusting openness with which Jason’s speaking, and the fact he’s here at all to say it – even if he’s not happy to be here, he is here, and that’s important.

“You shouldn’t be suiting up.”

Tim blinks, still too distracted by Jason’s miraculous apparition to have full command of language, or even awareness of his own situation. It takes a few seconds to fight his brain back into the wider circumstances of the present moment, “I…? Oh, um, yeah. I… there’s an issue… an Arkham break out. A big one, it seems. So, it’s kinda all hands, on deck.”

Then Jason glowers.

It hurts Tim to see it, but the black expression isn’t nearly as vitriolic as it could be.

“Do they know you’ll be participating?” Jason asks darkly.

“Um… no,” Tim admits sheepishly, “Not yet.”

Jason huffs, “You shouldn’t be. You’re not healed up enough, it’s too risky.”

With a quick snap that pulls his brain out of the awed funk it’d been caught in, Tim snorts derisively. “I’m not sitting on the sidelines while the others risk their lives.”

“You’re a liability.”

It stings because it’s true, but Tim won’t let it stop him.
“That’s why I haven’t checked in or told them that I’m coming,” Tim explains, pulling his gaze off of Jason and forcing his attention back to pulling on his gauntlets. “They need back up and I’m going to provide it, whether or not they know to look out for me. If they don’t know I’m there until we’re in the thick of things, they won’t have time to distract themselves with worry.”

“That’s a fucking awful plan,” Jason declares flatly.

“Well, I’m open to suggestions,” Tim snorts with caustic abandon.

“Don’t go.”

“Not that suggestion,” Tim bites out. With a heavy sigh under his breath, as he finishes with arming his gloves Tim adds spitefully, “That’s not even a real suggestion, like seriously.”

Jason growls in clear frustration as Tim moves on to securing his bandoliers across his torso, saying thickly, “You’re going to get yourself killed, asshole.”

“Maybe,” Tim admits. He owns up to that prospect fully, would never insult those he’s already failed and lost or those he’d leave behind in failing here, by ever pretending that he was not aware of the risks he was taking – the risks they were all taking. “But I might save lives, too.”

Jason curses under his breath in Spanish spit out too quick for Tim to catch.

Tim ignores it and reaches for his cape.

Before he pulls it free of the duffle, Jason’s hand whips out to grab hold of the material.

“Don’t go,” he barks again, giving the cape a firm yank.

Tim grits his teeth and wrenches the flexible material out of Jason’s hold – ripping it free by using an explosive burst of his full strength in a display of temper that nearly sends him toppling over because of the unexpected lack of resistance met in Jason’s grip.

Keeping his balance by the skin of his teeth, Tim rights himself, swings his cape around to drape over his shoulders, and grits out, “No.”

As Tim’s securing the clasps, Jason reaffirms, “You. Will. Die.”

“Maybe,” Tim corrects, adding, “It’s my life, Jason. I get to make use of it how I see fit, and if you don’t like it, too bad. You have no right to stop me, or tell me how to live.”

The implicit understanding is that while Jason has no right to stop him, they both know he has the abilities required to make him stay home… Jason could easily incapacitate Tim, even if he restricted it to an injury that would only keep Tim down for a few hours, Jason could do it.

Tim’s just praying that Jason won’t go there.

Jason hasn’t shown any dramatic proclivities for keeping Tim safe since he got back from the dead and the hateful dealings with the Lazarus Pit, but he’s also shown little regard for Tim’s feelings on a given matter – so if, for some bizarre reason, Jason decides that Tim’s safety does matter… he likely won’t hesitate to hurt him mildly to ensure his overall security.
Possibly.

Consent is big with Jason… so maybe, Tim can get away clean.

And maybe… maybe he can even do more.

“If you’re so certain I’m going to screw this up and die, come with me,” Tim suggests, “If you were out there to watch my back, the odds of me tripping up somehow and getting myself killed would go down dramatically.”

Jason makes a choking sound, and in Tim’s peripheral vision his body jerks towards Tim slightly – a disjointed, uncontrolled reaction that Tim’s learned to connect with something like a bout of Pit rage flaring up. It’s not the straight leap to violence that he’d displayed before his attempt to detox with the Outlaws, but it’s still a significant issue that Tim needs to collect more direct data on… It may be of crucial significance in affecting Jason’s Familial reintegration.

Tim’s not quite sure what about his statement caused the flare up, but now is not the time to dissect the conversation to figure it out.

He’s just about finished getting prepped to head out into the fray.

Picking up his domino, Tim hesitates in securing it to his face.

Before he lifts the mask and divests himself of a certain portion of his humanity, Tim looks up and tries to meet Jason’s eyes.

The man crouched across from him is glaring, but his gaze is inexplicably skittish. And when Tim finally does manage to catch Jason’s eye, he sees that the deep blue of Jason’s irises has been subsumed by a flickering, fiery tinge of Lazarus green.

“Come with me.”

It’s not exactly a suggestion or even a request, but the statement is said so softly it’s hardly a declaration spiked with any kind of genuine demand.

Jason’s fists clench, and his whole being gives a shudder.

And Tim resigns to backing off.

“Just think about it, okay?” Tim asks, looking down and then closing his eyes to secure the domino in place. As the mask beeps under his thumb print, as it hisses with the release of the gaseous compounds that mix together to create the adhesive, Tim adds, “I could really use your help out there, tonight. We all could. History and grudges aside, there’s civilians getting hurt out there. We can fight among ourselves all we want after the innocent bystanders are safe.”

Jason doesn’t respond and Tim accepts that as he rakes his fingers through his hair to smooth it down enough to pull his full cowl over his head.

With that accomplished, Tim’s ready to hit the streets.
Physically, technically, ready, at least…

Mentally and emotionally? He’ll need to give himself a few minutes alone on a roof to center himself before he truly joins the fray…

Tim permits himself one last look at Jason, who’s staring at him with an odd splash of confusion clear across his face – confusion strong enough that it seems to have calmed away the worst of the Pit’s influence, at least in going by what’s visible of the coloring within his irises.

Seeing that somehow calms Tim, as well.

He resists the urge to say anything, either in final invitation or as parting words, as he pushes to his feet and strides towards the window. He takes a single strong breath and then vaults out the window onto the fire escape, and then leaps into the abyss beyond as the full darkness of night definitively drapes itself across the streets of Gotham.

He makes it to the West Side, where his alerts had the projected action most centrally focused, and pauses. He takes three minutes in the shadowy alcove of an air conditioning unit tucked beside the shed like structure of a roof top access stairway and clears his mind, prepares his brain to focus on the fight as he runs through a quick routine of final warm up stretches.

The trip over here warmed most of his muscles up plenty, but the stretching keeps everything limber and moving smoothly.

Then he pulls a com unit out of the lead lined pocket on his utility belt and sticks it in his ear as he brings a live image of the city map with the gps locations of the others’ bio-trackers up on his gauntlet’s 3D projection display.

He clicks the com on and watches his own little dot appear in the center of his projected map as he finagles the device into his ear. His dot is fainter than the others, one point of data rather than the dozen or so complied to create theirs, but still too noticeable for Tim’s tastes.

Fortunately, the others are busy enough and focused enough to let him go unnoticed.

A flurry of voices meets him as the others are in the midst of assessing the extent of the damage already caused while simultaneously collecting, categorizing, and interpreting data about what’s actually going on in detail.

Tim doesn’t speak up and the others are too consumed with their own tasks to take any note of the addition of his com to the active communications stream.

While eavesdropping, Tim gleams that this is not a coordinated attack, but three separate incidents that have unintentionally coincided. The Arkham break out is exclusive to Clayface, Killer Croc, and Mr Freeze – who were only working together insofar as it took to get beyond Arkham’s walls. All three have now split ways and are wrecking their own brand of havoc.

Black Mask and Scarecrow are each in the midst of their own, independent scheme.
The timelines of their dastardly plots have both moved up at the apparent interference of the other incidents, as each villain is determined to become tomorrow’s biggest news story.

The immediate priorities are Clayface and Croc.

Mr Freeze is dangerous, but he’s attempting to escape. They’ll be able to track him down after the worst of this chaos ends, probably even before he schemes up an actual revenge plot or whatnot that would actually endanger civilians.

Croc and Clayface on the other hand… they’re on rampages that aren’t meant to allow them to achieve any higher goals, they’re just out for the immediate destruction – out to cause as much pain and chaos as possible while their limited freedom remains within their grasp.

Whatever Mr Freeze promised them to help with… whatever else they were planning, his part in the escape seems to have been entirely forgotten in their current wash of bloodlust.

Which is probably what Mr Freeze was counting on.

Dick and Damian have been assigned to Croc, while Bruce and Steph are on Clayface.

Cass, as the sneakiest, is going to scout and assess for the worst of what’s going down with Scarecrow and Black Mask – with Barbara helping ease her way and analyze her findings to evaluate priorities. Which will make taking them down easier after Croc and Clay are dealt with.

But Cass can only be in so many places at a time, and that can’t change no matter how sneaky she is – despite how it sometimes feels like she’s everywhere at once inside the Manor.

Even with Oracle’s help, there’s a limited efficacy to a single scout.

With Tim’s particularly rocky track record with Killer Croc, and his not much better history with Clayface – not to mention his current liability status due to the stupidity of still lingering anemia – all acting as additional encouragement, Tim decides to stick himself on recon with Cass. She’s currently scouting out Scarecrow’s scheme to determine the immediate threat level he poses to civilians.

Scarecrow’s threat is typically assessed as a higher danger than Black Mask’s.

They’ve worked together once or twice, but tonight it seems they are at odds.

While Roman Sionis and his specialized mafia subset gang of False Facers are drug dealers, gun runners, and general anarchists, he’s a fairly organized mob boss and his attacks on the public are almost entirely restricted to physical injury – with only mild psychological harm incurred.
primarily from the result of drug addiction.

Dr. Jonathan Crane, on the other hand, is far more sinister in how he imparts pain on Gotham’s civilians. The fear gas and neurotoxins he uses to affect the populace often leave lasting brain damage that can create both physical and mental disabilities if not properly treated. And most of the people affected are too underprivileged to get properly treated. Even many of the better off victims feel that they can’t afford the time off work and convince themselves that they don’t need it, that it wasn’t that bad (because taking time off work to keep themselves sane is the worst possible sin they could commit according to most bosses).

He also affects the wider population in two critical ways: first by making citizens hurt other citizens, which makes normal people fear other normal people more than they ever should, and secondly, he makes those who survive after having hurt people while under the influence of Crane’s drugs bear with the guilt of having done so.

So, Scarecrow is priority one.

But that means no one is on Black Mask.

Which gives Tim the perfect opening to insert himself into the operation in a manner that does not allow his participation to be questioned while simultaneously preventing it from being a dangerous distraction to the others.

Tim picks up on Black Mask’s location from Barbara’s constant stream of verbalized status updates and moves into a viable scouting position.

He’s just gotten settled in the swoop of shadows with the best view of the warehouse complex that the False Facers are working out of when Babs pings him over a private com connection – and he taps acceptance of the call with only the slightest wince of trepidation.

But really… it’s not like refusing the call would help at all. It would just buy him a few seconds of silence while an even more pissed off Oracle hacks into the line.

“You’re the one who always says that we can’t just disappear on each other, Tim,” Barbara says crossly the moment the connection clicks. “You scared us today, and I am gonna give you hell for it later, but for now… It’s good to see you here.”

They both sigh in the heavy pause that follows.

“Now, no BS birdy,” Barbara cautions before asking, “Are you really up for this?”

“Yes,” he barks immediately.

His answer came too quick, too defensively, and if he were talking to the Board at WE they would flay him alive for such obvious weakness.
Barbara simply waits for him to get over himself and give her a real answer.

“I’m not at 100%,” Tim admits, insisting, “But I can handle this. I can scout and help provide emergency back-up. I’ll stay out of the main conflicts and only intervene if something happens that catches one of the others off guard. I’ll be here for medical evac, mostly.”

Babs doesn’t sound like she buys it, but thankfully, she lets it go.

“Tell me what you’ve got eyes on,” Barbara sighs.

Tim relays what he can see of the False Facers’ numbers and excessive fire power, making explicit comment that he has yet to see Black Mask himself – positing that there may be another warehouse involved. This one could simply be a depot for weapons and drugs in transit, though it *could* still be the central operations hub – but with the actual command center located deep inside and possibly underground.

Tim will have to get closer and infiltrate further to be absolutely certain.

Babs gives her blessing with a vexed warning to be careful. She lets him know that she’ll keep the private chat between them live, but that she’s going silent for a bit to get back on the main stream with the others for a while. Anything Tim says out loud will still reach her and be worked into the overall Plan, even if she doesn’t audibly respond.

Acknowledging that, Tim goes silent himself and sneaks closer to the main warehouse in question – eyes open and wary.

The False Facers are a trigger happy bunch on a normal day, but today, they seem especially nervous – clearly fearful of the possibility that Scarecrow’s followers might pop up somewhere to ruin their fun before they even bring the main party out to the streets.

It is not an unfounded fear.

One of the other reasons that Black Mask and Scarecrow are considered lesser threats than the currently rampaging Croc and Clay is that they might very well get caught up in a pissing match between themselves and fight each other to exhaustion without requiring much Bat intervention aside from mopping up afterwards and locking everything down for GCPD.

So, Tim is cautious in his circling – keeping an eye out behind him for any hint of a wider net of security forces patrolling in the shadows between him and Scarecrow’s current location.

As he edges closer, he finds clues that confirm this as the primary headquarters, while also indication that there *is* a second warehouse like Tim hypothesized, but *that* one is the temporary supply depot. He relays everything to Babs, including the shout of alarm that goes off across the warehouse when a False Facer scout finds one of Scarecrow’s goons and sets everyone inside the warehouse on the offensive.
The False Facers flood out to deal with the Scarecrow incursion and Tim uses the opportunity to sneak closer. He still hasn’t gotten eyes on Black Mask himself.

It’s a worrisome gap in the information.

If they cannot locate Black Mask for the take down, they’ll have to subdue each and every goon individually and still risk having Black Mask get away to start this whole mess again next week. If Tim can find the man in charge before the Bats launch their attack, they might get the goons to surrender, and they’ll definitely put a huge damper on any plans for a raincheck.

While the sounds of shouting and gunfire pick up on the far side of the commercial lot, Tim creeps his way through the interior shadows of the warehouse.

He successfully makes his way down to a lower level that seems mostly vacated – the guards having moved up to the ground floor to replace those who’d been drawn outside into the Scarecrow conflict. There’s probably more even further downstairs, an elite guard surrounding Black Mask directly, but for now, it seems Tim can be nosy while undisturbed.

Before moving down to nail a visual on Sionis, Tim pokes into the assortment of crates and barrels littering the first lower level. He gets a look at some heavy duty fire power in the form of military grade rocket powered grenade launchers but not much else before a shout is raised behind him and the unique pattering of an automatic weapon fires on him.

The burst of fire is brief, but not quick enough for Tim to have escaped unscathed when diving behind a steel lined weapons crate – not naturally, anyhow.

The discharging bang of a larger caliber, semi-automatic gun is what interrupts the spluttering of automatic fire long enough for Tim to dive successfully for cover.

A second later, Jason appears in full Red Hood regalia. He drags Tim around to crouch behind a wide reinforced concrete pillar as a few goons from the lowest level appear and begin to fire a wild spray of bullets across the vague area of their position.

Tim is too overwhelmed with the swirl of emotion caused by the sight of Jason there beside him to care – or even notice, frankly – the ache of what is probably a bullet’s supersonic impact on his shoulder. His throat is squeezed tight enough to prevent any words from escaping, and Tim restrains the wheeze that wants to try pushing out despite the futility.

*You came, you’re here, you’re here,* replays on instant loop ad aeternam inside his head, drowning out all other thoughts and getting his mind caught in a deep, inescapable rut.

Tim can’t think of anything besides his awe and gratitude for Jason’s presence until Jason gives him a rough shake.

“*God, kid,*” Jason growls through the electronic filter of his helmet, “You have got to learn how to stay away from bullets…”
if we’re gonna tumble in the gun fire ( promise we’ll be side by side )

Chapter End Notes

Poor Timmy... But... Yay Jason?

A lot of Plot invaded this chapter. The best reactions to all of it show up in the next one.
XD

NEXT TIME: Jason (and Roy) try to navigate the minefield that is Gotham and Jason's feelings for her grand protectors...
stand up (and be counted)

Chapter Summary

Jason gets a little nudge from his emotional support redneck and works his ass off to try to keep the idiot Timbit alive... surprising everyone, Tim, Roy, and a newcomer to the party, even including himself, with some of the choices he makes along the way to ensure that the appropriate outcome is achieved...

Because Jason knows how to do the 'Right Thing'... if only he had some reason to want to want to try..

Chapter Notes

The thing I like about grad school is that I get to research cool shit and make other people read about it. Like seriously, I just handed in a ten page paper on the theory that the concept of Dance predates the concept of any other form of Art (even music) and positing the theory that Dance is not just an artistic construct of civilized societies, but that it is the proactively social art of constructing civilization.

I mean, /seriously/, how is that not awesome?

Also, I have a new floor! (yes, the melodrama with my neighbor and the washing machine incident has dragged out this long...) and all my furniture is finally back!!

So yeah, today is a good damn day, if I don't say so myself. ^_^

I'm still ridiculously busy (on the first week of next month I get to hand in a 25 page paper on the concept of cultural appropriation vs stylistic incorporation in the evolution of modern kpop dance techniques... which would feel a lot more awesome if I had the paper started yet), but I have decent queue racked up on this story, so I should be able to keep posting fairly regularly!

Anywhoo, on to Jason being angsty. It's not actually too painfully bad this time, it's honestly a nice little breather, kinda. And there's not another terrible cliffhanger waiting for you, either! Promise!

^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty – stand up (and be counted)

Jason collapses, when Tim leaves.
Falls straight back on his ass and winds up leaned heavily against the underside structure of his breakfast bar.

Somehow, he’s managed not to hang up his phone and Roy’s muffled shouts echo in the still apartment as Jason scrapes together the energy to tug the device out of his pocket and then all the way up to his ear.

“Heelllllooo~? Jay? You’ve got fifteen more seconds before I call Kori to go all supersonic alien war machine on your ass, answer me, damnit!”

“I’m here, Roy,” Jason sighs, voice dropped low and heavy with the weight of reality attempting to drown it all away. “Tim left, though. Emergency Bat mission, apparently.”

“Yeah, I caught that,” Roy drawls.

“God damn idiot is gonna get himself killed,” Jason laments coarsely, letting his head fall back heavily against the drywall.

“But you didn’t kill him first, so that’s a plus, right?”

Jason snorts. “Hardly.”

“Hey, man,” Roy contests firmly, “It’s not like he made it easy for you. I heard a few really dumb ideas being thrown around out there. But you didn’t kill his ass outright, and I’m proud of you for that, a’ight? Seriously. I remember working you down from the Pit Rage, an’ working up to having you hold it back yourself… You’re doing a pretty damn great job.”

Jason tries to snort again, but it comes out more like a desperate wheeze.

“So, uh, I’m still like half an hour out from Gotham,” Roy mentions after a moment of letting the lull stand. “But like… um… I’ll be there soon to back you up head on, so… maybe…”

Lip curling in annoyance at Roy’s uncharacteristic hesitance to shoot straight with him, Jason barks viciously, “Just spit it out already Roy. Fucking hell, man, you sound like a dumbass fourteen year old with their first crush.”

“Why don’t you go with him?”

Jason chokes on the air inside his lungs, again. He’s gonna have bruises on the inside of his frickin’ trachea after this shit storm of insanity wraps up.

“Listen. I mean it,” Roy affirms before Jason can drag in enough air to curse at him, “It’s
clear that Robin Mock 3.0 isn’t gonna be convinced to sideline it, and you’re worried enough about his safety so worked up over it that a stupid little spat with the Bats makes you need to throw a lifeline... I hate to say it, but the little bugger’s right about how things will go better for him if you’re there to watch his back – assuming you can keep your eyes off his ass, at least.”

The crass joke gives Jason enough space in his brain to craft a retort.

It’s not the snarky thing it should be, but it’s actual words with which to voice his primary concern, and Jason manages to speak them clearly as he says, “If I go out there to save him, the odds are pretty good that I’m gonna end up killing him, shit head.”

“I dunno, I think you might be passed that.”

Grinding his teeth together so hard he’s surprised that nothing chips, Jason grits out, “I’ve already nearly killed him five separate times in the last three weeks, twice in the last day.”

Jason can hear Roy’s shrug in the rev of an engine from across the line.

“Yeah, maybe,” Roy cedes after a moment. “But still... That was when he was being stupidly antagonistic towards you. Now, he’s being stupidly heroic towards, not-you. Pretty big thematic difference there, bubba. An’ I know you like seein’ Pretty Bird get down to business, so... I dunno, maybe it’ll be alright.”

Jason’s silence is sufficient to say that he’s not sure enough of anything to say it, and the quiet is thickly weighted with the implicit understanding that Jason mostly dislikes the idea.

Only mostly.

There is a tinge to it that shows he is considering Roy’s point about how when Tim is being his stupid stubborn self in a way that pokes and prods at Jason directly it elicits a very different reaction than when Tim’s stubbornness is directed at doing something kind of amazing. Tim’s reckless still grates on Jason when he’s being heroic, but to a lesser degree than it would otherwise... he hasn’t felt compelled to throttle Tim just for being a hero since... well since before the detox trip with the Outlaws, honestly...

Maybe Roy’s not wrong about this shit.

Maybe it would be alright...

“Like seriously, man,” Roy rumbles on in his ear, “Your choices are really limited. You can
“Today, Roy,” Jason interrupts to correct, “I’ve tried to kill him a couple times today.”

“—Or you can go out there and save his stupid ass while I’m stuck out here for the next 25 minutes, trying to dodge the psychotic traffic of your frickin’ ridiculous city,” Roy goes on undisturbed, adding with incredulous, personal insult, “Like how, man? It’s almost nine at night! Shouldn’t rush hour be over by now? Where are all these people even going?”

Jason’s only sort of listening to Roy’s traffic rant.

He’s mostly trying not to let himself be convinced by the bigger argument.

Trying and failing.

Because Tim is in danger, **significant** danger.

He’s still healing off a serious injury and he’s a fresh escapee from a suicide watch.

It’s downright irresponsible of Jason to let him go out there in a cape, and his half assed attempt to get the kid to stay put was never set up to be more successful than it was pathetic and embarrassing. Even while he’d been making his demands, Jason had never thought it’d work.

He’d rushed back to the apartment because he didn’t want to risk Tim killing himself, but then he’d just let the kid rush off into a gunfight that’s almost certain to accomplish that goal.

Even if Tim weren’t a suicide risk, he’s still recovering from a **massive** injury.

He’s a liability, at best, out there.

He could just falter and wind up with a bullet in his brain by accident.

But there’s the terrifying possibility that it won’t be an accident… that he’ll step openly into the line of fire, and then simply won’t even try to dodge when the lead starts to spray.

And Jason cannot abide by that.

He’s on his feet and heading for the bedroom before he realizes he’s made a decision, before Roy’s even finished raging about the idiocy of Gotham’s road system, and how the over crowding situation inherent to any sort of natural growth urban development mess is not at all helped by the city’s even more idiotic drivers.
He’s half dressed in the Red Hood’s signature armored get up when Roy calls a wrap on it, and nothing but a hot second manages to pass before the redneck notes the distinct sounds of shuffling gear.

“You’re going out?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. I think it’ll be helpful,” Roy approves before warning, “Keep me connected through your helmet and I’ll use its GPS tag to find you as soon as I make it into this break light hellhole you call home.”

Jason’s in the midst of securing his domino when he replies, “Sure thing.”

A moment later, he syncs his phone to the Hood, transfers the call over and then ditches the rather breakable mobile device on the counter. “Still hear me?”


Consulting the HUD inside his visor that depicts the trackers put on each of the Bats to help them back each other up (and allow people with access to the Cave system, like Jason, to avoid the busy bodies), Jason hmms. Tim’s primary tracker is not online. Nor are any of his secondaries, or tertiary back ups… If he’s got any sort of ping on him for Oracle to find, it’s a localized signal that buried too deep for Jason’s limited access to view.

Kid was dead serious when he said that came to Jason clean and untraceable.

Seeing absolute proof now makes a mix of satisfaction and frustration flood through him.

“West Side, I think,” Jason comments to answer Roy, “I can’t see Red Robin, but the others are gathered around that part of the city… with a pretty telling gap between them.”

Jason can feel Roy nod in the pause before he says, “Alrighty then, go save your stupid endangered bird species. I’ll be there quick as I can, and I’ll try to let you focus – you know, be less distracting than usual with all the brilliant dazzle of my witty commentary as I drive.”

With a snort that’s wholly amused, Jason retorts, “If by witty, you mean that awful, redneck crap you spew, I think it might be best if we just duct tape your mouth shut for a while.”

Roy attempts to make a retort, but he’s cut off by the blaring of a horn and his own string of bizarre, Appalachian pseudo-curses.

Jason simply huffs a laugh and turns his focus to finding one little Red Robin (who is bound to be in stealth mode) hiding somewhere in a part of Gotham that’s nearly the size of the whole god damn Queens borough in New York.

He’s also working on almost zero information.
With no idea of who broke out of Arkham to start with, let alone what the hell their immediate goals are now, Jason’s flying pretty blind.

It takes a while – a lot longer than Jason would ever want to admit – for him to find Tim, and even then, it’s mostly due to blind luck as he sneaks into a bit of blank space within the circle of area being covered by the Bats. Batman and Batgirl are the furthest east, and the furthest north – still flitting around close enough to Arkham to be on the edge of Coventry rather than firmly in the Upper West Side region. Nightwing and the demon brat Robin are furthest west, right by Gotham River on the West Side’s upper curve. Black Bat is significantly further south, half way to Chinatown, almost.

Which leaves about ten blocks right in between them all being effectively encircled and contained, but not actively controlled.

It’s not a huge hole in their coverage, but it’s enough to make Jason think that Tim would likely aim for it – as a recon position, if nothing else.

Jason turns out to be right, though it takes a spray of gunfire to help him zero in on the exact address of the warehouse where Tim’s aimed his interest.

The gunfire, thank fuck, is not being aimed at Tim directly.

It seems like a nasty spat between Black Mask and Scarecrow, but Jason doesn’t particularly care at the moment.

The sound drew him in, and he spies Tim on the opposite side of the warehouse roof from where the echoes of automatic gunfire are still pattering away. The kid’s using the distraction of the fight outside to sneak into the warehouse while the area is mostly clear.

Which, if Jason knows Black Mask – and he does – is a straight up terrible idea.

Obviously, Jason follows the malfunctioning little Timmy-bot inside.

The kid’s sneaky, Jason’ll give him that, and the warehouse’s ground floor is almost entirely vacant – as is the level immediately below it, if the sensors in Jason’s Hood are accurate (which he’s certain they are) – so the brain dead birdy’s idea of infiltrating the place in the midst of all the hubbub isn’t an entirely insane plan.

It’s still stupidly reckless, though.
And Jason’s fears of Tim being in the line of fire come to direct fruition after he spends just a few minutes poking around on the basement level – as a goon steps up from the shadowy corner stairway leading to a sub-basement.

Tim doesn’t notice the goon as he’s digging through the mountains of evidence piled up in crates around the basement, but the goon notices him. Immediately.

Jason’s a quick draw on his Glock, but he’s racing against a guy with a fully automatic machine gun. A half dozen bullets get shot towards Tim’s undefended back before Jason’s well aimed response finds its place between the goon’s eyes.

The gunfire inside the warehouse has raised the alarm and the shouts of other goons can be heard as they ascend the stairs while Jason sprints across the floor to where Tim’s hiding.

The idiot hadn’t been keeping out as keen an eye for trouble as he should have been, but when trouble came shooting, he had at least taken the initiative to dive behind protective cover – or… well, cover, at any rate.

The crate he’s tucked behind might be lined with steel, but it’s still filled with explosives.

It wouldn’t take too much bad luck for a bullet to penetrate the casing and hit the contents in exactly the wrong way so as to make them go boom prematurely.

Jason dives behind the same piece of cover, grabs Tim blindly by the spot on his collar where his shoulder meets his nape, and then hauls him over to a reinforced concrete pillar that serves a much more reasonable chance at actually protecting them from the maelstrom of lead.

Tim’s bloody, again.

He did not quite manage to dive away quick enough to get out of that mess unscathed.

It’s nothing too life threatening, just a couple shallow scratches. One that tore a few threads on his cape, one that managed to rip through the armortec covering his deltoid, and one that skimmed the edge of his cowl – leaving a streak of split skin over his cheekbone.

Three bullets, three very minor injuries… but… the red line on Tim’s cheek has Jason’s full attention enraptured—his obsessively intense focus fixates of the permutations of chance.

If that one shot had hit just a little bit lower, a little to the right… Tim wouldn’t have a jaw anymore. A little further and the lead projectile would’ve gotten stuck fast in Tim’s spine…
Tim’s gone mostly boneless, sitting limp and utterly still as he stares at Jason without any kind of present comprehension or sense of awareness.

“God, kid,” Jason growls, giving him a rough shake, “You have got to learn how to stay away from bullets…”

“I’m fine,” Tim retorts weakly, shuddering back into proactive awareness of the moment. He sounds… not winded, exactly, but still breathless in some way.

Jason doesn’t think on it.

He simply grabs Tim’s chin and swipes his thumb roughly over the cut on the kid’s cheek, collecting a thick sheen of blood on his glove to parade before the idiot’s eyes.

“Not fine,” Jason snarls.

Tim rolls his eyes behind his cowl and uses his gauntleted forearm to sweep roughly at Jason’s hand, brushing his obviously valid concerns aside like so much soapy fluff. “Fine. I’m fine enough, considering I was just shot at,” he huffs, adding, “And considering that I am still being shot at.”

The False Face goons are still spraying bullets at their position, though the volume has been reduced to keep them pinned down while a few of the gangsters approach to flank them.

“So, you got any good plans to get us out of here or is this just a sort of bash our way outside scenario?” Jason barks, packing away everything his focus wants to linger on.

Fixates himself wholly on the mission.

Tim angles himself to peek around the edge of their cover and over the mountains of crates scattered at near random across the factory – looking towards the staircase down to the sub-basement. “We need to get eyes on Sionis, directly. If possible, capture him outright. That way, at least some of the False Facers will just surrender immediately.”

“Not many of ‘em,” Jason refutes, explaining, “Blackie there still pays their salaries, even
from a cell in Blackgate. His goons don’t do commission work.”

“Some is enough,” Tim mutters, “It’s worth it.”

A brief pause and the sharp tensing of muscles is all the warning Jason gets before Tim bolts out from behind their bit of cover, uses his bow staff to trip up one goon and a blazing quick round house to incapacitate another, and then dodges swiftly into the shadows of a pillar set right beside the stairs.

Cursing all the way, Jason follows – firing off a few cover shots, and aiming at least two that have actual targets to drop.

Tim is frowning when Jason slams his back against the pillar beside him.

“Please don’t kill them,” the kid says quietly, tone low and mournful.

“What?”

Jason cannot believe he wants to do this now. Opening this can of worms is not conducive to accomplishing anything, let alone escaping… Which— as noted by some bizarrely detached bit of Jason’s brain—to be fair, Tim’s plan is not escaping, so really, blowing open this can of worms right now doesn’t really impact his immediate goal…

Tim’s voice draws Jason’s attention out of the oddly academic twist it got caught in, the baby bird’s words coming soft and slow.

“The False Facers,” Tim elaborates, as if he thought Jason were really confused on that part of this argument, but too gingerly for it to really be a believable ruse. “Don’t kill them. Please, Jason – you’re a good enough shot to manage it, you’re better than almost anyone at it, you don’t have to kill them to make sure they’re not a threat anymore.”

“You’re a little late to be asking that,” Jason huffs.

His body count is already at three, and that’s assuming that all his shots of cover fire missed entirely—unlikely, considering how good he’s gotten at playing with the ricochet…

“I’m asking now,” Tim states, undeterred. “No more bodies, not tonight.”

The earnestness with which Tim speaks strikes something in Jason.

It’s a hard blow, one that cuts Jason to the quick… but it’s not pain, exactly, that hits him in the aftermath… it’s pause… It’s this stillness that sinks into his bones as Tim just stares at him,
waiting for an answer – hoping for something impossible.

Hoping like he thinks he actually has the power to make it real.

Like he thinks Jason has the power to make it real.

The moment holds and Jason can’t breathe.

And then… and then a bullet ricochets off a metal support beam and hits less than an inch from Jason’s hand, slides through the edge of armortec fabric on Tim’s knee – reminding Jason that they’re still being shot at, and waking him up to how close he is to Tim… giving him an inkling of how easy it would be to just cut and run right now.

Get his ass out of here, maybe even take the baby bird away with him.

He could just pistol whip the idiot bird brain and haul his unconscious figure out by force. Easy. But… something about the idea grates at Jason’s insides…

Especially with how potently he feels the weight of whatever something Tim is feeling—whatever it is that’s pulsing through the idiot’s pleading gaze thickly enough to drip like heavy syrup into the tiny crevices inside Jason’s lungs…

Ripping his gaze away from Tim, Jason grumbles incoherently for a long moment, chewing on his words to prevent himself from acting and eventually grits out, “No promises.”

In response, Tim grins like Jason just personally swore him in for a seat on the Mars Mission and turns away to dart down the stairs as a gap in the stream of gunfire pops up.

“Oye!” Jason shouts after him, charging down the stairs at a dead sprint, “I said ‘no promises’. I mean it. Minimal effort will be expended on this no killing bull shit. Comprende?”

Tim doesn’t respond with any grave acceptance, but he doesn’t laugh either.

They both know that, despite Jason’s protests regarding minimal effort, there’s an implicit promise to try inside his grousing – and that’s more of a promise than he’s ever given on the matter before.

Fortunately, in some ways at least, the pressing encouragement of gunfire gets them both refocused pretty quickly. They make it all the way to the sub-basement and under reasonable cover before they take a pause to reassess again.
They’re definitely in Black Mask’s command center, there’s a semblance of walls set up to make a maze of the place – keeping Roman Sionis and his VP cronies separated from the rabble while they discuss their plans, but still keeping it connected enough to hear any disturbances.

Disturbances like a Bat breaking, getting spotted, and being welcomed with a hail of shouts and gunfire… If Blackie had any detailed plans or blueprints laid out on a table at the heart of this place, they’re long scooped up by now, probably even destroyed if the acrid tang of smoke and gasoline in the air is any indication.

The scent isn’t very thick in the air, barely any of it.

It’s hardly enough to make a notable reading on Jason’s HUD, and nothing makes it passed the air tight seal or filters on his helmet.

Jason has frequently been overwhelmingly pleased with himself for having the foresight to make the damn Hood so thoroughly air tight. And this instance is another example of why it was so necessary. Flashbacks to a different warehouse, a different time, a different reality with the same impossible odds and bursts of fire and accelerant would not be helpful right now…

Tim seems to note the smell, and know what enough about what it means to feel the kick to urgency, because his expression quirks briefly in a sharp frown before he turns to Jason and uses a quick flurry of hand signals to ask Jason to circle around to the right in an attempt to find the center area where Sionis and his cronies will be.

With a roll of his eyes being unfortunately concealed by his helmet, Jason nods.

They split off and work their way inward.

Sporadic shouts and grunts give tell of Tim running into a few goons and promptly disabling them with a few nasty taps from his bo staff.

Jason meets a few goons, too.

And aside from a few shots to the knee caps, he disables most of them with a quick nerve strike instead of a bullet to the head. He doesn’t know exactly why he does it, why he actually puts effort into keeping his stupid not promise to the idiotic baby bird, but he does.

And at the center of the maze, they find two of Roman Sionis’s False Facer captains.

It’s only a quick few seconds to disarm them, and then another few to figure out from where their angry looks are directed that Black Mask himself fled up a concealed back stair case.

A glance at the smoldering remains inside an oil barrel confirms that the plans have been destroyed to a point that makes attempting to reconstruct them unrealistic.
Without further pause, Tim and Jason charge up the back stairs after Black Mask and find themselves in a dark, narrow tunnel that leads south west. It continues to narrow until it’s only one person wide, and Jason has to turn his shoulders slightly to keep them from scrapping the grimy concrete of the tunnel’s damp sides.

Tim’s in the lead when they reach the end of the tunnel and he doesn’t even look back to see if Jason’s still following as he leaps up to snatch at purchase on the lowest rungs of a ladder built directly into the concrete – what looks like a utilities ladder leading two stories up to a manhole at street level. Jason grumbles spitefully under his breath about the tight squeeze as he follows Tim upwards, but thankfully, the passage isn’t so tight that he winds up getting sucked back down into any flashbacks about digging his way out of his own coffin.

Tim being there… Tim having turned around at the top so he’s silhouetted in the dingy glow of the streetlight above to wait expectantly for Jason to reach him… with Tim waiting there to grab on to his forearm with a firm determination to help haul him out of the darkness may or may not have something fairly significant to do with that…

Jason very carefully ignores the possibility.

And the potential complications of its consequences.

From the open street, it’s obvious that Black Mask fled into another warehouse packed with his cronies – they’re all on high alert and a group is heading over to the shadowy alcove where Tim and Jason have just emerged with guns ready. They’ve presumably just been ordered to ensure that no one’s followed Black Mask over from the ruckus in the other warehouse.

Tim silently replaces the manhole cover while Jason eyes the approaching goons and fights to keep his head on straight after the tightness of the tunnel.

Then they swiftly ascend the nearest wall to perch on the rooftop to make a reasonable plan of attack to get inside this new venue.

Unfortunately, they aren’t alone on the rooftop long enough to even start to make a plan.

From a roof on the opposite side of their current position from the alley that Tim and Jason popped up in, Batgirl swings over to where Red Hood and Red Robin have crouched to observe Black Mask’s new hiding spot.

She’d clearly been doing her own reconnaissance when they’d appeared.

“What are you doing here,” Tim asks, sounding rather more than just slightly offended at Blondie’s existence in a way that makes Jason want to cackle for some reason. “I thought you were handling Clayface with Batman twenty blocks north of here.”

“Clayface has been handled. Batman went to help Nightwing and Robin with Croc while I
“Scouting Black Mask,” Tim returns coolly.

“And Hood?”

Her question is *all* acid this time.

“He’s helping,” Tim retorts before Jason can.

Jason snorts, saying, “If by ‘helping’, you mean, ‘trying to keep your skinny ass from dropping dead of pure idiocy’, then yeah, I’m ‘helping’.”

Tim ignores him, and Stephanie squints at him – evaluative.

“Are you really here to help?” She asks, “This isn’t just a thing because you want to kill more of Black Mask’s cronies because he likes to operate on ‘your turf’?”

She even does the air quotes around the last two words.

Scoffing, Jason replies, “Blackie’s a whiny bitch who shoots civilians for kicks, and poisons those he doesn’t kill, I ain’t about to lost sleep over taking his ego down a few pegs for any reason. If you ain’t got the hands in brute manpower to tie that dog town before he does some real damage tonight, I’m not just gonna sit here and let the bastard walk – regardless of the neighborhood he’s currently terrorizing.”

Steph’s raised eyebrow can be felt in her posture where it can’t be seen beneath her cowl.

“He promised not to kill anyone,” Tim mentions in a floundering blech of fake factual statement, causing both of Batgirl’s eyebrows to shoot skyward in helpless astonishment.

“I did not,” Jason snarls, with more petulance than vitriol. “I ain’t said I’m not gonna be killin’ anyone. I’m just not trying to hit a new high score on my body count record.”
Stephanie looks Jason over, street kid hackles clearly raised.

Her gaze flits to Tim, sitting cool as a cucumber and already looking bored of all things by this frickin’ conversation – Jason half wants to shove him off the roof for that offence alone.

Before the idea solidifies and he has to actively fight the urge to follow through on it, Batgirl gives a heavy, beleaguered sigh, and says, “I got eyes on Black Mask. He went inside about forty seconds before you guys popped out of the ground.”

Jason frowns behind his hood.

Because that statement of hers in implicit agreement to fight alongside Jason… it’s a declaration of confidence in the Red Hood, a tacit promise to watch her back instead of skiv it.

Tim just nods like such was already a forgone conclusion, and then moves on immediately to plotting with Batgirl to get the three of them inside Blackie’s new digs as stealthily as possible while disabling the maximum number of goons before the rest of them realize the need to engage.

The conversation leaves Jason slightly behind for a few long beats.

“You okay there, Jaybird?”

Roy’s low voice in his ear makes Jason jolt back to awareness with a shudder.

He makes a low noise of affirmation and Roy replies, “I should be just less than ten minutes out from where you are, okay? We’ll work this shit out real good as soon as your stupid city isn’t about to burst its damn self into flames, every last bit of it. Promise, a’ight?”

Jason gives another low grunt of agreement and then wrenches his focus back to the present, joining in on Batgirl and Red Robin’s attempt at planning a stealth infiltration with his insider know how on Blackie’s False Facers.

It’s weird. Really weird.

Jason doesn’t know if the weird part is that he’s playing at being one of the good guys, or if it’s just that he’s working with a few of the actual good guys and they aren’t even pissed about it… The weirdness may even be something else entirely as a pleasant calm of ‘work focus’ settles in over him and most of his anxieties and Pit fueled furies get squashed below it.
Jason’s a criminal, and he knows it.

But… maybe there’s something to be said for playing the white knight occasionally.

He’s got both feet stuck firmly on the dark side of right, but maybe… maybe, he’s not quite so lost as he’d believed… maybe he’s not quite so far gone than he can’t step up and play hero now and then – keep the whole city safer in a different way than he’s had to do as Red Hood by ruthlessly ensuring his territorial reign so that Crime Alley stays as clean as it can get.

Maybe… maybe he can still figure out a way to help people directly, to help them by just helping, instead of helping by hurting those who’ve already hurt…

God, Jason needs Roy here for this shit – he’s got no hope of sorting it alone.

And besides… he’s got a mob boss to maim at the moment.

Instead of letting himself get lost inside his own head, Jason turns his complete focus to helping Red Robin and Batgirl execute their infiltration.

Between the three of them, this crazy ass counter attack might just work.
Poor, sweet, stupid ass Jason...

At least, you have Roy to sorta keep your head on straight while your dear little Timmy bot is all banged up...

NEXT TIME: Tim's view of the trio's attempt to take down Black Mask. (Don't worry, things do go pretty and well and a lot of bad guy ass gets kicked, but obviously... there are a few dramatic complications that arise...)

^_--<3
**don't ever doubt it (even if we're surrounded)**

Chapter Summary

Tim works with Jason to get the upper hand with Black Mask, and with a bit of help from Steph it seems to be working.

But it's a rare day when things ever go so smoothly and Tim knows better than to celebrate preemptively. Still, what happens to change things makes Tim need to act drastically to save the one person that his little Family cannot survive without.

Rescue missions are all the harder when half the rescue is pulling someone out of their own head...

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Chapter Notes

Oof, sorry about the delay!

I wanted to leave you with the previous chapter's closing statement in case the weeks got too hectic to post, because this one is a bit... cliffy. Sorta. The birdies are in immediate peril, but... it's not too bad? There's a splash of optimism?

Still, read with caution.

I should be able to post next week though. 97% positive. Unfortunately, we've got a long string of cliffhangers to get through, and a grand old dose of spiraling angst. ^_~

Anywho, on to hella angsty Timmy (and remember, he's distressed and caught in a terrible mindset, so most of his logic is rather strongly skewed...!)

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**Chapter Twenty One – don’t ever doubt it ( even if we’re surrounded )**

When Steph shows up on the rooftop where he and Jason have crouched to scout a way into to nail Black Mask, Tim’s first instinct is to groan like a ten year old being told he’s grounded and
therefore can’t go over to a friend’s house to binge a new video game.

His second instinct is to cut and run.

If Steph calls it in and he gets shunted back onto a suicide watch for trying to do his god damn job, and you know actually save people, Tim is going to be pissed.

“What are you doing here?” Tim asks, wary but convincingly aloof and unaffected. “I thought you were handling Clayface with Batman twenty blocks north of here.”

“Clayface has been handled. Batman went to help Nightwing and Robin with Croc while I got sent to scout Black Mask,” Stephanie explains promptly and calmly.

It’s not an apology, but there’s no hint of her gearing up any resistance to his presence.

A positive sign.

Still, a little warning would’ve been nice.

As if hearing his mental griping, Oracle connects to the com in his ear with a huff that tells of how stressed she is with keeping all her conversations separated on private lines.

“I did try to warn you, but I lost your signal for a few minutes,” Oracle explains, adding crossly, “Honestly, you’re lucky I didn’t send her after you, or call it in over the open wire.”

Tim grinds his teeth but does not otherwise respond.

Meanwhile, Steph – clearly not hearing Oracle in her ear – has flipped the question around to ask what he’s doing here. Her tone is still perfunctory and calm, with only the slightest edge of a disapproving growl behind it.

“Scouting Black Mask,” Tim returns coolly, stubbornly waiting for her to be the one to address the massive red elephant on the roof.

“And Hood?”

She doesn’t sound accusatory, but she also doesn’t sound happy.
“He’s helping,” Tim insists immediately. Too defensive, he knows, but where he’d be coming off as overtly antagonistic to any of the others, he knows that Steph will read his biting grumble as nothing more serious than the brattiness of an almost righteous age old tantrum.

Before Steph can swallow Tim’s response, Jason snorts and provides his own input, saying, “If by 'helping', you mean, 'trying to keep your skinny ass from dropping dead of pure idiocy', then yeah, I'm 'helping'.

Tim’s too focused on Stephanie’s reaction to bother with acknowledging Jason’s comment. Steph’s expression is all screwed up with careful consideration as she squints evaluatively at every inch of Jason’s person.

“Are you really here to help?” She asks, “This isn't just a thing because you want to kill more of Black Mask's cronies because he likes to operate on 'your turf'?”

Her stance is aggressive, and her gesticulation matches it, but Tim can hear real question in her tone. She’s genuinely asking, and willing to listen to what Jason has to say on answering.

Jason doesn’t seem to notice how hard she’s trying to forge a truce with him.

Scoffing, Jason huffs back, “Blackie’s a whiny bitch who shoots civilians for kicks, and poisons those he doesn’t kill, so I ain’t about to lose sleep over taking his ego down a few pegs for any reason. If you ain’t got the hands in brute manpower to tie that dog town before he does some real damage tonight, I’m not just gonna sit here and let the bastard walk – regardless of the neighborhood he’s currently terrorizing.”

It’s not… a resounding expression of Jason’s support in this, not a fair representation of the truly unwavering goodness in Jason that Tim knows will never let him leave the fray while anyone is being actively threatened by a Rogue. But it’s also not a cripplingly antagonistic explanation of his motivations…

“He promised not to kill anyone,” Tim blurts, as Stephanie regards the wayward Robin with a disbelieving eyebrow raised.

That shocks both of Steph’s eyebrows skyward and Tim can feel Jason tense angrily in the blind spot he’s occupying at Tim’s shoulder.

“I did not,” Jason snarls.

At the same time, Oracle chastises, “Tim. He didn’t say that. Over promising on his behalf isn’t going to help anyone, especially if he can’t follow through on it.”

While Oracle’s still prattling on in his ear, Jason follows up, “I ain't said I'm not gonna be killin' anyone. I'm just not trying to hit a new high score on my body count record.”
Tim ignores them both.

Because Jason didn’t exactly promise not to kill anyone, but he did make more of a commitment to the idea of it than he ever has expressed a tolerance for prior to now.

And because Jason has followed through on it.

Since Tim asked him not to kill anyone, he’s only fired the gun in his hand six times, and each shot that sounded was followed up by the grunting and pained yelps of a grappling take down rather than the soft schlump of a body drop.

Jason hasn’t killed anyone but that first guy tonight, and... maybe he killed two more between the first guy and when Tim asked him not to kill anyone else.

But since Tim asked him not to, Jason hasn’t killed a single person.

Oracle, and Batgirl, and all the rest will realize it eventually.

Until then, this conversation’s completely moot.

Batgirl and Red Hood stare each other down like alley cats, hackles raised and ears flat.

It stays like that for a ridiculously long time – Tim can’t even fathom what it is they’re looking at, or what’s taking so long to see it. Both Steph and Jason are incredible at reading people, this whole little silent battle of wills thing shouldn’t take this long...

An exasperated sigh is building in Tim’s chest when both of them let their gazes cut away, and both wind up staring straight at him. He can feel them glaring.

His heart pounds with a premature excitement as the possibilities narrow before him.

And then... yes.

To Tim’s relief, Steph metaphorically rolls over and she gives a heavy sigh.
She’s accepted Jason’s place in the ongoing team up and moves straight to business, explaining with an easy sort of work focus, “I got eyes on Black Mask. He went inside about forty seconds before you guys popped out of the ground.”

Tim jumps into planning an infiltration with her, distracting her from the fact that Jason’s still stiff as a steel beam behind him.

Steph has accepted the team up, if only as a temporary thing.

Jason didn’t quite realize that it was one.

He needs a bit of time to sort this whole thing out inside his head, to accept the implications of what it means for him to be working with the Bats – to be fighting alongside them, instead of against them.

Tim intends to buy him as much time as he can, while simultaneously making use of the pause to hash together an effective game plan for the three of them to use against Black Mask.

They’ve got a fairly solid plan of attack sorted when Jason speaks up, providing an insight on how Roman Sionis responds to the pressure of being cornered – a few personal insights that each reveal a piece of his off the record history and genuinely aids the Bats.

Over the next ten minutes, Jason offers several significant suggestions.

They’re all things that will most certainly keep Tim and Steph far safer than they would be without Jason there, even if they had an alternate third person on the team.

By the time they’re ready to rumble, Oracle has an update for them, saying to both Tim and Steph, “Killer Croc has been subdued. Batman and Robin are en route to aid Cass with corralling Scarecrow. Nightwing is escorting Clayface and Killer Croc back to Arkham and then will be heading out to rendezvous with Steph. The estimated time until his imminent arrival is currently about 15 minutes.”

Which means they only have about twelve minutes to wrap this up and get out of here before Dick arrives and throws yet another wrench into everything Tim’s worked for.

Whelp. At least it’s not Bruce.

Without even having to look at each other – a fortunate hold over from the time they were dating – Tim and Steph agree to say absolutely nothing about Dick’s impending arrival.
Unless Oracle hacks Jason’s Hood herself to tell him… But it’s distinctly unlikely that she feels the urge to go to such lengths to tell him something that he doesn’t want to hear and that stands a solid chance of making him relapse with Pit rage in the midst of battle… Yeah, the best plan for everyone is to wait until meeting up with Dick is inevitable.

Ten minutes into the plan and it’s looking like it might not even be inevitable.

They’ve got the False Facers forming a circle around Black Mask in the center of the most open part of the warehouse, and are picking off the few that try to make a break for an exit as the Bats circle closer. It looks like they might be able to wrap this up and get away clean well before Nightwing shows up – to maybe even get over to where the others are dealing with Scarecrow and his goons to provide back up for Cass and Bruce and Damian (from the shadows, obviously, while only revealing their presence if absolutely necessary).

But of course, nothing can ever go that smoothly.

Jason’s the first one to realize that something’s wrong.

Tim knows that Jason’s been playing it slower than he normally would, but he’d hoped that was because Jason was actually taking pains not to kill anyone rather than the fact that Jason was splitting his attention between his take downs and his suspicions.

Tim also has been hoping that Jason would be willing to share his suspicions with the team… preferably in time for them to do something about them before the wave broke.

Even Tim can tell that Black Mask is a bit too calm to make it easy for the Bats to be comfortable, but he can’t connect the dots like Jason can – can’t even see them.

And when Jason does put the pieces together, he doesn’t hesitate to act.

“Yo, Blondie! Duck,” he shouts at a seemingly random instant, reaching into his pocket and lobbing a grenade in Batgirl’s direction.

She ducks at Jason’s word without a beat of hesitation, which saves her life two fold: one it keeps her from being hit by Jason’s grenade, and it keeps her head from being knocked off her shoulders from the swing of a cargo crane’s steel boom being cast across the warehouse.

Jason’s grenade lands in the control box for the crane, but the goon who’d been controlling it manages to dive out before it explodes – and whatever he’d been doing there is apparently already done, because Roman Sionis cracks a smile.
But Tim doesn’t get a chance to analyze that.

His gaze is drawn to Steph and Jason, by a flurry of frantic movement that says Jason hasn’t even bothered to look at Sionis yet – he’s still firmly in the mindset of crisis aversion.

Steph’s dive took her halfway across the warehouse and she ends up within ten feet of Jason, who suddenly lunges at her. She yelps a protest as he wraps an arm around her elbows in a vice grip and starts roughing her around by grabbing at her utility belt.

Steph is struggling, half an inch from total freak out – absolutely convinced that Jason’s in a relapse or something and inches away from killing her.

Tim can’t blame her.

He knows Jason’s still cognizant, his movements are too smooth and too organized for this to be anything of the Pit’s direct doing. But it is still quite alarming to see.

“Arsenal, you on the roof yet? Cause, I got a delivery to make,” Jason howls above the din of shouts and the sound of heavy doors locking into place.

An explosion answers him from above, raining heavy steel beams and shrapnel down on top of them – most of it still on fire.

“Finally, numb nuts,” Jason huffs as he gets Steph where he wants her. Without looking at her, or at Tim for that matter, Jason fires a grapple gun upwards through the new skylight, attaches the winch to the hip of Batgirl’s utility belt, and starts it up retracting at full speed.

Batgirl gets yanked upwards and Jason lets go of her arms as soon as he’s sure she’s too high to retaliate. Tim stares upwards as she vanishes into the smoke and debris above.

Meanwhile, Jason’s turned his attention to Tim.

He’s barreling across the warehouse like a freight train, totally ignoring the chaos in the ranks of the False Facers he’s creating. Seeing all six foot two inches and two hundred plus pounds of him heading straight for Tim at full tilt is… dramatic… and absolutely horrible.

Utterly terrifying, and the sight pins Tim in place as he gets caught up in thinking about the last time he saw that exact thing evolve before his eyes. He ended up with a half-crushed trachea, two broken ribs, and a couple pints too few of blood in his body – and that was before Jason pitched him off the roof into the icy currents of the Sprang River.

And Tim knows that wasn’t Jason’s fault – knows that it was the Pit making everything Tim said sound awful and antagonistic. And he knows, he does; he knows that Jason’s not currently caught in anything like that spiral of frustrations and Pit whispers and whatever angst had so provoked the underlying anger Jason always bore him.

But… but still… it’s hard for a brain to write over that kind of bone deep muscle memory of abject terror and Tim can admit with only the slightest pinch of shame that he shrinks in on himself and squeezes his eyes closed right before Jason makes contact.
Unlike Steph, Tim goes boneless.

Fighting now won’t help anything.

It won’t stop Jason from accomplishing whatever he’s attempting, and it might wind up with Tim causing himself injury – also unhelpful, and dramatically so.

Therefore, Tim stays pliant.

Terror keeps his heart rate high and his eyes squeezed shut and his teeth ground tight, but his faith in the fact that Jason doesn’t want to kill him keeps him calm enough to beat down the instincts screaming at him to at least try to fight.

It hurts.

When Jason slams into him, every joint in Tim’s spine creaks and pops and too many pain receptors to track fire off as Jason tucks Tim against him and dives through a roll that sends them both sliding across the rough warehouse floor.

As Jason’s rummaging about to rig and aim a grappling gun, Tim feels it – feels how the floor is rumbling… like it’s warping under an unknown mechanism that’s not half as visible as an explosion, feels how the floor is literally tilting even, bending away right out from under them.

And then the slow tip that can barely feel accelerates sharply as gravity takes hold.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” Jason mutters darkly as he lands the grapple where he wants it and begins to reel them towards the hook at top speed – tearing up the knees and thighs of his cargo pants, and at least one shoulder of his jacket, as they zip across the fragmenting concrete of the disintegrating floor. He crushes Tim against him, so tight that Tim can barely breathe and angled so he can’t see anything but the crook of Jason’s shoulder.

He can’t see it, but he can feel when the floor falls completely out from under them.

The grapple gun’s winch is hooked to the cross point Tim’s bandoliers make on his back and
it catches them as they begin to fall, but the reel whines in vehement protest to the sudden weight it wasn’t calibrated to hold.

Jason hangs on tight to him for a moment, but then… he lets go.

“**Hood!**” Tim shrieks as Jason falls into the darkness.

He doesn’t get an answer.

The rumble of collapsing floor, the continuing patter of gunfire, and the cacophony of shouts as fires continue to rage and massive hunks of debris from multiple explosions continue to skitter across various surfaces as Tim struggles against the force of the grappling line that’s pulling him rapidly upwards.

It does not have an emergency release button.

Honestly, it looks like Jason crafted it specifically to hoist people up against their will, to *hold* people who he’d be expecting to have frantically fighting for escape.

Briefly, Tim considers simply unclipping his bandoleers and squirming out of the harness acting to keep him moving skywards – but he might need some of what he’s got stashed inside the many pockets of the two extra utility belts.

His normal utility belt, the one worn like a traditional belt instead of looped across his torso, has a lot of gear in it, but as the weak link in most of his team ups, Tim has adapted to playing smart and tricky rather than throwing down a brute force card. His bandoleers contain a plethora of things needed to make that happen.

And since Jason fell into unknown territory, with an unknown number of assailants waiting for him to hit the bottom, if Tim wants to follow, he’ll likely need every advantage he can possibly obtain to keep them both alive until they escape.

So, losing his bandoleers is not a viable option.

Which means that his next move is to reach into a pocket for a collapsed Batarang. He unfolds one wing and twists awkwardly to get the reinforced wire within reach.

He starts sawing away at the wire as Nightwing appears above him.

“**Tim!**”

“I’m fine, ‘Wing,” Tim shouts, the hint of desperation in his voice being the only thing to
rock the calm assessment.

It’s not a begrudging or a perfunctory response, it’s a genuine ‘work voice’ reply.

He’s not holding on to any petulance about Dick’s part in getting Tim on a suicide watch, not right now. They’ll probably have to hash that out later, but for now, Tim is totally willing to work with Nightwing, to trust him with his life, naturally, just like they usually do.

The edge of desperation just barely present in his voice is for Jason and it grows slightly as Tim goes on, “Red Hood. He… he fell. We have— we have to go after him!”

“We will,” Dick promises. “We will; I swear, we will. But first we have to get you up here and then regroup with Batgirl and Arsenal and the others. Something’s not right here.”

“No! He fell ‘Wing! He fell to save me and I am not just going to leave him down there to face whatever it is that’s waiting for him all alone,” Tim declares, renewing his efforts to saw through the grappling line or break the device winching him upwards.

There has to be a hidden release catch somewhere.

It seems like the device is meant to lock around a victim’s arms, which would leave a bit of space between them for a captor to finagle a finger towards a release on the inside of the device, since there’s nothing externally. Tim’s only worry as he begins to search for it is that it’s fingerprint locked or something.

What he finds is a pinhole opening for some sort of key – with some electronic coding release by the feel of it, probably like a modified micro usb embedded in one fingertip of Red Hood’s gloves with the release command inside it.

And Tim can hack that.

Well, he could if he had more time.

60, maybe 75 seconds would be enough.

It’s not long by most reckonings, but it’s an eternity by his current standard.

A standard where Jason could be bleeding out below him, could be facing hordes of goons and guns, could be dying in the dark… alone. Afraid. Again…

A standard where Jason has already died once, has already been in a position where his would be rescuer arrived too late…

Where he has no reason to think this time will be any different than before.
So, 60 seconds is an eternity.

And since Tim doesn’t have that kind of time – and because Dick is still screaming something about how Hood will be fine and they have to get out of here above his head, which means he’s unlikely to help Tim out of the winch and then let him dive back down if Tim makes it up to within arm’s reach – Tim decides to short cut it… By inserting his modified Batarang into the pinhole and using an overload burst of electricity to short circuit the device in a way that overloads all of the machinery completely.

It means that Tim gets a nasty burst of electricity coursing through him and may very well have a cool new branching fulgurite scar along his right hand when this is over. And so will anyone within about four feet of the cable he’s attached to, or whatever the cable’s other end is hooked on (assuming that the object is at all conductive).

Dick jerks back involuntarily, probably having gotten a smarting shock to his foot – which had been within striking distance of the bolt going through the cable – and shrieks, “Tim, no! We’ll get Hood, I promise, but right now, we need to go.”

“Sorry, ‘Wing,” Tim shouts back through clenched teeth as the winch attachment clicks open and he holds himself up with one hand on the device. “I can’t do that.”

Dick hovers over him, looking like he’s of half a mind to dive down himself.

It makes Tim’s chest expand with a grateful kind of true relief that Dick still truly does care, that he won’t abandon Tim for this… for so definitively choosing Red Hood over following along with the rest of the Bats.

It’s one second of relief, but it’s a nice second.

Because Dick can’t follow.

He doesn’t have a cape. His Nightwing get up is a purely streamlined jumpsuit, designed to let him maneuver through the air like a fish through water. And Dick is not a light weight creature by any stretch of the imagination. Just because it rarely looks like gravity has any claim on him, doesn’t mean he’s actually free from its constant pull.

Which means that, if he dives down here, he’s gonna be yanked downward hard and fast, and he will need to shoot a grappling line to something before he goes splat.

Tim can’t see much in the hazy debris and dim lighting, but he knows the bottom is far, far, far away and there’s not much around for a line to connect with.

Jason being alive at all where he fell is legitimately in question, but Tim refuses to consider
But if Dick attempts to follow, his survival is almost certainly a non-option.

“There’s nothing for a line to attach to down here, and the fall is at least three stories, probably more,” Tim explains, “So, don’t follow me without at least one of the others to spot you from up top. Try to find us a way out from below ground! I’ve got a com in, so unless we end up in a ten foot thick lead box, Oracle will be able to get through to us.”

“Timmy, please don’t do this,” Dick pleads, helpless.

“Sorry, Dick,” Tim tells him, genuinely apologetic.

He doesn’t want to hurt Dick like this, he really doesn’t.

But that doesn’t mean he won’t.

“I have to.”

And then Tim lets go.

Falls.

And falls.

And falls…

Then he fans out his specialized cape and *glides*.

He takes tight circles as he descends through the dark, keeping close and central, and allowing for the glide to keep him moving *very* quickly downward – inadvisably quickly, if he’s honest, but he knows how to hit the ground hard while avoiding injury.

It should be fine.
And it is.

Mostly.

He… *may* have pulled the stitches in his thigh again… though after three weeks of healing, he probably didn’t rip the injury *too* terribly.

Alfred is going to kill him after this. Repeatedly.

Wincing at the thought of Alfred’s wrath more than at the pain of struggling up to his feet, Tim flips the lenses of his domino over to his specialized night vision: a mix of reads from a starlight cam and from a thermal cam. It makes the landscape look like a hellish kaleidoscope of blues and greys and greens, and a few jarring warm spots of garish red and yellow, but at least it’s one with identifiable objects to maneuver around.

The biggest of which is a massive lump of what looks like fabric in the center of the area dimly lit from above – with a hot body at the center of it… *Jason*.

Tim makes his way over cautiously, because the body is not moving and… that… doesn’t bode well for Tim’s hope that Jason survived the fall.

When he gets close enough to see it clearly, he can tell the body isn’t Jason’s.

And… it’s still *alive*. Even in the chaos of *this* mess, Jason’s still keeping his promise to attempt not killing people. It makes a lump of pride and fear climb up Tim’s throat.

Tim would probably be totally okay with it if Jason chose to kill in order to keep himself alive right now. Yeah, no *definitely*… Tim would be *totally* okay with it.

After wasting a few seconds on that rush of emotion, Tim clamps down on his idiocies and looks around in search of where Jason’s gone.

His pulse is rushing too fast through his ears for the sounds of a scuffle to register immediately, but it does eventually, and Tim’s night vision helps interpret the vague shadows of six mercenary combatants struggling to subdue Jason as they drag him off to the south west.
Red Robin leaps into action, and within a few seconds of joining the fray, he and Red Hood have the mercenaries on the ground – unconscious and zip tied into pretzels.

And then Red Hood is standing across from Tim with his posture tense and uncertain.

Tim wishes he could see his eyes under the Hood. Like this, Tim can’t tell how bad the current flashbacks are for him, can’t tell how much rot and room the Lazarus Pit has to play with inside his head – can’t even fathom how much control the Pit’s influence currently has…

“You had an airbag under your armor?” Tim asks, carefully sidestepping any questions that might lead to traumatic answers about whether or not Jason is currently okay.

“Yeah,” Jason barks through his Hood. “It comes in handy, sometimes.”

He’s still got a Kevlar vest on, but his leather jacket and his usual top layer of armortec and plate ceramics is gone – presumably shredded in the act of saving his life during the fall.

Tim nods agreement and then asks, “Any idea how we’re getting out of here?”

“Nope.”

Jason still hasn’t moved.

And Tim, not wanting to spook him, hasn’t moved either.

“Well, we should probably start looking for an exit,” Tim suggests, still not moving, despite a growing awareness of encroaching echoes of shouts and footsteps, “I don’t think these guys are the only ones down here.”

“Uh-huh,” Jason agrees, not even nodding as he holds position. “There’s probably a hundred more on their way, give or take a dozen. Sionis has pulled this shit on me before.”

“So… shall we?” Tim suggests, moving with excruciating slowness to gesture for Jason to lead the way wherever he thinks best.

If Tim steps first, he’s about 87% certain that he’s gonna end up face down on the concrete with an armored knee between his shoulders…
It’s a fifty fifty shot as to whether that happens with a knife in his gut or not, right now.

Jason still doesn’t move.

They stare at each other for an uncomfortable ten seconds.

And then Jason, sounding painfully – heart *wrenchingly* – fearing and fragile, asks with an awkward, uncertain lilt, “You really here, Baby Bird? Or ’m I just seein’ things?”

Tim swallows the lump in his airways to promise, “I’m here Hood. I’m here.”

He still doesn’t take a step forward, but he *leans* closer.

As close as he can without falling flat on his face.

Jason leans away, in turn, but to a lesser degree than Tim leans towards him.

His hands twitch like he’s itching to reach out and prove to himself that Tim’s actually a solid object in front of him, and like he’s too afraid he’s not to be willing to test it.

“I’m here,” Tim promises again, but this time he adds urgently, “I’m here, but *Jason*, he have to get out of here before the rest of the goons find us.”

A shudder rips through Jason – so violent it nearly brings him to his knees.

Tim takes an involuntary step towards him as he fights himself to let Jason get himself under control. Jason has to set himself to rights, or they’ll never be able to get out of this without another close call with Jason nearly killing him in the process of escaping Black Mask’s goons.

It only takes about five seconds, but Tim swears it’s been an hour since he last inhaled.

And then Jason pants and without looking up, he grits through his teeth, “*Code. Names.*”
Joker’s torture included trying to break Jason by making him give up the identities of the other Bats working with him. Tim read that in the file he hacked out of the ice block of data at the center of the Batcomputer’s core storage. He read the transcripts. Listened to the audio files.

Tim tortured himself with it.

Jason didn’t know at the time that Joker already knew, that the Joker had known who all of them were for a long while, and he’d refused to give up the names.

Despite the brutal beatings, the drugs, the hallucinations, the food and water and light and sleep deprivations… despite the waterboarding, and the slow rot of minor amputations going putrid and septic… Jason hadn’t given up the names.

So now using real names over the wire while they were all in their costumes…

It must be one hell of a sore spot to work with now… a thing strong enough to short circuit his brain entirely, perhaps. Which… painful as it is… may have just been helpful.

But, in moving forward, it’s a painful remainder for Jason that is easy enough for Tim to avoid. He can work with that. It’s not even a struggle.

Tim nods. “Right. C’mon, Hood,” he says quietly, but with a resounding confidence in their abilities for creating the means for them to get out of this alive. “We gotta get moving.”

Jason inhales harshly a few more times as he straightens.

Then he shakes himself bodily and says, “North is probably a good idea. We might meet more goons, but whatever reason those shits had for trying to head south is probably worth taking pains to avoid.”

“Sounds good,” Tim agrees.

He waits until Jason takes a solid step forward before taking his own – towards Jason, though, rather than in the same direction.

Jason reaches him in another stride and grabs his shoulder to roughly spin him right around, growling, “North is that way, idiot.”
With his expression resolutely resisting the bright grin of blinding joy he \textit{wants} to make, Tim makes an noncommittal sound and very carefully pretends not to notice how Jason squeezes his shoulder again and hold on an excessive few seconds to cement the mental proof of Tim’s physicality to himself before they head into the darkness together.

He has never felt more confident. Or more exquisitely \textit{alive}.

\begin{center}
\begin{quote}
\textit{don't ever doubt it, even if we're surrounded } ( don't wanna slip away )
\end{quote}
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Chapter End Notes

Oh, Timmy....

And yes, I headcannon that when Timmy hacked the batcomputer for info on his predecessor, he didn't stop at just case files or progress reports. He dug up every detail he could on Jason's death and played it over and over again in a sort of obsessive, self-flagellation of raw angst. And if I ever get around to finishing the Red Rising story (don't worry, I will, eventually, it just may take until next summer...), you'll get to read about it first hand...

NEXT TIME: Jason's view of the Black Mask showdown and the rescue that follows! (With some hella crucial character development bits).

^_~
Chapter Summary

Jason's view of the Black Mask disaster and Red Robin's rescue, with a lot angst along the way as they become a good deal closer to each other in every way that matters.

And there's a few guest appearances, a bit more angst and drama, as the others catch them up at a critical moment.

^_^~

Chapter Notes

I'm getting this chapter up a day early because I love you all and because I'm hoping to post an extra one in the next few days (in honor of the Kentucky Derby coming up again!).

Please note that Jason's head space is VERY skewed here and none of his rationales are reasonable.

Also, this one is kind of cliffy, though not painfully so (there's a dash of imminent danger and all that, but the head space is resolved and there's a clear indication of how the fight is gonna end).

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter Twenty Two – we were whispers (in the dark)**

Jason doesn’t realize something is wrong with how Black Mask is behaving as the Bats encircle him and his False Facers until it’s almost too late.

Arsenal has just mentioned that he’s on site when it clicks for Jason.

“Get on the roof, we’re gonna need an extraction,” he mutters to his friend as he tries to form a plan for getting them all out alive – while simultaneously attempting to figure out what’s gonna be the trigger for Stage Two. He doesn’t figure it out until it’s happening.

“Yo! Blondie, *duck*,” he hollers.
She does, and a grenade gets lobbed over her head at the dude who pulled the trigger on the building’s destabilization switch, but it’s too late for that to really help.

Instead of pursuing it in futility, Jason moves on to an immediate evac.

He pounces on Batgirl, fully expecting her to resist, and hauls her into a reasonable spot for what he’s got planned as he rummages in his pockets for the grappling line and winch he’s looking for. His grasping fingers find what he needs and he growls, “Arsenal. You on the roof yet? ‘Cause I got a delivery to make.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m here,” Arsenal answers, punctuating the point with an explosion that blows a new skylight into the building.

“Finally, numb nuts,” Jason grips, securing the line like it needs to be for the job.

He fires the hook upwards and gets the winch locked onto Batgirl’s utility belt, and the built in harness it’s attached to inside her suit. Then he hits the release and lets her fly.

Jason doesn’t even look to see if she makes it up.

He trusts Arsenal enough to leave Batgirl wholly in his care.

His attention is on Tim – who’s staring after Batgirl with a perplexed and anxious frown.

Jason’s already barreling across the warehouse before the kid looks away from her.

Tim pales when he sees Jason heading towards him.

Pales like a ghost and shrinks in on himself like he wants to just crumple up into a ball and cower under his bed. Jason can’t blame him. Of course, the kid’s still scared of him, even if he keeps pretending that he’s not.

Jason tells himself that it doesn’t sting at all as he watches the kid’s eyes scrunch up and his teeth clench together in a visceral wince of pure terror just before Jason makes physical contact with him. He attempts as best he can to cradle Tim against the impact with the warehouse floor, but thinks he’s only mildly successful by the way Tim gives a sharp hiss of pain.

He doesn’t have time to lament the fact and immediately scrambles to get Tim hooked up to another grappling line as he feels the floor begin to shudder. He gets Tim secured and gets the line hauling both their assess towards the safety of the exit, but the floor falls out from under them before they get even halfway there.

For just more than half a second, Jason contemplates the idea of hanging on to Tim and letting the winch on his harness pull them both up to safety.
But the protestant whine of the winch’s gears settles that immediately.

It won’t hold them both.

Certainly not well enough to get them up to safety before someone with a gun peaks over the edge to pick them off.

No hesitation. He just lets go.

“Hood!”

The shriek from Tim is loud enough to almost drown out the shout from Arsenal.

As Jason settles into his fall, he tells Arsenal urgently, “Black Mask is working with Scarecrow, has been all along. This trap is meant to trip the Bats up. Make sure they don’t fall for it, Arsenal, or I will haunt your cupboards and throw cereal at your head until you die.”

With that, he taps off his connection to his best friend – pretty sure that whatever happens next is something he’s not gonna want Roy to hear. He might not die from the landing directly, but it’s not gonna be a pleasant impact – and he does not need Roy distracted.

Then he squirms around to grab a rip cord on the inside of his outermost layer of armor and yanks, hard. The emergency lining of compressed air and heavy canvas begin to rapidly expand – tearing straight through the outer layer of his armor and through his leather jacket to boot. Jason has almost two whole seconds to mourn the jacket’s loss before he hits bottom.

It hurts.

The impact knocks the wind out of him, and the way his neck snaps backwards and his helmet slams against the concrete blacks him out.

He’s not sure how long he stays out, but when he comes to, there’s a goon standing over him and the sounds of several others circling just out of range for his HUD to expose exactly.

With an explosive burst of movement, Jason kicks the first goon’s knee and throws the joint entirely out of whack. A nerve strike as Jason leaps to his feet ensure that he will no longer be any threat – lets Jason turn his back on him as he sways dangerously with the encroach of vertigo while he faces down the others who’re now at full attention.

The fight does not go well for Jason.
Until it does.

He’s not exactly sure how it happens, but he gets a foot hooked around a goon’s ankle and manages to get that one on the ground.

And then…

And then Tim’s there. Or maybe just in his head. Or maybe all the goons are in his head too… or perhaps Tim’s not really Tim, but some demonic imposter… or like maybe one of the goons he’s fighting got a needle full of liquid Fear shoved under his skin…

But Tim is there and they make short work of the goons.

And then they stand at opposite ends of the little field of carnage and stare.

“You had an airbag under your armor?” Tim asks, sounding just a touch breathless but also… amused. So… probably not the real Tim then, right?

Tim wouldn’t be amused right now, would he?

Jason left him hanging over an abyss while he was clearly having a flashback about all the times that Jason’s proactively attempted to kill him, so he should be scared, right now, if anything. Or angry, or something.

But… Jason did have an airbag under his armor.

And it was a bitch to engineer, so Tim might be impressed and amused by it. Maybe.

Jason can’t tell for sure.

“Yeah,” Jason barks, trying to breathe deeply through frazzled filters on his Hood. “It comes in handy, sometimes.”

Tim nods agreement and then asks, “Any idea how we’re getting out of here?”

“Nope.”
Jason still hasn’t moved.

He can’t.

Not until he knows what’s happening – until he knows if this is real, or a hallucination; knows if it’s the good kind of hallucination, or the bad kind, like one induced by Fear Gas…

Tim hasn’t moved either.

Which does not bode well for his real-ness.

“Well, we should probably start looking for an exit,” Tim suggests, still not moving, “I don’t think these guys are the only ones down here.”

“Uh-huh,” Jason agrees, not even nodding as he holds position. “There’s probably a hundred more on their way, give or take a dozen. Sionis has pulled this shit on me before.”

“So… shall we?” Tim suggests, hazily shifting position between the seconds while Jason has to blink away the edges of resurging vertigo.

He’s not sure how long they stay there.

He gives up on trying to figure things out and asks helplessly, “You really here, Baby Bird? Or ’m I just seein’ things, again?”

“I’m here, Hood. I’m here.”

Jason might imagine it, but he thinks that Tim leans closer.

Just in case, Jason leans away slightly.

His hands twitch.

He’s caught between wanting a weapon to dispel the phantom, and wanting to reach out to touch the thing… to see if… maybe … it’s really Tim. He’s too afraid it’s not to reach without a weapon, but too hopeful that it is to grab one preemptively.
“I’m here,” Tim promises again, adding in a quicker, harsher whisper, “I’m here, but Jason, we have to get out of here before the rest of the goons find us.”

A shudder rips through Jason – so violent it nearly brings him to his knees.

The way Tim says his name just gores his very core.

It’s Tim.

It’s Tim.

Real Tim.

Phantom Tim would never know his name. Not after… not after Joker tried to beat the names of his associates out of him – killed him over and over just to bring him back to life to get the details out of him for sport. Jason had gotten his brain to blank out on them. He’s still not quite sure how he managed that trick, but he’s damn sure glad he did – and he knows it’s not something that could ever be over written without extensive effort.


The others too. It’s only ‘Tim’ standing with him inside the safety of Jason’s head.

In terms of anything audible, he IS Red Robin. That’s the only name he goes by, the only title he exists with intrinsically.

So, this is Tim.

Real Tim.

He’ll deal with the how and why and what the fuck of it later…

For now, Jason pants through the last of a panic attack without looking up, and then grits out through clenched teeth, “Code. Names.”

Tim nods.
“Right. C’mon, Hood,” he says quietly, adding, “We gotta get moving.”

Jason takes another moment to straighten up.

Then he shakes himself, both bodily and mentally, and says, “North is probably a good idea. We might meet more goons, but whatever reason those shits had for trying to head south is probably worth taking pains to avoid.”

“Sounds good,” Tim agrees.

Tim still doesn’t move.

He doesn’t move until Jason takes a step forward.

And then he finally takes a step, but in the wrong direction.

If his idiocy didn’t confirm his real-ness for Jason, then the solid warmth of the shoulder Jason grabs to wheel the kid around would do it.

He has to growl to cover up the wheezing ache of relief he feels as he says with a throat worn completely hoarse, “North is that way, idiot.”

Tim makes an noncommittal sound.

And as Jason steers him towards the exit, he very carefully limits his physical contact to an extra squeeze and just an excessive few seconds of contact to cement the mental proof of Tim’s genuine real-ness before they head off into the darkness together.

He has never felt more confident. Or more exquisitely alive.

And he doesn’t care to think on why that might be as they encounter another pack of mercenaries – all far better trained than any low rent False Facer could afford.

Even so, the beat down that Team Red doles out on them is decisive.

As it is with the next pack of prowlers.

And the next.
And sometime during this video-game quest to escape this ridiculous dungeon, Jason realizes that the Pit’s whispers are entirely silent.

Not even *mostly* silent. But *gone*.

Entirely.

It’s something Jason hasn’t felt since his little dip in Ra’s demonic swimming pool.

The Pit is *never* silent.

Except that it *is*, now.

The realization almost makes Jason trip over his own feet, but he disguises the slip up by launching a punch solidly into a False Facer’s nose.

The Pit’s whispers are nonexistent as he’s fighting alongside Red Robin in this hell hole maze of poorly lit sub-basement corridors and gangster goons.

Jason has no idea *why* the whispers are silent, but he’s certainly not about to question it.

Instead, he just grabs Red Robin’s elbow when Tim shouts, and helps him sweep around through the air in round house that takes down three guys before launching him heel first at a fourth to get them a little breathing room as yet another pack of goons appear from the shadows.

This kind of fighting should be utterly exhausting, and he’ll probably *feel* it in the morning if they survive the night at all, but for the moment, the more time that they spend embroiled in this mess, the more thoroughly Jason feels himself riding the high of adrenaline.

Even when it starts to get truly overwhelming, when they start facing down circles of ten and twenty and even thirty goons, while Jason’s fighting back to back with Red Robin… it doesn’t seem quite so impossible… And perhaps more importantly, it doesn’t feel disheartening.

It feels like they might actually be able to get out of this alive.

*Victorious.*

In a way that’s very different than when he’s working on impossible odds with the Outlaws, fighting with Red Robin feels like they might actually win this… and even have the win be worth the trouble.

Even when it becomes clear that Red Robin’s strength is flagging, when the Baby Bird’s
endurance begins to run dry, it still feels like they can do this… Feels like beating their way through the however many hundred of these frickin False Facers there are in this ridiculous tunnel system is something they can genuinely accomplish without obtaining dire injury.

Even when he notices that Red Robin is limping – even when the limp gets bad enough for the goons to notice how he’s favoring one side.

Even when Jason’s own helmet gets hit by a steel capped baseball bat that shatters part of the carbonized plexiglass casing and jars the circuitry so much that his HUD is reduced to peripheries and just the barest layer of night vision.

Even when Jason’s own exhausted muscles begin to feel the strain of being asked to work so incredibly hard after having been overly exhausted by the last few weeks of stress…

Even then, there’s only one brief moment of concern that this might not go the way they want it to end up…

And then a boom from above opens up a new access point to the tunnel complex and in the rain of concrete dust and chunky asphalt, a streak of black and blue appears that brings a comfort and renewed confidence to Jason that he hasn’t felt since… Before.

Before he even died at all.

“You’re late, Dickface,” Jason grunts on autopilot.

Dick doesn’t laugh, but his voice doesn’t sound half as dark as when Jason last heard it as he responds, “Yeah, well, you two are not exactly the easiest people to find.”

Jason gives an acerbic laugh, but one that’s back filled by true amusement as he grapples with a goon. He manages to get the guy’s feet out from under him and bowls him towards a trio of others as he says, “The endless hordes of goons that keep finding us seem to think otherwise.”

“I always knew you could be one of the popular kids if you just applied yourself a little,” Dick teases, still not quite laughing, but with a significant smile sounding in his voice as his electrified escrima sticks make short work of half a dozen False Facers, “All you had to do was pull your nose out of those books for five minutes. Little Red could do it, too.”

A snort from Jason is matched by one from Tim, who’s panting heavily but able to fend off a goon with a nerve strike as he says, “But then I’d have to talk to people. In high school. It’s just not a disappointment worth the effort.”
There’s the laugh from Dickie bird that Jason remembers.

“You never know, Baby Bird,” he rags lightly, “You might like them.”

“Nah, think I’m good.”

A red arrow embeds itself in the shoulder of a goon coming up on Jason from the side where damage to his helmet has limited his HUD’s effective view.

Arsenal drops down beside Jason and knocks an elbow affectionately with Jason’s shoulder as he retrieves his arrow – to the great dismay of the downed victim – and the turns to fire on another attacker. “Are you guys always this chatty during fights like this? I mean, I knew Jaybird had a mouth on him, but this kinda seems like a weird Robin thing to me now that I’m seein y’all together. Like a regular box of songbirds, you lot are.”

A swish of purple falling out of the sky on Tim’s injured side announces Batgirl’s arrival before she cackles and answers Arsenal’s comment with confirmation. “It’s actually part of the job description,” she explains, “Right there next to the part about how you’re not allowed to drive the Batmobile, or detour from Patrol for snacks.”

Another snort from Tim, and another goon gets dropped to writhe on the ground in pain as the kid says, “Nobody ever listens to the last two.”

Agreeing, Jason adds, “I dunno why they’re even in there at this point.”

“So then why the bleedin’ hell do ya listen to the first bit?” Arsenal asks, exasperated as he smack a goon across the face with the broadside of his bow.

The four Robins in attendance all grin, and in perfectly unplanned unison, they all answer, “Because it’s fun.”

Arsenal groans, but Jason can see he’s grinning just as widely as the rest.

And that resonates with Jason, sinks deep into his bones.

_Arsenal_ is here, is his normal self – his normal, post _everything_ self.

So, this isn’t just some weird trippy dream or time travel or anything.

He’s actually working with the Bats, and not hating every second of it.

It’s _then_ that the whispers reemerge… but… but not the _Pit’s_ whispers, not exactly.
The edge of them pressing against the back of his brain feels the same as when the Pit’s influence is trying to be subtle – to just implant the seeds of a terrible idea and coax the thought to grow by sprinkling in a stream of complimentary urgings.

But this is different.

This isn’t like the urge to kill the Robin that replaced him, as the Pit whispers about how thoroughly the newbie has supplanted his entire existence.

And it isn’t like wanting to hurt Robin to hurt Batman, as the Pit whispers that maybe it would teach the Bat a lesson if he lost someone that he really loved.

This…

This is an idea that feels a lot more dangerous.

Because… because this idea is the vague possibility… the ridiculous imagining of an over tired, adrenalin fueled brain… that maybe… maybe he could… that maybe he could stay…

It’s utterly insane to think that maybe, after this is over and they all get out alive and relatively unharmed, that maybe… things don’t have to go back to normal.

That maybe… maybe there might actually be something to this insane thought of Tim’s that Jason could actually come back to the Family somehow…

It’s an insane, ridiculous, downright foolish notion.

But Jason is forced to admit that foolish tastes pretty damn good right now, and he’s not entirely sure of how exactly he’s gonna be able to give it up if it comes to that.
we were whispers in the dark ( sayin’ all of this is ours )

Chapter End Notes

Poor baby Jay has a couple screws gone loose, but he's trying SO hard... <3

NEXT TIME: Dickie's view of the disaster, and enough of what happens after to make him reassess what it means to be a Robin.

^_~<3
just for tonight (forget who we are)

Chapter Summary

Dick finds himself in a tricky spot. As the first Robin, as the oldest sibling, as a person raised to recognize that love is supposed to be as uncomplicated as it is boundless, Dick always wants to help. But sometimes, the hardest part of helping is understanding the hurt... and learning to understand what kind of help is necessary...

^__<3

Chapter Notes

So it's just gone 6am where I'm at, and things are gearing up for the Kentucky Derby! Post Time is 6:50pm, so I've got 12 hours to spend in a fancy dress with my bare feet in the dirt, a drink in my hand, and a sassy hat to keep the sun off. Always a good day.

Usually, I'd hope to have a pick ready for a bet to be placed, but I've been so harried this year that I don't even know who's running. So while I hop off to do some research, here's a bit of super-angsty Dickie bird to keep your spirits high!

There's not even any kind of killer cliff hanger at the end of this one!

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty Three – just for tonight (forget who we are)

Oracle gives him about fourteen seconds of warning.

“Heads up, Nightwing: Batgirl is working with Red Robin and Red Hood on subduing the False Face Gang and Black Mask,” she says out of the blue as Nightwing comes within a few hundred yards of his current destination.

While Dick reels, and attempts not to crash the Night Cycle due to the crushing shock of surprise and emotion, Oracle adds, “And it looks like Arsenal is arriving on site, as well.”
Tim.

Tim is inside the warehouse.

Tim who’s been near mortally wounded in the last few weeks, and under such stress that he’s ripped out his stitches repeatedly… and he was put on a suicide watch for it all, which he’d seemed to be grudgingly accept prior to attacking Dick himself in order to fly the coop.

Tim shouldn’t even be out of bed, let alone in the middle of a gang fight.

And… and he’s with Jason.

And Dick doesn’t have any idea how to feel about that.

Doesn’t have any time with which to sort himself.

Because Oracle patches him into Batgirl’s audio and even if he couldn’t tell that a mess is brewing from the very un-Robin-like silence amid the trio, the grenade he sees Jason lob at Batgirl as he makes it to the warehouse door would be a dead giveaway.

The door’s locked and it takes an explosive charge to get through – which costs him a valuable five seconds – and by the time he makes it into the warehouse properly, Batgirl is screaming curses at Jason as she is zip lined up towards the roof and Jason has tackled Red Robin to the ground.

The sight inflames the fury that’s been smoldering inside his chest.

It’s been there since Jason got back from the dead, a heat to squash the cold in him left from when Jason died to begin with.

He’s charging over to attack Jason – to save Tim from him, again – when the floor shudders violently… when it begins to crack and crumble.

A circle forms in the center of the warehouse, where the floor is starting to give way, and it makes Dick have to skid to a halt to avoid falling into the abyss himself.

Looking up frantically, he gets eyes on Tim and Jason – and freezes.

Jason’s hooked something to Tim’s back and is firing a grappling line from it – using it to drag the both of them out of the danger zone.

Jason is… he’s saving Tim.

He really is proactively trying his best to save him.
Really. Because the winch is hooked to Tim, not Jason… so… if something happens…

*Tim* will be okay.

If something happens… like they don’t make it to safety before the floor falls out from under them… Jason’s made sure that Tim will be okay.

It’s not the Red Hood doing that, not the Red Hood as Dick knows him…

But it *is* the Jason he knew.

Which makes the fact that the floor *does* fall out from underneath them all the more distressing. And makes the time it takes to circle around to where their wire is curled over the lip of the cave feel absolutely excruciating.

And makes Tim’s scream as the Red Hood falls absolutely heart breaking.

Dick frantically shouts Tim’s name as he makes it to the edge, and Tim looks up to reply hoarsely, “I’m fine, ‘Wing.”

It’s not laced with any resentment for having been a major part of what put him under house arrest and suicide watch, it’s an honest assessment of his current status.

It’s Red Robin’s ‘work voice’. So it’s probably worth trusting.

But Dick won’t be able to truly let it go until he’s got Tim wrapped in a hug and can test for injuries himself – preferably *away* from the worst of whatever’s going on here.

And edge of desperation pushes into Tim’s voice as he explains, “Red Hood. He… he fell. We have— we have to go after him!”

“We will,” Dick promises, and he means it – means it more than he’s meant a lot of what he’s promised Tim this past year, if he’s honest. He hates himself for realizing how that’s true, but it *is* and he reaffirms, “We will; I *swear*, we will. But first we have to get you up here and then regroup with Batgirl and Arsenal and the others. Something’s not right here.”

The stress he’s been under lately shows itself as a bit of *Tim* breaks through *Red Robin* as he protests, “No! He fell ‘Wing! He fell to save me and I am *not* just going to leave him down there to face whatever it is all alone.”
Pulling his gaze up from staring after where Jason fell, Tim begins attempting to saw through the cable that lifting him up to safety with a batarang.

Dick has never been so angry and so proud of him at once, not of Tim, anyway.

Jason provoked the feeling a few times.

And actually, thinking of Jason while he’s this mix of proud and scared and angry makes Dick think maybe Steph was on to something when she said that maybe… maybe Jason hurts Tim because he’s worried and scared and he lets his reactions to those feelings get out of control.

Because Dick is going to strangle Tim when he gets his hands on him.

And then Tim gives up sawing.

Jams the Batarang into the winch itself, and then fires a massive pulse of electricity.

Dick’s standing close enough to the cable to get a smarting shock to the foot that makes him jerk back involuntarily – meaning that the pulse Tim felt must have nearly knocked him out cold. When he looks back at Tim, he’s free of the winch, and is currently maneuvering himself around to hanging on with one hand.

Dick knows what’s coming, and he hates the idea.

“Tim, no! We’ll get Hood, I promise, but right now, we need to go.”

“Sorry, ‘Wing,” Tim shouts back through clenched teeth. “I can’t do that.”

Dick hovers over him, fretting and with half a mind to dive down himself to follow.

Tim glances back up at him with the slightest look of a small, sad smile on his face – like he knows exactly what Dick is thinking, and like he’s genuinely sorry for what he’s about to do…

About the fact that he has to do it alone.

Because Dick can’t follow.

He doesn’t have a cape at all, let alone one that could provide the kind of lift needed to act like a parachute or even a glider.

His Nightwing get up is pure streamlined jumpsuit, designed to let him maneuver through the
air like a fish through water. And Dick is not light or dainty. He knows how to play with gravity and flit through the air like he’s got a bloodline claim to rule over the skies, but it’s a facsimile of dominion. Gravity’s constant pull is one he’s intimately familiar with – one he knows far better than to test blindly.

Dick can’t see much in the hazy abyss, but he can tell that there’s nothing much to throw a life line out to hold onto… and Dick would need to find a place to grab or submit to going splat.

Tim confirms Dick’s initial assumption of his inability to follow, explaining, “There’s nothing for a line to attach to down here, and the fall is at least three stories, probably more.”

It’s frustrating.

That frustration gets easier to bear as Tim suggests that, were there a vaguely survivable possibility for Dick to follow, he wouldn’t object to having Dick along to help – and that notion is cemented when he requests an alternative by saying, “Don’t follow me without at least one of the others to spot you from up top. Try to find us a way out from below ground! I’ve got a com in, so unless we end up in a ten foot thick lead box, Oracle will be able to get through to us.”

It makes Dick feel slightly better, but really, it only makes him feel slightly less awful.

“Timmy, please don’t do this,” Dick pleads, pained and helpless.

“Sorry, Dick,” Tim tells him, genuinely apologetic – gaze turned upwards to ensure that Dick can feel how much he truly means his words. “I have to.”

Dick shrieks Tim’s name one last time as he falls, steps as close as he can get to the edge without tumbling down himself – very nearly too close – and then fires a line up to the hole in the roof as the False Facers reorganize enough to start firing their guns with actual targets in their sights while the dust begins to settle.

Amid a spray of bullets, Dick follows Steph’s trail up to the rooftop.

One catches him in the thigh at just the wrong angle, and it stings as it rips through the weakest point on the armor tech covering his skin. It’s just a glancing blow, but it’s still a supersonic projectile. Another hits his shoulder, but that one is in the right spot for his armor to withstand – it’ll bruise, but not so severely he won’t be able to move naturally in the morning.

Once he’s arrived on the roof, more or less unharmed, Dick turns his attention to Steph and Arsenal – still working to free her of the device Jason used to hoist her up.

They get the catch to release a moment after Dick arrives, while he’s catching Stephanie up on what happened to Tim and Jason.

She’s pissed, but unsurprised by Tim’s choice.
“We have any leads on how to get down to them from here?”

“I’m working on it,” Oracle tells them over a shared com line. “Damian, and Cass have their hands full with a ridiculous number of goons from Scarecrow. Bruce is en route.”

Steph and Dick nod, though neither thinks Barbara is wasting the time or screen space to watch them, and then Steph mentions, “Arsenal says that Jason thinks Scarecrow and Black Mask are working together again – trying specifically to trap us Bats.”

“Noted, I’ll inform the others,” Oracle acknowledges. There’s the staccato sound of rapid typing, and then Oracle adds, “And I’ve got Red Robin’s location. He’s pretty deep, but his signal is clear. I don’t have vitals on him, but he’s moving – heading… north, it looks like. There should be a way to access the tunnel system about a dozen blocks from here. You’ll have to get in by blowing through the tunnel roof, but the entry point is on an empty lot and the way down shouldn’t be blocked by any utilities or anything. I’ll ping you the coordinates.”

“Thanks, Oracle,” Dick and Steph say in unison.

Arsenal is looking at them with a raised eyebrow and when he notices that their posture has dropped out of the tense listening to Oracle on coms stance, he shakes his head.

“You know, if I didn’t have first hand experience with the lady on the other end of the line you Bats have got running, I swear, I would think y’all are some weird, quasi-religious order,” Arsenal sighs.

Batgirl cracks a smile. “Nothing is True. Everything is Permitted?”

“Except killing, which is what that whole Order is pretty much based on,” Nightwing retorts with his own grin, “But other than that… yeah, pretty much.”

Arsenal shakes his head again.

“Don’t you guys have daylight lives? How do you people even have time to play that?”

Nightwing shrugs while Batgirl snorts and replies, “I’m in high school, I need something to keep my braincells alive during study hall and certain classes.”

It’s a fair point.

Dick and Steph have never been the brainy ones, not like Tim and Babs and Jason, but they’ve each had their fair share of boring classes.

Arsenal seems to agree, because he lets it go with one last quirk of his grin.

Then he sober and asks, “So, we got any leads on chasing down the two idiots in the underground? Hood cut his com, and without an active line, the gps I’ve got available is pretty bare bones. I can probably find him within a few blocks, but it ain’t no grape fruit from space.”
“Oracle’s got Tim’s com locked down to the inch,” Nightwing explains with a nod.

“We’re just waiting on the gps ping,” Batgirl adds – heavy, but hopeful.

The next half minute passes in tense silence.

Then, finally, Steph and Dick both get a beep in their ear and a blinking light on their gauntlets that announce the arrival of new data. They’re already moving before they even flick open the wrist computers to display their holographic maps with their newly marked waypoints.

“Actual video game,” Arsenal huffs under his breath, “You frickin asshats live in an actual god damn video game.”

“Jealous?” Batgirl barks with aloof confidence.

“Damn straight,” Arsenal returns. “Even Ollie never has toys quite that fun. You know, if this whole thing with Jason coming back to the family doesn’t work out, can I take his spot? Like I don’t even care if you guys are total douchebags to me, that shit is awesome.”

“It’ll work,” Steph says, humor failing. “It’ll definitely work.”

Dick agrees with the humorless tone, but he’s still uncertain of the content of the claim.

He wants to agree, though, more than he ever has when the topic has come up before.

It’s an odd sensation and he’s not sure he wants to think about it right now, not least of all because it’s distracting, and he needs to focus in order to get to Tim and Jason before they get hurt or none of his concerns will have any real meaning.

The others seem to agree with the silent thought and they all fall into quiet as they move stealthily across the night touched skyline towards the marker that should be Tim’s com – passing ahead of it to the empty lot with the best chance for them to get down into the tunnel system on a direct route. According to Oracle, the tunnels bump up in elevation here, so all they need to do is blow through the roof and jump a single story down.

It takes a long few minutes to set the charges, to get enough of them laid and to put them in the right places to ensure that they’ll break all the way through to the tunnels below – even when they’re using Arsenal’s specialty mix of supercharged explosives.

But once they’re all down, and the heroes have retreated to a safe distance, it’s just a tense few seconds of rapid beeping and then boom.

Dick jumps before the dust has cleared enough for them to even be certain that the blast did what it was supposed to and successfully cut entirely through the surface layer.

He lands in the thick of a very one sided battle: Red Robin and Red Hood versus at least fifty
False Facers – and he joins right in to help even the odds.

As Dick helps pound back the False Facers to give Tim and Jason a bit of breathing room to regroup in, Jason shocks Dick by sniping lightly, “You’re late, Dickface.”

There’s no real heat behind it.

It’s just teasing to cover up the relief… like their banter from the old days when Jason was still Robin and they were all moderately happy and confident they would continue to be so.

Dick doesn’t laugh, but his voice feels light in his chest as he responds, “Yeah, well, you two are not exactly the easiest people to find.”

Jason does laugh.

It’s biting and acerbic, but it’s a laugh, and one that’s back filled by true amusement. He grapples with a goon, getting the guy’s feet out from under him and bowling him towards a trio of others as he says, “The endless hordes of goons that keep finding us seem to think otherwise.”

“I always knew you could be one of the popular kids if you just applied yourself a little,” Dick teases, still not quite laughing, but with a significant smile spreading on his face as his electrified escrima sticks make short work of half a dozen False Facers, “All you had to do was pull your nose out of those books for five minutes. Little Red could do it, too.”

A snort from Jason is matched by one from Tim, who’s panting heavily but able to fend off a goon with a nerve strike as he says, “But then I’d have to talk to people. In high school. It’s just not a disappointment worth the effort.”

That pulls a true laugh out of Dick, bright and unexpectedly full.

“You never know, Baby Bird,” he rags lightly, “You might like them.”

“Nah, think I’m good.”

A red arrow embeds itself in the shoulder of a goon by Jason and, just a beat later, Arsenal drops down beside Jason and knocks an elbow affectionately with Jason’s shoulder as he retrieves his arrow – to the great dismay of the downed victim – and the turns to fire on another attacker. “Are you guys always this chatty during fights like this? I mean, I knew Jaybird had a mouth on him, but this kinda seems like a weird Robin thing to me now that I’m seein’ y’all together. Like a regular box of songbirds, you lot are.”

A swish of purple falling out of the sky on Tim’s injured side announces Batgirl’s arrival.
before she cackles and answers Arsenal’s comment with confirmation. “It’s actually part of the job
description,” she explains, “Right there next to the part about how you’re not allowed to drive the
Batmobile, or detour from Patrol for snacks.”

Another snort from Tim, and another goon gets dropped to writhe on the ground in pain as
the kid says, “Nobody ever listens to the last two.”

Agreeing, Jason adds, “I dunno why they’re even in there at this point.”

“So then why the bleedin’ hell do ya listen to the first bit?” Arsenal asks, exasperated as he
smacks a goon across the face with the broadside of his bow.

The four Robins in attendance all grin, and in perfectly unplanned unison, they all answer,
“Because it’s fun.”

It’s the truest thing Dick has said in months and it feels good to know with absolute certainty
that he and the others agree completely on it.

After that, they fall into a focused, productive hush – broken only by the sounds of fighting
and the odd shout of warning. The Robins, especially, don’t need words to communicate their
actions most of the time.

It’s remarkable.

It feels… good.

Really good. Feels like he’s fighting with his Little Wing again – though not so little
anymore. Jason’s massive and he makes excellent use of his size during the fight. Dick’s seen, and
felt, the truth of that skill far too often while fighting against it, but in fighting with it… he can feel the
stylistic elements of Jason’s personalized technique – can identify the aspects of all of them that stem
from his time training as Robin.

It’s easy, after that, so easy, to just forget all of the angst and strife between them for a little
while and fight back to back like nothing’s changed.

Dick knows he won’t be permitted to forget for long, knows that there are still things that he
is not okay with regarding Jason, regarding Red Hood… but it’s too tempting an urge to resist while
he can just let go of all that hurt and hate and angry sorrow.

It will probably make the moment when he has to remember and work through the angst of it
all hurt that much more, but… but Dick can’t bring himself to care right now.
Right now, the only thing that matters is the present moment.

What matters is that he’s fighting side by side with his little brother.

With two of his little brothers, and his little sister – the four of them working together effortlessly, like the Family they are supposed to be.

Even Arsenal’s presence helps with that. Dick gets Arsenal, understands how to work with him and sees first hand how easily he adapts to work with the Bats. Dick knows him well enough; they worked together briefly in Young Justice before Red Arrow went rogue enough to become Arsenal the Outlaw, so they can read each other’s moves with a certain confidence.

But it’s quite clear that Arsenal is easiest with Jay, and it’s largely because of his connection to Jason that he can work with the others so easily at all, but even with regards to Jason, Roy Harper is… not a Robin.

He doesn’t move with them like they’re all part of the same creature, limbs on a body working in perfect, honed coordination that goes far deeper than conscious thought.

They are Robins.

They’re not family because of the blood in their veins.

They’re Family because of the blood they’ve lost in battle beside each other, because of the blood, sweat, and tears they’ve wrung out of themselves in training together, fighting together, and living for the same goal – even when they don’t agree on every issue, they all agree on the reasons they do this, the reasons why it’s still worth it after everything…

What matters is that they’re Family, and always would be no matter the strife between them or the struggles to find balance between acceptance and accountability.

The rest can be forgotten. At least for a little while…

_ _ _ _ _ _ _
just for tonight, forget who we are ( forget who we’re supposed to be )

Chapter End Notes

Poor birdies!

And sadly, things are gonna get a lot worse before they get better... but these sweet, stubborn, stupid little birds ARE making progress! Slow progress is still progress and according to that almond milk commercial 'progress is perfect', so YAY!

NEXT TIME: Jason feels the pressure of a time crunch. He knows his ability to fit in with the group is limited, and it's inevitable that his control will eventually erode away completely.

So it's the Run for the Roses, and Star Wars Day, sooooo:
May the Fourth be with you, and the Odds be Kind.

^_~<3
we're always (out of time)

Chapter Summary

If Jason knows anything, it's that any blip of happiness he gets to feel is gonna be brief, so when he realizes that this /thing/ he's got going - working with Tim and Steph and Dick and Roy - is a pretty damn good thing, he also realizes that it isn't gonna last long.

He starts feeling the pressure of the time crunch as the fight drags on against the Rogues, and he quickly gets more and more desperate to end the battle before he loses his cool and ruins everything again.

Chapter Notes

Well, it was a helluva race and the most dramatic resolution to a Derby day that I've ever seen first-hand, so, all in all, a pretty good day.

In other news, the semester is ending and finals are looming, but don't worry, I'll still be able to get at least one chapter of this posted every week!

Now then, this is one of my very favorite chapters in this story and it's a pretty angsty ride for poor Jason. The good thing is that Jay recognizes that not everything he's thinking is helpful or rational. The bad thing is that his conclusions are almost entirely based on worst-case scenario bases... But progress is made!

Warning: cliffhanger. It's not as bad as some I've given you, but it is pretty abrupt... like middle of an argument, jarring full stop, cut to black, abrupt... but nobody's in direct or immediate peril, not exactly, anyway...

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Four – we're always (out of time)

When Nightwing, Batgirl, and Arsenal arrive, and the tide of the fight begins to turn, Jason feels the confidence of certain victory settle over him.

It's a good thing they've got goin’ here, a really good thing.
Jason loses himself in it totally – embracing it as thoroughly as he possibly can and basking in the wonder of it… because he knows that he’s not the kind of lucky that would ever mean he’d be allowed to keep this feeling for very long.

He gets about ten minutes.

He gets ten whole minutes to enjoy it.

He even gets almost three minutes after they win to feel the soaring heights of the high.

Technically, speaking, they haven’t won.

Roman Sionis himself is still at large, but all the False Facers they were facing down have been subdued and secured – made ready and waiting for GCPD pick up.

There’s time then for assessment, for taking inventory – for checking up on injuries, and the extent of exhaustion – before they consider moving to help Batman, Robin, and Black Bat deal with Scarecrow.

It’s good.

Dick’s got his arm around Jason’s shoulders – the other’s wrapped around Tim – and they have just a few minutes to banter and breathe.

And then Oracle tells the three former Robins still inside the loop, speaking directly through the coms in their ears, that Black Bat, Batman, and Robin need immediate back up – and Jason remembers that he doesn’t belong.

He stays with them, keeps fighting beside them, and even keeping feeling the glow that being so firmly connected to someone else can breed – but the shine is dulled a little as they battle against Scarecrow’s almost zombified underlings.

Jason knows that the time he’s got left to enjoy this is limited, very limited, so he works very hard to keep pushing down the whispers in the back of his mind that keep explaining how he doesn’t deserve to have any of this – to enjoy it at all, regardless of how briefly.

It almost works, for a while.

But Jason’s not one of them, and sometimes that’s helpful, because he’s the only one who spots the exact moment when Sionis and Crane figure out that the tipping point has been reached – that the trap to split the Bats up, to scatter them and then overwhelm them with numbers, and confusion inducing chemicals, has failed.

The pair make a subtle dash to get out of dodge and Jason sees them slink off.

He breaks off from the main battle with the underlings to follow them.
Tim does too, but Jason doesn’t notice that until it’s way too late to keep the kid from following him, to even keep him out of the action.

Kid just pops up, all of a sudden, yanking Jason back by the collar of his shirt – hauling him out of the way of some sort of sandbag projectile and nearly getting himself shot through the skull by Jason’s blind retaliation.

The gut reaction is predictable enough for Tim to block it, but he has to use his bo staff with his weak shoulder to hold Jason’s aim off. It only takes a second for Jason to course correct, but it’s long enough to aggravate the injury – and Jason can feel the joint crunch awkwardly as Tim deflects his gun arm.

“S’rry,” Jason grunts.

Tim nods to acknowledge it, but he turns quickly back to the battle at hand.

The fight with Black Mask and Scarecrow, working back to back again with Red Robin, feels different than the first half of the night – when it was just the two of them in a sea of goons.

It feels… it feels like the hourglass is running out, and he’s grasping at the sand with bare fingers… or like the timer’s tickin’ down, closer and closer and closer to the inevitable blow up…

The feeling makes him twitchy.

And as the brawl heads up to the low rooftops of a self-storage warehouse facility, it makes him vicious. Black Mask and Scarecrow are stickin’ close together, for reasons Jason doesn’t want to have to look into in the morning, and even with Red Robin’s help, the pair of them together are a nasty fight to fend off.

Collateral damage becomes less and less relevant.

Grenades get lobbed with less care, with a touch of intentional disregard.

A few empty buildings going down is always better than letting Scarecrow and Black Mask get anything accomplished on their agendas.

It gets to a point that Red Robin grabs his elbow and yanks hard enough to make swivel around to face the idiot. “Hood, take it easier,” Red Robin chastises – sounding beat and scared and just about ready to drop. “We’re gonna bring the whole complex down at this rate.”

“Maybe that’s the point, Replacement,” Jason growls, feeling that itch of the hourglass tugging at him stronger than ever.

If they don’t get this done before Red Robin’s strength gives out entirely, Roman Sionis and
Jonathon Crane will get away again… they’ll be free to cause even more trouble, ruin even more lives. And with the itch of an hourglass, the ache of not belonging rears up again.

Jason told Red Robin that he wouldn’t put any effort into attempting to kill anyone else tonight, but if that’s the only way to keep these fuckers contained…

Like little Red can read his god damn mind, the idiot gets all up in Jason’s space.

“Hood, please,” the Replacement sighs imploringly, “Don’t kill them.”

Jason has to grab his shoulder and roll them both out of the way of a volley of fire launched by Sionis in the brief reprieve of the heroes’ assault.

“It’s not gonna be up to me pretty soon here,” Jason growls as they find their feet again and resume the charge.

“It’s always up to you, Hood,” Red Robin huffs, “And every single time you choose not to kill someone is a point in your column. I wanna help you, Hood, but I need you to help me do it.”

“I never asked for your help, Replacement,” Jason snarls right back, adding viciously, “I don’t need it, and I don’t want it.”

“I know,” Red Robin admits, “I know you don’t need it… and I know… I know you don’t want it… but still… Hood… If you’d just let me…”

Jason’s saved from having to respond as Crane and Sionis rush them.

It’s a brutal back and forth for a moment, with Sionis showing off every drop of that hyper developed mercenary training he’s got.

And then Crane splits off, seemingly attempts to make a break for it – and Jason’s gun is on his back in the same second that it’s turned.

He’s firing as he gets a heel under Blackie’s boot.

And he’s yanking the drug lord off balance as his shot should hit its mark – but instead of Crane’s pained yelp he hears a bit off grunt from Red Robin.

Jason can’t look until after he’s got Sionis on his back, until he’s struck the back of his skull with his pistol grip hard enough to crack the black helmet, and after he’s managed to jab a patch of sedative onto a sliver of exposed skin… until after Red Robin joins him in attempting to secure Black Mask’s wrists and ankles together with heavy duty zip ties.

Until Red Robin’s there nursing a bullet to the shoulder and pretending it’s a scratch from some earlier scuffle and not that he just jumped in front of Jason’s gun to protect a scumbag’s life at the risk of his own.
Until Red Robin’s shoving that hurt shoulder into Jason’s gut to knock him out of the way of another one of Scarecrow’s nasty ass sand bags.

Until Red Hood and Red Robin turn a united front against Scarecrow and the skeevy mother bangs off a hissing flash of fear gas bombs – all spitting a substance too thick and heavy to be considered true gas… A spray of chemicals that Red Robin jumps in front of to bodily intercept and prevent them from hitting Red Hood.

Red Hood doesn’t get a chance to react to the blatant idiocy directly as Scarecrow turns tail and attempts to scamper off – with Red Robin chasing close behind.

He does manage to snarl, “You didn’t need to do that, shithead, my Hood’s got filters for that junk and now we’ve gotta worry about you goin’ all fear crazy on us in the middle of a fight.”

Red Robin pauses a beat before he answers – a beat that Red Hood doesn’t understand and doesn’t care to – before he protests, “My cowl’s got heavy duty filters, too.”

Red Hood merely answers with an inarticulate grumble as Red Robin presses on, “As long as I don’t get anything in my mouth directly, which I didn’t, I’ll be fine. And your helmet currently has a pretty big crack in the casing – big enough to let the liquid screw with the electronics, at least, even if none of it could get inside directly to affect you.”

With a very serious disbelief that Red Robin isn’t terribly concerned about the idea of the fear gas having been potentially able to send Hood off on a killing spree spiral of fear gas crazed hysteria, Jason squints at the kid’s back and grinds his teeth together to keep from screaming about his recklessness as they chase Crane.

He manages the feat, if only just.

The kid is quick, even injured, and Jason is distracted, so Red Robin manages to stay a few strides ahead of him in the chase – manages to bodily block another sand bag attack from smacking into Jason’s chest.

This sand bag explodes with the chemical cocktail that Scarecrow’s reputation is made out of on impact with Red Robin’s back.

The secondary explosion sends Red Robin careening into Red Hood, who barely succeeds in catching him without resulting in them both toppling off the roof. Before their balance is fully righted, Jason’s got his gun sights fixed on Scarecrow’s back… finger just about to squeeze the trigger… just about to drop that psycho into the comfy respite of a six foot hole in the ground – a far quicker end than he deserves, honestly – when Red Robin pops up in his way.

This time, it can’t be played off as an accident.
This time, it’s clear that Red Robin is standing between Jason and the bullet he’s got slated to smash through Scarecrow’s skull.

“Move,” Hood snarls, reaching viciously to shove the idiot Replacement out of the way.

“No,” Red Robin protests. He resists Jason’s physical efforts to move him, ducking under one hand and out of reach while keep his body firmly in the way of a bullet’s trajectory.

“Damn it, Replacement,” Jason roars with waves of vitriol crashing over him, “He’s gonna get away.”

“You’re not aiming for his legs,” the idiot says, shouting right back at Jason, “You’re aiming to blow his brains out, Hood, and I can’t let you do that. I can’t. You know I can’t.”

“I know that if you try to justify letting that psycho run free, I’mma blow your brains out instead of his,” Red Hood threatens viciously, snatching again to grab at Red Robin’s shoulder.

He lands a hold this time, and he feels Red Robin shudder as he holsters his weapon.

“I would rather have you kill me than to just stand by and let you kill him,” Red Robin explains, dead serious with every softly spoken word cached in firm resolve.

It makes something in Jason crack.

His hold on Red Robin shifts. His hand fists roughly in the fabric at Red Robin’s collar and he swings the moron out over the abyss above a drop down to the blacker than black pavement and grime of street level – the kid’s heels caught on the lip of the roof are all that keep him from swinging free and he’s completely at the mercy of Jason’s grip on his collar.

“How does your dying to protect a scumbag help anyone, asshole?” Jason viciously accuses, “Aren’t you supposed to be a hero? Aren’t you supposed to save people? Letting that scumbag Scarecrow go free ain’t savin’ anybody, and you damn well know the stats on it.”

“I’m trying to save you,” Tim admits weakly.

He’s shaking in Jason’s hold – though it’s almost difficult to tell that he’s trembling in his own right with how thoroughly pronounced it is that Jason’s hold itself is quaking.

Either way, this feels like the final countdown… like the timer’s running out on them completely and the urgent beeping of the last ten seconds starts to rachet up the pressure. Jason is of half a mind to just let it go preemptively… to just drop his Replacement off the roof, and then cut and run in the way he wanted to before this mess got rolling downhill to start with.

If he runs hard enough, if he doesn’t take a single second to look back at what he’s losing, maybe this time he’ll manage to escape the blast…
But if he runs, if he runs like this, the god damn Baby Bird will die.

Even if he somehow catches himself here and goes on to fight another day, he’s gonna get himself killed eventually, just as certainly as sunrise.

And that tragedy’ll hit the headlines far sooner than later.

“You can’t save me, Replacement,” Jason grits out, “You ain’t got nothin’ left to save, and you go no right to go dyin’ on account of some shithead delusion you got of me. I don’t need any help, and certainly don’t want any of yours. You can’t even keep your dumbass self alive.”

Tim flinches hard at that, but he doesn’t break eye contact with Jason.

His gaze is so clear, so potent, that even with the Hood between them – and the thickly filtered lenses of both their dominoes adding further barricade – it seems like Tim is staring straight through him, right down to whatever husk of a black backed soul keeps his body movin’.

“You’re right, I don’t deserve it. I shouldn’t be the person who helps you see that you’re still one of the good guys,” Tim says, still limp in Jason’s hold – not even trying to grab onto Jason’s arm himself to keep himself from falling if Jason decides to let go. “But I am the only person in Gotham that you can’t scare off from trying, or piss off enough to stop wanting to.”

Jason’s grip tightens until his knuckles go white.

“You can’t help anyone if you’re dead,” Jason howls, shaking Tim so roughly that his heels kick free of the roof’s edge.

He hangs above the drop suspended exclusively by Jason’s less than friendly hold on his collar. Finally, his hand comes up to hold Jason’s wrist and root himself to relative safety, but it’s still only one hand and the grip he’s got is too weak to catch him if Jason lets go.

“Why aren’t you trying to catch yourself, idiot?”

“I don’t need to catch myself, Hood,” Tim pants, the exertion catching up to him from the fight and trying to talk while all his muscles are being held so taught and tense. “You got me.”

Teeth bared behind his helmet, Jason retorts, “And if I let go? Ain’t no one here gonna be fast enough to save you if you drop.”

A distant wheeze makes it into the peripheries of Jason’s conscious awareness – a whine of protest being kept as silent as possible, but too emotive to contain… It brings a slow alertness to him of the fact that Scarecrow is long gone, but he and Red Robin are not alone on the roof.
He’d noticed the arrival of Nightwing and Batgirl and Arsenal, on some level.

But it was not a conscious awareness until right then, until that moment when he takes a breath to look at them in his peripheries – to track how tense Batgirl and Nightwing are as they flit about the far edges of where a mid-range weapon could reach...

Jason has to side eye Arsenal, who’s standing tensely with his bow drawn and ready – aimed to keep the Bats where they are under threat of immediate impalement. They’re a hair trigger away from an all out brawl, and this one won’t be something they could ever all manage to walk away from with naught much bruised but egos…

Unlike the last spat between them all in the Cave, this brawl, if it comes to a full on fight, will spill a whole lot of blood.

The breath Jason took to skim over the newcomers to the roof extends as he starts to hold the air in… tensing up dramatically when Black Bat and Robin and Batman himself touch down silently on the rooftop.

The silence holds for a brief eternity.

And then it breaks like a rogue wave.

“**Hood.**”

Jason whips his gun out and yanks Red Robin around in the same motion – hammer back, trigger finger tense, and barrel tip pressed against the Baby Bird’s temple.

“**Don’t. Even,**” Jason snarls. “**I will shoot him.**”

In the same second, Tim growls, “Shove off, Batman. Your being here is **not helpful.**”

The sound of his voice is just as vicious as anything Jason’s ever spat at Bruce, and Tim manages to add another layer of biting vitriol as he adds, “Nightwing, I have everything under control, and I do **not** need you to ruin it. Again. If you wanna help, **stand down.**”

Tim’s words **cow** them.

Batman and Nightwing **both** actually **flinch.**
An odd niggle of… of pride, pinches at the inside of Jason’s lungs. And the fleeting memory of Black Bat’s hint that Tim can bully the biggest players in the game rears up – along with a flit of distraction as he mentally confirms that he damn well likes the look of how the Baby Bird can bash about inside their heads with nothing more than bitter words.

It’s… different, and distracting… and if circumstances were at all unlike they are, Jason would find himself utterly derailed by the new awareness of the Replacement’s most intriguing skill set to date. He’d find himself eager to learn more about what else the Baby Bird’s picked up.

But the pressure of the current moment is too much to let his mind wander far.

And B doesn’t let the clear blow that landed hard against a few deep wounds at the impact of Red Robin’s words stop him from saying, “This situation is not under control, Tim.”

Jason shudders violently at the name – so violently, he’s surprised he doesn’t pull the trigger and blow the kid’s brains out accidentally.

He surprised by how relieved he is that he doesn’t… well, no. Not surprised, not anymore… He’s invested in the kid’s survival… invested even more so because the idiot isn’t invested in that goal at all himself. And at this point, Jason’s bitingly aware of that investment.

And he’s relieved enough he didn’t pull the trigger, and anxious enough about a possible repeat of the inciting cause of the near miss, to tip his weapon’s barrel up and away slightly, so that an accidental pull won’t instantly kill the tiny, defenseless asshole he’s holding hostage.

It’s still close enough to kill him if Jason chooses to, but only if he chooses to.

That security is enough for him to calm, slightly – to force air out of his lungs:

“Code. Names.”

His grunted demand is not a singular voice – Arsenal threw his words in the ring, too.

And so did Red Robin.

Hesitation ripples through the others that Jason can see – a confused, surprised, or possibly even fearful pause that rocks Nightwing and Batgirl and even Robin back onto their heels… and makes Jason realize that he’s lost track of Black Bat.

The heel of a palm strikes his elbow before he can track the ninja girl down, and in the same motion he’s being spun around with a rough grip on his hand than makes him relinquish his hold on both Red Robin and his gun.
The gun skitters across the roof and Red Robin tumbles into ‘Wing and BG as Jason wrestles himself free and draws a pair of fresh weapons from his pockets – one in either hand, cocked and aimed at Black Bat and Robin, in turn, with his back to the skyline.

His glare is leveled right at Batman.

“Scarecrow escaped,” Batman reports to nobody who cares.

“That ain’t my fault,” Jason defends instinctively. “Your little Red Robin won that pot.”

“I take full responsibility for that,” Tim announces forcefully, righting himself and ripping away from the desperate hold that Batgirl and Nightwing have on his scrawny frame.

“Not the point,” Jason growls, and is shocked when Batman’s growled complaint of Red Robin’s contribution mirrors his own sentiments exactly.

Their full, aggressively focused attention – diverted briefly to Red Robin when he’d piped up uselessly like the little reckless idiot he is – returns to glaring daggers at each other from across the dead silent shadows of the rooftop.

The artificial crackle of a low, humming static intentionally induced on a speaker eases into the moment as Oracle breaks the new silence.

“Okay, everybody,” she says, using that school teacher type of chastising firmness in her tone, “Let’s all just calm down a little.”

Her instruction isn’t met with any movement, or any agreement, for that matter – but even so, the tension in the air does ease off a bit… like they all took a single deep breath to get themselves re-centered. It’s… helpful, Jason supposes.

His trigger fingers feel a bit less twitchy, at least.

The tip of Robin’s katana lowers a hair, and ‘Wings escrima sticks fall back to his sides.

Arsenal keeps his pair of arrows knocked, but he reduces the tension primed within his drawn back bow string.

Batman and Batgirl remain tense, hands likely fisted tightly around their weapons under the effective cover of their capes, but Black Bat drops into a cross legged seat on the rooftop – forcing Jason’s hand to drop substantially as he makes to keep his aim on her.
Red Robin’s hands are trembling fists at his sides, but he keeps them low and drifts outward from the center of the group to join the circle as Oracle’s little kumbaya fest gets goin’.

“Alright, that’s better,” Oracle sighs, still tense, but definitely relieved. “Now, let’s sort out a little of what’s happening here, okay? Make sure everybody’s on the same page.”

The silence feels a touch thicker, but no one voices any protest.

“Red Hood and Red Robin have been working together as an effective team on this for the last several hours,” Oracle intones, with the bland authority of an outside observer. “At Red Robin’s request, Hood has restrained himself from killing throughout the duration of their current partnership.”

Jason facial muscles flinch slightly at the word ‘partnership’, but thankfully it’s a reaction entirely hidden by his Hood.

Yet another tick mark in the ‘good plan’ column he’s got running for it.

“Hood’s agreement to avoid killing seems to have held until just moments ago, until Scarecrow’s escape of custody tonight became fairly inevitable,” Oracle goes on, “At that point, Red Robin interceded to prevent Hood from murdering Jonathan Crane, and Hood apparently turned his focus onto Red Robin.”

“It’s the Lazarus Pit, isn’t it?” Nightwing asks immediately, his conclusion clearly forgone. But… his voice sounds bizarrely… sad, rather than biting or accusatory for once.

“It’s not,” Jason snaps – in the same second that Red Robin shouts the same retort.

“Either answer vastly over simplifies things,” Oracle barks, amping up the chastisement in her tone to shut down the brewing argument before it implodes. “I think it might be a good idea to hear an explanation from Hood, himself, here… Ja— Just tell us why, exactly why, you’re currently so mad at Red Robin. Please.”

Jason noticed her little almost slip with his name as she implored him to answer, and he noticed that she corrected herself immediately – before she’d even finished speaking that first syllable, in fact…

The movement of Tim’s chest heaving up and down in an immediate sigh of relief that Oracle managed to keep on with the code names thing diverts his attention long enough for the roiling ache inside the wave of fear and fury and too-well remembered pain to wash back off the beach before he speaks.

“I’m pissed at the little birdy because he didn’t just let Scarecrow get away, he jumped in front of a god damn bullet to save the bastard,” Jason spits, eyes narrowing in a cutting glare that the kid can’t see, but flinches like he can feel.
Jason doesn’t know why he volunteered the information so easily.

And he doesn’t quite understand the pained pause that follows once his words hit the air.

But he does recognize the flare up of venom that comes with facing the root cause of what is wrong with everything that’s ever happened to him here in Gotham… with facing Batman head on… with feeling the bite of accusations when the damn vigilante’s been working this town since Jason was a god damn toddler and yet all these scumbags are still left breathing… left more than just breathing.

When the worst of the worst are allowed to keep existing… then that alone gives them implicit permission to go on killing and maiming and violating people, gives them a god damn Bat Brand endorsement to just continue on with ruining lives… even crap lives like Jason’s from before he’d ever met Bruce had been repeatedly worsened by the ongoing presence of Gotham’s most vicious criminals, because Batman won’t put the scumbags down like the dogs they are…

As the vitriol builds inside Jason’s thoughts, and as he identifies the true crux of his current fury, Jason changes gears.

He pulls his gun off of Robin – the kid has a katana, but even with it, he’s not nearly as dangerous as an unarmed Black Bat – and aims it right at the downward curve of Batman’s signature scowl. At the weakest point in his armor, right around the divot of his chin.

“You got this damn kid so wholly indoctrinated with this No Killing crap you spout about your ‘golden rule’ and the ‘moral high ground’ that the idiot you let replace me jumped in front of a bullet, B… he jumped in front of a bullet to save Scarecrow, frickin Scarecrow,” Jason growls vehemently, nearing on hysterics. “Your little birdie nearly got himself killed just because you made him believe that ‘we Bats are better than brutes with back alley justice’.”

He crows the imitations in insult, but a piece of him at the very back of his brain is suddenly acutely aware – and deeply embarrassed – that he said ‘we Bats’ like it was nothing. Like it was true. Like it never wasn’t true.

“Tim’s the one who proved it to me,” Batman says, eventually. “Tim’s the one who made it into a creed instead of just a moral platitude. I can’t count the times he’s stopped me from being what he considers ‘excessively brutal’. Tim made his own choice, Jason. No matter how poorly you think of my teaching methods, you must know that much about your old friend. Tim makes his own choices, for his own reasons. And you know he always has, Jason.”

Jason can’t reflect on the way his voice has gone quiet, contemplative… the way it’s gone all twisty, pained, and sad, because the phantom of Batman saying Tim’s name… of saying his name is too overwhelming to his psyche… too pinched and purpled and painted in the memory of another
phantom, a different, but never very distant ghost… a chemically induced hallucination, asking him to just say Batman’s real name out loud – asking and asking and asking, and using jabs and kicks and crowbars to drive the question home…

The gun goes off without Jason’s awareness – it’s not even the bang that wakes him up, but the echo of a grunt as Batman reacts involuntarily to the new bruise beneath his ceramics and Kevlar. The swirl of awful that made Jason pull the trigger at all knocked his aim off substantially, and the gunshot hit right where Batman’s thick armor could easily protect him, but the shock of how involuntary it was makes Jason drop the weapon like it’s a white hot poker.

No one moves or speaks, or even breathes, for a long moment after that.

“I don’t wanna hear, your excuses, B,” Jason pants out eventually, words squeezed in tight bursts of air through clenched teeth. “You shouldn’t have let him be alone. He shouldn’t be in a position where he’s even able to make such shit for brains decisions.”

“He is his own person, to take away his free will… would be as damaging as if we simply ignored him if he asked for help,” Batman returns, sounding… almost… defeated.

“You had him on a god damn suicide watch, didn’t you?” Jason rails, arms swinging wildly in a gesture of absolute abandon. He winds up with the gun he’s still got in his off hand aimed squarely at the Bat symbol emblazoned on B’s chest. “How’s that for free will? How’s that a moment when free will should even be considered?”

“You’re right.”

Jason almost shoots him again out of pure shock.

“I should never have put him under such close scrutiny,” B admits, startlingly open and sounding almost human. “And allowing for that lapse of judgement, I should never have allowed the rigors of that guard to go lax. It was my decision that pushed him away. It was my history of decisions that pushed him away… like it pushed you.”

The only reason Jason doesn’t empty his clip into Batman at that bull shit is that Black Bat makes her presence known again, leaping up and disarming Jason with the ease of having surprised him when he was already beyond off balance.

She grapples with him until his chest hits the roof, and the guns are kicked firmly away, but she only pins him long enough to skim over his pockets to get rid of any other side surprises he might have left on him still tucked away.

Once he’s thoroughly disarmed, the knee on his back lets up.
He drags himself into position to push upright, and twists his head in search of Tim – suddenly needing to see that ridiculous little bird brain’s reaction to all this to just prove to himself somehow that it’s all actually happening…

Jason’s suddenly pretty open to the idea that he got hit in the head at some point and the last twenty minutes here have all been a helluva fever dream as his body breaks down and dies. Again.

Before he can sink into that familiar spiral, he notices that he’s still looking for Tim – that he hasn’t let landed his gaze on the bright red uniform of the idiot bird.

He’s circled the roof more than twice now in looking – twice since he’s been counting, probably a few times more before any conscious awareness of not finding his target bubbled up.

Cursing as he leaps to his feet – a sudden, aggressive motion that startles everyone on the roof, Jason looks further across the night’s back lit skyline in search of the asshole.

Not finding him, and feeling the mounting pressure of wary stares around him, Jason asks with no small touch of desperation, “Where the fuck did that god damn idiot go now?”

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we’re always out of time ( i didn’t wanna be here )

Chapter End Notes

Poor widdle Jay-birddie... He tries so frickin’ hard at everything...

NEXT TIME: Tim’s view of the fight as he gets a face full of fear gas, and his sneaky escape after the chemicals start to take direct effect... and a nice long look at the desperately unhealthy thought processes that keep Timmy teetering on the edge of outright psychosis...

I love these people, I promise. I know I hurt them, but I will always wrangle the universe into giving them a happy ending... eventually.

^_^
say that you (can see me)

Chapter Summary

Tim's view of the fight as he gets a face full of Fear Gas and tries to salvage what he's built as everything about his original plan falls apart around him.

Chapter Notes

I've got a nice long one for you here! So much sweet, sweet angst from poor little Timmy...^_~

FYI, I'm again playing a bit fast and loose with canon in this one, particularly with the order of events in how Jason gets back to the States (and onto the Bats' radar) after coming back from the Pit, but it's nothing too wild and crazy.

Once again, Timmy's thought processes here are deeply unhealthy. But on the upside, there's not really a cliff hanger to hang on to here, things actually end on a rather calm beat.

^_~<3
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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty Five – say that you (can see me)

Fighting back to back with Red Hood… with Jason, feels good.

It feels good when it’s just them in an inescapable sea of goons without back up.

It feels good when it’s them with the aid of Nightwing, Batgirl, and Arsenal.

And it even feels good when it’s back to just Tim and Jason again, facing off against Black Mask and Scarecrow in the midst of their last ditch effort to escape.
Tim can tell that Jason’s antsy, unhelpfully antsy, right from the moment they split off to chase the ringleaders. And that feeling only builds as the chase continues.

Jason starts getting more aggressive.

The pointed and directed violence becomes more destructive.

Collateral damage becomes less and less relevant.

Grenades get lobbed with less care, and the idea of a few buildings collapsing out from under them becomes more plausible than not.

Jason’s playing the odds, and while he might know exactly what he’s doing, Tim is not a fan of the exact tolerances he’s established.

It gets to a point that Red Robin grabs his elbow and yanks hard enough to make them swivel around to stand face to face. “Hood, take it easier,” Red Robin chastises. “We’re gonna bring the whole complex down at this rate.”

“Maybe that’s the point, Replacement,” Jason growls, wrenching away from Tim’s hold.

Jason’s agitation is only growing, he’s anxious and desperate to keep the Rogues from escaping – by any means necessary, it seems. Tim knows it’s nothing words could fix, but he knows he wouldn’t ever be able to forgive himself for not even trying.

Dodging around to put himself back inside Jason’s personal space, to block the bulk of Jason’s field of view, Tim begs, “Hood, please. Don’t kill them.”

With Tim entirely focused on trying to get through to Jason’s heroic sensibilities, he fails to notice the launch of an attack by Sionis in the brief reprieve of the heroes’ assault. Jason has to grab his shoulder and roll them both out of the way of the brutal volley of gunfire.

“It’s not gonna be up to me pretty soon here,” Jason growls as they find their feet again and resume the charge.

It squeezes Tim’s heart to think that Jason feels so dissociated with his choices; that he can’t take pride in his good decisions because his bad ones don’t feel like decisions, at all.

“It’s always up to you, Hood,” Tim promises, “And every single time you choose not to kill someone is a point in your column. I wanna help you, Hood, but I need you to help me do it.”

“I never asked for your help, Replacement,” Jason snarls right back, adding viciously, “I don’t need it, and I don’t want it.”

It only stings because it’s partly true. Mostly true, even…

His help, in particular, is something Jason has very little incentive to accept.

But Tim’s the only one still trying to help him and Tim won’t let the world give up on Jason – even if it seems like Jason’s given up on himself.
“I know,” Tim admits in broken, overly emotive fragments, “I know you don’t need it… and I know… I know you don’t want it… but still… Hood… If you’d just let me…”

He just wants to show Jason himself how much good Jason still has inside him, to show everyone, and convince them all of what he can see so clearly.

Tim’s useless ramble is cut off as Crane and Sionis rush them.

With the exhaustion already hanging heavy on his bones, the assault is a brutal string of near misses and barely successful counter strikes.

Even Jason’s indomitable endurance is waning, his strength clearly flagging in a way that grates against his anxieties about letting the Rogues escape.

Tim sees the moment when he decides to let go and give into the Pit’s whispers and rely on instinct to move his muscles through the motions of the fight. It happens in the same second that Crane splits off to try for his own independent escape – and Jason realizes that drastic action is the only way to keep him from getting away successfully.

Jason’s gun is aimed at Scarecrow’s back in the same second the Rogue turns tail.

He’s firing even as most of his attention is on getting the upper hand in grappling with Black Mask – running on pure instinct.

Tim is too, but his instincts have him positioned to block Jason’s shot.

The bullet hurts like hell on impact with his shoulder, but his armor does its job decently enough and blocks the worst of it.

It makes him lock up for a moment, joints froze and muscles seizing, but soon enough he’s there to help Jason secure Black Mask for GCPD pick up and then they both turn to chase down Scarecrow – who’s mad dash for freedom hasn’t gotten him quite far enough away to evade the dogged Bats.

The heroes manage to gain enough ground to make Scarecrow nervous.

He launches a volley of explosive, chemical laced sand bags at the duo pursuing him and Tim throws himself bodily to block the hit from impacting Jason.

He’s whirled around to resume the chase before Jason manages to drum up a reaction, snarling, “You didn’t need to do that, shithead, my Hood’s got filters for that junk and now we’ve gotta worry about you goin’ all fear crazy on us in the middle of a fight.”

Choosing his words as carefully as he can, given the circumstances, Tim pants out, “My cowl’s got heavy duty filters, too.”

Red Hood merely answers with an inarticulate grumble as Red Robin presses on, “As long as I don’t get anything in my mouth directly, which I didn’t, I’ll be fine. And your helmet currently has
a pretty big crack in the casing – big enough to let the liquid screw with the electronics, at least, even if none of it could get inside directly to affect you.”

It’s a lie.

On most counts.

He did get some in his mouth.

And even if he didn’t, the chemical could seep into his bloodstream through the plethora of gaping flesh wounds he’s got exposed to open air.

But he’s reasonably certain that he can stave off a reaction for as long as he needs to.

And it’s always better that he get hit by liquid fear than any of the others.

Especially Jason.

Tim’s brain can handle the chemicals better than most, and with just how much horror Jason has already lived through, how much true terror he’s suffered, it would be torturous for him to be subjected to an encore performance inside what should be the safety of his own head.

It’s something Tim refuses to allow to happen if he has any say in the matter whatsoever.

Keenly aware that he’s now working on a very delicate balance of near insanity and exhaustion, Red Robin pushes on as fast as he can to attempt to secure Scarecrow before Jason gives up entirely on the idea of capturing him alive.

In staying a few strides ahead of Hood in the chase, Red Robin manages to bodily block another sand bag attack from smacking into Jason’s chest.

This sand bag explodes with the chemical cocktail that Scarecrow’s reputation is made out of on impact with Red Robin’s back.

The secondary explosion sends Red Robin careening into Red Hood, who barely succeeds in catching him without resulting in them both toppling off the roof. Before their balance is fully righted, Jason’s got his gun sights fixed on Scarecrow’s back – finger just about to squeeze the trigger – when Tim pops up to stand between the barrel and the target.

The shot goes off and Tim’s shoulder takes the brunt of it again, but it’s hard to tell if either of them actually notice that part with any drip of cognizance.

This time, it can’t be played off as an accident.
This time, it’s clear that Red Robin is standing between Jason and the bullet he’s got slated to smash through Scarecrow’s skull.

“Move,” Hood snarls, reaching viciously to shove Tim out of the way.

“No,” Red Robin protests. He resists Jason’s physical efforts to move him, ducking under one hand and out of reach while keeping his body firmly in the way of a bullet’s trajectory.

“Damn it, Replacement,” Jason roars, “He’s gonna get away.”

“You’re not aiming for his legs,” Tim shouts desperately, “You’re aiming to blow his brains out, Hood, and I can’t let you do that. I can’t. You know I can’t.”

“I know that if you try to justify letting that psycho run free, I’mma blow your brains out instead of his,” Red Hood threatens viciously, snatching again to grab at Red Robin’s shoulder.

He lands a hold this time and Tim shudders from the wave of white hot pain that streaks through him as Jason’s grip tightens on the injury of both his earlier bullet strikes.

“I would rather have you kill me than to just stand by and let you kill him,” Red Robin explains, pushing through the pain to make it clear that he is deadly serious.

Tim can feel that his words make something inside Jason crack.

He can’t tell what shifts, or how, or if it’s even a good thing or a bad one, but Tim can feel the shudder work its way through every one of Jason’s muscles, and can feel his grip begin to tremble. Belatedly, Tim notices that Jason’s put his gun away, has fisted both hands into the fabric at Tim’s collar – and Tim is torn between rejoicing at how Jason’s holstered the gun, and fretting over what raging darkness is going through Jason’s head as he roughly swings Tim out over the side of the rooftop to dangle him over the drop.

If Jason lets go, Tim will fall to street level – too far to survive the impact, but too close to have time for any hope to save himself.

Tim’s heels have caught on the lip of the roof and they are all that keep him from swinging free. He’s completely at the mercy of Jason’s grip on his collar.

Tim’s not sure if it’s his faith in Jason’s true intentions, or if he’s just hit the point of exhaustion and pain induced defensive euphoria, but Tim’s completely calm as Jason rails at him.

“How does your dying to protect a scumbag help anyone, asshole?” Jason viciously accuses, “Aren’t you supposed to be a hero? Aren’t you supposed to save people? Letting that scumbag Scarecrow go free ain’t savin’ anybody, and you damn well know the stats on it.”

“I’m trying to save you,” Tim confesses.
He can feel Jason trembling, and he can feel himself shaking – though it’s unclear whether the reaction is the leading edge of a Fear Gas reaction, the result of another bout of catastrophic blood loss, or even just the culmination of nerves, adrenalin, fear, and excitement.

“You can’t save me, Replacement,” Jason grits out, eventually.

He doesn’t give Tim any room to protest before he pushes onward on the issue, saying venomously, “You ain’t got nothin’ left to save, and you got no right to go dyin’ on account of some shithead delusion you got of me.”

The way Jason sounds so utterly convinced of it makes Tim’s lungs ache.

“I don’t need any help, and certainly don’t want any of yours,” Jason concludes dramatically, adding with pained accusation, “You can’t even keep your dumbass self alive.”

Tim flinches hard at that – feeling the Truth of the accusation ripple through him.

He’s not suited for the roles he’s pushed himself into, he’s never been suited for them.

That much has been true since the very beginning.

But with no one else stepping up, Tim has had to be the one to get things started.

He wants to look away, to hide from the reality of his inadequacy, but he is too determined to keep what little credit he has with Jason to risk breaking eye contact.

Besides, he’s long passed getting over the phase of being too ashamed to admit the truth.

“You’re right, I don’t deserve it. I shouldn’t be the person who helps you see that you’re still one of the good guys,” Tim admits openly, still limp in Jason’s hold. “But I am the only person in Gotham that you can’t scare off from trying, or piss off enough to stop wanting to.”

Jason’s grip tightens, his knuckles must have gone white beneath his gloves and the grip itself has gained a notable tremble against Tim’s jaw.

“You can’t help anyone if you’re dead.” Jason howls after a beat for his brain to process through the rage to wrap his tongue around intelligible words. As he shouts, he shakes Tim so roughly that his heels kick free of the roof’s edge.

Tim hangs above the drop, suspended exclusively by Jason’s hold on his collar. Carefully, his hand comes up to hold Jason’s wrist – only one hand and the grip he’s got is far too weak to catch him if Jason lets him go.

The point isn’t to catch himself, it’s meant to give Jason a reassuring squeeze.

Jason notices the difference, and does not like it.
“Why aren’t you trying to catch yourself, idiot?”

“I don’t need to catch myself, Hood,” Tim pants, the exertion catching up to him from the fight and trying to talk while all his muscles are being held so taught and tense. “You got me.”

Tim has complete faith in the notion.

Jason doesn’t.

“And if I let go?” Jason asks, and with another aggressive shake that rattles Tim’s teeth he adds, “Ain’t no one here gonna be fast enough to save you if you drop.”

A distant wheeze makes it into the peripheries of Tim’s conscious awareness – a whine of protest being kept as silent as possible, but too emotive to contain… It brings a slow alertness to him of the fact that Scarecrow is long gone, but he and Red Hood are not alone on the roof.

He hadn’t noticed the arrival of anyone else on the rooftop – too caught up with managing his own reactions, with pushing down the building blur of Fear Gas, and with trying to humanly connect to Jason…

But sometime in the last few minutes, they’ve been joined on the rooftop by Nightwing, Batgirl, and Arsenal – and all three have weapons drawn and ready, with Arsenal’s aimed at the Bats to keep them from intervening with Tim and Jason.

Tim’s lungs begin to seize as yet more Bats arrive on the roof – Black Bat, Robin, and Batman himself touch down in silent threat.

And then the silent threat gets voiced inside a single, graveled syllable, “Hood.”

Jason whips his gun out and yanks Tim around in the same motion – hammer back, trigger finger tense, and barrel tip pressed against Tim’s temple. His gloved hand in wrapped around Tim’s throat to keep him still and steady, but there’s no real pressure behind it.


Tim can’t even bring himself to care about the threat Jason’s actively posing, or the building intensity of tension in the air that might make Jason shoot him accidentally.

He’s mostly pissed that the others are here to ruin his hard work.

Again.
In the same second as Jason’s announcing a vehement threat to Tim’s life, Tim growls with acerbic vitriol, “Shove off, Batman. Your being here is not helpful.”

He adds a further layer of biting venom, he turns to Dick, saying with the kind of pleading he’s never gotten Dick to listen to, “Nightwing, I have everything under control and I do not need you to ruin it. Again. If you wanna help, stand down.”

There’s a brief moment of pause as the others on the roof digest his words.

And the tone he used to say them.

But then Bruce declares, “This situation is not under control, Tim.”

It’s insulting.

Made worse for the fact that things were under control – well, mostly, under control… enough under control, at least – until the other Bats arrived.

And then there’s the fact that Bruce used Tim’s name.

Something that Tim’s made clear over coms to Oracle is unhelpful, at the moment.

Jason shudders at Tim’s back, and grunts demandingly, “Code. Names.”

Tim and Arsenal speak with him.

While Tim is looking over the others to gauge their reaction, he’s blindsided by a palm strike against Jason’s elbow that effectively disarms him. The motion by Black Bat continues through its arc, spinning Tim out of Jason’s hold and sending him in a tumble across the roof to be caught by Dick and Steph.

Tim struggles to wrestle free of their obnoxiously over-concerned grips, to free himself of even the lightest hands on his arms, and once he finds his feet again, Tim sees that Jason’s drawn a fresh pair of pistols from somewhere. He’s standing with one in either hand, cocked and aimed at Black Bat and Robin in turn – the two in the midst of moving to flank him threateningly while his back is to the skyline.

Jason’s glare is leveled right at Batman.

“Scarecrow escaped,” Batman reports, unhelpfully.
“That ain’t my fault,” Jason defends. “Your little Red Robin won that pot.”

“I take full responsibility for that,” Tim announces forcefully, attempting to sound confident in the assertion that it was a conscious decision.

“Not the point.”

Bruce and Jason speak as one – startling almost everyone.

Even Tim is a bit surprised, but… tragically, the irony suits the situation.

Because, of course, the first thing that Bruce and Jason agree on after four years of actively throwing blows over misunderstandings and ideological impasses is that Tim is being ridiculous. Not like they’ve got any credit on that front, or anything. No, those two knuckleheads haven’t been stupidly stubborn or intrusive or pig headed or terrible role models lately…

Yeah. Clearly.

Tim is the only one being ridiculous here.

The artificial crackle of a low, humming static intentionally induced on a speaker eases into the moment as Oracle breaks the new silence.

“Okay, everybody,” she says, using that school teacher type of chastising firmness in her tone, “Let’s all just calm down a little.”

It works. Sorta.

Well enough to make it a bit easier to breathe.

“Alright, that’s better,” Oracle sighs, still tense, but definitely relieved. “Now, let’s sort out a little of what’s happening here, okay? Make sure everybody’s on the same page.”

The silence feels a touch thicker, but no one voices any protest.

“Red Hood and Red Robin have been working together as an effective team on this for the last several hours,” Oracle intones, with the bland authority of an outside observer. “At Red Robin’s request, Hood has restrained himself from killing throughout the duration of their current partnership.”
Tim flinches at the straightforward characterization of their temporary team-up as a ‘partnership’, certain that Jason’s got his teeth bared behind his Hood at the implication.

Fortunately, Jason doesn’t make an overt reaction.

“Hood’s agreement to avoid killing seems to have held until just moments ago, until Scarecrow’s escape of custody tonight became fairly inevitable,” Oracle goes on, “At that point, Red Robin interceded to prevent Hood from murdering Jonathan Crane, and Hood apparently turned his focus onto Red Robin.”

“It’s the Lazarus Pit, isn’t it?” Nightwing asks immediately, assuming like the asshole he is that Jason’s simply cracked again and has fallen into complete irrationality.

“It’s not,” Jason and Tim protest at once.

Before the fight can break, Oracles barks, “Either answer vastly over simplifies things.”

As they settle down again under her chastening, she adds, “I think it might be a good idea to hear an explanation from Hood, himself, here... Ja— Just tell us why, exactly why, you’re currently so mad at Red Robin. Please.”

Tim understands the slip with Jason’s name.

It’s hard not to say it when trying to connect with the person they need to believe is still hidden underneath the Hood.

His chest heaves with relief as Oracle manages to stop herself from saying his whole name, cutting herself off and almost seamlessly transitioning to a different phrasing.

Jason seems to respect the effort, too.

With relatively little resistance, and only minimal spite, Jason volunteers, “I’m pissed at the little birdy because he didn’t just let Scarecrow get away, he jumped in front of a god damn bullet to save the bastard.”

Tim flinches because the accusation, and the anger and hate and fear behind it, is all valid and reasonable, and Tim completely deserves it.

And worse than that, the double dosing of Fear Gas he got whammied with is starting to make Tim see shadows in the shapes he knows.

He doesn’t deserve to defend himself in this case, and in his evolving condition… he doesn’t
think he’d be able to mount a reasonable defense – one that sounds even remotely sane.

Not that these people would listen to him even if he had the ability to sound sane.

Jason and Bruce continue exchanging vitriolic barbs, creating a spectacle of themselves that keeps the attention of the others rooted to them.

It means that Tim has a window of escape.

He can’t be here right now.

If the drug in his system makes him speak out of turn, if the others notice how truly he has disregarded his own safety, if they realize that he knows how right they are about the fact that he’s not even qualified to keep himself alive… If they confront him on it…

He can’t handle it… not all of them together, not all at once.

And his tenuous grip on control is slipping fast.

So, while Jason and Bruce have everyone distracted, Tim slinks away.

He drifts down to street level and breathes in the ache of the sudden quiet.

With a stride he knows is not half as steady as he wants it to be, Tim makes his way across the city, boots firmly in the grit of Gotham’s on the ground grime.

The city isn’t silent around him, Gotham never is, but he experiences the distant cacophony of a living, breathing, bleeding city through soft focus and a focal adjustment that breeds warm bursts of lens flare to halo all the street lights.

It’s… a pleasant disassociation with blunt reality.

Like walking through a snow shower… or the shark tank tunnel in an aquarium… everything is just as real as ever, but it’s all different, somehow. Less… immediate.

Impersonal in a way that makes breathing easier.
Tim gets back to Jason’s safe house in one piece, with no idea how long it took him to get here or why he chose here to begin with… but since he is already here, he slips inside and makes for the workstation Jason’s got set up in his bedroom.

He doesn’t turn the room’s over head light on, he just taps the computer into wakefulness and then slots himself into the space beside the specialized CPU tucked under the desk’s tabletop. He just barely fits with his knees curled up tight to his chest and his cape wrapped close around him as his hurt shoulder leans into the warmth of the computer.

The heat and the hum and the close quarters coax him into a half-asleep doze – the closest thing to comfortable he could hope to get while riding out the fear gas.

He’s not reacting badly, not compared to how the others would take it.

But he is reacting.

It’s less mental for him, like always, more purely physiological.

Tim’s heart rate is elevated, and his limbs are all shaky and numb, but mentally… he’s okay. Ish. His worst fears… well, they’ve all been realized already, so it not much of a shock to go through the terror again – he’s learned how to pack it all away and deal, to make the emotive response affect as little as possible in order to obtain the best possible outcome of a terrible situation. He already knows the truth of everything the shadows would say to him – accusing him of being worthless and inadequate and a danger to everyone he cares for…

He tells himself much worse on a daily basis.

It’s fine.

It’s all true, and Tim is dealing with it, and nothing that the shadows might say can scare him any more than his usual reality does.

He just needs a little extra time when he’s been dosed, a little extra calm and quiet.

It’s fine.

It is.

And Tim’ll be fine.

Just not quite yet.
It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay…

This is just a setback.

Oracle is on his side in this, she’ll be able to smooth things over enough to give Tim some room to work with when he comes down from this and manages to pull himself together. It’s possible they may even make progress.

Without Tim’s meddling, they’d never have gotten started on this road, but now that he’s not the only one pushing for it… maybe it is better for him to back off. He seems to keep causing more problems than he solves, after all, and getting him to stand down is the first time that Jason and Bruce have agreed about since Jason got back…

Maybe he should just… disappear for a while.

When he comes down from this… maybe he should just step back a bit and let things happen as they will without him… Now, that the ball is really rolling, his pigheaded input isn’t strictly necessary anymore. Not in the way that it was before anyone else got on board.

Maybe it is time for him to just let go.

To leave while things are going moderately well so that he doesn’t mess any of it up…

He would have faded away on his own if it hadn’t been for all the things that Tim felt compelled to speak up about – without an active issue to make a fuss over… he could just slip into the background and vanish into the scenery.

He’d done it often enough before.

It’s how he’d managed to start up with stalking the Bats to begin with.

Tim was only noticed, only seen when he spoke up and demanded the attention.

He’d been his mother’s little darling at business dinners, the perfect child with exemplary manners and a perfect embodiment of the ‘seen not heard’ viewpoint of children.

He’d been the teacher’s pet when it suited him, affording him significant leeway with the need to turn in homework or prove he’s been paying attention in lectures.

Even as Robin and Red Robin, he only mattered when he made himself relevant. If he didn’t actively pursue his own involvement, he would’ve been left behind a hundred times over.
It was only with Jason… only with Jason that Tim didn’t just immediately slip out of everyone’s thoughts when he stayed quiet for a few beats too long.

Jason saw him.

He’d caught Tim in stalking the Bats – not until after they’d been introduced under duress and it had been exposed that Tim went out at night to snap photos of them, but still…

Jason had found Tim in the shadows of Gotham’s skyline and seen him.

There had even been a couple of nights… moments that sometimes Tim’s afraid he just dreamed up in a spasm of lonely desperation (because his track record with hallucinations is not one that bodes well for such incredible encounters being genuine)... but a couple of nights when Jason split off from Batman… when Robin strolled the skyline alone and when he made sure to call Tim out on his stalkery – made sure to invite him into a real conversation.

I can see you, little bird, he’d say – whistling a light tune as he swaggered down the elegant cornice of one of Gotham’s skyscrapers. Speak up now, or I’ll send you straight home.

If Tim didn’t admit to being there, Jason would hang back – wait until Tim got distracted and then knock him out to deliver him back to his bed without Tim being able to protest.

If Tim did speak up, Jason would join him on the roof – would sit and chat and then walk him home like they were friends or something.

I see you, little bird, he’d say. I see you squirming, trying to keep whatever’s going on in your big brain from gettin’ to your mouth. I see you, baby bird, and I’m listenin’, so speak up.

And with Jason Tim found he actually could.

He could volunteer opinions, even negative opinions – something profoundly forbidden whenever his mother was present, to the point that it had become an almost pathological habit in Tim to just stay quiet when he felt any smidge of dissent.

But Jason saw him, and asked him to speak up… and Tim could.

Around Jason, Tim could speak up – could be a real person in his own right, instead of simply an accessory to his parents, or just a body to fulfill a scripted role.

Around Jason, Tim was just Tim.
It was different, it was special… and it made everything about what’s happened since Jason died hurt all the more profoundly.

Tim knew that it was Jason the very first time the Red Hood popped up in the caped community’s peripheries… when he’d first come back to the States and made a splash by attacking Titans’ Tower.

*I see you, little bird,* the man had crooned – tone soft and teasing to make the contrast with the warpath bloodlust of his actions even more unnerving. *You can’t hide from me.*

Tim doesn’t think Jason realized he’d given his identity away so thoroughly when he’d said that – thinks Jason didn’t even realize he was speaking out loud for most of it.

But that’s how most of Tim’s supposed ‘genius’ works: people hand him information without realizing it and then seem shocked when he retains those hints and secret answers.

The very first attack had been brief, just enough to put everyone on alert when the Red Hood picked Tim’s *civvie clad* figure out of a crowd on a busy California street.

Even then, Jason saw him – when, for anyone else, Tim would’ve been invisible while hidden among the average citizenry.

That first attack was just a bruising, more meant for shock and awe than any legitimate bash for rapid, indelible dominance.

*That* came the day after, when the Titans were gathered up and all on high alert, all cloistered defensively together inside their Tower… when Jason had systematically disabled each of them, one at a time, until Tim was the only one left.

He took his time in trying to scare Tim, but the only reason Tim was trembling was the shock of having it confirmed that Jason was really back. He used the little bird line again, and the slant to his body language was right, and Tim even managed to get a finger of his gauntlet to scrape against the sliver of skin between Jason’s Hood and his collar (managed to scrape a sample of skin and blood up inside the specialized fingertip to provide himself with concrete confirmation when he ran the tests on a secret server wired to his phone while he was still stuck in recovery from the near death experience).

Tim had thought he was hallucinating again when Jason had first found him on the streets, spent an entire 24 hours debating with himself over whether or not to remit himself from Titan leadership because he’d well and truly cracked.

But was Tim *not* crazy.
Jason was back.

Jason was alive again, somehow, and he was back.

He wanted to kill Tim, but that was… well, not excusable, exactly, but there were Reasons… solid Reasons, for it. The important part was that he’d come back.

Tim had kept that little fact to himself for a while. (Even after running the DNA test.)

He’d run home to Gotham like the scared little bunny everyone always thought he was, but Jason hadn’t been fooled. Even After… Jason saw him.

The Red Hood started more proactively consolidating the power he’d already begun to accrue within Crime Alley and established himself as a viable crime lord. He didn’t actively target Tim again for several months – because he knew Tim would be ready to counter him… because he saw Tim more clearly than Bruce or Dick ever could.

When Jason did attack again, he hadn’t used the little bird line.

But that time, Tim saw it coming, and that time, he’d been able to see how Jason moved – how he’d grown into a frame built like a tank, but still moved like the rough and tumble scamp in pixie boots Tim that had tangoed with on Gotham’s rooftops as a dumb little kid.

That was around the time Bruce figured it out.

Got his own DNA sample to test and retest.

He’d kept it quiet, but Dick hadn’t been far behind in figuring.

The day after Tim woke up in the Cave’s med bay after barely surviving the second attempt on his life made by the Red Hood, it was quasi-official news that Jason was back from the dead and going out at night as the murderous Red Hood.

Tripping up on painkillers, Tim had hallucinated a conversation with Jason that night.

He hadn’t done it in a while.

The night between the first contact and the first real attempt on his life hardly counted, and, prior to that, he hadn’t had a run of phantom conversations since before he’d gotten some security in his role as Robin – some tangible results and case files closed entirely on his own merit. That time
between when he’d first muscled his way into the pixie boots and when he’d felt almost confident in his ability to perform to par had been rough – and there had been more than a few sleep deprived, pain killer prompted conversations with his still-dead idol.

But he’d gotten that under control. Sorta.

And after Jason had come back, after he had really come back and his identity was proven beyond doubt… the hallucinations just sort of stopped for Tim.

He hasn’t thought about it in a while, hasn’t had time.

The brief blips of worry from earlier this evening when Jason showed up in unexpected moments after Tim had been sure that he’d chased Jason off were the first his thoughts had fully turned that way since the Red Hood’s real identity was officially revealed.

A couple years ago at this point…

But still, his thoughts had already turned towards the probability of a hallucination twice in the last 24 hours, so he’d honestly been primed for it… and with a double dose of Fear Gas, and all the exhaustion of the stress and over work of the last few weeks… Tim’s hardly surprised when a hallucination shows up in front of him.

It’s definitely a hallucination.

Tim didn’t hear anyone come inside – into the apartment or into the bedroom. Jason simply appears in the center of the room between blinks.

And Jason looks too different from how he did on the roof where Tim last saw him to possibly be real… He’s not bleeding, at all, for one thing. But he’s also wearing a totally different outfit – simple black sweats, a gray t-shirt, and a red hoodie that all look like they’ve been worn soft with time and loving use, and like they have not been through any kind of scrimmage lately.

So, it’s not Jason who sits down on the floor by Jason’s bed, with one leg kicked out flat in front of him, and the other pitched up as an armrest. But that’s okay.

It’s not Jason who leans his head back against the mattress and stares at Tim from across the room and says with aching softness, “I see you, little bird. Speak up if you see me.”

It’s not really Jason, but still… Tim had promised himself… every time he snuck out to find Jason after he’d got it in his head that Jason could see him.
Every time he’d staked out a rooftop in hopes of seeing Robin on his own… Say that you can see me, he’d beg the Universe mentally – needing the constant reaffirmation that Jason even could… But if he did… Say that you can see me, and I’ll speak up… I swear.

Jason saw him as a person, wanted him to see himself as one. So he’d promised…

And now, even though it’s just a Phantom of his own overwrought imagination, Tim feels the deep seeded urge to respond claw up in throat in a raspy whisper, “I see you.”

Jason nods slowly. “Alright,” he mutters, “Good.”

And then they fall silent – comfortable in a way that could only be achieved within the company of one’s own inner demons becoming outside shadows.

It’s probably the nicest way Tim could imagine to ride out the rest of this trip and he almost smiles as he curls up tighter against the humming CPU. He keeps his heavy-lidded eyes slit open in the dark and watches Jason breathe.

It’s not the real Jason, but it’s a reminder that the real one is still really alive and still breathing out there somewhere, and the imitation Tim’s brain has summoned up is a close enough comparison to make the reminder truly comforting.

They fall silent, and Tim settles in completely to wait it out.

Using the act of watching Jason’s muscled chest rise and fall in a slow, calm pattern to keep his meditational focus fixated on a good thought instead of any of the darker ones, Tim makes himself breathe too.

It makes sitting in the quiet of the room and the aching of the drug more pleasant than a lot of things he’s done this month.

Tim’s not really sure what that says about him or about his lifestyle choices, but that is a question to ask after the fear gas filters out of his system.

For now, Tim just embraces the calm.

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say that you can see me ( i'll speak up, i swear )

Chapter End Notes

Ah, poor, sweet little TimTam...

Also, the events of Jason's return that Tim skims over here will be pretty thoroughly fleshed out in a few chapters of /Red Rising/ when I eventually get around to working on that story. That one is heavy in a way that's hard to work with and still be functional in the real world, so the hiatus will last a while longer, but I am working on it when I get a lucky two days in a row where I don't have to be a person, so I swear I will post more eventually!

NEXT TIME: Steph's view of the debacle on the rooftop before Timmy disappears, and a little more of what happens up there afterwards. (Honestly, it's one of my top five chapters in this story, so I'm QUITE excited to put it up for y'all).

^_~<3
we were made (out on these streets)

Chapter Summary

Steph's view of the tension show down on the roof with everyone, and enough of what happens after Tim flees for her to start recognizing directly that things have to change for them, /all/ of them.

(And her insights on the things already HAVE changed)

Chapter Notes

Posting early because, like I said, I love this chapter.

Steph is awesome.
And her observations are deeply important for how things are going to start moving for the rest of them.

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty Six - we were made (out on these streets)

When they catch up to Tim and Jason after those two morons break off to chase the ringleaders of this little fiasco… it’s clear that something’s changed between them.

Not a good something.

When they’d first run off, Steph was of half a mind to tease her idiot ex about running off from a party to get it on with the hot asshole who crashed the gig – because holly hell did those two flirt like drunk frat boys, just constant, man, constant.

But… while they’d been all working together like they had… she’d forgotten the little insignificant detail about how Jason wasn’t quite one of the good guys yet… not officially.

And there was a damn good Reason for that…
When Steph and Dick and Roy catch up… Jason’s got Tim held up over a two story drop – hands fisted at the idiot’s collar and grip shaking like holding him up is an effort he won’t be able to maintain much longer. And he’s screaming at the dumb ass – who probably deserves it…

Jason’s threatening to kill the stupid kid… Again.

The sight of it happening right in front of him nearly makes Dick collapse outright.

But then it makes him draw his weapons and tense his muscles to attack.

Arsenal reacts to that immediately – drawing his bow, with two arrows nocked and aimed at each of the Bats. His harsh whisper about staying right the fuck where they are is only enough to keep them rooted because they’re both too worried about startling Jason into dropping Tim accidentally to really want to make a move… It’s just too risky.

Arsenal probably knows that, is probably only threatening them to make sure they remember that point of risk, but still, being threatened at arrow point, makes Steph curl herself into her cape and carefully latch her hands onto a smoke bomb and razor sharp set of Batarangs.

She wants – needs to be ready… in case things change again.

Which seems likely as the other Bats arrive on the roof.

As Black Bat, Robin, and Batman himself touch down silently on the grimy slap of tarmac roofing, the tension in the air ratchets up by doubles as Jason’s peripheral gaze visibly shifts and skims over each of them in turn. The pause holds for a moment – almost long enough for Jason’s attention to drift back to the idiot he’s holding over almost certain death.

And then B – obviously, being that he’s an established, branded, and copyrighted Bathole™ – has to push. He just says the second half of Jason’s code name, but it’s enough.

Jason swings Tim around, putting his feet back on the roof and a cocked gun to his head.

Everyone takes an involuntary step forward – except for Bruce, obviously, who’s just as grumpily statuesque as ever, with great black folds of fabric falling around him like the Greek masterworks (that she’s got a test on soon and really has got to study for tomorrow), but B’s got a glowering and grim fury about him instead of ethereal, ecstatic grace…

Steph gets distracted easy.
She knows it.
It’s always been a problem.
But it’s always been kinda handy too.

Because while her thoughts have skittered sideways to the Art History test she’s got later this week… Bruce and Jason have been arguing. Like the *bad* kind of arguing. Like *bad* bad.

The kind of arguing she remembers from overhearing when her parents fought over things like money and work and how maybe the love that their marriage was built on wasn’t quite enough any more despite the tiny human they’d unfairly dragged into the mess of Life…

It’s the kind of arguing that’s desperate and painful and built on good intentions that have warped beyond all reckoning.

Steph’s dad became a super villain because of that kind of arguing.

Jason kinda already *is* one.

Before Steph’s thoughts can start to spiral further, the situation changes again.

Black Bat makes a move.

With her usual, specialty brand of kick-ass *awesome*, Cass gets Jason to drop his gun – *and* to release his hold on Tim.

The last bit sends Tim careening into Steph and Dick – who successfully manage to catch him and immediately start checking him over for what injuries they can while he struggles to escape their frightened and less than perfectly gentle hold.

Tim’s not in good shape.

Like, he wasn’t in good shape when this shit *started*, but now… the fact that he manages to get back on his feet and wrench himself away from them is… well, unsurprising for *Tim*, but pretty much super human for anyone else.

Jason and Bruce go back to arguing.

Steph still doesn’t listen.

It hurts too much to listen.

Steph doesn’t even *like* Jason.
Well, she doesn’t really *know* him, but since she doesn’t really *want* to, it’s kind of beside the point. Jason keeps trying to kill the boy that Steph still kinda loves, and he keeps driving tornadoes of chaos through the fragile little house of cards Family that Steph has found… the Family that she was finally, *finally, finally* starting to feel like she had a proper place in…

Jason is the worst kind of homewrecker, too, because he doesn’t even *mean* to make things so much harder for everyone (well, he *does* mean to piss off Bruce, and has to know that pissed off Bruce definitely makes life pretty sketchy on the bearability front for the rest of them under the Manor’s massive roof, but still…).

She doesn’t *know* Jason, but she *gets* him. Because even though he’s always been an asshole about it, Jason’s been trying to do right – to do right by *Gotham*, at least.

And, honestly, Steph really does *get* what he’s goin’ for – on more days than not, at least.

She is definitely starting to feel that whole warm glow of the moral high ground Bruce and Tim keep goin’ on about, but she’s still from the grubby side of Robbinsville and she still remembers how those god damn playground bullies didn’t get any better when you got them sent to detention… she remembers how they got *worse*, and how they grew up to join the gangs and become the drug dealers that inspired yet more kids to be awful to each other…

She and Jason… in a lot of really important ways, are very similar.

They ain’t the best people.

Jason’s actually a lot smarter than she is, and a lot stronger.

But they’re both stubborn as *hell*.

They both don’t take crap from *anyone*, and they both understand how shitty people can be to each other, even reasonably decent people.

And they both love Tim – she can see it now, truly.

*Jason hates* Tim. But only because he loves the idiot so damn much that everything Tim does that proactively damages himself just about *destroys* Jason.

Steph hates Tim for that, too. But not like Jason does.

It’s not the Lazarus Pit, either. That crap hole complicates things, certainly, makes a lot of Jason’s reactions much more visceral and aggressive and forcefully *compelling*. But the reactions are all Jason. She’d seen as much first hand when they’d had that brief blip of *okay* between them when they were searching Tim’s apartment for his case files on those drug dealers Tim was tailing in New Town.

Jason was okay then, for a while… and then it got exposed that Tim’s been runnin’ a long con game on the Bats (and the Titans, and the god damn *Justice League*) to get Jason back on the official list of ‘good guys’ they’ve got registered. It got exposed that Tim’s doing shit that could land him on a Blacklist so dark, that even Santa Claus doesn’t have to check it twice.
It’s a short list, too – pretty much just Ra’s and Satan, himself, at this point.

And possibly, soon to be, Tim.

Because actively lying to and manipulating the entire system of good guy Organizations responsible for keeping the Universe intact is pretty definitive ‘bad guy’ behavior. Like way bad guy. Like Satan wishes he could pull that shit off.

Let alone to manage it as easily as Tim…

So, yeah. The game Tim’s been runnin’ could land him in some hella hot water.

And Jason did not like that.

And in a classic ‘push peeps away before they leave on their own’ kind of move, Jason bolted out with insults and curses in his wake – and the screaming headache of dealing with every single one of Tim’s ridiculous alarms going off at the same time.

Yeah. That pissed her off a bit.

But not enough to make her forget how easy it was to work with Jason before he got wrapped up in that weird attempt to keep Tim from throwing away his ‘good guy’ status.

And even now… even now, while in the midst of a gut wrenching, screaming mimi, of an argument with the Father figure he’s spent that last few years being actively betrayed by… Jason’s still thinking about Tim more than he’s thinking about himself.

More than Steph has been thinking about Tim, certainly…

Because it’s not Steph, the ex-girlfriend who still loves him (but apparently not enough to hand him everything she is on a platter, or to make him the center of her whole existence), who first notices anything amiss…

And it’s not Dick, the older brother who’d tried to be better for Tim than he had for Jason but had just failed so fucking miserably and has spent the last year or so attempting rather pathetically and desperately to make it up to him, who notices…

And it’s certainly not Bruce, who’s supposed to be Tim’s adoptive father and shit, not to mention that he’s got a mad scary rep for being the greatest detective in the god damn world…

It’s Jason, obviously, who notices that Tim’s gone.
And *that* brings Steph’s attention into clear focus on the present.

Jason’s popped up (from being knocked down again by the epic awesomeness that is Cass at her ninja best), his whole body tense with the kind of fight or flight that ramps the tight and tense pressure to 11, and curses, asking, “Where the *fuck* did that god damn idiot go *now*?”

No one believes Jason enough to look for Tim, at first.

No one, but Steph.

Her heart and stomach sink as one when she can’t find his stupid little figure on the roof – on *any* roof they can seen illuminated on the surrounding skyline.

Tim had slipped away from them.

Again.

Dick’s the next to notice, but he doesn’t quite believe it, muttering, “He was *just* here.”

Bruce actually *emotes* when he realizes it – when he recognizes that while he’s been fighting with Jason over how his own idiocy pushes his children away, he has again proactively pushed a child away. It’s not much, but that twitch in his frown is more than most people (even most of the people on this very roof) have ever managed.

Tim is just *that* special.

Even Cass is frowning like she didn’t notice he’d Houdini-ed himself up outta here.

A string of Spanish curses spews from inside Jason’s helmet, switching to English eventually and culminating in, “God damn *lying asshole* got himself *gassed*.”

Fear Gas.

They’d expected it to be a factor, after all they *were* chasing Scarecrow himself, but they’d forgotten about that bit when being faced with the immediate circumstances of Jason’s current act of threatening Tim’s life. Again.

“He got hit?”

Dick’s question is laced with the strife they all are feeling – and as usual, he’s the only one really able to openly express it.
“He said he didn’t,” Jason snarled, venom directed mostly at himself, “Of course, that stupid moron lied about that shit, why wouldn’t he be honest about anything important? Not like this Family encourages that crap or anything.”

His glare finds Bruce with the weight of blame behind it, but Steph can see that Bruce (and even Dick, from where she’s standing) is more caught up in the fact that Jason just accidentally included himself as part of the Family than with the validity of the accusation.

A burst of static announces Oracle’s intervention again – this one loud enough to startle everyone on the roof out of their fight ready postures.

“He hasn’t taken his com out yet… he’s moving East, Northeast,” she reports.

The dread pulling down Steph’s heart and stomach like a lead weight grows spikes for a moment, but then eases slightly as the reality of the situation solidifies in the back of her brain.

“He’s going back to where he went when he skipped out on us at the Manor,” Steph verbalizes, connecting the dots for the others as her gaze drifts over to Jason.

Who’s standing there stiffer than ever, because he realized it too, but he’s not letting himself be convinced of it. “That ain’t a safe spot,” Jason protests, “He wouldn’t go there if he was legit scared out of his brains. He only went then to try playing pathetic on me.”

And that’s why Steph can forgive Jason, mostly, for having been the asshole who’d somehow won over Tim’s complete trust… Half the reason she’d been pissed at him for it to start with was that he didn’t deserve it – the asshole had tried to kill Tim, after all. (Twice.)

But Jason, gets that.

He knows he doesn’t deserve what Tim’s trying to give him, what’s probably always been his (by rights, in Tim’s head) even without any conscious acknowledgement of it.

“And that’s why Steph can forgive Jason, mostly, for having been the asshole who’d somehow won over Tim’s complete trust… Half the reason she’d been pissed at him for it to start with was that he didn’t deserve it – the asshole had tried to kill Tim, after all. (Twice.)

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“Steph’s right,” Oracle confirms, “He just crossed into Crime Alley.”

Bruce is the first to react to that – all action, all the time, never a second to consider the consequences of any of it… At least, in terms of the emotional impact. He knows that, in straightforward tactics, retrieving Tim is obviously important. Getting Tim to a truly safe space to ride out the prolonged and terrible high of a Fear Gas dosing is a priority.

But Tim’s doing that himself.

And trying to drag him away from whatever little closet or cupboard or god damn air conditioning unit he’s decided to ferret himself away in won’t help him… it’ll hurt, and that’ll hurt everyone as Tim defends himself as best he can – with the biting words and cutthroat accusations only he can manage. It’ll hurt everyone involved, and hurt Tim two-fold for it.

They’ll all regret it.
Jason knows it, too.

He moves to bodily block Bruce’s course. “Na-uh. You ain’t goin’ near that kid.”

“He’s my son, and he’s afraid,” Bruce counters, “I’m not leaving him alone.”

Jason’s fists shake as he holds himself back from launching at Bruce for that, from biting out a valid accusation about how Bruce has been content to leave him alone before – and to leave his other children alone, too.

“He ran off for a reason,” Jason grits back, “And if he’s scared, he’s gonna be just as scared of you as he is of anyone else – more even, because fear gas likes how easily your kids can disappoint you. If you show up, you’re just gonna look like a monster to him. And you know it.”

“We all do,” Dick agrees – shocking everyone by even the oblique alignment with Jason.

“You standards are high, Bruce,” Oracle confirms, insisting, “None of us want to disappoint you and the Fear Gas plays with that. Tim, least of all, can tolerate it. He works himself half to death to live up to your standards when he’s not dosed. When he is…”

“That’s not—”

Steph doesn’t realize she’s choked out the words until the weight of the others staring at her somehow makes her throat open up enough to speak, “That’s not what it is… not for Tim.”

“What do you mean?” Dick asks, truly shocked and stumped – but willing to listen.

“Tim doesn’t… he doesn’t react to fear gas… not the same way the rest of us do,” Steph explains in stilted jolts, “He doesn’t… the way he processes fear isn’t… it’s different. He’s not afraid of disappointing Bruce… because he’s convinced he already has. Convinced he’s already disappointed everyone.”

There’s a pause.

Bruce clearly wants to protest to that, but he also wants to use it to excuse how he still wants to pick Tim up and take him back to the Cave.

Steph has to stop that.

She has to clear her throat before she can speak up again, but she does it.
“But that doesn’t mean we’re not still monsters when he sees us high on Fear Gas,” she insists carefully, “It’s just… different. He… doesn’t fight the way the rest of us do, he just bites back with words, but they hurt, and they last longer than bruises… and it hurts him more to hurt us, especially like that… and he just… he just wants to take care of himself when he gets dosed. Doesn’t wanna be an inconvenience.”

Chewing over the words before she says them, Steph admits to a personal insight she’s not sure Tim would want to have shared – but one she thinks is necessary to help them understand – explaining, “He… he describes it like a headache, like a really bad headache. He just wants everything to be dark and soft and quiet and warm while he rides it out.”

“He can’t be alone, right now,” Dick says, voice creaking with the strain behind it. “He…”

“He can’t be alone, ‘cause he’s a frickin’ suicide risk,” Jason finishes.

“He’s not,” Steph protests weakly, “He’s not. Suicidal, maybe… but tonight, he won’t… he works himself to death on a normal day, but when he’s dosed, he rides it out, safe and quiet.”

With a sigh being restrained, Bruce admits his own, earlier, wrongdoing again, while simultaneously pushing forward another misstep in the present, “I shouldn’t have allowed him to develop that mindset to start with, and I shouldn’t have let him leave the Manor – not when he did, or like he did – but I cannot allow him to remain alone while he is in this condition.”

“It does seem like a good idea to send someone to keep an eye on him, talk him down if he needs it,” Barbara mentions cautiously. “But not you, Bruce.”

“Damn straight,” Jason seconds.

“Then who?” Dick asks, sounding defeated. He knows he’s not on the list either.

He tries not to look at Steph, but a guilty side-eye still makes it over to her.

He won’t ask her to go, he knows the break up between her and Tim is still too raw… but he doesn’t recognize how it serves to make her presence be terribly unhelpful in this situation.

Dick knows it might hurt her, but he definitely still thinks she’s the one who should go.

If Dick can’t, and Bruce definitely shouldn’t… and Steph won’t… Babs?

Maybe. But she’d never get there in time for her presence to be meaningful…

Damian was never even on the list.

There’s Cass… but Cass isn’t much for talking. She is good at the sitting still and being quiet thing. But she’d just be a babysitter, not a true confidant… and he’d feel the difference.
If Tim needs an intervention of any kind, it wouldn’t be a talking down, it’d be a physical prevention – and he’d be just as aware of that fact as Cass would be, and *that* would make him feel like they were treating him like a child to be minded rather than a *brother* to be *saved*.

So… probably a bad idea. No worse than the other options, possibly… but…

“Hood should go,” Steph says suddenly, startling herself.

She apparently interrupted Barbara saying something about Dick and Cass possibly going together… but it doesn’t matter what Babs was suggesting, because as soon as the words hit her tongue, Steph knows it’s absolutely the right call.

Jason.

*It* *has* to be Jason.

“Hood should go,” she says again, more assertively after clearing her through with a rough cough, “Hood’ll be able to talk to him.”

There’s a blink where no one reacts, and then Jason snorts, “You get hit on the head there, Blondie? ‘Cause I dunno *what* jungle juice you drinkin’ but *that* is an absolute *crap* idea.”

“I concur,” Damian says, piping up for the first time that night – words coming in a slow drawl that indicates he’s deep in carefully considered thought.

“See? Even the Demon Brat agrees,” Jason huffs.

“I *mean*,” Damian responds snidely, “I concur with Batgirl: Hood should go.”

The roof is silent for a solid *minute*, at least – Steph is willing to stake her life on it.

“Explain,” Bruce orders – first to recover, as always.

Damian sighs, steps forwards – taking the floor like the demonic little diva he is – and intimates, “Hood has already done the worst to Red Robin that could possibly be done, barring actual execution. Red Robin has nothing left to fear losing from a conversation with him. Hood is the only plausible option if the goal is to get Red Robin to speak at all candidly.”
“Exactly,” Steph affirms.

She does not speak up about the ridiculous flirting thing between duo on Team Red, and she
does not mention how Tim’s confessed to having hallucinated a disappointed Jason at his lowest
moments in the past, how he’s explained that even an angry, disappointed hallucination of Jason
managed to make him willing to pick himself up – she doesn’t mention any of that, but the
understanding that it gives her of how Jason is the best choice, the only choice for someone who will
provide Tim with the most direct comfort, makes it into the vehemence of her tone as she says, “He’ll
let Hood close enough to talk to him… maybe even close enough to listen.”

There’s another pause.

And then Jason spews another string of Spanish expletives, totally nonsensical and over-
dramatic in the obscene department – to the point that it would’ve made Steph cackle madly in
almost any other circumstances.

Then he asks, “Why the fuck ain’t anyone saying that’s a shit idea?”

“Because it’s not,” Roy chimes in.

Arsenal’s bow, and the arrows he had nocked to it, have been returned to his back, and he’s
pealing away his domino as he says, “It’s really not a shit plan, Jay. It makes sense. And they just
don’t like how much sense it makes. Hell, you don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it, because it’s shit,” Jason bites back.

Roy sighs.

“If you wanna get out of here, we can,” Roy offers, adding with a vague gesture to the west,
“We can hit the beach and chill out and get our tans back in time for Fall Fashion Week.”

Jason takes half an unconscious step towards the mechanic, clearly tempted by the offer more
than he can even process, let alone express.

“But,” Roy attaches with a pointed glare, “If I have to listen to you bitch about how you’re
feelin’ guilty for letting that ridiculous little bird brain kick it, I am gonna pelt your ass with coconuts
until your ability to ever sit down again is severely in doubt.”

“He ain’t gonna kick it,” Jason protests, though he’s stopped moving mid-step and he’s
shaking so bad it would be apparent to even the dumbest civilian.

His eyes are still hidden by the Hood, but Steph feels his gaze cut to her in a last ditch effort
for confirmation on the front of Tim’s chances for surviving the night.
“He won’t kill himself tonight,” Steph owns, but she adds with just as much certainty in the notion, “But if he doesn’t let someone talk him into coming home tonight, he’s not gonna have much motivation to keep himself alive tomorrow.”

She nods towards Jason at that, knowing that he has to understand the real risk here – that he’s gotta be able to get it better than the others can.

To Bruce and Dick and even Babs, suicide is an act of desperation – a consciously chosen course when there are no other options that feel bearable.

To Cass and Damian, it’s a ritual. No less conscious, no less distinct a choice, but one weighted with different sorts of costs and consequences.

Steph doesn’t know about Roy, but to her and to Jason… well, it’s pretty obvious that Life is hard enough to just live through on a given day. It’s not hard at all to just stop trying to avoid the things that’ll kill you, it’s hardly even a choice some days.

And Tim’s the kind of idiot at risk for that.

She and Jason might be the only ones that see it clearly, but Tim doesn’t have to kill himself to die. He just has to stop trying to stay alive.

He barely tries at all, as it is.

Jason heaves a sigh. He gets it. He knows.

Just as well as Steph does, Jason knows that Tim cannot be alone to ride this out.

“Putos cerebros de cabra,” Jason hisses under his breath.

Steph holds her breath until her chest feels like it’s about to burst.

Then, finally, he groans, “Fine. I’ll do it.”

Everyone important breathes out in a slow second of relief.

Even Bruce, whose opinion does not matter right now, seems to give a little deflating shudder of exhaled tension.

“I got some sweats in my truck,” Roy mentions as the tension eases in a jerky fit. “And a towel with a jug of water to wipe off the worst of the blood and grime and whatnot. Five minutes out, and I’ll drive you over to the Alley while you change.”
Jason simply nods.

It’s nice that Roy suggested it, as Steph suspects that there’d have been a lot more resistance to the idea if someone else mentioned the need to nab some new threads and possibly a shower, ASAP, to keep the shock factor to a minimum when he goes to talk Tim down.

Tim is one of the only people who knows how Red Hood equates to Jason in his core, but still… Tim wants Jason to talk to him – Jason the person, not Jason the vigilante.

“Black Bat or I should provide discreet assistance,” Damian mentions, adding without prompt, “To ease the consciences of those disallowed to participate directly – either of us could disable Hood should it come to that due to some sort of Pit relapse. And someone should be able to provide Red Robin with a direct means of returning to the Manor.”

“Well… I’mma… If it’s all the same to you… I’m… gonna go study for that Art History test now,” Steph announces awkwardly, trying to dodge off the edge of the roof.

“I— um, I’ll, uh,” Dick stumbles into saying, “I’ll give you a ride. My bike’s just a few blocks over from here.”

Wary, sheepish, and very keen to get out of there, Steph nods.
She follows Dick down to ground level and tries really, really, really hard not to think about how they just kind of left Bruce up there, alone on the roof.

She feels bad about it, but she’s already got way too much to worry about to add the emotionally constipated angst of a dead stick father figure to the list right now.

Steph might be a mature girl for her age, but she’s still just a teenager. And between classes and vigilantism and just trying to keep her head on straight while attempting to be a part of this ridiculous family…

She’ll bake muffins tonight, or something, and then check on Bruce in the afternoon.

He’ll survive until then.

And, honestly, the spiteful little angry bit of her kinda wants to let him stew…

She thinks Dick feels the same.

He at least drives like he does.

It’s good, it clears her head.

Dick stops his bike at the end of the driveway, rolls to an indecisive almost halt.

“I, uh— I think, I should head back out,” Dick says as his feet drag and skitter while they roll, “You know, give a cursory Patrol, at least… Remind the regular criminals that we’re still here and all, maybe make sure the GCPD have everything they need to keep the goons from tonight all locked up tight.”

“Yeah… sounds good,” Steph attempts. Her support for the idea is weak at best, but Dick really just needs permission… He’s antsy, they both are.

And with the Cave only really one room, it’s not exactly a place to be alone when more than one person’s feeling the need to get an anxious work out in… And Dick and Steph have trained together… but they are not a good fit for anxiety spars.

He’s letting Steph take it first, and probably going to be a grown up and make sure Bruce isn’t going all self-destruct on them like Tim.

Because Dick is the oldest kid, a good big brother – even when he messes up, and even
when he and Steph are not *quite* compatible enough to just be friends outside of all this…

“Thanks, Dick,” she mutters as she gives him one last squeeze from behind and then slides off the bike.

Dick doesn’t kick the bike back to life again immediately.

He holds off, looking her over in silence until that nudge of awkwardness from the roof starts to worm its way back inside.

“He’ll be alright,” Dick promises abruptly, sounding as certain as he can force himself to be for an assurance so obviously empty.

Still, it calms Steph anyway.

Dick’s caught between so many different people, and he wants so badly to keep them all safe and happy that sometimes it just kind of breaks him when they’re hurting.

And right now… they’re *all* kind of hurting. And, worse, they’re all realizing how much everyone has been *hiding* how they’ve been hurting.

They need to keep the conversation going, honest and open and wholly supportive.

“They both will,” Steph promises back – just as empty a promise, but really it’s a sign that she’s still trying to be a sister to him. Empty promises, but somehow still full.

Dick smiles like he understands, and Steph thinks he probably *does*.

After all, they’re not Family by blood.

They’re Family because they make the same choices, they’ve grown up as Gotham’s protectors because they’ve chosen to do so – and that means they’ve chosen each other, for better or worse. It’s what’s made them who they are.

It’s not always sunshine and roses, but Gotham was never all that sunny.

They’re good people, at heart, and that’s all they can ask for.

Steph still heads down to the Cave in dire need of some time on the training mats, but she doesn’t feel like she needs to wear herself out until the emptiness goes numb – she just needs to work up a sweat, to work through a few last things she hasn’t even let herself consider yet, and to calm herself down from the anxiety attack…

She’s still hella anxious now, but not terrified, and that might not *sound* like much of a difference, but it means that Steph will probably be able to sleep tonight.
And *that* means a world of difference.

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*we were made out on these streets ( we were all the same )*

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Chapter End Notes

Yay, Steph!
And everyone else is doing so much better at all of this now than in the beginning. <3

NEXT TIME: Jason's view of finding the baby bird all tucked up under the desk in his safe house bedroom.
we were kids (holdin' out for a dream)

Chapter Summary

Jason's view of heading out to find a way to get the Bats' baby bird back to the nest in one piece... but the Big Bad Red Hood knows he's a mess, which doesn't seem likely to change despite a few very enlightening tidbits of being dropped in some HELLA real conversations, and it means Jason's not exactly well equipped to help the birdie with a broken wing remember how to fly.

Chapter Notes

Whelp, it's a beautiful, rainy Tuesday and my semester is finally entirely over! A few weeks of breathing room and then back to the grind, but for now: super angsty Jay/Tim! It's a sweet bit of hurt/comfort, but the hurt lays on a little thicker than I had hoped it would at this point, these two are just THAT stubborn and stupidly insecure... it actually hurts to write this shit sometimes...

There's another /kinda/ cliff hanger-ish pause point for the ending. Like, no one's in immediate danger, and it's a nice sorta soft and quiet moment, but it still hurts my heart a bit to leave you lot like this...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Seven – we were kids (holdin' out for a dream)

Jason doesn’t know why he agreed to this.

He’s a little fuzzy on the conversation that led up to this, and a lot fuzzy on how the fuck Roy talked him into doing this, and every second of the drive back to Crime Alley is a second Jason spends questioning his very existence.

The fever dream while his body's dying theory comes up again.

More than once.

But oddly, the idea of just not going does not come up.

Not even in a brief niggle of maybe.
He doesn’t know why he agreed to this, and he doesn’t know why he’s going through with it, and Roy is being uncharacteristically quiet… and Jason can’t tell if that’s a curse or a blessing.

It means he wrestles himself into Roy’s clothes in the roaring silence of his own head.

When he’s cleaned up as much as possible, gotten settled in the clean clothes, he falls back against the seat beside Roy and covers his face with his hands – working hard to resist the urge to just claw his god damn eyes out.

“The fuck am I doing, Roy?”

“You tell me, Jaybird,” Roy answers, uncharacteristically solemn.

Jason actually peeks out from under the side of his hands to side eye him. Roy’s not looking at him. He’s driving slower than he normally would and is just staring out into the night ahead – just the fuzzy little piece of the world that’s lit up by his headlights.

“What are you talking about?”


Jason lets his hands slide off his face and fall heavily into his lap.

“Roy, just… what?”

“You mean it, Jay. You mean it. Seriously. I knew he was an old friend, your first real crush and whatnot, and I know he’s been… tricky to deal with since you got back,” Roy laid out carefully, gingerly, “But I didn’t realize… dude, you’re… you’re a different person for him. For him, not because of him. He doesn’t do anything but ask and… and even if he doesn’t ask… like, you stand up to the Bat for him, not just defending yourself when the Bat takes a go at you, but, like active face off for a cause man… I think… well, I dunno, but… he’s… he’s good, for you.”

Jason snorts, “You giving me your blessing to like woo the idiot or shit?”

“I guess, yeah,” Roy says with a shrug and a tone too serious to just play off. “Yeah. I am.”

With a wary frown, Jason asks, “The hell?”

“Dead serious, here, Jason,” Roy says, going so far as to pull the truck over. “You and Tim… That somethin’, or what?”
“It’s something,” Jason cedes, growling, “It’s me repeatedly almost murdering the idiot.”

“Not what I mean.”

Roy’s rarely serious. Never this serious.

He needs Jason to be honest here, really honest. Honest with him about something Jason’s never even really confronted openly inside his own head...

“I... yeah, Roy. Yeah, it’s somethin’,” Jason admits, far more easily than he thought could be possible. “But it’s also nothin’. I killed him, Roy. I stopped his heart and left it that way for a god damn minute. More than once. Even if it could be something, it shouldn’t be.”

That’s when Roy looks over at him.

The weight in his gaze is almost enough to crush the last vestiges of reality he has in him.

Jason just rolls his head over to stare out the far window.

Roy stays quiet for a long moment... and then he pulls the truck back out onto the road and resumes driving at normal speed up to Jason’s safe house.

“Your Bat Brat’s on the building across the street to the west, looking into your bedroom window with a parabolic mic on the glass – your creepy hacker chick says he’s not using special lenses without cause and that the mic is rigged to only catch sounds over 50 decibels, so you’re quiet convo’s private enough, but you start shouting with Pit rage and ninja brat will rain down katana fury on you in a second.”

Pausing briefly to shake his head, Roy explains, “She’s using my digital speedometer to text, by the way, which is a thing I seriously did not know was actually connected to the internet, so hella creep points to the Original BG for that... but seriously, you’re good. They’ll keep you from doing real damage if you relapse, and you’ll keep the little idiot you love from doing himself damage, a’ight?”

Jason huffs out a breath and shakes his head.

“The hell am I doing, Roy?”

“The only thing you can.”

It’s true enough.

It gets Jason to pull himself to his feet and slide out of the truck’s cab.
He’s fuzzy on the exact process that gets him to the window over the kitchen sink (since the front door is locked and even *Jason* can’t get in without some pretty heavy equipment).

But he gets inside.

He gets into his bedroom, and finds Tim curled up underneath his desk.

Shaking like a leaf, obviously.

He’s still in his costume, cape pulled tight around him like a blanket, but the cowl and the domino below it have been removed – though by the sore splotchiness of his skin and the disheveled state of his hair, it wasn’t a completely conscious action.

Tim’s eyes are locked on Jason – his pupils blown so wide there’s nothing left at all of his irises – but the vacant gaze inside is not really *focusing* on Jason’s shape, and he’s not blinking.

Shadows dance inside his eyes, ones that may very well be blocking out reality entirely.

“I see you, little bird,” Jason sighs heavily, falling into a pattern he’d thought he’d long ago forgotten. As he settles down on the floor, leaned back against his bed, Jason tests the waters of Tim’s current awareness to say, “Speak up if you see me.”

It takes a minute, or at least it *feels* like a whole minute, but eventually Tim replies in a dry and raspy whisper, “I see you.”

Jason nods slowly. “Alright,” he mutters, thinking that at least Tim’s got a smidge of reality reaching into that bugged up brain of his. “Good.”

Jason waits another minute. Trying to be respectful, trying to wait it out, *really* hoping that frickin Bambi learns to blink in the near future…

But then he cracks and says, “So, that BS you told me about not getting any gas in ya?”

Tim blinks. And huffs straightforwardly, “Yeah. That was a lie.”

It startles Jason to silence for a beat.

“You’re better at that than you used to be.”
“Not really,” Tim says with a shrug. “I’ve always had a talent. You just throw it off a lot.”

Jason blinks. It seems like he’s okay.

Sorta.

He’s weirdly… calm, actually. Not the stuttering mess of overwrought anxieties Jason’s used to seeing the little weirdo act like. Which is… odd. Especially, under the influence of Fear.

Tim’s still trembling, still curled up in a tight ball, and still going way too long between blinks, but he’s… okay. Ish. Okay enough to prompt Jason to comment on it with the curious ache of a question in his words, “You’re okay. Like… not okay, but uh, I can’t help but notice that you ain’t kickin’ and screamin’ at any phantoms here. What’s going on in your head?”

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine,” Tim says, like it’s a mantra he’s been running in his head.

It probably is not the best sign.

But it’s also not the worst thing he could be telling himself right now.

But still, Jason’s … curious. And Tim seems willing enough to volunteer information…

“What do I have to be afraid of?”

“Lots of shit,” Jason fires back, just as straight and quiet, “Like me.”

“Why would I be scared of you?”

Jason snorts. “You gotta be kidding me.”

“I’m not. I’m not afraid of you,” Tim reports. “And I wouldn’t bother lying to my own brain about it.”

“Wait. Back up. ‘Your own brain’?”

Tim frowns. “I haven’t seen you on Crane’s gas before, but usually you’re more… aware than this. Like it’s creepy talking to a hallucination at all, but it’s hella creepy to have to openly admit that we both know you’re not really here.”

“You think I’m a hallucination, Timbo?”
“Obviously,” Tim snorts.

Jason huffs a pained half laugh. “That’s funny. You see, ‘cause I’ve been thinking this whole thing’s been a fever dream since… well, I dunno exactly. A while now.”

He’d thought it might’ve started when the floor fell out from under them and he’d let himself drop… but getting to that point even feels kind of ridiculous when thinking about the situation they’d been in prior to that… Maybe Tim didn’t show up on that rooftop two weeks ago, maybe Jason just had some sort of catastrophic aneurysm or something.

It makes a lot more sense on the face of it than what else has happened since then.

“I dunno, kid, maybe you’re the hallucination here.”

Tim’s frown grows more pronounced.

“Why would I be the hallucination?”

With a lazy half shrug, Jason says, “Well, we’re in my safe house. This is my bed, and you’re tucked up under my desk…”

And more than that, Tim’s talking to Jason, willingly. And Jason’s not threatening him over it, or over anything else for that matter – and the rest of the Bat Family is… well, not exactly on board with that, but there’s also only been a straw man sort of protest to it – nothing with any hot vehemence in it at all.

“Seems to me like an awful lot of this is mine for it all be inside your head.”

And it’s all pretty nice, honestly… like, it feels… well, not good, exactly, but not bad. It’s… comfortable, almost… in a way that Jason doesn’t quite believe is real… and in a way he wouldn’t know what to do with if it is real.

“You didn’t think that when I was under ‘your bed’ at the Manor,” Tim mumbles.

It’s just a petulant little huff, but no less shockingly impactful on Jason because of that.

If he weren’t in his own weird state of drug-like lethargy, Jason probably would’ve choked on his own tongue. “My bed at the Manor?”

“Yeah… when I would hide there after… usually, the third week after my parents left and I was able to go back to training full time, and I may have over done it slightly… and Bruce wanted to send me home… I’d hide there, and you’d show up, and… and I’d get back to work.”
Again, the lethargy is… helpful.

The strange delayed reaction he feels in the warm exhaustion means he can’t react to any of the shrapnel launched by that bombshell.

“We’re coming back to that bit about… well, everything, because you are not a sane little squirrel by any stretch, but uh, first… you worked yourself so hard that you got B’s dumb ass to tell you to take a break? And then you hallucinated a dreamed up version of me to frickin guilt trip you into working even harder?”

Tim squints at him, tips his head to the side like the little magpie Jason remembers.

“May~be,” Tim admits slowly, adding, “Assuming I’m hallucinating, now, at least.”

“You’re not. Well, you might be, but you’re not hallucinating me,” Jason tells him insistently. “I’m really here, bird brain.”

Still squinting, Tim tips his head to the other side, rotating it on his neck slowly with the eerily keen attention Jason remembers all too clearly from Before, and asks, “Why?”

It’s a punch to the gut. A question that echoes their first real conversation, when Jason first realized how… tragically unsocialized Tim was… The kid legitimately didn’t, and still doesn’t, understand why Jason would ever have a rational reason to talk to him.

“Well, Blondie and Dickface are worried about ya,” Jason explains, trying to be ginger but unable to stop himself from adding, “You’re not exactly a picture of safe and sane, right now, Timbers. You’re apparently something of a suicide risk.”

Tim’s quizzical expression is swept away by a glower so dark it looks painful.

He buries his head in the folds of his cape and growls, “Go away.”

“So now I’m real, huh?”

“I’m not a suicide risk,” Tim retorts, like that’s enough of an explanation.

In some ways, it kind of is.

If Tim doesn’t think he’s a suicide risk, no way a hallucination cooked up by his own brain would so casually tell him something to the contrary.
“When was the last time you ate something. Anything. A cookie, even.”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Is that because you’re bein’ a little shit, or because you can’t remember?”

Tim’s sullen silence is answer enough.

The air in Jason’s lungs slides out through his teeth. “It’s not suicide, Baby Bird, but it ain’t different by enough.” And Jason knows it better than most.

“I had breakfast with Dick,” Tim grumbles with enough petulance that his words become almost incoherent, “Two days ago, max, and then pancakes with you.”

“You only ate like one.”

“I had three,” Tim protests.

Jason doesn’t give an inch. “Yeah, so basically, like one. While I had seven.”

Without uncurling from his balled up position under the desk, Tim gestures vaguely at Jason’s everything (making the edge of his cape flap like a kid inside a blanket fort) and says sounding sullen, “You’re a fuckin’ tank, asshole. Of course, you eat a shit ton of food every day.”

Jason wants to be angry – Tim needs to fucking eat – but that lethargy wells up again, that… nostalgia.

And… a vague glazing of surprise.

“You swear now,” he sighs heavily, “And you lie… But you still don’t eat.”

“We were kids,” Tim protests in an adorable squawk, “Bad words were… bad.”

“And now?”

“Now… the world’s pretty bad itself. So why the fuck not?”

Jason actually chuckles at that. “Fair point, Baby Bird, fair point.”

He shakes his head slowly and wonders if he should address the fact that Tim just skipped straight over the other two points of observation he’d made.

It doesn’t seem worth it.
The food thing is definitely still necessary to address, but not right now… because right now, Jason couldn’t summon the energy to get back to his feet if Tim agreed to eat his weight in cheesecake this very second.

Jason probably couldn’t even support the effort to get his ass into the bed he’s currently leaned back against – sleeping right here will be hell on his neck, but not much is gonna be able to make him move regardless.

But there is one thing he should probably bring up again…

Even if he doesn’t really want to…

“So… that bit about you hidin’ under my bed at the Manor… what was that about?”

Tim buries his face in his knees as a shudder rocks his slight frame.

Clearly, it’s a question Tim wants to answer even less than Jason wanted to ask.

But for some reason – perhaps the liquid Fear loosening his tongue, or the unique delirium of exhaustion – Tim heaves a sigh eventually and says, “I needed to remember why I was doing it, why I was fighting so hard to become an adequate Robin.”

Jason isn’t entirely sure that he asks it out loud, but the question bounces around loudly enough inside his head that Tim could probably hear it anyway, “Why were you?”

“For you, sorta,” Tim confesses, lifting his gaze up to meet Jason’s with the saddest look in his big ol’ Bambi eyes that Jason had ever seen. “Well, because of you, at least.”

This time, Jason knows he doesn’t ask aloud.

The question of why is just too big and clunky and impossible to get out.

Tim answers it anyway, elaborating, “After you died… Bruce… something in him broke. He started getting more violent – too violent. He embraced the idea of Batman as the monster inside criminals’ nightmares and forgot that the point of being so scary to the bad guys was to be a hero to the good ones. He needed a Robin to make him remember, to keep himself in check.”

Jason jaw is clenched as Tim explains, but that lethargy still lingers as a heavy weight inside his blood and even the Pit cannot impart enough grief and fury to make him leap to vitriol when speaking a reaction would mean having to shout over Tim’s continuing ramble. Jason needs to hear what Tim is saying – more than he needs to refute the reasoning inside it.

“I tried to get Dick to do it,” Tim sighs, resting his cheek on his knee, “I don’t suppose you have any reason to care – I mean, it doesn’t really matter, because it didn’t work, but I did try to get Dick to come back to be his partner instead of me… But Dick was so angry with him, so hurt… and he missed you too much to be able to move back without you being here.”
Silence falls as Tim gets lost in his own rememberings.

“It does matter,” Jason grits out eventually, having gotten a little lost himself.

It’s important to say that out loud, Jason feels, because it’s true.

He hadn’t known that Tim had tried to get Dick to do it, hadn’t realized that Tim hadn’t just leapt at the chance to don the Robin cape as soon as the role had been vacated.

Jason had known the way that Talia framed the information she gave him had been designed to get him angry, but he’d never fully realized just how fabricated the context of that information had been. With Tim having started going out as Robin within a few short weeks of Jason’s untimely demise, it had been all too easy for Jason to accept the idea that Bruce had welcomed in the Replacement before Jason’s corpse was even cold.

And with how good the new kid had been at filling out the pixie boots, it was hard to believe that Bruce hadn’t started training him right away… even before Jason had died, possibly.

Jason had needed a few months of practice before he’d gotten the okay to go out on the barest semblance of a true Patrol. He hadn’t been given any cases of his own to solve for over a year, and even then the privilege had come with a lot more supervision than genuine freedom.

Not like how it’d been for Tim’s term as Robin.

Tim had started closing cases all on his own in less than a year after Jason’s death, perhaps eight months into his official tenure in the tights. It’s hard to believe that something like that could ever have happened without Bruce taking the kid under his wing just a few days after Jason had walked out. Even Dick and Jason had needed a few months of training before they’d been cleared to head out on the streets.

It seemed like Tim was given the okay to patrol right away, and he’d been running his own independent case load within weeks of Jason’s funeral.

By the time Jason had regained a hold on his own head, had fully returned to the realm of the living with the dubious ‘help’ of the Lazarus Pit and a few months of staggered recovery from the lingering amnesia, Tim had already established quite a name for himself as the new and improved Robin.

The ‘improved’ part still grates on him, even now that he doesn’t truly blame the kid for replacing him to start with.

Mostly because it’s true, and Jason isn’t quite petty enough to pretend otherwise.

Tim made a damn good Robin.
Better than Jason ever did, that’s for sure.

Hell, he’d probably done a better job at it than Dick, even – the detective stuff, at least.

And the fact that Tim’s saying he didn’t want to be Robin to be Robin, that he’s saying he tried to get Dick to come back as B’s partner… it matters.

It’s still pretty hard to believe, but Jason trusts Tim right now – trusts that, right now, he’s not just incapable of bullshit, but too tired to even try it.

He also doesn’t think Tim would want to lie about this, since just bringing it up has been more than enough to merit Jason’s wrath in the past. Tim’s vulnerable at the moment and if Jason got pissed enough to try to kill him again, Tim wouldn’t be able to do shit about it.

Jason knows the Demon Brat is watching for any excuse to intervene, but Tim doesn’t.

If Tim were going to lie about anything right now, it probably wouldn’t be something that would risk his life. Blondie seemed pretty confident that Tim’s current mindset, while still possibly suicidal, isn’t bent on provoking his immediate demise.

Jason’s still reeling from the revelation that Tim might not have even wanted to be Robin as Tim petulantly huffs, “How can it matter if it didn’t work?”

“It just does,” Jason insists quietly.

Tim grumbles into his knees, but nothing articulate enough to be a viable word.

“So why did—” Jason’s question gets choked off by the rise of emotion that swirls inside him at the notion of directly addressing how Tim replaced him.

Tim somehow understands.

He fusses with a thread on his knee for a moment, weighing his response, but then he lifts his gaze to meet Jason’s again and declares, “I became Robin to protect your legacy. I was the only one willing to take the role on who knew enough about you all to keep the secret safe.”

Even with the lethargic heaviness in his responses, Jason can’t help but snort.

“I did.” Tim asserts. “You did so much good as Robin… and if Robin died… people would start to forget. Not to mention how it risked exposing Bruce as Batman… and you’d worked so hard to do it right, to be a hero without letting anyone know who exactly was responsible for such dangerous good deeds… You’d kept Bruce in check, and you’d helped so many people, and I couldn’t let that all be undone because you’d died. You deserved better.”
It's not an explanation that makes much apparent sense to Jason, but he can tell by Tim’s conviction that he completely believes in what he’s saying.

“I know… I know, I wasn’t good enough,” Tim goes on, voice sounding strained in a way it hasn’t yet felt otherwise in this conversation, “I didn’t do you justice, but… but I kept Bruce from killing anyone, or himself, and… and I did it long enough for the others, for Dick and Babs, to come back… and for Cass and Steph to join up. I’m sorry, I wasn’t— that I didn’t—”

“Christ, kid, just stop,” Jason pleads, feeling his chest starting to collapse in on itself a little more with every word. “You didn’t— I wasn’t that— you did… you did pretty damn great at replacing me – more than lived up to the hype.”

Tim’s expression flattens out with an exhausted annoyance.

His unspoken I did not rattles around in the heavy hush between them.

Jason ignores it, for the moment – too focused on figuring out his own words, trying to make the swirl inside his head render right when verbalized.

“I wasn’t that good a Robin,” he insists, eyes locked carefully on the short sheared fuzz of the ratty carpet. He can’t believe he’s admitting this, let alone to the kid directly, but he somehow goes on, “You made at least as good a Robin as I did… better, probably.”

He can feel Tim vibrating with how hard he’s trying to hold back a protest.

Lifting his gaze briefly as he tips his head back to rest against the mattress, Jason sees Tim wearing this pitiful little teary eyed ache of an expression. Instead of just letting his head drop against the mattress, Jason has to slam it back… lets it bounce, and then slams it back again. He hears Tim let out a squeeze of air, pained and almost… panicked…

“I wasn’t… I didn’t— didn’t do any good… nothing real,” Tim wheezes. Before Jason gets too pissed, he cedes, “I solved a couple crimes, and I guess that helped people… but I didn’t… I couldn’t… inspire anybody. I didn’t… It wasn’t— it wasn’t enough.”

“Whiny, dumbass little prick,” Jason huffs. “The fuck it wasn’t enough. Hell, if anything, you were too damn good as Robin. It’s prolly half of why I fuckin’ hate you so damn much.”

Jason can hear the sharp intake of breath Tim tries to hide.

It makes Jason’s lungs clench up so tight it’s impossible to continue speaking.

For a long moment, there’s nothing but quiet – tense in a way that isn’t taught between them, but still aches with the strain of what outright wrongness lingers there.
Eventually, Jason is able to ease the constriction in his throat enough to say, “I was too wild; and when I wasn’t too aggressive, I was too caught up in the fun of it to really be considered anybody’s hero.”

“You were always mine,” Tim protests immediately in an almost inaudible croak of confession. “You were always mine… long before you were ever my friend, you were the hero I idolized the most. And I… I missed you… That’s why… that’s why I hid under your bed on the bad days. I wanted to be closer to you, and not just as the Robin I could never live up to, but as the Jason who had been my friend.”

Jason doesn’t quite know what to do with that.

He can’t just believe it… but he also can’t ignore how thoroughly Tim does believe it…

It doesn’t sit right with him, any of it.

Jason can’t put his finger on what it is exactly, but between the spiky feel of the something that isn’t right with Tim’s vehemence and the surge of vertigo that strikes as Jason tries to zero in on why it doesn’t feel the slightest bit plausible, the idea of this all being one big fever dream rears up again.

It’s a suffocating thought, but at least it’s one that makes sense.

Vision spotty with the black ache of threatening unconsciousness, Jason heaves a sigh and breathes, “You’re gonna have to take the reins here, kid, ’cause I’m suddenly pretty damn sure that none of this is real. The Universe is a weird ass place, but it still ain’t the kind of crazy that could make anyone like you think the hell like that of me.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because I sure as hell do not deserve it.”

“Yes, Jason,” Tim says, pleading with him. “Yes. You do.”

If that ain’t proof enough that this whole thing is just Jason’s brain livin’ out some sort of final moments fever dream, Jason doesn’t know what is.

He sighs, defeated, and just relaxes into it.
Okay... it hurts my heart a rather lot to leave it at that... Jason just needs to be kissed a couple thousand times by someone who utterly adores him (*stares expectantly at Tim, who doesn't even register my divine authorial presence*). These idiots are FRUSTRATING. <3

Anywho, I have a request to make and it's more than I ever wanted to ask of anyone, especially anyone here where you've all given me so much support already... but with one semester ending, I'm starting to turn my thoughts to the next one... and how in the world I am ever going to pay for it... I'm applying for scholarships like there's no tomorrow, but even if I get every single one of them, things are still gonna be tight. I mentioned the idea of a Patreon page a few months ago and you guys were surprisingly (awesomely) receptive to the possibility, so I decided to go through with making one! It's still majorly under construction, but it does have an early access post up for next week's chapter!

Which means that if you choose to be a Patron, you'll be able to read Tim's side of this conversation, TODAY, and you'll get to follow how Timmy moves it further forward, pushing adamantly towards a happy resolution (for Jay, at least, because Timmy's stupid and stubborn too). That chapter is LIVE right now, and you can find it here.

NEXT TIME: Tim's side of this nonsense: dealing with Fear Gas, defending his hero's worth to his hero's face, and finding a new kind of motivation to do what's necessary to make sure everyone in the Family understands exactly how important Jason is to everything.
say you'll be there (when the walls get close)

Chapter Summary

Tim's view of working through the Fear Gas, and dealing with the uncomfortable conversation with Jason that he's already a few years over due for... and he comes to a few conclusions that solidify his resolve.

Chapter Notes

Holy Moley and a Big Blue Bat Cow, people!

You guys are the absolute BEST. You've already given me so much support and now, thanks to you, my income feels like I'm working two extra shifts a month. Like my grocery budget has been MADE.

I can't thank you enough for everything you've done, but I hope that you all continue to support me however you can for a long while yet to come! I've got plenty more stories up my sleeve and I am VERY excited to share them with you. <3

Anywho: on to the super-angsty inner thoughts of Timmy Drake! This chapter is another one with a calm-ish ending, so it's not an unbearable cliff hanger! It is an example of dramatically unhealthy thought processes, but that's just Timmy to a T. Don't worry, though, a certain degree of progress IS made here, for both Tim and Jason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Eight - say you'll be there ( when the walls get close )

It’s weird.

Talking to a theoretically real Jason in the way he’s gotten used to talking so candidly to his own private hallucinations of not-real Jason…

It's really weird.
But it’s kind of a nice weird.

Tim thinks it’s even that peculiar kind of nice weird when Jason’s ribbing him about food… and Tim’s general lack of care for it.

Jason’s voice sounds truly angry, and Tim’s not seeing straight enough to have any hope to interpret his expression, but the exchange feels like nothing more than teasing… Almost teasing in the way it used to be… Closer than it’s been in years, at least.

So, of course, Tim has to go and ruin it.

“You’re a fuckin’ tank, asshole. Of course, you eat a shit ton of food every day.”

It’s true, entirely true in a way that almost hurts. Jason had always been a kid to take seriously on size alone, but these days… these days he’s massive in a way that makes him more resemble Superman than any earthling or mere mortal.

He’s so much more than Tim can ever be.

And that’s just considering the literal physical state of their existence. It doesn’t even touch on their metaphysical status as Gotham’s inspiring heroes.

Tim’s so caught in his own idiocy that he doesn’t even react when Jason goes oddly silent, and it takes a second for him to refocus enough to listen as Jason explains what Tim did that made him react like that.

“You swear now,” Jason sighs, “And you lie. But you still don’t eat.”

“We were kids,” Tim squawks, mortified that Jason still thinks of him as that kind of pathetic, so childish that even curse words should feel foreign. “Bad words were… bad.”

“And now?”

What changed to make the stupid kid who couldn’t curse into a stupid kid that could?

Jason died.

That’s what happened.

But Tim can’t just say that… He settles for a vaguer Truth, saying, “Now… the world’s
pretty bad itself. So why the fuck not?’”

Jason actually chuckled at that.

It makes the tightness in Tim’s chest squeeze again, hard.

He’s missed that sound. So much.

And he’s so preoccupied with savoring the echoes of Jason’s laugh that he almost misses Jason’s low reply. “Fair point, Baby Bird, fair point.”

The silence that descends after that is heavy, but not uncomfortably so… it’s more like a comfortingly weighted blanket than an awkward pressure.

Tim thinks the quiet lasts a while.

He can’t quite tell with the way his head is pounding in the hush, and the way his heart beat is still so dramatically accelerated, but he likes the feeling of the quiet and he almost hopes it’s been there a while to let have let him fully enjoy it.

Eventually, Jason’s cautious voice breaks the silence.

“So… that bit about you hidin’ under my bed at the Manor… what was that about?”

Tim buries his face in his knees as a bone jarring shudder rocks his slight frame.

He’d almost forgotten that this Jason was real Jason… that it wasn’t just a figment pulled from inside his own head, but that question… that reminds Tim with a starkly spiked reality that this Jason is the real one – that the real Jason now knows a bit more about how truly pathetic a replacement for him that Tim is than Tim ever intended for him to learn…

And this… well…

It’s not exactly something that Tim wants to explain to Jason, but… the hero Tim still idolizes deserves to know... And he’d rather explain it himself than have one of the others do it, or to have Jason just figure it out on his own.

“I needed to remember why I was doing it,” he admits slowly, “why I was fighting so hard to become an adequate Robin.”
He’d needed to remember why it was worth it… why the physical pain and heartbreak of being forever too much less than to truly make a difference wasn’t more than he could bear, why it was so important to carry on regardless in order to protect the ideals that Jason had lived for.

“Why were you?” Jason asks, sounding every bit as suspicious of Tim’s motives as Tim had known he would be… as he would have to be, given the circumstances.

“For you, sorta,” Tim confesses, lifting his gaze to meet Jason’s in an attempt to convey the earnestness of his words. “Well, because of you, at least.”

It could never really be for Jason… because Jason had been gone…

And even if he hadn’t been, even if he’d just been catastrophically retired from the Robin role like Babs had been with Batgirl… Tim had done much too poorly with the job of living up to Jason’s standard to really have a hope at pretending it was a viable gift.

It had been an attempt at honoring Jason’s memory, his legacy, but it had only ever been an attempt – nothing successful enough to be worth calling sacrifice.

Jason doesn’t ask, but Tim finds himself elaborating anyway, “After you died… Bruce… something in him broke. He started getting more violent – too violent. He embraced the idea of Batman as the monster inside criminals’ nightmares and forgot that the point of being so scary to the bad guys was to be a hero to the good ones. He needed a Robin to make him remember, to keep himself in check.”

Tim can’t see straight enough to see for certain, but he imagines that Jason’s jaw is clenched – that he’s biting back his vitriol so aggressively that a vein’s popped on his forehead.

Tim gets it, he does.

Jason’s still pissed at Bruce for all the hurt between them that Bruce could have done far more to have relieved. Doing anything for Bruce’s sake seems antithetical to Tim’s assertion that he’d taken up the Robin role to protect Jason’s legacy.

But it’s the truth.

If Bruce had gone bad, everything that Jason had lived for would’ve gone sour with him.

“I tried to get Dick to do it,” Tim sighs, resting his cheek on his knee, “I don’t suppose you have any reason to care – I mean, it doesn’t really matter, because it didn’t work, but I did try to get Dick to come back to be his partner instead of me… But Dick was so angry with him, so hurt… and he missed you too much to be able to move back without you being here.”

Dick hadn’t been willing then to even listen.
He’d hardly been willing to let Tim in the door, too consumed with the pain of grieving Jason and too convinced of Bruce’s remorseless guilt for all of it… Seeing Tim as Jason’s useless friend had hurt Dick, had been a constant reminder of the heroic little brother than he’d lost, and hearing him attempt to defend Bruce and advocate for Dick going back to help him… that conversation had not gone well.

Finding Dick in Blüdhaven to start with had been hard enough, and after that conversation, Dick had gone even further to ground. Tim had chosen to take the hint.

He’d already been acting as Robin by then, but until Dick’s refusal, it had mostly been a role taken up with the intention of being a hold over position until Tim could locate someone who was actually qualified to handle it.

After that, Tim had redoubled his efforts to become an adequate subject to bear the mantle properly. He’d mostly failed at that, too.

But his failure had brought Dick home… had convinced the true hero in Nightwing to train him enough to have a fair chance at keeping himself alive as Robin even though the constant reminders of Jason (going through the same training and doing so much better at it) had to have cut the man very deeply every time they trained together...

And even then, with both Nightwing and Batman training him, Tim had only improved so much – barely enough to make it matter. To make any of it matter.

Before Tim has the opportunity to sink into that spiral, Jason breaks through his thoughts, declaring, “It does matter.”

That Tim tried to have Dick hold up the mantle, Tim assumes – brain jumping frantically back to skim over the last piece of the conversation that had been voiced aloud.

He’s not entirely sure he hasn’t missed something, but he’s relatively positive that Jason didn’t hear him mentally go into how he’d already been acting as Robin when he’d failed in his attempt to convince Dick to come back.

Jason would likely be a lot less amenable right now if he knew.

Tim doesn’t want to tell him that, but he does have to push a reaffirmation that, regardless of his intentions, he’d failed to convince Dick and he’d ended up having to uphold the Robin image by his own pathetic self.

“How can it matter if it didn’t work?”

The question applies to more than just his failure with Dick, but Jason doesn’t know that.

“It just does,” Jason insists quietly, soft and warm and knowing in a way that makes Tim terrified that perhaps he does know how broad the real issue on the table has become.

Tim grumbles into his knees, not even sure enough of himself to be confident in his analysis of his own shortcomings – too weak to give them all a public voicing.

The silence falls again, but this time it doesn’t last long before Jason asks the inevitable
question: “So why did—”

Jason cuts himself off for a reason Tim doesn’t understand… but he does understand what Jason is asking… If Tim knew he wasn’t good enough, why did he even try?

“I became Robin to protect your legacy,” he explains heavily, “I was the only one willing to take the role on who knew enough about you all to keep the secret safe.”

Jason snorts derisively.

“I did,” Tim asserts, despite knowing he deserves Jason’s strident disbelief. “You did so much good as Robin… and if Robin died… people would start to forget. Not to mention how it risked exposing Bruce as Batman… and you’d worked so hard to do it right, to be a hero without letting anyone know who exactly was responsible for such dangerous good deeds… You’d kept Bruce in check, and you’d helped so many people, and I couldn’t let that all be undone because you’d died. You deserved better.”

This time, Jason doesn’t even bother to summon up a snort.

“I know… I know, I wasn’t good enough,” Tim goes on to admit apologetically, “I didn’t do you justice, but… but I kept Bruce from killing anyone, or himself, and… and I did it long enough for the others to get involved; for Dick and Babs, to come back… and for Cass and Steph to join up. I’m sorry, I wasn’t— that I didn’t—”

He’d tried so hard… and yet… he couldn’t even come close to measuring up.

Even now, as Red Robin, he barely managed to perform to the par of good guy inspiration that Jason had set as Robin.

“Christ, kid, just stop,” Jason growls, sounding ready to reem Tim out for being the embarrassment he is… Tim braces himself, and waits, only to be confused by Jason’s garbled response as the vigilante says, “You didn’t— I wasn’t that— you did… you did pretty damn great at replacing me – more than lived up to the hype.”

Tim’s expression flattens out into irritation.

He wasn’t any good, and it’s weird of Jason to insist on pretending he was… especially since Jason had repeatedly attempted to kill Tim for being such an undeserving failure.

Tim can’t even distill rational words to form a protest.

Jason seems to be having at least as much trouble, and when he speaks again the words come slow. “I wasn’t that good a Robin,” Jason insists irrationally, eyes locked on the carpet by his knee. Keeping his eyes pointed downward, Jason continues, “You made at least as good a Robin as I did… better, probably.”

Tim has to clamp down with the muscles in his jaw to keep the inarticulate babble of blunt
protest from spewing out of his mouth. To keep from spewing his guts.

He feels physically, violently ill at the thought that Jason might be codling him…

Or even worse, and this thought makes Tim’s vision tip dangerously close to black as tremors wrack his muscles and bile crawls up his throat in waves of scorching acid, that Jason might genuinely feel like his efforts as Robin hadn’t amounted to enough to make his contributions matter more than Tim’s ever could…

As Jason lets his head fall back against the bed, as he lifts his head and lets it fall again in a slide of self-flagellation, Tim loses the tight grip he has on his tongue.

Panicked air escapes his lungs in a pained wheeze at the idea of Jason still feeling such doubt about his capacity to have done good as Robin. It had been an anxiety he’d been reluctant to confess to Tim when they were kids, but Tim had known it was there, and the idea that it’s still something Jason’s struggling with… that it’s something he doubts so much he thinks that comparing his impact to Tim’s own meager contributions is reasonable…

It hurts.

“I wasn’t... I didn’t— didn’t do any good... nothing real,” Tim wheezes, “I solved a couple crimes, and I guess that helped people... but I didn't... I couldn't... inspire anybody. I didn't... It wasn’t — it wasn't enough.”

He wasn’t Jason.

Tim may have managed to get some bad guys off the street, but he couldn’t make Bruce smile, not for real… and he couldn’t make Dick come back to Gotham without getting himself almost mortally wounded… he couldn’t even make Babs engage with a god damn logic puzzle, not until Dick showed up to connect to her instead.

As Robin, Tim had been an adequate crime fighter.

But as just a crime fighter, he’d hardly made par as Robin.

Jason huffs across from him, head still back against the bed with his gaze on a point beyond the ceiling. “Whiny, dumbass little prick,” Jason says, “The fuck it wasn't enough. Hell, if anything, you were too damn good as Robin.”

He sighs again, and mutters, “It's prolly half of why I fuckin' hate you so damn much.” The sting of confirmation that Jason hates him, still hates him, even though it’s been a few years of them trying to be civil, distracts Tim from the part about how Jason thinks he was a good Robin – distracts him almost enough to make him miss the statement entirely.
When his brain finally works it over, Tim’s not sure he can believe it.

Funnily enough, the fact that Jason hates him for it is the only reason he can’t simply dismiss the sentiment as complete nonsense.

Eventually, Jason starts speaking again, words coming slow and quiet like they’re being squeezed through a painfully constricted throat, “I was too wild; and when I wasn’t too aggressive, I was too caught up in the fun of it to really be considered anybody’s hero.”

Choked off by his own conviction, by the heartbreak of hearing Jason talk about himself like that… like he actually believes that, Tim barely manages to squeak, “You were always mine.”

Jason stills.

Flicks a disbelieving gaze over to search Tim’s expression.

“You were always mine,” Tim insists, utterly honest with his entire being thrown into the assertion. “Long before you were ever my friend, you were the hero I idolized the most. And I… I missed you. That’s why I hid under your bed on the bad days. I wanted to be closer to you, and not just as the Robin I could never live up to, but as the Jason who had been my friend.”

Tim can almost see the words bouncing off of Jason’s brain as he refuses to accept them.

Jason’s shoulders hunch inward, and if he weren’t already seated, Tim thinks he might’ve fallen as he swayed… His voice is oddly vacant as he mutters breathlessly, “You’re gonna have to take the reins here, kid, ‘cause I’m suddenly pretty damn sure that none of this is real. The Universe is a weird ass place, but it still ain’t the kind of crazy that could make anyone like you think the hell like that of me.”

“What? Why not?”

Tim is truly baffled by the notion, and then tortured by Jason’s quick and confident response: “Because I sure as hell do not deserve it.”

“Yes, Jason,” Tim says, pleading desperately with him. “Yes. You do.”

Tim can feel the walls closing in around them as Jason just ignores him, not letting either the assertion or the tone Tim used for it creep into his brain.

He has to reevaluate the idea of Jason’s real-ness again, because this is pretty much the only fear he has left – the only thing that could potentially affect him when he’s been dosed with Fear. The shadows can whisper all they want to him, can accuse him of all manner of failings, and Tim
won’t bat an eye… but when they start trying to tell him that not only is he useless, he’s managed to fail the others enough to make them feel useless…

Tim can’t even comprehend it. How they could ever feel like that about themselves.

“You are somethin’ else, Timbers,” Jason sighs – jarring Tim back to the moment.

He’s sure he missed something else being said, but Jason doesn’t give him any clues or context to figure it out as he moves on with the discussion, asking, “So… ignoring just about everything about that shit. Why’d you come here – after you got dosed, I mean, why’d you come here instead of going back to the Manor?”

“I can’t go back there,” Tim says, voice far more strangled than he wants. “I can’t.”

Jason doesn’t question it, or his motives… likely understanding how he feels far too well to make discussion of it comfortable. Instead, Jason asks, “Okay, then why not one of your own private bolt holes? I know you got places in this city where no one could find you.”

Tim buries his face in his knees and just breathes for a long moment before he summons up the strength to reply… when he manages it, he says, “The bolt holes are all part of Red Robin’s network. Even if the others don’t know about them, or couldn’t find them… it’s still… too close. I ran away from the Manor… and from everything it means to be there.”

“But you brought your uniform when you came here the first time,” Jason points out tersely, “And you’re still wearing it now.”

When Tim doesn’t respond after a long pause, Jason accuses him directly. “You ran from the Manor, but not from everything it means.”

Despondently, Tim admits, “It was only for emergencies.”

“Like an Arkham break out.”

“Yes…”

And Tim… Tim had helped with that.

His contribution hadn’t been spectacular, but he had definitely saved Nightwing and Batgirl a few bruises… and his presence (well, his and Jason’s) had meant that Batgirl was able to act on the information she scouted from Black Mask’s secondary warehouse well before she would’ve been able to otherwise – and it had meant that the other Bats didn’t even need to deal with the first warehouse at all until the clean up bit.

Tim’s participation had definitely helped move things along quick enough to prevent the whole grand scheme Black Mask and Scarecrow had been attempting to enact from coming to fruition. So that was good. It was good that Tim had been there.

Even if Scarecrow still got away in the end.
Even if it was directly Tim’s fault that Scarecrow had gotten away…

Tim’s being there had still done more good than bad, right?

Probably.

And dwelling on it more probably won’t help convince him, so Tim carefully sidesteps it.

But that leaves him with nothing much to think about in terms of distracting him from Jason’s underlying question: if he’d really run away, why couldn’t he manage to do it right?

Tim’s still trying to find away to frame it so he doesn’t seem *too* pathetically attached to the cape lifestyle and everything it means for him to be a hero, even if he’s not a very good one, when Jason gives a heavy sigh.

“I could never separate myself, you know?” Jason mused with a weighted exhaustion holding down the words, “I could never see how to be a hero without being under B’s thumb until after the whole revenge thing… until after I figured out how to do it for the express purpose of proving that I could do it better than B. But you’ve still got one foot in the steel caps, even while marching out the fucking door… you’re too good for this place, Babybird. Gotham sure as hell doesn’t deserve you.”

The sentiment confuses Tim, being that it’s so opposed to what Tim knows Jason *must* be thinking about him, about how he’s too weak to really cut ties and make himself into a hero unattached to the Robin mantle – legitimate in his own right, rather than as part of the Bat’s own little entourage. He can’t be a Nightwing, or an Oracle, or even a Red Hood… he’s just a stupid little Robin who outgrew the boots, but couldn’t find any other role to fill.

But Jason’s looking right at him, dark eyes filled with something far removed from pity.

Tim can’t quite tell what that something is, but it soothes some of the ache inside him.

It’s only after that tension begins to go slack that Tim starts to realize how crucial it was in terms of tying him down firmly enough to hold together.

Tim doesn’t know how long he’s been under the subjugation of Crane’s fear gas at this point, but he’s fairly certain he’s got several hours left to suffer through on it. Normally, he would have his eyes closed at this point – forehead pressed against his knees while he curled up against the warmth and solid hum of the CPU he’s tucked beside – so he wouldn’t have to consciously fight the claustrophobia as his warped perceptions make it feel viscerally *real* that the walls of the apartment are beginning to press inward to suffocate him slowly.

He likes small spaces.
They’re safe and comfy, and they’re good hiding places and getaways that make use of his smaller size as he slips through openings that very few followers are able to pursue him through.

It’s why he likes being under desks when he’s on Fear. He knows the exact dimensions of his hidey hole and he can feel the solidness of his surroundings.

The part that bothers him is when the spaces he knows are big start to feel small… that is when Tim starts to feel the pinch of claustrophobia.

All in all, Tim knows that suffocation is not the worst way to die, but it is top tier among the manners of death that make him feel most pathetic about it being the end he’d come to suffer – and the awareness of the impending asphyxiation being a dragged out affair only makes it worse, as it gives him time enough to delve deeply into his regrets and weaknesses.

Even knowing that none of it is real doesn’t help – it simply means that he feels yet more guilty for the extent to which he remains pathetic in comparison to the others. They, at least, fully believe in the idea that whatever horrors they’re seeing are genuine. Tim can tell it’s all just a bit of insubstantive mental CG, but he still can’t drag himself passed any of it.

Tim feels his muscles start to tremble again – recognizes only at the point of resurgence that, at some time during this conversation, the trembling had stopped – and instinctively curls up more tightly with an embarrassed and futile hope that Jason won’t notice.

He does, of course, and Jason’s keen attentions only makes the phantom sensation of the walls pressing in feel all the more pointed, especially as Jason’s eyes narrow to suspicious slits.

“What’s goin’ through your head right now, Timbit?”

Jason’s scrutiny doesn’t let up as Tim fails to answer immediately, and after an unknowable stretch of silence, Jason adds, “Blondie seemed to think the whole Fear Gas schtick was different for you, that it affected you different than it does the rest of us. When I first walked in here and you weren’t freakin’ out, I thought she might be right, but now, I ain’t so sure.”

Gathering the limp threads of strength inside his lungs, Tim manages to squeak out a fragile, honest whisper, “It… it is different, and it’s not. It’s… I… I have anxiety issues.”

“No shit,” Jason snorts under his breath – something that Tim, ridiculously enough, finds calming like complete acceptance rather than hears it as a pejorative.

“It means I – I can tell better when the panic isn’t real and shouldn’t be acted on,” Tim finishes, voice still weak and quiet but with his throat far less tight than when he started.

In a whisper of his own, Jason tells him, “Just because the fear is technically unfounded in the legit physical, that doesn’t mean it isn’t real.”

Tim’s response is nothing but a half shrug to allow Jason his opinion on the matter.

He knows that Jason doesn’t understand what he means – knows that Jason can’t get how the fear is fake and stupid because fearing the truth is useless and irrational – and he knows that he can’t
possibly articulate that to Jason, at all, probably, but certainly not while in his current, compromised state.

Jason can read well enough between the lines to be dissatisfied with Tim’s response. Thankfully, however, he doesn’t seem inclined to push the issue.

At least, not that issue.

Instead, he gives another heavy sigh and jumps back a bit to say, “You know, the others wanted to come runnin’ after you once they realized you’d been dosed.”

This time, it’s Tim’s turn to snort derisively.

“Nah, for real, Timbers,” Jason huffs, “Had a whole big debate on whether that shit about having them chase you down would actually do any good or not.”

“No. Not ‘for real’,” Tim contends bitterly. “They felt obligated to come, because they’re supposed to be ‘responsible’ for me, like I’m some kind of kid who can’t take care of himself.”

“You are a kid—” Jason attempts to point out before Tim cuts him off.

“Legally, I’m emancipated, therefore, not a kid,” Tim expounds sharply, adding, “They didn’t want to come for me. They wanted to come because it would ease their own frickin’ guilt complexes. Hell, you only came because it’s your damn apartment I ran to—”

“Fuck that,” Jason growls, “I came because you’re fucking high, moron, and nobody should be left alone with themselves like that… even when they do it to their own damn selves – especially when they do it to themselves, like you fuckin’ did by taking all those bomb blows when you didn’t fucking have to. I could’ve used the Hood to filter that shit out, just fine.”

“Bull. SHIT,” Tim grits out. “Your Hood was compromised, structurally; there’s no telling what the gas would’ve done to the electronics, and it would definitely have gotten down to you… and you don’t have any of the last few rounds of inoculations, and you’d never let us take you back to the Cave to get any of the neutralizers, and you’ve got too much body mass for the stuff I had on me to be effective, and—”

“And nothing, shrimp,” Jason retorts sharply. “If any of that shit’s true, why ain’t you at the Cave now, gettin’ all fawned over and neutralizer-ed up? You just didn’t think I could take that shit without going crazy and trying to kill everyone again.”

To be fair, Jason did threaten to kill Tim again. Even without being gassed.

But Tim doesn’t mention that, and it’s only a tiny smidgen of his brain that even notes the
factual nature of the observation.

Most of his brain is focused on the more important part of the sentiment.

“The only reason they would ever fawn over me is that they feel guilty about not doing well enough at it with you,” Tim reports with a heavy lamentation welling up under his tone, thick and wet enough to drown out most of the fight that had been rising within him.

Jason doesn’t respond immediately.

“They want you, Jason,” Tim says, mouth running in the lieu, “They’ve always wanted you to come back. I was… I wasn’t enough because I wasn’t you. I was a temporary place holder, at best. They never wanted me to be involved. They don’t like me bein’ a part of this, would’ve kicked me out long ago if they could’ve managed it.”

Tim has let his head drift downwards as he’s talked, and he’s mumbling into his knees by the end of his rambled confession.

It means that he hasn’t been watching Jason’s expression shift – means that he’s surprised when Jason snorts.

His head jerks up to see Jason giving him an unreadable look as he drawls, “I don’t think that anyone could stop you from doing whatever the hell you want. If they ever tried to stop you, it’s because they actually give a damn about your ass stayin’ alive – more than they ever gave about me, that’s for sure.”

The dark pit in Tim’s gut solidifies into something with vicious spikes.

“You didn’t see them After,” Tim says, low and quiet and somewhere stuck between angry and heartbroken. “You didn’t see how losing you destroyed them… The near misses with me, they weren’t – they didn’t… They helped the Family. If they actually lost me… I doubt—”

“Don’t,” Jason snarls. “Don’t even. If you’d died at any point in the last five years, none of the others would be alive right now. Hell, Gotham, herself would’ve probably gone under.”

Tim shrugs awkwardly.

As long as he died after Nightwing came home and Oracle was up and running… there might’ve been one or two spats with Ra’s that would’ve been difficult for the others to counter, but Lucius Fox would’ve noticed the encroachments on WE before it was too late to recover…

Tim isn’t a necessary player.

Never really has been, and certainly never will be if this debacle is the best he can offer.
Tim is a facilitator, he works in the shadows to nudge things along, but he’s not meant to be the central figure. He can be the face of WE, can take the scrutiny off of Brucie long enough for business to be done on both sides of sunrise. And he can wear the cape of Robin long enough for someone else to be trained up well enough to survive the gig. But that’s about it.

The others though… the others do things, accomplish things.

They matter in the bigger schemes of things.

And they need to really know that… but Tim’s apparently not very good at telling them.

Before he can fully sink into the angst of the memory of the last time he’d tried to tell them explicitly how much more important they are to the Mission than he is, Jason shifts – the sound of his movement amplified in the silence.

The implications of his movement – of his leaving – makes Tim’s head snap up.

A garbled noise escapes his throat, a strangled attempt to ask Jason to stay while he knows he has no right to say anything at all, let alone to ask for that.

Jason freezes. Asks, “What’s goin’ though your head, Baby Bird?”

Tim clamps his teeth down on an answer, but something in his face must give him away.

With a frown, and hands raised in surrender, Jason promises, “I ain’t goin’ anywhere.”

Stupid Fear Gas making his face feel too numb to know if he’s even remotely able to control his reactions the way he’s supposed to… the way he was trained to…

It’s irksome.

And it’s humiliating… but if it – for some reason – means that Jason won’t leave, means that Jason will tolerate him being here, will tolerate him being such a bother when the rest of the Family would just leave him to get his shit together and make himself useful again… maybe Tim’s almost okay with the idea of showing such weakness.
It’s not just anyone witnessing his histrionics, after all.

It’s Jason.

And that… that matters.

Because it’s Jason, and he’s alive, and here, and Tim is… Tim will do whatever it takes to keep things that way.

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say you’ll be there ( when the rest don’t show )

Chapter End Notes

Once again, y'all, THANK YOU. I love you all, and even if you can’t support me monetarily, I still think you’re all wonderful people! <3

NEXT TIME: Damian is forced to react to everything that’s been happening within the Family - and to confront the suppressed thoughts and feelings he has in relation to his place among the people in it.

(And again, the next chapter is currently available on my other page.)
Chapter Summary

Damian is forced to confront his own issues at the root of the Family's current crisis.

Chapter Notes

Heya! Once again, I want to thank you all for your amazing support!
And without further ado, onto angsty little Damian learning to understand his own feelings!

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Nine – *tell me (how to breathe)*

Drake is an incorrigible, supercilious point of stymied frustration among the Family, and he is vexingly adept at achieving his intended purposes – his menial abilities somehow function to serve his goals while creating unforgivable upheaval amid the Family, even within its otherwise sensible members.

Even within in Damian, himself.

And now…

Damian doesn’t even know where to begin with sorting himself out.

He barely understands the broad stakes in this conflict, let alone the true costs or advantages of supporting any given side of it.

Damian wants to agree wholesale with Father, because that is what a dutiful son is supposed to do – and Damian is nothing if not a keen instrument of Father’s will. There are many things that Father does that Damian does not agree with, things that he does not understand enough to make sense of Father’s undisclosed reasonings, but Damian always obeys Father’s commands – accepting that Father is as correct as his role as patriarch presumes.

But in this… Well, in *this*, Father has chosen to assume blame…
It was his fault, Father had said… It was his choices that had led Drake to make his moronic leaps of judgement, and Father said his own inadequacies were what had pushed Todd away years before to make him run off to Ethiopia without sufficient skill to survive or the reinforcements to compensate.

Father had capitulated totally, assumed the entirety of the blame for the weakness and idiocy displayed by both Todd and Drake. And Damian doesn’t understand.

It simply does not compute.

Such absurdities. Such coddling.

Father must have his reasons for saying such things, and Damian does not expect to be given an explanation of those reasons, but the confusion he feels regarding Father’s choice to assume blame in this argument, to assume it so wholly on the rooftop with the entire Family assembled to be informed of it, has led him to question whether he should side with Father as firmly as he wants to in this case – whether he even could side with Father as he theoretically ought to, as his filial duty demands.

Because… because even Grayson does not side with Father in this, not completely.

Grayson has placed blame on Father’s shoulders, just as firmly as Father has self assumed the need to carry it.

That alone is strange enough, but that the blame Grayson has levied against Father means that he does not support Father’s endeavor to extract Drake from the situation he’s made for himself is an observation that sits uncomfortably in Damian’s gut.

Grayson has never before proactively stood against Father’s course.

He and Gordon, both.

They both have directly asserted that Father is not suited to pursuing Drake on his ridiculous excursion… and Damian… understands that defiance more acutely than he is comfortable with admitting.

If he had somehow been negligent enough to allow himself to be dosed with Fear Gas… Father would not be a presence at his bedside that brought any sense of relief.

Damian knows that Father respects his right as the Blood Heir, and that Father acknowledges how much better suited he is to filling the roles that being heir entails than any of the others, but with the distortions of a drug clouding his logical capacities… Father would be an unwelcome presence at his sickbed, a mortifying witness to his weakness.

Certainly, Damian would handle the humiliation better than the others – accepting his due
shame with a stoic reserve and a vow to improve himself, but even he can recognize that it would be a difficult burden.

*Drake* would not handle it well, not well at all.

While Drake’s quiet removal of himself from the scene to handle his debilitation under his own power is something Damian finds uncharacteristically rational, the Pretender would react far more problematically than Damian were Father to seek him out under these conditions.

So… Damian agrees with Grayson, agrees that Father should not seek out the Pretender — more because Father should not lower himself to such pettiness as babysitting an errant imbecile than for Drake’s personal wellbeing, but still, the result is the same.

And Grayson certainly can’t be expected to babysit the Pretender during his lie in — though, inexplicably, it seems as though he’s desperate to do just that. Or to have someone he trusts do it in his stead — as Grayson seems to believe that he’s *undeserving* of the onerous duty due to his legitimate failing to keep Drake restrained to begin with.

*Fatgirl* can’t possibly be tasked with anything so delicate, though Damian cedes that Brown *has* proven to have some sort of knack for wrangling Drake’s wilder tendencies.

It should be someone *responsible* who does go to retrieve the idiotic Pretender — meaning that considering Father’s abstinence and Grayson’s emotional compromise, it should be Damian himself or Cain who corrals Drake back to the Manor.

But… the others… they’ve made it seem like simply corralling the moronic weakling is not the only goal, they’ve made it seem like getting him to speak candidly about his current concerns is of prime importance.

Which is ridiculous.

Drake would never show such weakness as to openly discuss his difficulties — be they physical, mental, or emotional. It’s one of the very few things Damian can grudgingly admit to bearing a certain amount of respect for regarding Drake.

But still, if the others want Drake to talk, they won’t be satisfied until Drake talks.

Which means this idiocy will drag on endlessly unless the proper catalyst can be found to prompt Drake to such egregious insanity.

Perhaps it’s their particular *history* together, but Brown proves herself not totally inadequate by contributing the idea that Todd should go talk to Drake in this crisis.
Drake has always been fixated on Todd, to the point of broad delusion. Even if Drake won’t willingly speak of his dire weaknesses to anyone, the confusion of his current state combined with the apparition of the object of his insane obsession might tip him past the edge of rationality enough to allow his secrets to spill.

It’s a chink in Drake’s armor that could be exploited by a villain and one that Damian knows must be corrected in the future (though he may have to see to it himself, as the others will be too soft about how Drake has a humanizing connection with Todd to see how at risk that vulnerability places the rest of the Family), but for now, it’s a useful angle to work.

Damian announces agreement with Brown’s plan, elaborates on it further, and reluctantly accepts the burden of being the one to babysit his pathetic predecessors – Cain points out in a blur of hand signals that, as the one who had the idea and the one who so keenly understands its inalienable worth, Damian is the one to which the responsibility of seeing it through falls to by default.

Her logic is reasonable, even if her bizarre display of affection before rushing off is outrageous and unsettling. Leaves him feeling queasy and disquiet.

Damian successfully keeps himself from attempting to wipe off the nonexistent residue of Cain’s affection and announces his departure by requesting the gps coordinates of his target destination from Oracle.

With dutiful immediacy, Gordan prattles off the location and gives a slew of more straightforward directions. She pauses, though, in the aftermath… in a tense lilt of silence that Damian has learned to read as ‘hesitance’ from her—an uncharacteristic weakness from Gordon that comes rarely enough to ensure that Damian doesn’t abjectly disparage it.

He waits in a graciously patient silence for the time it takes to travel four whole blocks by rooftop before Gordon speaks up, saying softly, “Thank you for doing this, Damian. Truly.”

Damian tsks noncommittally, careful to mask the fact that he’s not even remotely certain of how to appropriately respond to such a blunt statement of permeating gratitude.

Particularly one that he is certain is entirely undue.

He is not doing this for Drake.

Or even for Father.

He might be convincing to say that he is doing this for Grayson, but even that feels rather more disproportionately untrue than not.

To be perfectly candid, Damian is… not wholly sure of why he is even doing this at all.

It could be as simple as being the mere product of exhaustion and circumstance.

But that explanation doesn’t sit correctly either. The queasy disquiet from earlier redoubles in
his gut, swirling with a pinch of... apprehension.

“I know that you and Tim haven’t had the smoothest of relationships,” Gordon rambles on, voice still dripping with that slimy sentimentality. “But, I hope you know he loves you.”

Damian bites down hard with the effort it takes not to scoff blatantly.

‘Love’ is a foolish enough concept on its own to be easily dismissive of Gordon’s claim, but to suggest that the Pretender loves him? Ridiculous.

The Pretender is not so sentimental, so emotional.

Drake hardly even bothers to muster up a pretense of emotion when Grayson directly demands it of him on such occasions as holidays. Drake’s cool logic and emotionless calm pervade even in the most histrionic of circumstances – any degree of crisis notwithstanding.

It’s one of the rare attributes of his that Damian truly, and almost openly, admires.

The Pretender might respect him, but only as such respect is due.

Damian is a valuable asset and the Blood Heir; it would be an insult – both to Damian’s person and to Drake’s mildly impressive intelligence – for him to do anything but respect him.

And Drake might proactively appreciate Damian’s input and his abilities, but a few words of thanks and direct acknowledgement of Damian’s contributions (even when the others would be forgiven for assuming that any developments were solely Drake’s doing) is not the sort of sappy affection that Damian associates with the delusion of ‘love’.

Only Grayson can manage that sort of idiocy.

Even Mother, who is utterly devoted to Father as her ‘beloved’, assesses Father’s value on more practical principles than familial attachment or romantic interest.

And Father… Father’s romantic entanglement with that woman… with that Kyle woman… it’s an entanglement that is rooted deeply to Father’s core, a clear bias of sentiment, but even that is clearly a result of how compatible they are as true equals. Neither of them will admit to their obvious attachment, or make any more to make strident progress with developing their currently stagnated but pervasive intimacy, which simply proves to support Damian’s idea of love as nothing more than emotional drivel leading to illogical idiocy.

The only person with whom ‘love’ is not directly associated with insanity for Damian is the Family most worthy and loyal constituent: Alfred Pennyworth.

Pennyworth is… he is centered and certain. And when he speaks, it is with direly considered
words and the weight of absolute resolve behind them.

And when Pennyworth says that he loves Damian, Damian believes him.

He even believes it when Pennyworth says that Father loves him – and it doesn’t make him want to scoff at the ridiculousness of the sentiment.

Father is not required to ‘love’ Damian, as Grayson seeks to convincingly insist.

Damian is the Blood Son, the Rightful Heir, and the only child of the household meant to be innately Favored – though, even Damian admits to having been genuinely and legitimately required to earn that particular right, and is still surely expected to defend it.

Because, he can admit if only to himself and only tangentially, that he does have a certain degree of competition. Primarily from Drake.

Grayson is no threat, to his position as heir or his place as favored. If anything, Grayson favors him with even more conviction than Father. And Grayson himself has formally separated from Father’s line of succession by developing his own life in Bludhaven.

Todd is the antithesis of a threat to his position. Still legally dead, Todd has no avenue to pursue a place as Heir, should he even desire to attempt it (which Damian would stake his life on betting that he would never even consider it). And while Todd may have once been Favored… his caustic personality and his destructive evolution into Red Hood has ensured that only animosity now exists with any significance between him and Father.

Gordon and Brown and Cain are female, and perfectly reasonable and rational (and therefore respectful of their places outside the main line of contention for the rights of succession), and as such they are no burden on the Family to bear.

But Drake…

Drake is different.

Drake is consummate Heir to his own company, and runs it competently enough to prove he has the merit of established skill in being considered to inherit Wayne Enterprises.

He is already a respected figure on the company’s board of directors.

Damian is not. And worse, Damian is not particularly keen on becoming one.

And even if he tries his best, Drake will have a significant head start and… Damian can admit that Drake has a substantial bit of skill at such social maneuvers as required in Business.
Drake is a threat.

And… and Grayson and Father and Gordon and Brown and Cain, and even Pennyworth, all openly shower him with affection, and care, and ‘love’…

He accepts it with grace, and returns the sentiments in a manner that’s somehow absent of emotional idiocy… and Damian… Damian has to admit to having learned how to accept Grayson’s overtures largely from watching Drake’s interactions with him.

But Drake is weak.

So unbearably weak.

For a Bat, at least.

Damian’s killed countless warriors, but at ten years old he should not have been able to best a Bat in honorable combat. That he only just managed to secure the upper hand with Drake in a fight that was not quite honorable combat makes sense because he was trained by Father.

By Father, Lady Shiva, Mother, Grandfather, and countless others – many of whom Damian is certain Drake has willfully neglected to disclose.

Drake has been trained by the absolute best, and he is still so frightfully weak.

Damian can still sneak up on him.

Even Brown can sneak up on him and her shameless plodding through the Manor is a travesty of raucous noise.

Without the Family, Drake would not survive for long.

In order to garner favor with the other Family members, and in order to protect the Family from the almost inevitable moment when Drake’s inattentiveness gets him killed, Damian has taken it upon himself to continuously test Drake – to ensure that he stays aware and alert and capable of defending himself.

Grudgingly, Damian can accept that Drake’s pitiable weakness is only a true concern within the bounds of the Manor or his own penthouse Nest apartment, but still… it’s a folly to relax when supposedly ‘safe at home’, as that is precisely when the worst will happen.

Damian has maintained his diligence with pushing Drake to improve himself, though the initial aim of garnering favor with the others for his good deed has proved less than viable – as they
seem to find his persistence with attacking the Family’s weakest link disturbing.

Drake has pronounced vehement frustrations (strong enough to nearly rival Damian’s own frustration with Drake’s lack of progress), and he has complained to the Family’s other members repeatedly… but he has yet to directly retaliate.

Drake responds, establishes himself as being on even ground when Damian attacks, but he never takes it further – and he never initiates a fight.

It’s a tolerance… an acceptance, almost, that Damian used to think was simply resignation to the inevitability of it – Drake is weak and Damian would have to continue attacking him until he was no longer weak, and since Drake was not improving in any discernable way, Damian would have to persist endlessly.

But aside from disparaging comments and the occasional glare over breakfast, Drake has made no move to proactively stop Damian from attacking.

And… and Drake gives Damian pointers as they fight, less obvious ones than the taunts he lobbs at Drake, but legitimate advice nonetheless… and Damian has come to… not rely on, exactly, but to… to deeply appreciate that advice. Drake’s suggestions have helped polish off some of Damian’s own rough edged weaknesses.

But Drake is still weak.

And that weakness is rearing its head here, risking his life and sanity on a whim.

The election to remove himself to privacy was reasonable, but it was only the final decision in a long string of irrational choices that held any sense of sanity.

If this does not go well, if Drake triggers Todd and either of them die here… the Family will not recover. Damian is not well versed in the consequences of emotional turmoil or similar strife, but he does know that the Family is fragile, and this could break it beyond repair.

So, Damian settles into place on the rooftop across the street from Todd’s derelict excuse for a safe house with a decent view of the bedroom where he can just barely see the edge of Drake’s knee from where he’s curled up under Todd’s desk. He gets out his binoculars and the parabolic microphone and props everything securely into place for a stakeout.

It’s not for a long few moments into his vigil that Todd appears – looking sufficiently refreshed so as to not be overly jarring to a distraught Drake.

He stands in the center of the room like a wild animal caught in a glaring spot light.

Wary, worried, and most of all, disconcerted.

Lost and drifting on a vast ocean.

But also… like he’s looking at the shore…
As promised, Damian keeps the mic keyed to a filter that keeps the quiet words private, but he can read the tension in Todd’s posture as he moves to sit beside the bed.

Only a few moments later, a disturbance in Damian’s peripheries makes him draw his katana, though he doesn’t take his eyes off the window. He recognizes the shadow approaching him from a respectful distance: it’s Todd’s country bumkin best friend, Roy Harper.

“State your intentions.”

Harper simply chuckles at Damian’s demand.

“I’m just here to say ‘thank you’, brat,” he huffs.

“You have no reason to thank me, nothing I am doing is at all meant for your benefit intentionally,” Damian retorts, earning another low laugh.

With a shake of his head, Harper sighs. “I know, kid,” he admits, “Don’t care, though. I don’t have any best friends to spare here, so you lookin’ out for the one I do got… well, it means somethin’ to me, even if it don’t mean anything to you.”

“It doesn’t mean anything to me,” Damian insists. He’s not attempting to reaffirm the sentiment, but something about it sits poorly inside him and he feels compelled to add a clarification, cementing the linguistic correction as merely that, “Your grammar is atrocious.”

“Don’t care ‘bout that much, neither,” Harper repeats and then insists, “And I think… I think you do care, somewhat. About both of ‘em. I know I do, even if Jay’s the one I care about most. Either way though, carin’ or not carin’, you bein’ here is keepin’ Jay safe. So… thanks… for that… seriously, kid. I mean it: shukraan lakum, li’anak tamasuk qalbi.”

Damain covers his surprise with a snort.

“Your pronunciation is appalling,” he lies brusquely.

“No, it ain’t, gremlin,” Harper retorts confidently as he sidles back around and hops down to the easy exit of the fire escape. “And it don’t matter much, but I’m glad you do care.”

Damian doesn’t respond, not even with a vague iteration of the sharply disparaging comment Harper’s assertion deserves. And he can’t quite calm himself enough to sheathe his katana until long after the unhealthy diesel chug of Harper’s truck fades into the quiet echoes of the tremulously calm night.

He is unsettled.

Partly by Harper’s words, and partly by his own anxieties.
Damian has been feeling deeply disquieted since this fiasco began when Drake first went missing on patrol all those weeks ago.

He’s not quite certain what the root cause of it all is, or even if there is a singular cause at the center of this anxious knot of tension in his gut.

At base, Damian wants to place the whole of the blame on Drake’s shoulders – even for the tangential concerns he’s felt clawing at the shadows of his brain.

After all, it’s Drake’s fault for making Grayson fret like an old maid, for making Grayson brush up so coarsely with Todd that the barbs of all their past disputes reopen old wounds… It’s Drake’s fault for making Damian see how he and Todd compare, and how the esteem that Grayson bears for him is built on the fragile framework of a temporary delusion…

It has become painfully clear to Damian that if Todd is the benchmark of evil that the Bats are currently operating on, Damian is an abjectly horrible human being.

And he doesn’t mind it. He only minds that Grayson will be saddened by the revelation.

That Grayson will inevitably withdraw his support and confidence, his approval… and his affection… Which is something frivolous and useless that Damian never even wanted to have, but now realizes he will have to mourn losing.

It… it hurts to think that, to even avoid thinking it – the notion lurks in the recesses of his brain as an almost solid entity that cannot be willfully dismissed.

And it hurts to sit here watching Todd demonstrate why it’s so inevitable that Grayson will eventually renounce his claims on Damian…

As the grandson of the Demon’s Head, Damian knows the workings of the Pit better than almost anyone alive. And he knows that the fact that Todd has any cognizance at all is utterly miraculous, but that he’s using the Pit’s vile power to fuel his crusade to do good is unheard of…

That he can sit across from the object at the center of his Pit crazed fixation, the person whom Mother had arranged for him to feel a visceral need to kill… that Todd can sit there and… and care… Damian can hardly fathom it.

Because Todd so clearly does care.

He cares about all of Gotham’s wretched and lonely and broken, he cares about them in a way that even Father doesn’t – despite his Rule, and despite Todd’s routine flouting of it.

And he cares about Drake in a way that makes Damian… not uncomfortable, but… a bit awkward and like he’s out of his depth. It makes his insides feel ‘squiggly’, to use a crassly childish,
but crucially specific descriptor… and he doesn’t understand why.

Damian has no cause care for Todd’s well being, he hardly knows the man and what he does know is primarily related to how he causes the rest of the Family strife. He may admit to bearing a few similarities to the man, namely in Todd’s perspectives on ensuring the complete erasure of the criminal element they are Crusading against (and he may admit to understanding Todd’s frustrations with the Family’s disdain for such an effective and permanent solution), but that topical similarity is not enough to breed the weakness of empathy within him.

Or… at least it shouldn’t be…

But seeing Todd’s tortured expression as his nearly silent conversation with Drake progresses makes Damian… make’s his lungs clench and his gut churn and his whole being simply aches with something tight and worried.

His mind jumps back to Harper’s accusation that he cares… and now, alone on the rooftop and inside the privacy of his own head, Damian can admit that there may be some truth to the statement. He… feels for Todd, for his plight…

But that’s not enough to explain the churning in his gut.

That is anxiety, not sympathy…

And it’s… it’s not for Todd’s security.

It’s for Drake.

Damian can see plain as day that Todd doesn’t want to hurt Drake, not in the way he wants to hurt the scum he guns down without mercy in Crime Alley.

But Todd does want to hurt him in a more nebulous manner, in a more acute and painful manner… Todd wants to hurt him just enough to keep him from hurting himself or the Family by being such a weak link in the chain.

It makes Damian reassess his own intentions for performing such similar actions.

Damian harps on Drake’s tardiness when Red Robin is delayed on returning from a mission by an unexpected difficulty (things he usually faced alone in silence rather than acknowledging his weakness and calling for backup, and frequently resulting in injury).

And he works diligently to force Drake to be more spatially aware, to hone his instincts and training to defend against the inevitable attacks that even his admittedly well crafted mind cannot plan ahead to circumvent…

And he criticizes Drake’s pervasive weakness and his lackluster skill to encourage him to train better – not just working harder and longer at a dummy or on a stationary target, but at sparring directly with opponents of diverse abilities in varied environments and states of mind.
Because, as Mother drilled into him from very early on, there is no way to truly prepare for fighting in a real battle other than fighting in a genuine contest for individual survival.

A true warrior can only learn to fight by fighting.

And Damian knows without a shred of doubt that only true warriors could ever have what it takes to survive the world’s harshest realities…

And Drake is not prepared for that…

How he’s stayed alive this long is baffling to Damian.

He’s read the files on Drake’s training and case history, even the files put into the Bat computer long after the inciting incidents and carefully crafted to hide the most dangerous elements of the missions. Even with the twisting about of details to make things appear less fraught with danger, Red Robin’s history is pockmarked with things that should have killed him.

And Damian… doesn’t like that… that uncertainty…

He needs to be certain that his allies will survive anything thrown at them.

He needs to know that they will all be able to keep themselves alive without his own constant vigilance in watching over them.

Damian needs to feel secure in the notion that they will be okay…

All of them.

Including Drake.

Because he does care for Drake.

As more than just an asset or a liability for the Family.

Damian… Damian cares about Drake… cares about his rival… about his brother.

He cares about his brother.

It’s a revelation that shakes something loose in Damian, that somehow eases the ache of tension that he’s been feeling. It doesn’t alleviate the pressure of anxiety entirely (Drake is still in frightfully close proximity to a man with deranged tendencies to lash out with lethal force at those he professes to care about, after all), but it makes breathing a little bit easier.
Somehow.

Damian doesn’t understand it… any of it…

But his lack of understanding in this somehow doesn’t make his stomach swim with a toxic excess of bile. His lack of understanding here can simply be folded up and pushed aside.

It’s not enough… but it’s a brief blip of stability in his currently chaotic mental landscape and Damian wants nothing more than to take full advantage of it.

His job right now is simple and he intends to perform to the best of his abilities, whether that performance is purely for the benefit of Father’s approval of his clear usefulness or for the additional benefit of soothing his own apparently deep rooted concerns for his Family’s safety.

Damian has a job to do, and nothing will stop him from doing it.

Tell me how to breathe ( and feel no hurt )
meaning later.)

NEXT TIME: Steph also confronts her feelings, and really takes time out to detox from all the drama.
Chapter Summary

Steph gets back to the Cave and works through a lot of the issues she's been pushing down beneath the pretense of being okay enough to carry on without slowing down. And thinking about the things that matter brings her through a few very significant conclusions... about who she is and wants to be, about how she and Tim still fit together, and how both of them fit better with someone else...

Chapter Notes

*waves*

So this chapter is going up early because I'm going to be spending the week with my Associated Human and AH's extended Family, someplace in Upstate NY, so I've not got the foggiest clue as to whether or not I'll have time / internet access to post tomorrow!

Now, on to Steph being a little bit slower than some, but so much more sane and logical and centered than most:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty - go (with me)

Steph does not take her time in walking up the hidden driveway into the Cave.

After Dick drops her off and the roar of his bike’s engine fades to muted echoes, Steph takes off at a jog that’s only just shy of being a dead sprint.

She’s breathing hard and lost inside the swirl of adrenaline and exercise induced endorphins before she even hits the mats.

There’s a slew of dummies still set up on half the training floor (honestly, they’re a pretty perpetual presence… Since no one’s ever calm enough to consider putting them away for long… they only ever get shoved around a little to change up the attack patterns now and then).

Steph dives into her ‘stress out’ (because ‘de-stressing attempt via work out’ is way too much of a mouthful to type into her calendar, and she needs these to be regular occurrences, with cheery bell reminders for when she gets too stressed to realize she needs to de-stress) and tries her best to sink into the heady oblivion of hard exertion.

Hitting, and getting hit back by, the dummies keeps her focus on the present, up close and
personal like with every single second.

She’s gonna have more bruises from this not exactly ‘training session’ than from the actual fights she got into over the course of the hella long and eventful evening.

But stress outs are always like that. It’s good they’re like that.

The Bats are all pretty self punishing folks, and while Steph likes to pretend he’s above that nonsense, she does still feel the urge to punish herself for things even when she knows it’s not her fault… knows they’re not anyone’s fault.

These stress outs are the only step she’ll ever allow herself take to act on the urge.

They’re as far as she’s willing to let herself go.

Because she’s seen how stupid and destructive the spiral can get.

Hell… it’s a part of why she and Tim could never really work out together, not in the long run. He’s got it bad, through and through, and it hurts Steph too much to see it to do what needs to be done if wants half a hope of stopping any of it.

She can coax and nudge and gripe and cry… and Tim tries, he really does, she’s seen how hard he’s tried for her… but nothing she can do will ever be enough to really help. Not in a way that does more than draw out the self destruct into a slower sort of impending doom and agony.

Trying to fix it, trying to work with him to make it better… all it ever really ended up doing was an awful lot to hurt them both.

It’s how they got to here, kinda.

They tried to fix Tim when he didn’t want to be fixed, tried to convince with soft words and then hold him back with brute force until the soft words worked and it all just backfired and now Tim’s on a runaway ride of Fear Gas, alone with the only psychopath in the multiverse he might actually ask to be killed by.

But, psychopath or not, Jason won’t kill Tim.

Steph has to believe that.

She can’t let herself dwell on the case reports that leave an awful lot of questions open about how in the hell Tim survived what Jason had done to him… how he’d somehow kept breathing after Jason had been done with him for long enough to be rescued.

Tim had said that Jason had made sure help had always arrived in time to actually save him… Steph had pretty much dismissed the statement every time it came up, but now… now she’s thinking he was sayin’ it for a reason… a scarier reason, almost… a reason that says Jason stuck around for a while after the damage had been done… stuck around and kept Tim teetering.

She’s not sure if she can convince herself that Jason stuck around purely to save him.
While Tim clearly believe that’s the unadulterated truth of it, Steph thinks the whole Pit Crazed Psycho Show that she’s been binge watching these past few weeks makes that more complicated... makes seems more like a game, like a will he or won’t he kind of daisy chaining, with instead of kisses being counted it was Tim’s next breath, or his last breath... decided in an eeney-meeny pluck of flower petals...

(The spiral she’s on distracts Steph enough to make her get whacked, square in the face, with the spinning protrusion of the dummy she just elbowed swinging back around. Jarring her back to the stress out in exactly the way she has always counted on it to do.)

But Jason won’t kill Tim.

He’s always chosen not to... really chosen, as Tim has always said he had and as she can see now quite distinctly... even if the ‘choosing’ circumstances don’t seem very stable to her.

So, Jason won’t kill Tim.

She believes it... she does...

She believes it... because... well, not just because she has to in order to stay sane... but because... because she believes that Jason loves Tim enough to do what she couldn’t...

That Jason loves Tim enough to accept him.

Tim’s self flagellation and self loathing and his visceral disdain for all his imagined faults and failings... Steph had tried to fix it. She’d seen it as a problem to be solved and nothing more, just a twist of the weirdness in basic human brain chemistry playing tricks on him.

But... it’s not that simple.

Shouldn’t be reduced like that, essentialized as its own object that’s entirely removed from Tim as a person...

It’s a part of who Tim is... a part of what makes him Tim.

His drive for perfection and his hatred of failure, his anxieties over short comings, they’re both cause and effect of his exacting nature – part and parcel of the precision and cleverness and constant calculation that he brings to every aspect of his existence.

While his self neglect is heart breaking, and while the rigors of his self inflicted punishments are dangerous, and while all of it is genuinely problematic... it’s not something that ever could be ‘fixed’... because it’s part of who Tim IS and therefore needs to be... it needs to be acknowledged in a different way than Steph is capable of doing.

But she thinks – hopes, really, if she’s being honest, she hopes that maybe Jason can.

Because Jason’s not a ‘soft words’ kind of guy (not in this anyway, she’s never seen him with kids or animals but... well, if the grouchy little gremlin’s any litmus test... Jason’s probably something of a saint with them by most reckonings... weird as that might be to consider).
Jason’s not the kind of guy to plead with Tim to be better, that he has to be better, for both their sakes… Jason’s the kind of guy who will respect Tim’s choices as choices, but also as something more fundamental than that. He’s not the type to try forcing Tim to be better, but the kind that might convince him that it’s okay not to be… The type to make him want to believe it.

And that might just make the difference.

Hard words, soft gestures…

Instead of trying to convince Tim gently to try, Jason can wield an honest blow of disagreement with Tim’s choices. And instead of trying to force Tim into doing or not doing something, by physically restricting his options, Jason can coax with soft support.

If Steph had been able to figure that out years ago, she and Tim might be in a very different place right now.

But she didn’t.

And Jason did.

At least, she thinks he did.

He’s certainly been demonstrating the skillful execution of the sentiment.

All through the fighting tonight, he’d been harassing Tim’s decision to involve himself while too hurt and exhausted to be effective at keeping himself alive (between the snarky barbs of flirting, at least). Jason had disparaged Tim’s choices, while still sticking close beside him in such a way so as to protect him without smothering him.

It could’ve been instinctive, Steph supposes, but if it was, Jason’s got better instincts than the rest of them combined.

And… and Steph can almost let herself trust in him.

To trust him… with everything, honestly, even with Tim.

Because he loves Tim in a way that Steph never could… loves him in a way that makes Steph’s chest ache with hurt and longing, but also… Jason loves him in a way that makes Steph see how her own love for him is based on wishes, hopes, and dreams… that it’s illusory in some ways, a love of possibilities as much as it is love for the actual person.

Jason loves Tim in a way that doesn’t even make Steph jealous… or… won’t make her jealous, eventually. It’s already not so much jealousy as it is mourning.
What she and Tim had will always be special to her, and she does need a bit more time to truly move on entirely from it, but… already, the jealous ache is being soothed by the clear potential for Tim to be truly happy.

He will always be more than a brother to her, but the idea of Tim no longer holds her heart captive in the way it once did.

And she’s… she’s almost okay with that… she’s learning to be, at least… and that’s more than good enough for now.

Even if she is a bit tear streaked as she finally gives into the pain and exhaustion begging her to step away from the training dummies.

She feels hollow and empty as she drags herself towards the showers, but… in a cathartic way rather than a damaging one. It’s different… and it’s good.

As she’s stripping off her uniform’s endless layers of armor and fabric en route to the showers, Steph spots Cass sitting cross legged on the flat plain of a work bench set higher up in the Cave’s multifaceted terracing.

A curl of something like shame pulls at her belly as she wonders how long Cass has been sitting there. She’s not… embarrassed, exactly, that Cass saw her, but she is… saddened, she guesses, by being such a clear cause of worry to the girl.

Cass is the biggest bad ass Steph has ever come across, and she doesn’t like being the thing that makes such a strong person have to sit with such worry.

Steph lingers in her shower as long as she can.

Which, on later reflection, isn’t all that long with how freakin’ beat she is.

But it’s still long enough that Steph doesn’t expect to see Cass still sitting on her perch when she comes back out to the main floor.

As Steph collects the pieces of her uniform while trying to balance with the towering twist of the towel wrapped around her hair, she keeps throwing glances over to where Cass is watching her from. And with each glance she reaffirms that Cass is worried.

Steph tosses her uniform in the laundry, puts the plate armor and outer layers back in their cases, and then cuddles deeper into the soft warmth of her sweats before heading up the path to the House. Her course takes her right up to where Cass is sitting, to within an arm’s easy reach of the epic ninja lady…

But of course, it doesn’t take such a big gesture for Steph to stop at Cass’s clear request.

A simple blink does it.

Steph is good at reading Cass, after all, one of the best, even among the Bats.
But even so, she still can’t quite read the full depth of the expression currently swirling with vicious phantasms inside Cass’s dark eyes.

“Sad,” Cass states with confusion coloring her tone.

Steph cocks a pitiful attempt at a half smile, not that Cass would ever accept a thin veneer of happiness in lieu of an explanation.

“Tim safe,” Cass affirms, calm and confident in the way she always is, in the way she never says anything she’s not entirely certain of. “So. Why sad?”

“Tim’s safe,” Steph repeats with a thickly laden sigh, proving to both herself and to Cass that she honestly believes it. “I just… I miss him, I guess. I miss us.”

It’s not exactly true, and Steph knows it, but she’s not sure how else to say it.

And explaining things to Cass is tricky even when she’s not dead on her feet.

Steph doesn’t want to mislead Cass, but she also doesn’t want to have to explain the whole jealous/not-jealous thing she’s got going on behind her headache. It hurts enough as it is, and that’s without admitting it aloud to the one person Steph’s ever met who’s cool enough to be legitimately confused by such pretty emotionalities.

“I’m just tired and scared and… and lonely,” Steph confesses with a shrug that curls her deeper into the comfort of her sweatshirt’s phantom hug.

She is lonely.

That’s definitely true.

That’s the jealous bit, and some of the not-so-jealous bit, both aligned to feel the loss of Tim in bed beside her. On a night like this, when her emotions and her body had both been put through the ringer… Tim wouldn’t ask questions. He wouldn’t ask because he didn’t need the exact answers of why to know that she was hurting.

All that was important was that she was hurting, and Tim was smart enough to know it.

He would snuggle up close with her, not holding her exactly, but being close and warm and curled together in a mess of limbs and love and safety.

The cool sheets of an empty bed would feel good on her sore muscles, but… but she thinks right now that she’d rather ache and feel safe and wanted.

She’s so far gone on the exhaustion front that she might’ve dozed off there for a second because she’s caught completely by surprise as Cass’s hand whips out to grab her forearm.

“Not lone,” Cass insists, giving her forearm a gentle squeeze.
It makes something squeeze at the inside of Steph’s throat, makes the tears well up in her eyes again like twelve year old sap. Cass pulls on her forearm, tugging her close – close enough to make her have to sidle halfway up on the workbench. Half sitting, half standing, Steph is enveloped by a crushing hug that pulls her flush against Cass’s warmth, that wraps her in the solid frickin’ steel of Cass’s super ninja muscled figure.

It feels good, good enough to break through all of her defenses, all of her Gotham grit gained from growing up on the wrong sides of the tracks.

Good enough to make her give in and let the tears flow freely.

She bawls like a god damn baby, leaning into Cass like a rock in the fricken ocean.

It would’ve been unbearably embarrassing if it had been anybody else… though, to be frank it probably wouldn’t have happened to her with anybody else. Steph could hold in the tears (she’d learned the importance of doing so the first time she’d met a playground bully).

But Cass could always get her to fess up.

Without even trying really.

It’s pathetic. It’s not fair.

But it’s the truth.

And eventually, after she cries herself out, Steph feels better for it… though that exhaustion she’s been trying to pretend away feels heavier and more tangible than ever.

She’s not sure she’s entirely awake for the whole trip up to her bedroom, but with Cass leading (ie strong arming it up like Steph is just a rag doll), it’s not really a problem.

When they reach her bed, Cass doesn’t just let Steph collapse into it. Instead, she gingerly lower’s Steph’s semi-conscious form into a cozy nest of covers.

Which puts Cass at an angle that’s easy to latch onto as Steph mumbles that she doesn’t want to be alone just yet, that makes it easy for them both to just kind of sink into the softness and warmth of being safe… of being home.

And, even if she’s not there yet, Steph knows she’s on the way to being truly okay.

It’s all terrifying in its own way, but it’s a helluva lot better than the other possibility.
Steph can let Tim go, can trust that Jason will take care of him, and she can even do a little growing up herself.

Curléd up with Cass, Steph comes to feel like maybe it’s not so awful after all.

At some point about halfway through that thought, Steph falls completely asleep and for the first time in far too long a time, her sleep is peaceful, and her dreams are sweet.

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go with me ( through the dark )

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Steph...

You know, I typically don’t like reading about Steph’s perspective, and even writing it’s not my favorite (I think I just resonate a little TOO closely with her sometimes to be comfy with it), but she’s just such a crucial view point to step back with and see the rest of the Family... I just ADORE her at some moments.

Anyway, now I have to spend a week with a new family that seems to like me so much more than my blood related family that I don’t really know how to handle it just yet... Like even the PETS are nicer... So ciao! And I hope y’all have a great week!

<3
just for tonight (give up)

Chapter Summary

Cass's PoV of Steph's stress out, with a little forward progress as Tim makes it home.

Chapter Notes

The vacation with the Associated Human was AMAZING. (I have never empathized more with how lost Jason feels when first being introduced to Alfred's honest CARING... like AH's Family is the nicest family I've ever met to the point that I'm still not entirely convinced it can possibly be legit...).

Anywho, here's Cass watching Steph and trying to sort out her own feelings after realizing that even she can't stay entirely above the chaos of being part of a Family.

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty One - just for tonight (give up)

It hurts watching Steph.

It hurts like nothing Cass has ever felt before.

She doesn’t have the words to describe it, doesn’t have the colors to manage it.

Which means there’s no chance in the universe that Cass has the ability to form the right words to fix it… To fix how she feels, or fix whatever Steph is feeling…

Cass can’t do a thing about any of it.

The only thing, the only big thing, that she can think of that could be pushing Steph to hurt like this – to hurt enough to need to work herself into exhaustion – is Tim. And Jason.

But that’s taken care of.
Tim’s going to be okay.

Jason’s going to make sure of it.

And then Tim’s going to bring Jason back into the Family and they’ll all be able to move forward from here… they’ll finally be able to truly start to heal, all of them. Together.

It’s set.

All that’s left in question is how long the intervals between each step will last.

And Cass bets they won’t be very drawn out.

This whole thing has been… horrible… but it’s also good.

Cathartic… or Cathartic… rather. Xuānxiè, release.

It’s been awful, but it’s also good.

And Cass is usually good at recognizing, and more crucially, good with accepting that.

But it still hurts. This still hurts.

When Steph got back to the Cave she went straight to the training mats, not even half a glance around the massive space for a cursory awareness of who else might be there.

She’s on the brink of collapse when she finally steps away.

She’s ‘absolutely wrecked’, as Steph would say, wiped out entirely in body and in mind.

It makes Cass ache.

Her gut is tight and churning, and her lungs are taught with the weight of something thick and suffocating stuffing them to capacity – drowning her on dry land.

The feeling doesn’t ease as Steph makes her way over to the showers, glancing up just briefly – but for long enough that Cass knows she spotted Cass observing her.

Cass sighs as Steph disappears into the steamy refuge of a hot wash.
She’s been sitting on her favorite workbench since she’d gotten out of her own shower half an hour after she’d gotten home. She’s been waiting for her Family to trickle in behind her. They’d all be in various states of not okay and on the way to alright, and she wanted to be where she could most efficiently assess them. Where she could help them, if need be.

Unfortunately, she doesn’t know how to even start trying to help Steph.

Steph looks a little better when she appears in a burst of steam after her shower. It’s not much, but any bit better helps ease the knot in Cass’s chest.

As she works her way across the Cave, picking up the bits of clothing and armor she’d discarded as she’d walked over to the showers, Steph keeps stealing glances towards Cass. Her expression as she does so is… perplexed, mainly.

There’s also a degree of shyness, embarrassment… and it shifts further towards an uncomfortably anxious hesitation once she’s finished putting all her gear away and has to face the prospect of walking up to the House. Her course will take her right by Cass’s perch, and she can’t avoid coming into arm’s reach unless she wants to walk out through a side exit and circle all the way around up the Manor’s main driveway.

It’s part of why Cass picked this spot.

The Bats are all too proud to admit they can’t handle simply walking by and ignoring her if they don’t want to talk. (Partly because they’re all too proud to admit that they do want to talk)

When Steph eventually makes it up to where Cass is sitting, dragging her feet the whole way, Cass tips her head slightly to the side and gives a pointed blink.

It’s hardly a firm demand, and most plain old civilians probably wouldn’t even notice that she’d moved at all, let alone be able to interpret the request for what it was.

But Steph is a Bat, and even among the Bats she’s one of the very best at understanding the uniquely complicated version of stilted language that Cass possesses.

She stops when Cass asks her to, but won’t look up to let their eyes meet.

An aching sorrow curls her posture, and though the tear streaks Cass had spotted on her cheeks before her shower have been thoroughly washed away, Cass can guess that her eyes are still red rimmed. They certainly look puffy from this angle. And her nose is still red, too.

The ache behind Cass’s lungs gives a painful throb.
“Sad,” she states, making her confusion on the matter clear.

Steph cocks a half smile, chagrined mostly – likely just at being caught out.

“Tim safe,” Cass assures firmly, knowing it to be the whole truth of the matter.

Tim’s circumstances are the only the thing Cass can think of that might drive Steph’s emotions into this distressed state. But Tim’s safe. “So. Why sad?”

“Tim’s safe,” Steph repeats heavily.

Her voice sounds honest, truthful and resigned. Her body language matches it, keeping still and soft and silent as she sighs. Steph believes the statement. Wholly.

It’s a good sign, sort of… but it makes Cass even more confused about the sadness.

Makes the ache inside her throb again.

As Cass waits patiently for Steph to get her thoughts together, that soft posture starts to curl… just a little, just a certain tightness in her shoulders. “I just… I miss him, I guess.”

A deep breath and a slight pull back in the tensing of her neck muscles.

“I miss us.”

There’s… there’s grief in her voice, pain in how her fists are clenched around each other inside the belly pocket of her hoodie… and… and there’s a pinched deception in the pull back.

Deception… and guilt.

Cass can’t tell if the guilt is for the deceit, or the guilt is for something else… something like leaving Tim in Jason’s hands when she still feels like she ought to be the one handling him herself… she is special to him, and he to her… in a way that can’t be quantified.

In a way that Cass has no base of words to interpret.

The colors of them, though, they swirl together in a beautiful mess of red and purple, and pure and hopeful gold. If Cass could ever bring herself to paint them… they would be beautiful.

Another painful throb strikes behind her lungs, curling through her chest.

Cass would be easily convinced that Steph feels guilty for abandoning Tim to Jason’s care, even if they both completely understand that Jason is the one that Tim needs right now.

“I’m just tired,” Steph confesses, elaborating, “and scared and… and lonely…”
She curls again, this time purely inward, pulling her hoodie close and tight around her shoulders in a simulated phantom hug.

She is lonely.

She aches with it... in... in almost the way that Cass feels lonely when Steph and Tim are laughing in the library over jokes she can’t keep up with... When the combination of pop culture trivia and insider stories makes her lose track of the conversation entirely.

Cass’s hand snaps out without her conscious command.

“Not lone,” Cass insists, giving Steph’s forearm a gentle squeeze – desperate for her to understand. To truly understand.

Steph will never be alone.

Not so long as Cass is here still breathing.

Steph’s a Bat, even if she doesn’t always believe that she has a real and proper place inside the Family... The Family loves her, needs her. They’ll always support her if she asks.

But more than that...

Cass.

Cass... is here. For her. Always.

Cass won’t let Steph be alone. Can’t bear the idea of Steph thinking that she ever might.

Cass... for Steph... always.

Like Jason for Tim.

Sort of.

Cass still struggles with the finer points of defining relationships.

Of understanding why relationships even really need to be defined...

But Jason and Tim are red and gold and black and warm like sunset, filled with promise and potential and everything that makes life perfect some nights.

They’re special.
It’s a different special than the Steph and Tim special, and it’s a special that no one else seems to think is a very important kind of special, but Cass knows it’s important to them.

And *that* kind of special is the special that Steph is to Cass.

Not special enough matter in a way that makes it obvious to the others… nothing that makes it worth making a fuss over explaining, but still important to *her*. To... to *them*, maybe.

Tears bubble up in Steph’s eyes as she finally meets Cass’s gaze.

Cass tries to push everything she is, everything she wants to be for Steph, through that liminal space of connection between them.

Cass hurts because Steph hurts, because she doesn’t want Steph to hurt and doesn’t feel like she can do anything to truly relieve Steph’s hurt…

Without thinking, Cass gives a gentle tug on Steph’s arm.

And then when Steph acquiesces, when she steps willingly forward without any of that earlier hesitation, Cass pulls harder – tugs her into sitting halfway up on the workbench with her (something she might’ve noticed and shifted to prevent or accommodate had she been thinking).

Cass pulls Steph into a crushing hug that tries to pass every drop of care and concern Cass feels for her through the force of contact.

And Steph cries.

She weeps and grieves and empties herself entirely.

It hurts. It hurts so much that Cass tears up too, buries her nose in Steph’s hair and just breathes in the fruity nonsense of her conditioner until she feels floaty and warm and *better*.

Crying is cathartic.

Like this whole process has been, it hurts, but it’s good.

And this is Steph’s moment of release.

Cass will hold her together through it.
Because holding Steph together suddenly feels like it’s the only thing that’s holding Cass together… Cass needs this moment, at least as much as Steph does.

Eventually, Steph cries herself out against Cass’s shoulder.

And when she does, the exhaustion she’s been pushing through creeps up on her like a tiger set to pounce. She’s dead on her feet and Cass needs to help her get to bed.

She won’t make it on her own.

Well… she might, Cass admits in her heart of hearts, but… Cass doesn’t quite want to let go of her yet. And Steph latches onto the soft fabric of Cass’s loose black crop top, like she doesn’t want Cass to let her go just yet either.

It’s tricky getting them both upstairs in one piece, Steph is more asleep than not for the last few hundred yards of the trip.

When they reach the bed at last, Cass doesn’t just drop Steph into it and let her collapse into oblivion. She arranges the covers into a cozy nest – she knows how Steph likes to sleep – and then she helps tuck every one of her sprawling limbs up into it.

And then Steph grabs her arm and yanks it as she rolls over.

Cass *could* have extricated herself.

Steph’s grip is not the strongest she’s ever escaped.

Not by a long shot.

But Cass doesn’t pull away.

Steph mumbles something about not wanting to be alone and Cass can’t help but kiss her temple in silent assurance that she will never *be* alone. Not while Cass is breathing.

It soothes Steph’s worries and she hums in soft contentment, and the feeling of peace and comfort that descends over Cass is enough to make her settle down and sink into a brief blip of welcome oblivion. She enjoys every second of it, refusing to think of anything but *home*.

The calm of warm oblivion doesn’t last long, an hour or two, maybe.

And then Cass is wide awake again.
Steph is conked out and will likely remain that way until late afternoon.

Cass presses another fond kiss to Steph’s temple, making her hum happily again with sweet contentment in the midst of good dreams.

Then Cass slips gently out of Steph’s bed and makes her way slowly back down to the Cave… feeling an odd and icky twist of something slimy in her gut.

It’s not… guilt exactly… but it’s close. Uncomfortably close.

And Cass can’t quite pin down why.

Not until Damian returns in the Batmobile with Tim in tow.

Alfred is there to help get Tim up into the med bay, and between the butler and Damian, Tim is maneuvered without too much fuss. He’s groggy and clearly riding the dregs of a drug that’s *not* just Scarecrow’s fear gas. Damian must have sedated him.

Cass thinks it might’ve been *after* he collected him willingly from Jason, though, since neither of them bear any fresh injuries that would’ve resulted from the inevitable scuffle if Damian had *needed* to intervene. So, it’s likely that Jason successfully talked him down, and that Damian got him safely into the Batmobile, and *then* the panic started to rear up again… causing Damian to dose him with a mild sedative.

Cass’s hypothesis is confirmed as she approaches the med bay, getting close enough to hear the tail end of Damian’s report.

After a few moments spent thoroughly checking Tim over, and drawing a bit of blood to run a more formalized analysis, Alfred pronounces that Tim will be fine with substantial rest.

Damian is sent to shower, and Alfred heads upstairs to prepare something for him to eat before he too is sent to bed. Cass is left in charge of monitoring Tim’s condition.

She takes a ginger seat on a sturdy instrument cart with its wheels locked into place at Tim’s bedside. She can’t stomach the idea of the chair, of being quite so low to the ground in a position that’s so poorly defensible.

That twist in her gut is still bothering her.

It’s worse and worse as she keeps her gaze on Tim.
He’s not asleep yet.
But he’s also not awake.

When he tries to sit up, Cass slides halfway onto the bed with him and pushes him firmly back down against the mattress by his shoulders.

He doesn’t resist, blinking at her groggily – confused, but compliant.

Cass rewards his earnest trust with a kiss to his forehead.

Tim’s frowning when she leans back.

It makes Cass tip her head in confusion.

“C’me ‘ere,” Tim slurs, raising his arms like he’s asking for a hug.

It’s a rare gesture from Tim, so rare that Cass is instantly suspicious of it, but she loves Tim and trusts him entirely and if he wants a hug for his own reasons, Cass trusts that they’re probably good enough reasons to let him have a hug without questioning it.

The gesture is a bit stilted by Cass’s confusion, but she does lean in and wrap her arms around her sweet, sad little brother and gives him a heartfelt squeeze.

He returns the favor fiercely.

Clinging to her with support and love and trust and everything he’s forgotten how to feel in these last few weeks of strife and anguish in the Family.

And then he inhales deeply.

Suspicion squiggles in Cass’s gut.

And that almost guilt again.

Biting, gnawing, *tearing*. 
The almost guilty bit redoubles into genuine and spikey shame as Tim breathes a confused word into her ear, “Steph?”

Steph belongs to Tim in a way the Family acknowledges and approves of… and while Cass is sure that the special thing that binds Steph and her together is not something they should ever disapprove of… she can admit that Tim might have some cause to be… Dùjì… hurt and sad and angry in the face of Cass’s role in consoling Steph… like how Steph was of Jason being given Tim’s care… There’s a word for it, Cass knows, in English… but she can’t be bothered to care as that guilty tendril starts to squeeze sharply at her lungs.

“You ‘nd Steph,” Tim huffs, prompting the thorny thing to give a vicious, jerking yank against her heart. “i’s good. Hm. ‘m ‘appy… ‘appy fer you… fer both ‘f you.”

The slimy, thorny twist inside Cass evaporates, releases in a single exhale as if it had never been there at all. It’s replaced by a slippery sort of shiny thing, a tight and vibrant bloom of warmth… of giddiness, almost.

It makes Cass smile so broadly that her face hurts.

Which makes Tim attempt to chuckle.

He nods, again.

This time more to himself than to Cass.

“Yeah, it’s good.”

Tim is entirely asleep as Cass presses one last kiss to his forehead.

She settles back on her perch on the instrument cart and waits for Alfred to return while feeling like she’s about to vibrate her way into a parallel reality. She’s a single spark away from catching fire outright, and it feels like she could run a four minute mile on the beach.

Her wait is not long, and Alfred’s assessment assures her that Damian is safe and sound and sleeping. And his butler magic means he knows exactly what she needs now.

“I believe you require rest, yourself, my dear,” he mentions, “You and Miss Stephanie should be able to keep each other honest about getting enough sleep, don’t you think?”

Cass gives an enthusiastic nod and starts the jog upstairs.
Her sudden spurt of energy is sapped from her in gallons with every step and by the time she reaches Steph’s room, she’s as dead on her feet as the girl she’d just recently helped tuck into these very covers. The girl whose peaceful sleep looks less peaceful than Cass left her with it.

But that’s okay.

Cass can fix it.

She slips back into the spot she’d vacated, feels where the covers have gone cold because of her absence. She snuggles in deeply and curls up around Steph feeling the closest thing to true contentment she’s ever known.

This time, when Cass falls asleep, she falls deep enough to stay asleep.

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just for tonight, give up (and ignite)

Chapter End Notes

Oh Cass. I love how she is one of the very few sane ones, but I think it's important to show that she's still human too and, even though her insecurities and emotional confusion doesn't spark a spiral, she does still fall victim to her lack of understanding and the stress of simply BEING on the odd occasion.
NEXT TIME: Bruce's PoV as he is forced to react to the fact that his Family is fracturing and it is almost entirely his fault.

^_^
nobody teaches you (to reminisce)

Chapter Summary

Bruce begins to process the emotional upheaval of the last few weeks, with a little help from Alfred.

Chapter Notes

Oh Bruce, you are SO ridiculous, but progress is occurring...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty Two – nobody teaches you (to reminisce)

His Family is in tatters.

They blame him for it, and they are right to do so.

So much of this is his fault.

Bruce rarely gives into the distraction of self loathing, but this is a special circumstance.

This whole debacle is a special circumstance, and Bruce doesn’t even know how to quantify the exact moment where it all began to start spiraling.

In some ways, it started with him becoming Batman at all. Without Batman, there’d be no Robin, and there’d be no conflict between all the boys who’d ever held the mantle.

But without Batman and Robin, Bruce wouldn’t have his sons at all. And there’s still too much good he’s done, good they’ve all done, to truly regret becoming the Bat.
How he’s handled his children… that’s another story.

Different regrets, all of which contribute to the current chaos in his mind, but only a few specific and potent enough to have any viable impact on the Now: how he handled Jason, how he pushed Jason away and caused him to seek out a ‘real family’… how he’d failed to keep proper tabs on Jason after letting him leave and how he’d wound up allowing Jason to face the Joker.

How he’d wound up letting his son die.

And because of Jason, there was Tim.

Tim had come into Bruce’s life to save it, and save it he did – in every way possible.

Tim would never have become Robin if it weren’t for how Bruce had let Jason die.

And Tim wouldn’t have grown into the type of Robin he is today, the fiercely independent to the point of self destructive type of Robin he is today, if Bruce had simply taken him under his wing properly, right from the beginning. If Bruce hadn’t forced him to pass muster at an outrageously high bar before allowing him to patrol alongside the Bat, Tim would never have developed a habit of hiding his injuries, or of nearly killing himself in the pursuit of perfection in his training.

There are countless minor instances for to Bruce to regret how he’d handled things, countless moments when he should have been better, to both Tim and Jason.

Somehow, they all add up to this.

They add up to Tim attacking one brother to let another (who attacked him) escape, to Tim being so self destructive they can’t call it anything but suicidal, to Tim being forcibly restricted to his bedroom for his own good… to Tim attacking his Family to escape that confinement… to Tim running away from them with no indication of any inkling of an intent to ever come back.

Learning that Tim had run away was terrifying to Bruce in a way he could never fully communicate to another living soul. It was a visceral, hateful fear and Bruce had been ready to tear this city apart to get his son back safe and sound… he’d been ready to bleed Gotham dry.

Bruce would not lose another son.

Not like that.
But Alfred had talked him into giving Tim a bit of time.

He’d agreed to 24 hours, but had started Oracle on locating him regardless – she had acquiesced, had spent almost fourteen hours pulling apart fragments of data to recreate the puzzle pieces into something she could understand, but she’d refused to hand over the results of her analysis until Alfred’s 24 hours were up.

And then Arkham had a breakout.

And the Crusade for the greater good of Gotham had consumed the Family’s attention.

Work was always a sufficient distraction from his internal suffering to allow Bruce to function at full capacity. The threat posed by Killer Croc, Clayface, and Mr Freeze was significant, but nothing the Bats couldn’t handle so long as they remained focused and utilized their exceptional capacity for effective teamwork.

Even with the news of Scarecrow and Black Mask enacting their own devious plots to assault the security of Gotham’s citizens, Bruce wasn’t worried.

He simply adjusted for the development.

Simply shifted the Bats’ tactics to play conservatively, but aggressively enough to tip the odds back in their favor while keeping everyone as safe as possible.

Nothing changed.

Nothing changed until Oracle informed them that Red Robin was on site.

Tim.

Tim was back on the grid, back working with the Family – Crusading for the greater good as always, regardless of his contentious vehemence regarding a disagreement.

The first thing Bruce felt at the news of Red Robin’s return was relief.

The Family had always had its spats, and these days, Tim was frequently at the center of some of their very worst disputes. But they had been able to repair all the previous squabbles.

Things would blow over, go back to normal, and they could move on in the aftermath.
But **work** had pushed Bruce’s focus too far off the Family’s situation.

The blip of relief was the result of forgetfulness, of neglectful self **delusion**.

Things would not be going back to normal, because this time, Tim hadn’t simply disagreed with Bruce or Dick over how to handle an investigation, or what needed to be done to ensure a safe and expedient acquisition of evidence, or how long someone needed to stay benched to reach a full and satisfactory recovery.

This time, Tim hadn’t just run away to blow off steam or handle things himself…

This time, Tim been on a Suicide Watch before he’d run.

He’d been in recovery from a severe wounding – a recovery that should have been set to last at least another three weeks – and he’d been deemed a danger to himself and others.

Well, he was a direct danger to Dick, at least… and as a liability in the field he was a danger to the others by merit of a mere extension of his being present. They could not protect themselves if they were anxious and distracted over protecting Tim.

As distracted as Bruce himself was in the very moment that he realized the state Tim would likely be in while attempting to participate in the night’s developing situation…

It earned him a severe bruising to his ribs as Killer Croc thrashed suddenly in his restraints, attempting (and succeeding to a certain degree) to take advantage of Batman’s stuttering focus. Bruce has trained his body to respond well enough without his mind being directly involved to have avoided grievous injury, but the tail swipe still hurt on impact…

And… to be truly candid about it… if Robin hadn’t been there to slam the hilt of his katana into the soft spot on Croc’s skull that rests right between his eyes, it’s possible that a few of the GCPD officers on site to help secure Croc’s containment and transport back to one of Arkham’s maximum security wards would’ve been hospitalized.

Fortunately, when the next bombshell dropped, Killer Croc was already fully restrained, and Damian had been sent ahead to back up Black Bat with the recon on Scarecrow.

Because Oracle informed the group that Red Robin was working in tandem with Batgirl and, due to the pressures of Scarecrow’s goons encroaching on Black Mask’s newly staked out bit of urban territory, they had been forced to directly engage Black Mask’s gang of False Facers – and that Red Hood was there, too. Purportedly operating on the **right** side of the Bats.
Bruce hadn’t stumbled on a rooftop landing in... years at this point, but hearing *that*...

So many conflicted emotions bubbled up that a shudder of them ripped through his iron clad control and caused him to scuff his feet across the graveled asphalt of an elegant old office building from Coventry’s redevelopment period in the late 80’s.

If Oracle heard the scrape over his com, she politely didn’t comment.

She informed them all that Batgirl, Red Robin, and Red Hood were all working together as effectively and cohesively as could possibly be expected. Nightwing was en route and about to make direct contact, and they were all apparently being supported by Arsenal, as well.

Another Outlaw.

That was Bruce’s first thought.

Steph and Tim were engaged in a fight with only a psychopathic, remorseless murderer and his equally remorseless and vicious best friend and personal ally to keep them safe.

Dick’s arrival would help soothe his nerves, but it did put another of his children at risk.

No matter how hard Oracle was working to assure them of Hood’s current helpfulness, Bruce knew the moment his name came up that it wouldn’t take much to make him snap.

And nothing triggered Jason’s enduring psychosis quite like Tim.

Bruce redoubled his efforts of speed to reach the scene where his children were facing down Black Mask, though he likely ought to have gone to support Robin and Black Bat with Scarecrow’s goons. Scarecrow himself had yet to be spotted, and even as the pair were forced to engage the villain’s hoard of goons, there was nothing about the situation that they couldn’t handle easily enough on their own.

The situation with Black Mask and the Outlaws, however...

That one was evolving quickly, and it was shaping up with bitter odds against the Bats.

Oracle’s bullet pointed, play by play briefings of the developments were delivered without apparent emotional strain, but they came in sharper and sharper bursts of information as first the
goons began to over power the Bats, and then as the apparent collusion between Scarecrow and Black Mask was uncovered, and then as the warehouse in which they were all fighting began to crumble into an underground tunnel complex.

Batgirl escaped to the roof with Arsenal, and both were then joined shortly by Nightwing – both of whom had muted coms, likely muted remotely by Oracle rather than by conscious thought on their part.

(Bruce didn’t have time to hack lines back into them himself and he trusted Oracle’s judgement enough to only be a slight bit disappointed in her for assuming that the others in the Family would not be able to remain focused on their own goals if they heard the distress in some of their own as it developed in their peripheries.)

Working dutifully as always, Oracle relayed an account of Jason falling through the breach in the tunnel complex, purportedly as a rather valiant demonstration of making amends with the Bats: as an attempt to allow Red Robin to get away to safety.

Red Robin had, against the advisories of Nightwing and Oracle (and despite the fact that Red Hood had seemingly fallen in order save him from the same fate) pursued.

(Bruce had tabled the comment of Jason’s heroic behavior for later, had outright refused to analyze in that immediate moment how there was a clear chastisement present in Barbara’s tone at the notion that any of them might be doubting Jason’s earnest intent to help.)

By the time Batman arrived at the scene, there was only a last round of clean up to do in dealing with the goons – most had already been defeated and secured for GCPD pick up, there were about a dozen stragglers that had been missed.

Batgirl, Nightwing, and Arsenal had gone, on Oracle’s instruction, to rescue Red Robin.

Batman, with only the slightest tug of fatherly reluctance from Bruce’s deepest buried worries, went to secure Black Bat and Robin’s victory with Scarecrow’s cronies a few blocks down from where Oracle was directing the others.

The victory against Scarecrow’s goons had been swift and decisive once Batman arrived, and soon the remaining three Bats were charging off to aid the others against the more elite goons and the actual bosses that the mobsters were protecting.

Before any of them had arrived, the bosses had broken off from the main pack of conflict, recognizing how the odds had tipped against them.

Red Robin and Red Hood had charged off in pursuit, with Nightwing, Batgirl, and Arsenal close behind. Their rash pursuit, enacted prior to wrapping up their immediate engagement, perhaps ought to have been indicative to Bruce, should possibly have triggered his immediate alarm and concern for how they viewed the manner in which Red Hood and Red Robin disengaged to chase
after Scarecrow and Black Mask.

Perhaps it should have, and in retrospect, perhaps it’s surprising that it didn’t, but at the time and in the visible context, Batman had considered the choice a calculated risk assessment.

Scarecrow and Black Mask were direct and present threats to the whole of public safety.

Their goons were not.

Black Bat and Robin were left to finish subduing the remaining goons, and Batman went in pursuit of the bosses as well, splitting off to cover a short cut course, as directed by Oracle who was mapping the erratic pursuit in real time – plotting out the likely twists and turns that Black Mask and Scarecrow might make to escape and creating one of her exceptionally accurate forecast models of their possible routes.

With Batman set to head them off, the Bats’ complete victory was almost utterly assured.

And with the news that Black Mask had been caught, subdued and secured, Bruce had breathed in the heady adrenalin of righteous triumph.

Even inside the Cowl, he was still too human to truly be completely unaffected by the bright success of a mission and the almost vicious pride in his children’s drive and capabilities.

But he knew better than to celebrate too early and restrained the impulse to bask in the successes until the entire mission was complete. Until everyone was safe and sound back at the Cave and had been fully debriefed on the entire situation…

Still, he couldn’t help the satisfied confidence.

Scarecrow was the only loose end left (for tonight, at least, Mr Freeze would be tomorrow’s top priority, but he was no threat for causing immediate damage tonight and therefore could be left until the Bats had recovered their strength).

Batman was less than three minutes out of the intercept.

And then…

“*Batman. Cease Pursuit.*”

He took the leap to the next roof top, but then did as Oracle required – distinctly noting the
firm restraint in her voice, the unique sound of pain and fear and sorrow all colliding inside her and being skillfully covered up by intentional, careful focus.

She hesitated to elaborate.

“Something’s happened,” she admitted eventually as Batman remained still and silent.

She sighed. Bit her lip, clicked a pen. “Bruce… it’s Jason… he—”

If she ever finished that sentence, Bruce didn’t hear it. The blood was already rushing through his ears loudly enough to drown out any other sound – even the wind rushing passed as he charged across the skyline sounded hollow and muted and achingly distant.

Bruce arrived on that fateful roof top in time to see Jason holding Tim out over what was almost certain to be a fatal drop – in time to see his quaking muscles tense to do something.

“Hood.”

It was a plea.

Desperate and unashamed, his sanity torn into a thousand pieces – all with raw and jagged edges that were each intent on goring every aspect of his being entirely to shreds.

Everything had spiraled away from there.

Which had led him to the current moment, where he is standing alone on the roof where it had all gone down, alone and aching, with the hollow certainty of utter failure.

His children, all his children, bear such fear and grief against him and all his failings that they united to intervene to stop him from attempting to help Tim.

His children don’t trust him to help Tim. They’re all entirely agreed upon the apparently empirical and indisputable fact that if Bruce goes to help his little boy right now, all it will do is hurt
him even more thoroughly than simply abandoning him.

Such a revelation is rocking.

It’s shaken Bruce to his core in a way that nothing else ever has – not even the death of his parents, the death of his son, had left him feeling so distinctly bereft. So entirely useless.

There had been anger with the deaths, anger and purpose and a clear course that was worth pursuing in order to achieve some semblance of justice in the world.

But this… there is nothing he can do in this, nothing he can do to fix it – to even mollify it, in any way. His Family has ensured it. Declared it.

And Bruce is powerless to refute their claims, to refuse their decrees.

So here he stands, alone.

Lost.

For the first time in his life, he truly has no idea what to do.

No idea what he even could do, were he able to muster up the energy to move at all.

“They are certainly keen on taking care of each other.”

Alfred’s sudden statement is an unconscionably welcome voice inside his ear.

It’s been at least an hour since any of the others spoke to him. Probably more.

Bruce cannot currently recall the last moment any of them spoke kindly, or without the focus of immediate work as the inherent impetus for both the speech and the calm inside it.

“They are fierce in their protectiveness.”

Alfred’s claims are true.
The children are a tight knot, despite their differences – they love each other without the slightest hint of putting any conditions on their concern for each other. They fight, as he’s been told all siblings do, but while they fight, and while they truly mean it when they fight, they also love each other more deeply than Bruce could ever estimate.

He is unspeakably grateful for it, for their bonds and for the way they’ve grown into such caring, loving, wonderful people despite his own obvious ineptitudes.

“They do love you, Master Bat,” Alfred goes on eventually, “And they do, in turn, truly know that you love them without thought and without hesitance or condition. They just have moments of fear and uncertainty, but deep down, they know. And they do love you, Sir.”

Alfred’s convictions are topically comforting, but the clear untruth of them leaves Bruce feeling no less hard or hollow about any of what’s happened here.

“I have failed them,” Bruce declares.

“You have,” Alfred confirms without judgement. “You have indeed failed them. And I do not doubt that you may yet fail them once or twice again. Alas, all parents fail their children, in some way or other, even those who give themselves wholly to raising children who may not be naturally their own. Most, I’m afraid, fail out of an intent to do good by their youngsters.”

The ache inside the black pit at Bruce’s core swirls with the honesty and prescience of Alfred’s words – it’s not soothed at all by the insistence that all parents fail their children.

“I must inform you that I, too, bear significant responsibility for this incident,” Alfred goes on after a long moment of silence. “For it is my failings with you that have, in large part, at least, lead to your lack of understanding in how to deal with those you love. We both must be better in recalling that, no matter how observant they are, the children are not mind readers – we must tell them directly of our care and concerns.”

“They won’t believe me,” Bruce insists.

He sighs and shakes his head – feeling how stiff his muscles have become after so long spent utterly motionless.

“After this, I doubt they ever could, even if they wanted to.”

“Of course, they can’t,” Alfred tells him, voice sure and calm as ever, but tinged with the certain kind of sadness that only decades of experience has allowed Bruce to detect. “They can’t believe any such claims. And, poorly considered as it seems, I am only just beginning to understand something of the full extent of how their doubts afflict them.”

Alfred knows everything, always has. His assertion that he’s only now coming to realize
anything perplexes Bruce – in a way that makes the aching pit inside his gut roil with tension.

“The children all come from rather unfortunate backgrounds, even Miss Oracle’s loving family has its problems with clearly communicating their care for each other, and her story is the only one without true tragedy or direct abuse behind it,” Alfred states.

The sentiment confuses Bruce for how exceedingly obvious it is.

Alfred can’t possibly have not realized that, until now.

The children’s tragic backgrounds have been part of their narratives from the very beginning of their involvement with the Wayne Household.

Their backgrounds had been enmeshed with both sides of their lives – making their motivations for the Crusade feel acutely poignant, and complicating their daylight lives in no uncertain terms. The daylight entanglement had been direct – so direct that Bruce had been routinely forced to sit his children down and discuss the matter with them, directly.

It had gotten repeatedly to the point of causing more than one of them significant strife in dealing with Gotham’s upper echelon who believe they are protecting the Wayne legacy when they assert that any ‘street urchins’ Bruce did not deserve to be naturalized as his heirs.

But where they each came from is not who they are, nor who they were ever destined to become, and Bruce had been especially careful to ensure that each one understood that.

“They’ve been traumatized, Sir, to the point of being rendered unable to believe that honest, incontrovertible love is something that does indeed exist, let alone that it could possibly be something they each uncontestably deserve. The question of whether or not they have such love being given to them simply for their own existence, and not by merit of having earned a few mild affections is… inconceivable to the whole lot of them,” Alfred lays out.

Bruce takes a shuddering breath.

“They cannot believe we love them, because they do not believe in love, at all.”

But the children have been cared for, been told such, and seemingly accepted such…

While Bruce knows they all have tragedies that dog their pasts, they’ve grown up into well-adjusted young men and women. They’ve moved passed the horrors of their histories.

Bruce might say some of that out loud, but it’s just as likely that he doesn’t.
“Unfortunately, I do not believe the kind of trauma the children have each and individually suffered is any sort of thing they might ever grow out of,” Alfred comments.

There’s another pregnant pause where Bruce forgets to breathe as he fights the sudden tightness in his throat.

And then Alfred continues, tone even more grave and grieving than before, “If they have ever professed to having been able to move on, I’m afraid to say they may have been lying to themselves about it. And both of us simply allowed ourselves to believe it, too.”

The silence falls again, but this time, for some bizarre reason, Bruce feels almost like he might be able to breathe a little easier.

“Come home, Master Bruce,” Alfred insists, “Your children need you.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I know this one kinda cuts off in the middle, but I’m working on 4 hours of sleep right now and this chapter was getting ridiculously long, anyway. I’ve decided to cut it in half to give myself a bit of breathing room on getting the rest of it drafted.

Which will help me keep a regular posting schedule!

NEXT TIME: Bruce Continues to reflect on his mistakes and starts attempting to move forward.
reminisce (part II)

Chapter Summary

Bruce continues his self-reflection and attempts to be a parent in the midst of circumstances that makes doing so tricky on a good day, and it is most certainly NOT a good day.

Chapter Notes

Bruce is trying to correct his mistakes, but it's an excruciating process, and it means changing a few fundamental aspects of how he interacts with the world.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty Three – reminisce (part II)

“Come home, Master Bruce,” Alfred insists, “Your children need you.”

Eventually… Bruce manages to acquiesce.

It takes him a while to get back to the Cave, another hour at least.

The Cave is dark and quiet as he enters, running on its lowest power setting as the distantly impending sunrise begins to make the edges of the night glow gray.

Alfred is waiting for him at the ramp up from the primary garage area.
The butler’s stance places him directly in front of the last curve onto the Cave floor proper, blocking Batman’s way, and his placid expression leaves no question of his demand.

The worry is a valid one, but unnecessary tonight, as Bruce is finished pulling off his cowl and gauntlet before he’s even halfway up to the floor.

He’s absently working to undue the hidden straps that support his outer armor as he reaches easy ear shot of a quite word and continues making progress on removing all of the depersonalizing aspects of the Bat as Alfred starts to speak.

“Miss Cassandra and Miss Stephanie are safely asleep upstairs, after having both showered and eaten, as is Master Damian,” Alfred reports, quiet in a way that won’t carry through the Cave, but not deigning to stoop down to whispering. “Master Tim is sequestered in the medical bay, sedated as he rides out the remainder of Crane’s toxins. I expect he will remain unconscious for another twelve hours, give or take a few dozen minutes. And Master Dick is at his bedside, currently refusing to be parted from it... Miss Barbara has just arrived and is currently upstairs, fixing up a little something warm to eat.”

There’s another silent demand inside the arched tone of the innocuous comment included with the status update.

“I’ll send Dick upstairs to bed as soon as I’ve gotten cleaned up,” Bruce promises, handing Alfred his gauntlets as a good faith gesture.

When Alfred nods his acceptance of the assurance, with a firmly arched eyebrow indicating that he will be holding Bruce directly to his word, Bruce prompts, “Injuries?”

“Everyone with active monitors in their suits seem to have a smattering of bruises, a few tender abrasions, but nothing notable enough to mention individually,” Alfred claims, toeing the line between truth and deception in the way he has completely mastered. “None of them were required to visit the infirmary for even the most overly cautious bout of treatment.”

But Bruce has mastered how to read through Alfred’s careful side stepping.

“Even Tim?”

“Master Tim did not have active monitoring and needed to be assessed after he returned home. He has a few significant lacerations, three bullet wounds that are not life threatening, a bruised rib, several pulled muscles, a sprained wrist, and he has aggravated his previous injuries,” Alfred admits calmly. “His shoulder will need monitoring for the next month, but he should be out of the sling by the end of a fortnight.”

Bruce nods.

The list is long, severe… It’s not anything he would ever want to hear as being a round up of his child’s injuries… but, it’s also not half as dire as it could have been.

Alfred tips his head as Bruce blows out the air from his constricted lungs.
As Bruce then heads for the showers, Alfred vanishes upstairs.

Bruce emerges only a few moments later, after doing nothing more than assessing his own rather mild injuries and hurriedly washing off the night’s dousing of blood and dirt. He’s only bothered with pulling on a pair of silken lounge pants and he makes his way over to the med bay while brushing absently at his chest with the towel he nabbed en route.

Dick is sitting with both his hands wrapped around one of Tim’s, elbows resting heavily on the gurney’s plush mattress. He’s wearing pajamas and his skin looks clean, which isn’t much of a relief when his expression looks so tortured, but it’s still something.

He doesn’t notice Bruce’s arrival.

He doesn’t notice the movement as Bruce drapes the towel around his neck.

Jerks with surprise, half jumps out of his chair, when Bruce says his name in the silence.

Dick settles quickly from his fight reaction, gaze going right back to Tim’s slack face.

Coming up to stand beside his eldest, Bruce hesitates. Starts to move and aborts the act twice before he manages to force his hand to rest on Dick’s shoulder.

Waits for Dick to shrug him off, and then gives a gentle squeeze when he doesn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Dick says eventually, his whisper sounding raw and tight.

Bruce can’t bring himself to say anything as Dick hangs his head and presses the hands he has clasped around Tim’s to his forehead.

“It’s my fault he ran away, my fault he was able to get out,” Dick states, still whispering with the wreckage of his battered vocal cords, but forcing the words to come out clear. “It was my turn on the Watch, and I let him distract me.”

Dick’s words are not untrue and Bruce, even with his vicious, biting awareness that Dick needs reassurances here, cannot bring himself to comfort Dick by saying that his very literal failure to keep Tim contained is not a portion of what led to Tim laying in this medical bed.

He can’t say that it’s not Dick’s fault, or that it doesn’t matter that Dick failed, but he can force out a few words, “I don’t think anything in the world could have stopped him, Dick. He wanted to leave, and he was willing to hurt any one of us to do it. You just happened to be the one on call at the moment that he moved.”
Hearing his own words echo, Bruce knows that the statement doesn’t sound supportive in the way it should – in the way he wants it to, the way he means it. It just sounds tired.

Defeated.

Maybe even disappointed.

As soon as he says the words, he half wants to take them back.

Especially as the tension Bruce feels building in Dick’s shoulder seems to indicate that the interpretation of the tone he’s heard is not one with pleasant connotations.

“Tim will recover,” Bruce assures him – assures himself. “And we’ll debrief tomorrow, once everyone is feeling less immediately stressed over these events. We’ll take care of him.”

“I don’t think he’ll let us,” Dick responds.

Bruce waits in silence, giving Dick as much time as he needs to gather himself before he chooses to elaborate, “We drove him to Jason, tonight. Needed Jason to talk him down. He thinks he understands Jason’s motives enough to predict his actions, and I don’t think he believes in ours anymore… at least not in the same way he thinks he knows his.”

“Then we’ll have to convince him,” Bruce asserts, trying to sound soft and confident.

“I… I think it might be too late for that.”

Bruce pulls in a stuttered breath.

Careful.

“Alfred would smack you upside the head for saying that.”

It’s true, and it’s the kind of oddly lighthearted sentiment of gravitas that could usually make his Robins laugh – crack a smile at the very least, no matter how dire the situation.

But Dick doesn’t do any of that.

Instead he simply pulls his head up, tears his gaze away from Tim, and contorts to look up searchingly at Bruce’s own expression.

Asking without asking if Bruce believes it could be true that Tim might still find a way to trust any one of them again after all of this…

“We have to believe that it is never too late,” Bruce manages eventually. “Tim is strong,
resilient. He’s truly one of the best of us at heart. I believe that we can fix this, Dick, I really do.”

And he does. Almost.

He hadn’t until he’d said it out loud, but now, he thinks he honestly does.

Dick gives a minuscule nod and turns back to Tim, exhaling with a deep relief that allows the worst edges of his tension to collapse.

Now all that’s left is the exhaustion.

“Come now, son, you need your rest,” Bruce prods.

“I can’t leave him,” Dick pleads. “I can’t, Bruce, not again. Not like this.”

“You’re not leaving him, Dick. He’s home, and safe, and I’ll be watching over him while you go get some sleep,” Bruce insists.

“What about you?”

“I have some WE files that ought to be looked over tonight, anyway,” Bruce tells his oldest son softly. “I need to make notes before I send them off to Lucius to handle in the morning. It seems that I’ll be taking the next few days off to spend some much needed and well over due time with my Family.”

That breeds a flickering shadow of a smile underneath Dick’s grief and exhaustion.

The hint of a smile becomes a frown quickly, though.

“That should be taped up,” he comments.

It takes Bruce a beat and a half to catch that Dick is referring to his ribs, and the way that a vicious bruise is beginning to bloom visibly enough to announce the injury.

“It’s nothing.”

Dick’s frown sharpens. His jaw twitches, searching for words.
“I promise, Dickie, it’s just a bruise,” Bruce comforts.

Dick doesn’t look any less distressed.

Remembering one of Alfred’s many lectures, Bruce recalls that care must go both ways in any relationship with proactive negotiation involved.

If Bruce wants to help his adoptive children accept his care for them, he must allow them to do the same for him – even if it goes against nearly all of his protective instincts to let them feel any of the burden in their adoptive parent’s keeping.

He doesn’t want to let them do it, feels like he ought to bear exclusive responsibility in it, as he would if the children he’s raised had been his naturally. But the relationship with adoptive children is necessarily different, particularly those adopted while old enough to be aware of the difference between a parent and a guardian.

Bruce sighs, steeling himself to force an admission of weakness.

“But it could use a few ice packs if you’d be willing to help me wrap them properly.”

Dick blinks. Wary like he doesn’t think he heard right, like he thinks the exhaustion is finally getting to him – like it’s dug in deep enough to cause hallucinations.

Then he nods.

His move to stand is slow and stilted, and he’s extremely reluctant to let go of Tim’s hand, but at a squeeze of his shoulder from Bruce, Dick does manage to step away – if only to slide himself under Bruce’s arm in an attempt to support his weight as they step into the next bay over for Bruce’s own treatment. Fortunately, Bruce is still a fair bit taller than his oldest boy and since he doesn’t really need to lean on him, he’s able to keep most of his weight over his own feet and off of Dick’s already over burdened shoulders.

It only takes a few minutes to get Bruce fixed up.

His muscles are taped off supportively, ribs wrapped with a tension bandage, ice packs tucked into a snug over layer meant mostly to cushion any further impacts.

Dick is dead on his feet as he tucks the last of the supplies back into place.

“Off to bed, now, son, alright?”

Dick looks horror-struck and glances back at Tim.

“I need you to check on Damian for me, okay, Dick? Can you do that, my boy?”
The frown returns, but this time it’s concerted and slow – thoughts tripping over sluggish mental gears that have finally ground entirely to a halt.

He nods.

Bruce walks with him to the elevator, pushes him inside lightly, and remains standing there until the indicator light reaches the main foyer of the House, until the camera shows Dick stumbling out of the grandfather clock and nearly falling face first into the carpet.

He recovers his balance and then moves on slightly more steady feet in the direction of the stairs. There’s a chance he’ll be intercepted by Barbara, but that can only be of benefit.

Bruce nods again to himself, takes a last steadying breath, and then moves back to Tim’s beside – taking up the seat Dick had vacated.

And the posture.

“I am so sorry, Tim,” Bruce confesses. “I’m sorry for everything I’ve done to hurt you, and I’m sorry that I don’t know how to help you.”

He sits there, watching his little boy hurt… watching him breathe… and allows himself to close his eyes as he tries to willfully meditate Tim back into perfect health.

He gets a decent burst of rest before he is disturbed.

Perhaps an entire hour, possibly even two.

A knock at the glass of the med bay’s doorway is what wakes him – ginger enough not to startle him unnecessarily, but forceful enough to ensure that it is not ignored.

Bruce doesn’t look over, but he lifts the heavy weight of his head off his hands.

“We need to talk about Jason,” Barbara says softly, wheeling over to sit beside him.

The air in his exhale feels like it’s been punched from his lungs.

“It can’t wait until morning,” Barbara says apologetically. She sighs and explains more directly, “It can’t wait until the others are awake to hear it.”
There’s a pause, and then Bruce gives a slight incline of his head – permission to go on, not that Barbara would ever have been convinced to stay silent if he hadn’t shown acceptance.

“Jason saved his life tonight, Bruce. Saved it a hundred times over, in a dozen different ways,” Barbara tells him firmly. “Final body count was sixteen people. Five were stray bullets from their own side’s crossfire. Jason killed six of the others; half with bullets through their skulls, the other half bled out or died of complications – just like the ones the rest of us inadvertently caused. Six dead. Out of 782 engagements. That’s a zero percent kill rate, Bruce. Zero point seven six. That’s more than twice as good as Damian’s current average.”

“He intentionally murdered three people tonight, nearly killed Tim for attempting to stop him from murdering a fourth,” Bruce contests.

“You heard him, Bruce,” Barbara stresses. “He’s not a mindless killer. And he only threatened to hurt Tim because he was scared. Jason has always tried to chase people away so they wouldn’t be able to chase him. The part of him that almost wants to kill Tim right now wants to do it because he’s just so damn scared that Tim is going to go up and die on him.”

“He shot Tim, tonight. Twice.”

“And he hates himself for it.”

The silence then is filled with stony impasse.

Bruce is too drained to really feel the furor of his anguish over Jason, and he cannot even start to contemplate what reason Barbara has for bringing this up now.

It takes Barbara another few minutes of sitting in the silence to decide to explain herself.

“When he wakes up tomorrow, what do think his first question is going to be?”

What happened?

It’s the obvious answer, especially considering the degrees of memory loss typically associated with Crane’s noxious Fear Gas, and Bruce goes to voice the words when a look from Barbara clearly indicates that she’s expecting a directly verbalized answer. “Wha—”

“You are not this stupid,” Barbara chastises, voice surprisingly harsh. She’s glaring at him when Bruce manages to look over at her. “His first question will be ‘where’s Jason?’.”

Bruce doesn’t let his face show any reaction.
But he feels the keen bite of disagreement dragging through his veins.

“Tim is going after Jason, as soon as he wakes up,” Barbara says, voice full of warning and certainty. “You need to understand that. You need to be on board with it, because Dick is going to freak out at the mere suggestion, and Steph may be too distressed to stop him. This is all going to end in another stupid brawl unless you can take your head out of your ass for five minutes and just give a damn about something other than your stupid logic.”

By the end of the tirade, Barbara’s voice has turned a bit hysteric.

Abruptly, she chokes herself off and takes a few calming breaths.

“Sorry. I’m tired. I shouldn’t have said it like that,” Barbara sighs. “But that doesn’t make it any less true. We need you, Bruce. You have to participate. I know you don’t want anything to do with Jason anymore, but that ship has sailed. You can’t stop this, and you can’t ignore it.”

Bruce breathes out, resisting the urge to interrupt his daughter.

She shakes her head and pulls her arms around herself as she draws in a shudder of fresh oxygen before saying, “I don’t know if we can take another fight this week… certainly, not without someone drawing blood… and I’m… I’m not sure we’d be able to recover from that.”

Bruce doesn’t know how to respond to that, doesn’t even know what he’s supposed to think of it. On an instinctive level, he wants to disagree – wants to believe, as Alfred does and Alfred is always right about such things, that they’ll be able to recover from anything.

And yet, he knows Barbara; knows how she never states a theory without significant evidentiary support. She’s looked at the variables, judged the mindsets of those in play… between her understanding of statistical analysis and her innate grasp of the psychological elements of human relationships… Bruce has trouble doubting the veracity of her opinion.

Particularly when he is self aware enough to know that his understanding of that underlying aspect of humanity is far too lacking to have given him the independent ability to assess such fissures accurately. Particularly such fissures within his own Family.

Barbara collects herself with a long breath in that restrains a sigh, that restrains a sob.

She shudders back into a semblance of her Oracle competence.

“You need to accept the reality of this situation, Bruce,” she insists. “You need to accept it
and get on board with helping Tim achieve it.”

She reaches out to place a hand on Bruce’s knee. “Look at me.”

He’s been observing her since she arrived, though it has been primarily through his peripheries – his main focus rooted immovably to Tim’s still form.

Barbara is patient and insistent, she won’t speak further until Bruce does as she asks; and she is perfectly willing to wait out the entire night for him to do it.

It takes him a long moment, Bruce doesn’t even know how long, to tear his gaze entirely away from the fragile figure of his third son. Eventually, though, he does manage to meet Barbara’s gaze – her eyes are glassy and red rimmed, clear indications that she’s been crying, but her gaze is steady and sure.

Filled with certainty and concrete understanding.

“Bruce… I know this is... I know it’s hard for you,” she says carefully, “But we all look to you for guidance when things get crazy. It’s hard for us to admit a lot of the time, and we disagree with your opinion on a lot of things, be we trust your judgement. We count on it.”

The statement makes Bruce’s chest tighten for some reason, makes his rib cage clench around his lungs… but not… not in a bad way, not exactly. There’s guilt and fear there, certainly, but also a bright kind of joy sparkling faintly above the black swirl of inadequacy.

“The others will be counting on it tomorrow,” Barbara goes on, “They’ll be looking to you to see how to proceed with this.”

Her gaze darts briefly to Tim but returns to hold Bruce’s again before he can follow suit.

There’s a new sense of steel behind her eyes, resolve.

“You need to show your support for allowing Tim to leave the Manor tomorrow to go out looking for Jason,” Barbara instructs firmly.

Bruce balks.

Internally, the recoil is violent, vicious, but he allows nothing to show on his face. Barbara doesn’t need to see a reaction to know what he’s thinking, however.

She gives his knee a reassuring squeeze and places her free hand gently on top of the one already in contact with him.

“Tim is leaving the Manor tomorrow and he’s not coming back until he finds Jason,” says the young woman with more on her shoulders than anyone her age should ever have to bear, “Or he’s leaving the next day and he’s not coming back at all.”

Barbara gives a final squeeze and then releases him, moving to wheel entirely away.
At the door, she quietly gives one last instruction: “Get some rest, Bruce. We’ll need it.”

Bruce doesn’t respond.

He simply turns back to stare at Tim.

He stays that way for a long while, letting his nebulous thoughts attempt to spin themselves into something solid to grab onto as he tries to think through all the possible permutations of what could happen when the Family began to wake.

Eventually, Alfred comes to bully him into laying down on a bed in the next bay over and he sinks into the brief relief of oblivion.

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nobody teaches you ( to hurt like this )

Chapter End Notes

Oh Bruce... Changing like your Family needs you to is painfully difficult, but they have
so much faith in you!
(And of course the pressing need to get you to change your tune before Tim does something truly drastic...)

NEXT TIME: Dickie Bird finds a middle course he can live with, and he fights to make it happen.
Chapter Summary

Dick tries to cope with the hot mess of EVERYTHING that's happening to his Family. It doesn't quite work, but he starts to push past the angst to attempt figuring out a way for everyone he cares about to get through this with minimal damage.

^_^~

Chapter Notes

Hold on to your hats, buckoes, it's about to get blustery. The spiraling feels trip we're on is taking another turn for the heart wrenching, and unfortunately, I do still need to break the chapters up into two parts. This month has been a wild ride in terms of work-day chaos, and MS Word has been acting up, so I've hardly been able to work on this (or any story) for about a week and a half at this point. I've still got enough of a queue on this to keep posting for another few weeks, but just a few, so I'm using what I've got to it's utmost advantage. Besides, these chapters are still super long and really ought to be split up anyway.

Anyway: On to angsty big bird Dick!

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty Four - we could (try)

The morning starts slow, for Dick; slow and late.

He doesn’t even stir until almost eleven, and when he does, it’s with stiff muscles and aching, creaking joints. Mercifully, there’s not a pounding headache, but his brain is quite sluggish in rolling through its usual start up routine.

The moment that he’s fully conscious, he understands exactly why his brain doesn’t want to face reality… he remembers how last night went down, how it had been bad enough patrolling with his little brother hurt and missing and operating inside a dangerous mindset.

How patrol had turned into an Arkham breakout.
How the breakout had been complicated by the scheming of other Rogues.

How that had been complicated by the reappearance of Red Robin and all the conflicting emotions that his involvement caused… and how it was all further complicated by Red Hood.

Thinking over the last bit of the evening’s terrible spiral as his feet move him on autopilot towards the Cave, Dick loses touch with reality… starts to feel floaty and distant and yet also like the world around him is starting to collapse.

The Cave is still running on its lowest power setting when Dick arrives.

It feels like he’s way behind on waking up, but none of the others are down here yet – except Alfred, but he’s magic and therefore apparently doesn’t ever need to sleep at all.

Even Bruce is absent (likely bullied by the mysterious magics of Alfred the Magnificent into making his own attempt at sleeping).

Alfred is fussing with Tim’s IV line as Dick arrives at the med bay door.

The butler brushes Tim’s hair back with a loving, tender hand that makes everything pause calmly for a few moments.

Then he turns to Dick, entirely unsurprised to see him loitering at the door, and says with his usual lilt of bright pragmatism. “Shall I fetch a spot of breakfast, Master Dick?”

“Alf,” Dick starts heavily. “I don’t think I could keep anything down.”

“Ah, well. Just a bit of toast, then, hm?”

There’s no point in arguing, so Dick just attempts a grateful smile and sighs, “That sounds alright. Thank you, Alfred.”

“Of course, Master Dick,” Alfred says as he crosses the room. He puts his hand gingerly on Dick’s shoulder and says earnestly, “Master Timothy is healing, but you need to keep your strength up for him.”

Dick nods, suddenly feeling the prickle of tears.

He dives forward to wrap Alfred in a hug, feels the dam break inside him as the hug is returned with the steely strength they all so often forget that Alfred possesses.

Dick doesn’t start bawling, like he would have when he was younger. Instead, the broken dam on his emotions simply allows him to breathe more easily as he pulls away.

With an understanding, and utterly supportive nod, Alfred leaves to fetch him something small to eat that might help calm his stomach.

Dick moves to sit beside his little brother, taking up Tim’s hand in both of his as he had the
night before. This time, he quickly transfers one of them to petting gently at Tim’s hair.

“Oh, Timmy,” Dick breathes. “What on earth are we gonna do about all of this?”

Tim, obviously, doesn’t answer.

Dick still sighs in response.

He doesn’t even know where to begin with worrying.

Tim’s physical injuries seem an obvious start, but even those generate conflicted reactions in Dick’s psyche. Between accidental injury, unintentional self abuse, intentional woundings by villains (including Red Hood), and the possibility of intentional self abuse…

Dick can barely categorize Tim’s injuries, let alone rationalize them.

And that leads into the psychological damage Tim’s accrued.

It breaks Dick’s heart to even vaguely consider.

Tim was put on a suicide watch.

He’d been distressed prior to the worst of this; his mental state rendered precarious prior to the intense Fear Gas dosing he’d been subjected to as the night played out in full.

The initial distress had led Tim to run to Jason.

The Fear Gas had led him, again, to Jason.

To Jason.

Jason is an entirely separate can of worms for Dick.

Of worms and blood and bullets…
And of crowbars and bombs and razor wire…
Of being too late to do anything, and of graveyard dirt that makes everything too final.

Last night made Dick want to think differently of Jason, and of the Red Hood he’s become since his Family failed him so completely.

At least… *most* of last night had made him hope that thinking of Jason differently than he has been for the last few years might be a viable possibility…

There were still moments, even at his highest high of good vibes from last night, when Dick *hated* Jason, hated himself for being part of what had made Jason into the Red Hood.

When Jason tossed around an especially crude joke about his death, when his hand to hand was supplemented by a few gunshots that got too close a permanent solution…

But mostly, it hurt Dick to think about how *he* had been some significant part of what caused Jason to become the Red Hood when he transitioned over to actively threatening Tim…

Threatening to *kill* Tim…

When Jason had stopped pursuit of the real bad guy in play to threaten to kill the *one person* in the multiverse who has always refused to think ill of him…

There is still a difference between how Dick was thinking of Jason before all this got started spiraling out of control and how he thinks of the wayward former Robin now…

He does think of Jason and Red Hood as almost wholly different creatures: one that is his little brother just grown up a bit and made even more rough around the edges, and one that is the product of a pure psychosis that takes over sometimes and might possibly be treated – that might somehow be tamed enough to work around… enough to let Jason stay in control.

Dick thinks it’s half a product of Tim’s direct meddling and half a result of Barbara and Steph starting to wheedle down his resistance to the idea that Tim’s been pushing.

Jason is… he’s still a thorny point for Dick, but he does think that Jason *can* be helped.

It might take a lot longer than he would hope for as the worried big brother whose Little Wing is hurting, but it might be possible.

Red Hood… Dick doesn’t even know where to start with unpacking all of the angst potentially piping out of *that* wellspring…

But he knows that the Red Hood is a threat.

A threat to his city, and to his Family, in far too many ways for Dick to tolerate.

And yet… Jason *is* in there, somewhere.
Jason saved Tim last night, saved him from himself.

Connected to him, talked him down and got him to let go of an idea that could’ve been the end of him… Made things better in regards to a terrifyingly nebulous thing that Dick has only ever been able to make worse when he’s tried to get Tim to help him understand it.

Dick is unbearably grateful to Jason for that.

And simultaneously furious at Jason, or the Red Hood, or whoever, had been responsible for making Tim tip over the edge like he had.

He also has a slimy feeling of uncertainty that the answer is more complicated than he would prefer… more complicated in a way the implicates himself, and maybe even the rest of the Bats, as significant factors in what contributed to Tim’s sudden spiral.

But even if it makes him uncomfortable to think about… Dick wants to know what happened. Exactly, what happened. And why.

Because his little brother is lying in a hospital bed, he’s hurt and hurting, and Dick doesn’t want to be a part of the problem anymore.

He wants to be the one that Tim can go to for help.

But more importantly, he wants to help… even if it might mean that things change – even if he can’t fix this enough to be the one that Tim relies on, he wants to be someone Tim doesn’t regard as the reason he has to hide his troubles, no matter what those troubles are.

Dick knows he’s not alone in that.

Even the part about coming to terms with not being the one Tim relies on… Steph certainly just wants him to be safe and happy, to the maximum extent possible.

She’s actually the next one in the Family who wakes up enough to make it down to the Cave – though ‘wakes up’ might be an overly generous description.

Steph stumbles into the med bay with bleary eyed concern painted over her expression, barely cognizant enough to avoid knocking into the instrument tray still perched by Tim’s bedside on the shoulder that’s across from where Dick’s sitting.

Working with slow movements, a diligence stemming from her awareness of being too sleepy to operate at full speed, Steph moves the instrument tray into its usual corner and replaces it with another chair. Before curling up in it, Steph drags a supply bin out from under one of the
stainless steel cabinets and acquires the comfort of a fluffy blanket. With her prize wrapped tightly around her shoulders, Steph falls heavily into the chair and pulls her heels up to the edge of the seat, tucking her knees under her chin.

“How is he?” she asks with a quiet gravitas after a few breaths to let the somber silence of the venue recover from the echoes of her shuffling exertions.

“Stable,” Dick promises, equally quiet. “Alfred pushed his last round of antibiotics right before I got here, so… half an hour ago, maybe. Unless Bruce added pain meds or another sedative without charting any of them, he should be waking up in a few hours, at most.”

Steph nods, her whole body rocking forward on her perch.

Her eyes dart towards the medical chart hanging at the foot of Tim’s bed – a more precise and detailed record of his comprehensive health concerns than any hospital would ever be able to obtain. It records the effects of all the medication he’s ever taken, down to the change in his saliva’s salinity – because even the most seemingly irrelevant detail of a reaction could prove vital to his survival in a scenario when he gets exposed to new chemicals as Red Robin.

It would not be at all beyond the controlling protectiveness that they expect from Bruce to learn that he had added significantly to Tim’s medications – that he would chemically enforce a regimen of painless sleep as part of Tim’s recovery.

But it would be going a bit too far to say they expect the level of irresponsibility required to have pushed meds without recording them.

Such a thing could quite easily lead to an accidental overdose, potentially catastrophic enough to kill him outright. It was one of the first rules they’d all learned in Alfred’s crash course of pre-EMT training: if you start it, chart it.

So. Tim would be waking up in a few hours. Probably sooner, even – knowing Tim.

And it is unlikely that he would be happy to see he was back in the Cave.

Unlikely he could possibly be receptive to staying here for very much longer.

It is possible that he might submit to simply moving upstairs, that he might permit them to help him through a few more days of recovery in the comfort of his own bedroom, but even that is a lot less likely than Dick is really comfortable with accepting.
Steph understands the issue, too.

“He’s not gonna wanna stay here,” she mutters into her knees. “He’s gonna freak as soon as he realizes that he’s back – won’t matter if we leave him here until he wakes up or move him up into the Manor before he’s conscious. And if we try to keep him here…”

“It’ll be a fight,” Dick agrees gravely.

“A fight we won’t have half a chance to win,” Steph furthers.

Dick nods, extrapolating, “Even if we manage to keep him here, physically, he’ll never trust us again. We’ll lose him completely… At best, he’d cut ties with the Family, but still operate out of Gotham as Red Robin… but it’s far more likely he’d move permanently to California for the Titans. Hell, he might even wrangle some of them into helping him start a brand new team, stake out a whole new city on the other side of the world.”

_Hmm-_ing with somber agreement, Steph sighs.

She tips her head to the side and smushes her cheek against her knee, letting her eyes slide almost closed. The slits that remain allow her just enough of a sightline to keep Tim visible, though Dick isn’t certain he’s still in focus for her.

“We could transfer him to his apartment in China Town,” Dick suggests after a lingering moment of an uneasy hush. “Keep him there until he wakes up and then have the Titans come collect him pre-emptively… They’ll be able to look after him and it might be good to keep him out of Gotham for a few weeks. We could meet with him on _his_ turf, give him the high ground in any negotiations we hold to try to fix all this.”

Steph just _hmms_ again.

It’s the only plan Dick’s got that addresses even half the issues that they’re facing, so it’s currently the best he can do. And it’s likely that Steph can’t do any better, even if she does seem to recognize that it’s not exactly the best plan they’ve ever concocted.

She looks like she’s chewing on a more detailed answer to respond with, but before she can figure out how to make the words come out the way she wants them, Alfred returns with a tray full of his special high calorie, high protein, vitamin infused breakfast biscuits.

Cass is right behind him, balancing another tray high above her head with one hand – this one loaded with four steaming hot cups of tea, with a pot in the center on a cage above a lit candle and a few extra cups stacked upside down beside it. For an entire second, Dick thinks he would have preferred coffee, but then he thinks of how the scent of fresh coffee could probably pull Tim out of a dead drop coma and is suddenly very grateful for having an alternative beverage that’s still comfortably warm and highly caffeinated.

The trays are set up on the swivel tables that hang over Tim’s bed, and Cass winds up sitting primly on the edge of a steel and plexiglass storage unit at Tim’s feet while Alfred stands stoically beside her as the tea and snacks start to be devoured. The first few bites are simply dutiful, merely an ingrained habit of children raised to know very distinctly that they’d better _eat_ something now, or face Alfred’s wrath and not so subtle vengeance later.
The next few bites are ravenous, from all of them – they've been far too worried to recognize how hungry they've let themselves become.

The span of ten minutes or so that it takes them to demolish the food is spent in silence, but it’s possibly the most comfortable silence Dick has felt in the last month.

Certainly, it’s the nicest moment he’s spent with this many his siblings all gathered together in one place… It’s nice enough to make the pleasantry of calm last even as he spies Barbara having taken up a place at the Bat Computer, with Bruce standing stonily at her shoulder as she studiously ignores his existence.

Damian is almost certainly lurking in the nearby shadows somewhere, but Dick’s long since accepted that Damian cannot simply be found, and he’s pretty much just given up the ridiculous goal of locating the littlest Bat without Damian’s own move to reveal himself.

Alfred excuses himself to head back upstairs intent on retrieving more food and Dick feels the tug of his exit encouraging his own.

With a heavy sigh as Dick recognizes what he needs to do, he gives Steph and Cass a last once over to assess their feelings on the matter at hand. Steph is still too focused on Tim’s breathing to be at all willing to part with her place at his side – even for the task of arguing a case with Bruce for his benefit.

As the oldest, the responsibility would fall to Dick anyway, even if Steph were chomping at the bit to get the argument rolling, but it does feel good to know that he’s sparing her a hardship by doing it himself.

Cass, being Cass, looks perfectly neutral as Dick skims her figure over. She arches an eyebrow at him, but he can’t tell if she’s questioning his ridiculous-ness in feeling the need to check up on her, or if she’s just not so subtly telling him he should just get on with it already.

Every second of delay is making it that much more difficult for him to push up to his feet and walk out of there, after all.

With one more sigh, and one more glance at Tim, Dick does convince his feet to move.

He makes it down to the main floor where Bruce and Babs are studying some sort of thermal scans without figuring anything out about how to win his point. He has to win, for Tim’s sake, but he’s never been the most artful about any of finagling it.

Having Babs there to help will probably be his saving grace.

With that in mind, instead of winding himself up with anxiety over his words or how they might sound, Dick just walks up behind them and blurs, “We have to move Tim to his apartment in China Town before he wakes up.”
Both Bruce and Barbara turn to him with hints of surprise etched into their stoic expressions – and Babs has the leading edge of a smile, like she wasn’t sure Dick would realize what he has and like she’s immensely pleased to find that she’s been proven wrong.

Bruce does not give any sign of approval, not even a minuscule twitch of possible resignation, which means that, in Bruce speak, he’s projecting his abject refusal to give assent.

“We have to move him,” Dick repeats, “Before he wakes up.”

When Bruce is still utterly unmoved, Dick elaborates, “The last time he woke up here, he was kept against his will. If he wakes up here again, he’s going to assume things will be the same as they were before. And if he believes that we’re going to force him to stay here, under heavy sedation and constant guard, he’s gonna kill himself trying to get away from us. And when he manages it somehow, he won’t be coming back. Ever.”

Bruce huffs.

Slight as the motion is, it’s still overt acknowledgement of the truth in Dick’s point.

“The China Town apartment is the one best suited to keeping Tim both safe and stable as he recovers, and it’s the one with the easiest access for the Titans – in case Tim wants to be with them right now, instead of us.”

A muscle twitches in Bruce’s jaw.

Disagreement.

“Bruce.”

There’s desperation in Dick’s tone, but also warning.

Tim needs this, and Dick knows it – and he needs to make Bruce understand it.

“We can’t keep him here, Bruce,” Dick continues, pressing, “Even if it were the best thing for him, we can’t. He won’t let us. And unless we just keep him constantly drugged, he’s gonna get away again. Hell, even if we do keep him knocked out… he’s crafty. He’s too good to stay captive for long, and he’s so damn good that even Ra’s al Ghul can recognize that.”

The intake of breath Bruce makes is more measured than Dick expects, more considering and focused than could possibly bode well.

“What makes you think he would accept being kept at his China Town apartment?”
Dick is taken aback by the question, his head jerks back and he takes a half step away as dread pools in his gut.

Of course, Bruce has considered all the variables that Dick has.

And of course, he’s gone even further with it – has managed to consider things that haven’t even occurred to Dick yet.

“What do you mean?”

“Keeping him here has better statistical odds of success in keeping him contained,” Bruce lays out flatly, like he’s trying to coax Dick’s thought processes to stumble over the right answer in a puzzle he’s presented for training purposes. “The China Town apartment is his ground. If he decides to run from there, his odds of getting away are good. Better than from his bedroom in the Manor. What makes you think he won’t decide to run from the China Town apartment?”

That dread is still pooled deep in Dick’s gut, heavy enough to make him sure he’s wrong as he answers, “He’ll recognize that it’s a good faith gesture and understand that we’re really trying to help him. It’ll give him back the feeling of control that we took from him last time.”

Bruce just gives him a pointed stare.

A good faith gesture won’t be good enough.

It won’t be encouraging him to stay so much as allowing him the opening to leave.

“So… so we call the Titans, send him to California right away,” Dick tries, grasping at straws with a building sense of panic stirring up the dread. “They’ll take care of him, make him want to be taken care of… They’ll be able to keep him safe and he’ll accept their help; he won’t feel like he has to run away from them like he would from us.”

Bruce’s expression doesn’t change.

Beside him, Barbara sighs – giving up the charade of ignoring the conversation going on beside her. She pushes back from her station at the Bat computer and gives Dick a sympathetic look at makes his lungs clench.

“Dick,” she starts. She bites back a few words and rolls her lips over her teeth as she considers how to rephrase what she was about to say. “It’s not just about Tim leaving.”

Confusion makes Dick’s thoughts stutter, but at least it quells the panic for a moment.
“Tim isn’t just running away,” Barbara lays out, “He’s running towards.”

The stutter makes it hard for Dick’s brain to connect the dots, but eventually he recognizes the real issue here. “Jason.”

Barbara nods. “Jason.”

we could try (to stop this bruising)

Chapter End Notes

Oh Dickie....

NEXT TIME: Dick's part II, where the tear-jerker aspect of this stint really gets going as Tim wakes up and things head south like a shipwreck (so bring a nice soft stuffy to cuddle as you cry).

We're nearing the Endgame here, but we've still got at least 8 chapters to go, even if I don't split any more of them into multiple parts. ^_^~
bruising (part II)

Chapter Summary

The Family is beginning to fracture, has been doing so for some time, but now it's hit the critical point of utter crises. And Dick knows that there's no more pretending that things can go back to how they were... He has to fight his own demons before he can even hope to see a future for the people he loves.

Family is rarely comfortable, but it's sometimes the only thing a person has...

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Chapter Notes

Okay people, the feels hit hard in this one. /HELLA/ hard.

Poor Dickie is doing his damnedest, but Timmy ain't making anything about this easy. The good news is I ended it without a cliffhanger! Everything hurts when you get there, but there is at least a pretty good point to pause. ^_^

On to the angst:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Chapter Thirty Five - we could try to stop (this bruising)**

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“Tim isn’t just running away,” Barbara lays out, “He’s running towards.”

The stutter in his thought process makes it hard for Dick’s brain to connect the dots, but eventually he recognizes the real issue here. “Jason.”

Barbara nods. “Jason.”
Dick lets the panic hit, works himself through it like it’s just a burst of Fear Gas, grounds himself enough to judge the variables. He knows that he’s still not rational in reacting to Jason, knows that he needs to respond to it with logic.

Tim has plenty of reasons to want to check on Jason, to be worried about him.

Jason saved Tim last night… and after having saved Tim previously, all he got for it was grief from the Family. Tim has plenty of reasons to want to go see him.

Even if it makes Dick uncomfortable to think about, he understands.

He would maybe even be willing to help Tim find Jason… Yeah, he can accept that.

Once Tim’s healed up a bit, and things calm down, they can probably even go together… or Dick could just help Tim get close and then let him contact Jason alone. He could just be back up, if that’s what Tim wants… because Dick trusts Tim, and he… well he doesn’t exactly trust Jason with Tim, but he trusts that… that without some sort of specific trigger, Jason won’t intentionally harm Tim.

And if Dick helps Tim find Jason, Tim might be willing to let Dick hang around close enough to provide support in case something does go wrong.

It’ll be okay.

Dick nods, trying to pull his focus back to Barbara.

“Okay, fine, I guess,” Dick manages. “We… we can figure something out. As soon as Tim’s healed up enough, we’ll go find Jason.”

Barbara flashes him a brief smile, proud and relieved… and yet, it’s still so sad.

“There’s no grey area in this one, Dick,” she tells him softly, wheeling closer. She reaches out for his hand and only continues once she’s holding it. “There’s no ‘as soon as’ for Tim right now… The moment he wakes up, finding Jason is going to be his immediate focus. Either we keep
him contained by force or we let him wander off at less than half healed.”

The words sink into Dick’s consciousness like flat stones in a vat of viscous oil.

It hurts to contemplate, but there’s no possibility of denying the truth in Barbara’s statement. There’s no wiggle room at all in it.

Tim is going to leave the moment he can survive the attempt to do so.

The moment he thinks he can survive, which is very probably well before he actually can survive it… Tim’s gonna push himself hard for this one, harder than he’s ever pushed before, and he’s already nearly died because of his attempts before…

If Tim leaves here, at all, even without considering where he’s going… his odds of just dropping dead on the street are unacceptably high… but with consideration for his destination, for the fact that Jason might not be receptive to having Tim pop up for an unexpected visit…

If Jason picks a fight, Tim won’t resist – wouldn’t want to, and wouldn’t physically be able to… and even Tim’s not quite durable enough to survive another brutal battering right now.

Dick swivels to look at Tim’s prone figure in the med bay.

Aching, desperate… he just wants to keep his little brother safe.

Alive.

Happy and healthy…

It doesn’t feel like it should be this hard.

This impossible.

Because Dick knows – he knows, without a doubt or the slightest sliver of hope – that if they stop Tim from going after Jason here, they will lose him forever. Even if he does somehow survive the trip, Tim will never speak to any of them ever again.

Bruce is willing to make that sacrifice in order to keep Tim safe.

He loves Tim enough to let his son hate him.

Loves them all enough to attempt to shoulder all the blame for it, to make Tim hate him alone
instead of blaming his siblings in hopes of allowing their relationships to maintain a slim degree of viability when this is over.

But Dick…

Dick doesn’t quite know if he can stomach that.

Maybe he could’ve before, but… now…

He’s not given long to think it through.

Before he’s fully finished processing the implications of Barbara’s statement, there’s a commotion up in the med bay: Tim’s finally awake.

The thought sends Dick’s heart soaring with relief, even as his gut is lined with lead and begins to plummet though the floor.

Bruce and Dick and Babs are all moving before Dick consciously realizes that they need to, all arrive at Tim’s door before he’s pushed himself upright and Dick remembers to breathe.

“Where’s Jason?”

Tim grinds the question out, panting heavily through his clenched jaw as he struggles with the exertion of sitting upright.

Before Dick can even choke down some air to attempt a reply, Babs says calmly, “He’s at a safe house in Crime Alley, approximately ten blocks southwest of where he was last night.”

Tim blinks unevenly, trying to process the response and map it out mentally.

“The one by the river?” he asks, gaze still fuzzy and unfocused as it finds a place to rest on Barbara. “Or the building on Hanover?”

“Sprang River Waterfront,” Babs confirms.

Then she cracks a half smile, asking, “He’s got a building on Hanover? Hanover Court, or Hanover Drive?”

Tim’s mouth quirks in a brief grunt of amusement, so fast Dick would’ve missed it if he hadn’t been staring – even with his Robin training, the grin is simply too quickly buried beneath the dampener of pain. And with Tim’s ridiculously high tolerance… the pain must be intense.

It makes Dick’s heart ache.
The ache becomes a screaming throb as Tim shifts and starts to fight his way out of bed.

“Tim.”

It’s Batman’s fiercest disapproving growl, and it slides off Tim like oil on water.

He struggles to his feet.

Wobbles as he makes it up to standing in a way that makes Dick take an involuntary step forward. Steadies himself and takes a deep breath before attempting a single stride.

“That makes Tim look up.

His glare is something truly vicious and the way his teeth are bared to let him keep breathing while those pearly whites are being ground so tightly makes him look positively feral.

“Make. Me,” he pants, ferocious.

And dead serious.

He takes another step, this one steady on the first try.

The next one’s steady, too.

Slowly, he makes it all the way to the door where Bruce and Dick are standing. Babs has already moved away, obliging Tim’s egress.

Dick is still pressed against the door frame, leaned against it for support as his legs are suddenly too weak to support him alone. He’s in Tim’s way, though not any real obstacle.

But Bruce shifts to actively block Tim’s path.

Tim looks half dead and doesn’t even bother with drawing himself tall as he reaches the door. He leans one hand on Bruce’s chest, half pushing him back and half using him as a support for a quick breather. After a few wheezing heaves of his chest, Tim starts to press forward, moving to slide around Bruce’s massive figure.

Dick can’t move – can’t decide if he wants to aid Bruce in blocking Tim’s way, or step out of
the door to give Tim an actual opening.

It takes a bit of doing, but Tim manages to use Dick’s status as an indecisive barrier to slip under Bruce’s arm in a way that Bruce can’t block without stomping all over Dick’s feet.

Dick feels a bubble of something at the success, a little blip of… triumph on his little brother’s behalf. *Righteous* triumph.

He can’t do this, though.

He can’t let Timmy kill himself like this.

But seeing Bruce grab Tim’s wrist, seeing Bruce physically *stop* Tim from leaving feels like an even worse kind of *wrong*.

And when Tim wrenches free – spins a Red Robin move right there in the door with no holds barred and a vicious kick aimed at Bruce’s throat that makes the *Bat* have to dodge to stay standing with any kind of trachea intact – Dick feels that pride again, that triumph.

That pride dissolves into fretful worry as Tim sways on his landing, listing so severely that he’s forced to take a few extra steps, and a little skip sideways, to keep his feet under him.

It makes Dick lurch forward again, moving to catch Tim on instinct – holding himself back from the action as soon as he realizes what he’s doing.

He and Bruce follow as Tim marches down towards the main floor, steps angling towards the nearest entrance that could take him topside.

Bruce grabs at Tim’s hand again as he reaches the main floor.

Tim wrenches free in a way that makes his wounded shoulder contort so severely Tim has to half-scream through the pain of pulling free.

He sways dangerously in the recoil, spinning around to diffuse his momentum and stay upright. He pants through it as he glowers straight at Bruce.

“Tim, I can’t let you do this,” Bruce says, openly pleading.

“If you want to stop me, you’re gonna have to kill me,” Tim says coldly.

Everyone around draws a breath into tight lungs and holds it like it’s the last gasp of air they’ll ever breathe.
“I can’t beat you, Bruce,” Tim admits wholly. “But I can keep you from winning long enough that I drop. You know I can. And even with the supplies in the med bay being right here, I can hold out long enough to make saving me almost impossible. You have to fight me, Bruce, really fight me. And it’s at least an 89% chance that you’ll have to break the Rule to win.”

Bruce doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe, doesn’t even dare to blink.

Much like Dick himself, who can feel the acid clawing up his throat so thickly that he fears he might legitimately drown in its fiery embrace.

“Cass and I have a deal, so she won’t stop me,” Tim continues, laying out the facts in an icy monologue that rivals Ra’s for how brutally emotionless he sounds. “Steph can’t stop me, and Babs clearly won’t. Dick could manage it, if he were willing to use the necessary force, but I don’t think he’s capable of it right now. Even if you get Damian to tranq me, I’ll fight through it until the dosage gets to lethal. I can do it, Bruce, you know I can. So. You decide what kills me: are we having it out now, or will you let me take my chances with the big bad Red Hood?”

No one moves, Dick doesn’t even think his heart dares to beat for the few seconds the tension pulls ever more taught. Bruce’s fists squeeze tighter at his side as he seems to choose the relatively lower risk of the first option over the almost certainty of the later.

89% is horrible, and it’s a lowballed estimate, Dick’s sure.

But Tim’s not likely to survive the walk to Crime Alley, let alone what he might find when he gets there. He’d be easy prey in the shape he’s in, buzzing with a billboard above his head like he’s just asking to be victimized by the scum on those streets.

And that’s not even considering the matter of Jason’s likely less than friendly welcome…

Bruce is careful, calculated.

11% possibility of success is plenty of room to work with when the only other option lends itself to chances of successful survivability in multiples of zero.

Even Dick would be hard pressed to refute those odds.

But they can’t fight like this, they can’t.

And then the tension snaps in a wash of cool relief as Alfred appears and announces dryly, “Now that is quite enough of that. I’ll not hear another word about any such horrors as killing and dying today, particularly not regarding any possible deaths within the Family.”
Dick has never heard Alfred sound so cross. So legitimately *livid*.

“If Master Bruce would kindly cease this nonsense with holding hostage a child he has vowed to care for, perhaps we can move on towards finding resolution, here,” Alfred suggests.

Bruce doesn’t make any grand statements of acceptance, but his fists unclench as he admits defeat and stands down.

Alfred nods, acknowledging the effort.

Then he turns to Tim.

“Now then,” he sighs, “You really ought to pace yourself, Master Timothy. I have to insist that you at least come upstairs and eat something before you go.”

“I know, Alfred. But I can’t do that. Sorry,” Tim grunts, somehow sounding both cold as ice and genuinely apologetic at once.

Alfred sighs again as Tim turns his back on them all and begins shuffling towards the exit once more. The butler’s gaze lifts to meet Dick’s for some reason, boring into him with a fierce depth of understanding and expectation that Dick cannot even begin to fathom.

And then Tim huffs, drawing Dick’s attention away.

He swivels to see Tim facing down Damian, standing on the ramp down to the garage with his katana drawn and his fighting stance loose and ready.

Tim rocks back on his heels, clearly exhausted and just as clearly prepared to dig in.

“I will end you, Gremlin,” Tim declares.

The nickname is all affection, and it’s as open a pronouncement of brotherly love as Tim has ever made towards the youngest of them.

It’s so obvious, so honest, so unflinchingly true and visible, that it makes Damian falter, and his sword tip droops despondently as his gaze searches Dick and Bruce for some indication of what he ought to do here.

Because the threat is honest, too.

Tim loves Damian.
And will kill him if he finds it necessary.

Bruce is still a statue beside him, and it makes Dick want to scream.

That’s when it clicks.

When the right answer swings at him out of nowhere and straight up clocks him in the face like one of Jason’s right hooks, thrown in his nastiest splash of street flash steeliness.

He knows what Alfred wants from him… knows what he needs to do as the big brother in this scenario, as the middle ground between anxious parent and co-conspirator he’s always been supposed to be… He gets it.

Understands what has to happen, and knows with every fiber of his being it absolutely \textit{has} to happen.

But he doesn’t have to like it.

“Fucking \textit{hell},” Dick huffs under his breath.

He shakes his head roughly as he starts forward, his fists clench and begin to shake where they hang limply at his sides, and his glower grows painfully pronounced as he attempts to glare reality into submission.

It doesn’t work, but he didn’t expect it to, and he marches on regardless.

He strides straight passed Tim, who frowns and tracks his progress with deeply suspicious eyes, and passed Damian, who also frowns but additionally wilts with confusion to the point of nearly letting his sword’s deadly blade brush the dirt on the Cave floor.

Furious, frustrated, and absolutely heart broken, Dick trudges down to where he’s got a daytime street bike stashed by his Nightcycle. The Suzuki is not as fast or as flashy as the Ducati in the upstairs garage, and it’s not as subtle a sight in Gotham’s worse off regions as the Honda, but it’s here and it’s got a smooth enough ride to keep even the most unsteady passenger stable.

Dick mounts the bike while dragging on a helmet, kicks the monster’s engine on with more force than necessary, and then yanks it roughly around to steer up to where Damian and Tim are still standing halfway down the ramp.

“Get on,” he growls sharply, holding out a helmet for Tim without looking at him.

He shakes the helmet when Tim doesn’t take it, still refusing to look at him.

Someone takes a tentative hold of the object and Dick lets go, allowing himself to stare down
at Tim’s feet – acknowledges a certain relief and gratitude in finding that Tim’s shoved his feet into boots at some point, and that it’s Tim’s boots he sees having stepped closer.

For a second there, Dick thought Damian might be coming up to try talking him down.

Tim doesn’t drop the helmet when Dick lets his own hold fall away, but Dick can see in his peripheries that he also doesn’t move an inch toward putting the damn thing on.

With his teeth grinding together hard enough to risk them breaking, Dick growls again in heavy, pointed syllables, “Get. On.”

“To go where,” Tim asks, quiet in a way that almost sounds scared.

“To find Jason, damn it,” Dick shouts, exploding with such force that he has to hit his motorcycle to keep himself from turning around to strangle Tim.

Tim jumps at that, flinches so hard he nearly fumbles his hold on the helmet.

Dick takes a breath.

Squeezes his eyes closed, and then forces in and out another round of air.

Repeats the action twice more.

“I hate you,” he whispers, hoarse and harsh. “Right now, Tim, I honest to god hate you.”

He hears Tim take a strangled breath, the kind he would’ve hidden easily had he been operating at even 50%. Dick knows that sound, that sort of desperate, loathsome resignation.

Tim’s self esteem has never been the best and when Dick first started working with him, supposedly training him as Robin, he’d taken advantage of that to try wheedling down Tim’s spirit – hoping that it might be enough to make him quit the life before he got it started.

It never worked, and he got very familiar with Tim’s self loathing – with hearing the tell tale signs that Tim was internalizing some blip of criticism as a universally acknowledged aspect of his inadequacy… as something that couldn’t be reasonably changed, but apparently still needed to be corrected somehow – like by working himself to death to achieve perfection.

Tim hears that Dick hates him, but he understands it as a reality that’s always been at least a little true. He thinks he deserves Dick’s hatred.
And he does. Kinda.

Dick wants Tim to know how much he’s hurting Dick with his choices, how much he’s hurting the *Family* with his choices… because Dick isn’t perfect and he’s hurting right now and knowing that Tim feels a little bit of the sting from this makes the hurt ebb away just slightly.

“I hate what you’re doing,” Dick clarifies, fists squeezing at his handlebars. “And I disagree with it. Strongly. But I’m your brother and I am not going to let you kill yourself.”

Tim pulls in air like he hasn’t breathed in weeks.

It makes a muscle twitch in Dick’s jaw.

“So, stop gawking and get on the damn bike, already,” Dick growls, turning his gaze away from Tim’s feet to focus on the bike’s plethora of little dials. “Before I change my mind.”

That spurs Tim to motion, though Dick is pretty sure that Tim knows the threat is empty.

It takes a moment for Tim to tug the helmet on, and another excruciating pause as Tim struggles to mount the bike, but Dick’s still breathing when Tim finally wraps his arms around his waist, and Dick counts that as a little victory right now.

He has to, or he thinks he’ll fall apart.

As Tim settles and Dick wheels the bike around, he feels lost and broken, but… for the first time in an alarmingly long while, he’s pretty sure he doesn’t hate himself.

And he gets more certain of that point as Tim gives his ribs a squeeze when they get out into the glaring sunshine.

“Thanks, Dick,” Tim mutters.

Dick just swallows down his frustration and tears, and pretends he didn’t hear.
we could try to stop this bruising (we could be like novocain)

Chapter End Notes

Oh.... Dickie.... and just....... /EVERYONE/...

Yeah. And despite the big strides here, it's not exactly over for them, FYI...

NEXT TIME: Babs takes a long hard look at what her Family's become... and questions what can come of it.

//Also// I feel it important to commemorate the fact that three days ago (7/20/19) was the anniversary of the moon landing! Personally, I find it kind of depressing rather than inspiring, being that in 50 years since walking on the moon (which admittedly was ridiculously reckless and something we really should have beta tested a little longer before throwing out the drawing board), we've pretty much done nothing since. There've been some truly awesome advancements, but nothing on the scale of that... I was promised that my generation would have retirement options on Mars and I want my chateau on Olympus Mons, people, so chop chop.

Anywho, yay moon, poor Batkids, and good luck to all my readers in anything you attempt this week! <3

^_^
there's a (high)

Chapter Summary

Babs reflects on the lead up to all of this insanity and watches the culmination of it unfold in the Cave.

Chapter Notes

I know it seems a little repetitive to show these events again, but I found it really fascinating to consider everything from Babs' PoV, especially as she reaches her breaking point. She's been awake for at least 72 hours at this point, worried sick over everyone in her Family, and severely lacking on the food and water intake, so she actually has to remember she's human and in the midst of an acute stress-response.

Also, it's Discovery's 31st annual SHARK WEEK!!!!! And in celebration of my very favorite week of the year, I'm hoping to get three chapters posted for you! At the very least, I'll be getting two of them up.

Be nice to Sharks, respect the Ocean, and enjoy the Bat Family Angst!

^_^~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty Six - there's a ( high )

The problem starts before they even get Tim back.

It starts long before Jason even picks the fight with Bruce that let Tim get away.

It starts the moment that Tim decides Jason’s sanity is worth more than Tim’s life.

Far more.

So much more that even his relative happiness, encapsulated in the vague potential he has to rejoin the Family, to regain the support system and have the real chance of being loved again that being part of the Family entails, is worth more to Tim than his own life.
So much more that Tim would rather die than let Jason proactively break the Rule.

It’s a moment Barbara knew was building for a while, but she didn’t realize how skewed the scales were until she watched Tim consciously evaluate the variables and proactively step into the path of a bullet to save Jonathan Crane.

It wasn’t an instinctive move.

It wasn’t just a hail Mary kind of last ditch effort to save Jason from himself.

It was a choice.

A conscious, proactive, *premeditated* choice.

And if Babs hadn’t been certain of it the first time it happened, when the exact same scenario came up less than five minutes later in the exact same way, even *Jason* could tell.

It changes things.

Rather dramatically.

Barbara knows that no one else quite realizes how completely the stage has shifted, even Jason only feels it on a gut instinct sort of intuitive level.

He knows that something’s changed, and he knows that the change is bad… and he knows that Tim has got to be stopped somehow – saved from himself.

Jason goes about attempting it, but only Babs can see why the effort is utterly futile.

Only she can see that Jason’s effort fails because it proves Tim right.

The more Jason cares, the more he tries to drive the point home that Tim can’t just let himself die for Jason’s sake, the more definitively he *proves* to Tim that there’s something in him left to save. Something truly good, *Robin* good.

Proves it to Babs, too.

Not that she didn’t believe that already, but having such empirical evidence in her corner, with HD video and crystal clear audio, feels pretty nice. She believed Tim, had faith in Jason, but
now… now she’s got hard evidence, tapes that could convince a court room.

As the argument on the rooftop starts to spiral, and Babs attempts to mediate, she can feel how things are sliding out of anyone’s control.

She can say that it’s not all bad news.

Even while it’s probably the worst thing to have happened to the Family since Jason died, Barbara can step back and note a few key things of progress that make her hope to every god that ever got a spark of creation that Tim’s right and this will all be worth it in the end.

First off is how thoroughly obvious it is that Jason wants to protect Tim.

How it’s so obvious that even Steph and Dick can see it.

Cass already knows, and Damian’s clearly starting to waver.

Second is how Jason’s comments have subtle, voluntary inclusions of himself within the Family, as part of their collective in a way Babs hardly even heard from him before he died.

And how Dick and Steph don’t balk at hearing it.

Then there’s how Bruce has recognized his failures here, recognized and acknowledged exactly what he’s done wrong. He wants to be a parent, a protector, and Babs can’t fault him that – even when it means he’s willing to do one more wrong in pursuit of right.

He just wants to make sure that Tim’s safe.

He’s so close… just a few steps short of being able to recognize that it’s the very same urge in Jason that makes Jason cause so much direct damage to Tim… And though it’s tweaked away from being parental, it’s an urge that’s no less potent or rife with emotional strain.

If Bruce can be truly convinced that his presence will cause more harm than good here, he might be able to see how Jason’s situation is similar… might be able to truly understand how the desire to do good can do such direct and egregious harm.

As things spiral, as it’s decided that Jason needs to go talk Tim down, things simmer.

It makes an impact on Bruce, but Babs can’t read him well enough to know for sure what he’s thinking – to know if he’ll bounce back in the right way, or dig himself an even deeper hole.

She listens in on his conversation with Alfred as she makes her way over to the Manor from the Clocktower, listens to how Alfred navigates the treacherous waters.
Finds the disconnect.

She realizes that she and Alfred have both underestimated how impactful the trauma of the others’ pasts still are to them.

The root of the problem is how Tim feels so unwanted, so unvalued.

How he feels so much less than…

Specifically, less than Jason, but also just lesser in all regards.

Getting Jason to come home actually balances out evenly with Tim dying, at least in Tim’s mind… And there is exactly zero possibility of convincing him otherwise, right now.

He’s been left behind by everyone he loves, been living in Jason’s shadow since the worst thing in the world happened to the Family, and nothing in the universe will be able to convince him that all of that history doesn’t prove he’s worthless.

Combined with his personal investment in Jason’s safety and sanity, for both the Family’s sake and because he clearly loves Jason with every fiber of his being… Well…

This spiral isn’t over yet, even if Jason succeeds in talking Tim down and convincing him to come back to the Manor for the night.

The Problem is still in full swing.

When Barbara arrives at the Manor, Alfred is there to coax her into eating something. She gets the rundown of everyone’s injuries, including Tim’s, and relents to eat her chicken cacciatore in willing silence as Alfred goes down to check on Bruce’s eminent arrival.

She finishes her food, all of it, and cleans her plates.

Moves slowly, deliberately.

Thinking carefully all the while.

She been crying on and off all night, but she’s not so distracted by the emotions or the exhaustion that she can’t still use her big brain to accomplish something vital. Even if that something keeps making her tear up all over again.

Mentally, she’s been running through scenarios, and none of them are going good.
She heads down to the Cave before Dick heads up, hides from him and Bruce easily enough and doesn’t feel at all guilty as she eavesdrops.

She feels for Dick, truly.

Babs absolutely hates his stupid hero guilt complex, but she can breathe easier at hearing how he’s getting on the right track. He might even figure this whole mess out for himself.

He just needs a bit more time.

But Bruce… is still stuck.

Caught on being a parent.

He always does better with Dick than he has with any of the others, and tonight he does better than he’s done even for Dick in a long while.

He doesn’t do perfect.

But it’s hard to blame him for being unable to absolve Dick of some very specific points of error, especially while standing at the bedside of the child put in danger because of those errors. It’s not really Dick’s fault, but there’s no real convincing either of them of that, and Bruce does give him significant comfort, so Babs forgives them both their idiocy.

When Dick heads upstairs, Babs gives Bruce a few moments alone with Tim.

He needs it, and Babs respects that.

He needs rest, too. Babs gives him what she can, wheeling her way over to the server room to perform a few procedures of routine maintenance – nothing too taxing, and the simplicity of the task allows her to fall into a zen like state as her muscles move by rote.

She delays the inevitable for as long as she can.

But Tim needs her to talk to Bruce, and he needs for it to happen tonight.

The conversation does not go terribly well.

She and Bruce are both too exhausted and too distressed for it to have had any possibility of going much better than it does, but it’s still alright. The important things get said.

In a way that should make them stick.
Barbara is proven both right and wrong in the morning.

Bruce has taken her advice to heart, knows she’s right about the idea that they’ll have to let Tim go in one way or another as soon as he wakes up.

But he’s chosen Tim’s physical safety over his mental security.

Barbara finds Bruce in his office just before noon, setting up the means for Tim to run a fully viable Drake Industries branch in any city in the world he might want to run to – a branch that he could make into the company’s new headquarters with a single stroke of his pen.

He’s also transferring substantial liquid assets to all of Tim’s more established aliases, including several he uses exclusively while working with the Teen Titans. And he’s establishing communications routes for Tim to contact the Justice League and all the contingent parts of the entire universe’s collective super hero community without having to go through any of the Bats’ channels or receive high level authorization for independent access.

Bruce is ensuring that Tim can live his life exactly as he wants to, anywhere he wants to, without having to proactively cut ties to the Bats to accomplish it. In fact, like this, Tim would have to proactively choose to stay in with them to really be associated with them by any default.

He’s the youngest person she’s ever heard of being fully established as an independent cape, and he’s definitely the youngest person with a Fortune 100 company at his fingertips.

In a lot of ways, Bruce has fully secured Tim’s future.

And in a lot of others, he’s completely ruined it.

But Babs can’t say she’s too surprised. Or even disappointed.

Asking Bruce to change so quickly… to change at all is hard enough, but to shift his entire base of existence and his understanding of the universe… to try forcing it to swing around in such a short time, almost overnight really… it would be a lot to hope for from anyone, and expecting it from someone as stead fast and deeply rooted as Bruce…

Her bar was set at an impossible height and Bruce still tried to get up and over it.

Valiantly.

He made a choice to force himself to let Tim go.

And made himself create the means for proactively following through on it.
He just chose wrong.

He’d tried. He’d really tried.

Bruce had considered the options carefully, hadn’t allowed himself to be blinded by his own desires or mere sentimentality… But still, he chose wrong… When he picked what part of Tim he needed to let go of, he just chose wrong.

And it would be unjust of Babs to blame him for it.

His son’s life is at stake here, and Bruce is willing to sacrifice whatever he needs to in order to keep his child safe.

Babs has to respect that on some level, even if she doesn’t agree.

“I’m not supporting you in this,” Babs warns as she sits before him at the great beast of a desk he uses to shoulder the weight of both worlds he seeks to control. Both in daylight and in darkness, Bruce does his best to find the best way to save the most people, sacrificing every part of everything he is to manage it. “I can’t.”

“I know. I don’t expect you to, or any of the others,” Bruce says as he finalizes the last of his paperwork and rises from his seat. He places the files in a thick legal envelope with Tim’s full name penned on its front and seals it like a grave. “You don’t have to be there when I tell him, none of you need to be any part of it.”

“I do have to be there, Bruce, but for my own reasons,” Barbara sighs.

She and Bruce make their way down to the Cave together, in a respectful silence that isn’t quite comfortable – but also isn’t charged with any distinct unease.

Babs heads straight for the Bat Computer, with Bruce following a step behind her shoulder. He doesn’t stop her from using the computer to locate Jason. He does note his son’s location for himself, but makes no comment on the matter whatsoever.

And then Dick comes over.

He doesn’t waste any time with pleasantries or status updates. Instead he gets right to the heart of the matter and blurts out with certainty, “We have to move Tim to his apartment in China
Surprised, and as worried as she is hopeful, Babs swivels around to half way face him. Bruce does the same beside her, shock leaking through his stoicism.

“We have to move him,” Dick repeats forcefully, “Before he wakes up.”

Dick stares Bruce down admirably, and when the Bat is unmoved, he presses onward to say, “The last time he woke up here, he was kept against his will. If he wakes up here again, he's going to assume things will be the same as they were before. And if he believes that we're going to force him to stay here, under heavy sedation and constant guard, he's gonna kill himself trying to get away from us. And when he manages it somehow, he won't be coming back. Ever.”

Barbara isn’t sure when the last time she was this proud of Dick actually was. But she is now, so proud. He figured this all out on his own.

And he’s decided to use what he’s figured out to truly help Tim, as best he can.

Bruce huffs, acknowledging the truth in Dick’s point without overtly indicating that he does not intend that truth to at all affect his course.

Seeing Bruce validate his reasoning, even as slight as the motion was, gives Dick all the encouragement he needs to keeping pushing. “The China Town apartment is the one best suited to keeping Tim both safe and stable as he recovers, and it's the one with the easiest access for the Titans – in case Tim wants to be with them right now, instead of us.”

If Bruce’s expression gives a twitch, Babs can’t see it from where she’s sitting, but Dick sees something that makes him say Bruce’s name. His voice is pleading, but laced with warning.

Dick is willing to fight Bruce on this.

It makes Barbara’s throat go tight.

Pride and terror mingling.

“We can’t keep him here, Bruce,” Dick continues, “Even if it were the best thing for him, we can’t. He won't let us. And unless we just keep him constantly drugged, he's gonna get away again. Hell, even if we do keep him knocked out... he's crafty. He's too good to stay captive for long, and he’s so damn good that even Ra's al Ghul can recognize that.”
Bruce takes a measured breath, debating whether it would be better to explain his reasoning to Dick or simply push him away and shoulder all the blame himself.

He seems to settle somewhere in the middle, leading Dick through the bread crumbs to help him figure it out himself.

“What makes you think he would accept being kept at his China Town apartment?”

Dick is confused by the question, and afraid of it. He knows Bruce is better at this than he is, knows that if Bruce has given any thought at all to the scenario, he will have considered more variables in it than Dick ever could’ve managed. Bruce asking such a direct and pointed question dramatically undermines Dick’s confidence in his own conclusions.

“What do you mean?”

Sticking to his choice, Bruce elaborates, “Keeping him here has better statistical odds of success in keeping him contained. The China Town apartment is his ground. If he decides to run from there, his odds of getting away are good. Better than from his bedroom in the Manor. What makes you think he won't decide to run from the China Town apartment?”

Flustered and wearing a clear expression of deep dread, Dick responds, “He'll recognize that it's a good faith gesture and understand that we're really trying to help him. It'll give him back the feeling of control that we took from him last time.”

Bruce just gives him a pointed stare.

A good faith gesture won't be good enough.

It won't be encouraging Tim to stay so much as allowing him the opening to leave.

And Dick is smart enough to see that.

Grasping at straws, Dick tries desperately, “So... so we call the Titans, send him to California right away. They'll take care of him, make him want to be taken care of... They'll be able to keep him safe and he'll accept their help; he won't feel like he has to run away from them like he would from us.”

Bruce’s body language doesn’t change, and but Barbara’s collapses.

Because Dick is smart enough to pick apart the flaws in that plan on his own.

He just doesn’t want to see it.
She sighs and turns fully away from the computer.


Bites her tongue.

Dick is trying here, really *trying*, and treating him like a petulant child because she’s too tired and stressed to accept how hard this is for him won’t help anything.

She takes a deep breath to re-center herself and starts again.

“It’s not just about Tim leaving.”

Confusion makes Dick’s brain stutter; a perplexed and anxious expression of deep concern sweeps across his every feature, followed closely by fear.

“Tim isn’t just running *away,*” Barbara lays out gently, “He’s running *towards.*”

Dick really fights against making the obvious connection, but eventually he’s forced to admit that he knows the answer. “Jason.”

“Jason,” Babs confirms, feeling the tug of a truly sympathetic half smile.

He’s doing so well here, taking so many great strides…

And as his expression clouds, as it darkens with panic and fear and deep regret as he works through the logical progressions necessitated by the implication of Jason’s direct and utterly irretractable involvement, Barbara has nothing but faith in him.

He can do this.

She knows he can.

Eventually, Dick reaches some internal resolution.

There’s sadness showing in his posture, grief and fear, too… and yet, there’s a tinge of resignation, and the slightest shine of *hope.*

Dick huffs out a steady breath, and nods – mostly to himself.

“Okay,” he manages eventually, going on slowly, “Fine, I guess. We... we can figure something out. As soon as Tim's healed up enough, we'll go find Jason.”
Barbara flashes him a smile, a true grin bursting with relief and pride – she’s tearing up again because of it. She’s so proud. And the worst part of it all is that it doesn’t even matter.

Dick has come so far to get to this point.

It’s more than she could have ever asked of him, more than should’ve been required.

But it’s still not enough.

Not nearly enough.

Barbara sighs again, pushing down the ache in her voice to say quietly, “There’s no grey area in this one, Dick.”

She wheels closer to him and reaches for his hand.

Holding it to ground herself as much as to ground him, she explains, “There’s no ‘as soon as’ for Tim right now... The moment he wakes up, finding Jason is going to be his immediate focus. Either we keep him contained by force or we let him wander off at less than half healed.”

The words sink into Dick’s consciousness like flat stones in a vat of viscous oil.

It clearly hurts him to even distantly contemplate, but there’s no possibility of denying the truth in Barbara’s statement.

Tim is going to leave the moment he can physically manage attempting to try.

Whether or not he can survive it.

And there is nothing any of them can do about it.

Even Bruce’s plan is flawed, but Barbara hasn’t yet been able to bring herself to verbalize why it won’t work. She can barely accept in the sanctity of her own mind that she knows the way in which Tim will be able to get around Bruce’s best effort without even a second’s consideration, and the idea of voicing such aloud... it seems like a betrayal, of Tim and of her own status as an objective outsider, and like it might just be enough to strangle her regardless.

Dick is not given much time to sort through the implications of the idea that Tim’s timeline is not drawn out enough to even pretend that negotiations are possible.

Almost before he’s even accepted the truth of it, there’s a commotion in the med bay.
Tim’s woken up.

And as predicted, his first question is simply, “Where’s Jason?”

there's a high (we keep on choosing)

Chapter End Notes

Poor Babs. Poor everyone.

NEXT TIME: Babs view of the final scene in the Cave, and what happens to the Family in the aftermath as the few saner parties move to try patching up the others. Cass takes Steph, and Alfred works on Bruce; Babs gets to handle Damian.

SHARK WEEK 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**high (part II)**

Chapter Summary

The second half of Babs' PoV in this critical point of culminating crisis in the Family, and her attempts to begin dealing with the Fallout as the dust begins to clear.

Chapter Notes

It's still SHARK WEEK!

And in celebration of these magnificent animals, here's another super angsty chapter!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**Chapter Thirty Seven – there’s a high ( part II )**

“Where’s Jason?”

Tim’s awake in the med bay, and Barbara, Dick, and Bruce have all drifted up to the door of the med bay’s glass enclosure in the time it’s taken from the commotion of Tim first waking up to the point at which he’s pushed himself halfway to upright in order to ask his question.

It means that Barbara is close enough to answer him immediately, saying calmly, “He’s at a safe house in Crime Alley, approximately ten blocks southwest of where he was last night.”

Tim blinks with fuzzy focus as he attempts to level his gaze to meet that of his sister.
Then he asks, “The one by the river? Or the building on Hanover?”

Barbara blinks, filing the detail away for later as she chirps, “He has a building on Hanover?” Then she notes a twitch in Tim’s grimace, a shadow of a smirk, and realizes with her own grin tugging wider, “Wait, Hanover Court, or Hanover Drive?”

Tim doesn’t answer, but that shadow of a smirk slides into view again.

Which could mean any one of a thousand different things that Barbara now has to look into regarding Jason’s possible safe house arrangements…

It almost makes Barbara laugh.

Seriously. This god damn ridiculous little kid’s a better con artist half conked than any of the other Bats on their best day.

It’s more than enough to make her smile.

She doesn’t quite get all the way to laughing, because Tim’s already pushing out of bed.

Struggling to push out of bed…

Bruce calls Tim name, in full on Batman Disapproval Mode.

The disappointment rolls off Tim like glass marbles bouncing off a steel door.

Tim simply continues to strain and struggle up to standing.

It’s painful to watch.

Even more painful to watch how Dick and Steph and Bruce react to seeing it, to feeling the visceral squeeze of fear and worry and pride and furry tear at their lungs. Even Cass can’t quite pretend to be entirely resigned to stoicism.

Barbara has to wheel away to keep from flat out crying again.

Especially, as Bruce attempts to soften.

“Tim, you can’t leave right now. You have to rest.”
Barbara feels the atmosphere shift at that.

Wants to slap Bruce for his phrasing.

If Tim hadn’t already been dead set enough on leaving right now… the implication that he couldn’t manage it would be enough motivation on its own.

*Challenge accepted, B. Thanks for that…*

“Make. Me.”

Tim’s growl is positively ferocious, *feral*.

It’s not Red Robin, and it’s not Tim Drake, or any of the other perfect masks he wears.

It’s just Tim.

Just the gritty, stubborn, viciously loyal and utterly brutal, entirely indomitable core that makes up the center of every single one of Tim’s variegated personalities.

The part that’s truly Tim in his most perfectly simplistic state.

All of what he is, and none of what he’s learned to be.

Slowly, Tim makes it to the door.

Barbara sees Dick freeze up, sees him panic and shrink away from the choice before him.

Sees Bruce double down on his decision, and sees him move to block Tim’s path directly.

Even with Tim as weak as he currently is, blocking him does not go well for Bruce.

Barbara can’t bear to watch as Bruce tries again, and it means she’s looking at the elevator as Damian finally appears, and means she sees that he has Alfred at his shoulder.

She’s watching them as Bruce openly pleads with his son, “Tim, I can’t let you do this.”

She’s watching Damian evaluate Tim’s options and she sees him begin to sneak a course through the Cave’s darkest shadows to intercept Tim’s route as the birdbrain in question replies coldly, “If you want to stop me, you’re gonna have to kill me.”

And she’s watching Alfred collect himself and stride slowly closer as Tim elaborates to his dumbstruck audience, “I can’t beat you, Bruce. But I can keep you from winning long enough that I
drop. You know I can. And even with the supplies in the med bay being right here, I can hold out long enough to make saving me almost impossible. You have to fight me, Bruce, really fight me. And it's at least an 89% chance that you'll have to break the Rule to win.”

Alfred lays a comforting hand on Barbara’s shoulder as he nears her, supporting her in the small gesture in every way she needs.

The pause allows Tim room to continue laying out the playing field, explaining how he’s already arranged things to mean he can’t be beat.

“Cass and I have a deal, so she won’t stop me. Steph can’t stop me, and Babs clearly won’t. Dick could manage it, if he were willing to use the necessary force, but I don't think he’s capable of it right now. Even if you get Damian to tranq me, I'll fight through it until the dosage gets to lethal. I can do it, Bruce, you know I can.”

They all know, and Tim knows he doesn’t need to remind them of it – but also knows that rubbing salt in these wounds does a lot to ensure that he gets his victory without a fight.

Even now, even like this, Tim doesn’t want to hurt the Family any more than absolutely necessary. And it is necessary to hurt them here, especially Bruce.

Which means Tim doesn’t flinch as he posits the question, “So. You decide what kills me: are we having it out now, or will you let me take my chances with the big bad Red Hood?”

Alfred gives Barbara’s shoulder one last squeeze of solidarity, and then moves to address the scrabbling rabble.

“Now that is quite enough of that. I'll not hear another word about any such horrors as killing and dying today, particularly not regarding any possible deaths within the Family.”

He is utterly livid.

Mostly with Bruce.

“If Master Bruce would kindly cease this nonsense with holding hostage a child he has vowed to care for, perhaps we can move on towards finding resolution, here.”

Bruce fights him, desperate in his silence as their gazes meet – and Barbara can see the understanding Alfred shows him. Alfred understands why he’s doing what he is – and he is all the angrier with him for doing it because of that understanding.

He knows that Bruce wants to protect his son, but Tim came to them for a reason and it was never because he couldn’t take care of himself physically.
Tim came to the Family because he needed the Family.

He needed love and care and the comfort of knowing there were people who wanted him around, who needed him around.

Tim’s physical safety has always had to be a secondary concern.

And Bruce still does not quite understand that.

But he knows that when Alfred feels so strongly on a subject that he voices his opinion so directly, he ought to be trusted on the matter without a blink of question.

It’s a struggle for Bruce to force himself to capitulate, but eventually he lets the tension of fight readiness slide away. His fists remain fists at his sides, but they cease to be stilled with active strain – start to shake slightly as he loosens his hold.

Alfred nods, acknowledging the effort – grateful and loving and proud, even while he remains angry enough to warrant a significant discussion later.

“Now then,” he says, turning his focus to Tim. “You really ought to pace yourself, Master Timothy. I have to insist that you at least come upstairs and eat something before you go.”

No ultimatums, just pleading.
And a blanket willingness to support Tim in anything he seeks to do.

It’s an icy sound that’s in his voice, but also genuine apology.
And it proves the words are literal.

Tim can’t go upstairs to eat something before he goes.
Physically cannot manage it.
He can’t even reasonably manage going out to start with, and he certainly can’t pace himself in trying to leave or he’ll never make it out the door at all.

Alfred sighs in acceptance.
Knows that Tim can’t be swayed, knows that trying is futile.

But he doesn’t settle back in resignation, instead his focus stays crisp as it lifts to stare Dick straight in the eye – like he thinks there’s one more ongoing fight to be waylaid.

One last struggle to be resolved.

Barbara looks at Dick too, seeing Alfred’s focus there.

She sees the strife in him, clearly enough… sees the fear, and the worry.

His tight shoulders, his dark expression, the way he’s curling in on himself – bending at the waist like he wants to puke.

Dick’s breathing is irregular as he starts to truly panic.

It makes Barbara’s ragged lungs clench tight around her heart.

And then Tim huffs.

And all attention turns back to him.

To where he’s facing off with Damian as they stand halfway down the ramp to the garage area, with Damian terrified but serious as he makes a stand to block Tim’s path.

Tim rocks backward, defeated in some ways but none that really matter.

He sighs heavily, relaying his full reluctance to speak what he’s about to say.

Then he takes a deep breath and states plainly, “I will end you, Gremlin.”

The nickname is all affection, truly as open a pronouncement of brotherly love as Tim has ever made towards the youngest of them.

It just about destroys Damian.

He never quite realized how much he wanted assurances from Tim about his place in Tim’s esteem – his place in Tim’s heart. And hearing such so simply now, stated so naturally and clearly and with the ease of honesty… it would be enough to shake anyone in his position.
Damian looks desperately to Dick and Bruce for any indication of what they want him to do here… he knows they want to stop Tim, and he’d do it if they asked it of him, but he’s hit a point in his regard for Tim’s genuine well being where he needs to have them ask it.

Needs to have them order it.

Especially because the threat in Tim’s words is as real as the love.

Tim loves Damian.

And will kill him if he finds it necessary.

Damian is willing to fight, willing to die… willing to betray his brother, and his own sense of morality… Damian is willing to do just about anything for Dick and Bruce.

He just needs to have them ask it of him.

But Bruce is still reeling, trying to come to terms with how his attempts to help have been so utterly misguided. Barbara’s not even entirely sure he can actually see what’s happening around him at the current moment.

He certainly isn’t capable of responding to any of it.

And Dick…

Dick looks like he’s dying.

Like he’s on a warpath without any hope of living through the battle.

“Fucking hell,” he shouts, throat so tight it comes out sounding like a whisper.

He’s shaking and curled inward, face still dark with fear and fury.

But he’s surefooted as he starts marching forward.

He strides straight passed Tim, who frowns and tracks his progress with deeply suspicious eyes. This is not something he’d predicted, and that makes it dangerous in a way none of them could possibly know what to do with.
And he treks passed Damian, who also frowns but additionally wilts with confusion to the point of nearly letting his sword's deadly blade brush the dirt on the Cave floor.

Damian doesn’t understand at all; doesn’t know what side he should be on – likely doesn’t even fully understand what sides there are in place to even be on.

Dick makes it to his own little corner, grabs a helmet and drags it over his head. Straddles one of his street bikes and wrenches it around to face the main Cave. Drives it right up to where Tim and Damian are standing.

And that is when Barbara feels her heart truly shatter. She is just short of openly sobbing as it all clicks inside her sluggish brain and she manages to understand the magnitude of what is happening. Alfred there beside her again, that hand on her shoulder holding her together.

“Get on,” Dick growls sharply, holding out a helmet for Tim without looking at him. He shakes the helmet when Tim doesn't take it, still refusing to look at him.

Tentative as a day old puppy crawling out on fresh ice across a river, Tim steps forward. He looks confused, and more openly terrified than Barbara’s ever seen him.

It’s worse than seeing him like a child again, worse because it’s so clear that he’s no less frightened of the possibility that somebody might actually give a damn about him than he was when he was twelve and being actively, abusively ignored by the only family he’d ever known.

He’s had a new Family, what was supposed to be a better Family, for years now, and he still looks like he’s two steps out of foster care, caught between the wolves and something worse.

And Dick looks pissed beyond reckoning, but he is still seeming to offer Tim aid. Tim doesn’t understand it, simply cannot comprehend it. He takes the helmet when Dick shakes it again, but he holds it like it might disappear if he so much as blinks. Doesn’t move an inch otherwise.

Dick won’t look at him, just stares at his boots as they remain frozen by Dick’s own, and he clenches down so hard on his teeth that his shoulders start to tremble.
“Get. On.”

He sounds like Tim, there.

Sounds like he’s been reduced to his simplest state.

The stubborn, gritty, stupidly loyal and loving core that he is beneath all the learned behaviors of social integration and politeness and calm.

Dick is just a fierce as any of them, twice as emotional, and so stubborn that most people never even try to resist him…

Because most of his stubbornness makes itself known in the form of unavoidable hugs.

But he can dig in on things even when they’re not so simply innocent, but they can never be for anything but the good of the Family. And the good of the individuals in it.

Dick is digging in here – against even himself, it seems.

And Tim can sense it, too.

But he’s too afraid he’s reading things wrong to trust his own judgement with it.

Terrified to the point of having to whisper, Tim asks eventually, “To go where?”

Dick explodes at that.

Smacks his bike hard enough to dent the aluminum shield on the casing.

He looks right at Tim’s terrified face, but clearly doesn’t actually see him as he shouts at the top of his lungs, “To go find Jason, damn it!”

Dicks eyes are on the dials of his bike’s dash as Tim flinches so severely that he stumbles, nearly drops the helmet in the process of fighting to stay upright.

He forces in a breath and his exhale is a strangled wheeze that echoes painfully in the silence of the Cave around him. But at least he’s breathing.

It’s more than Babs can say for herself.
She struggles to correct the situation as Dick gathers himself.

She’s only just managed a single breath of her own when Dick starts talking again.

He’s utterly defeated, bowed over the front of his bike and looking like a puppet with cut strings, but his words are clear and sure: “I hate you.”

It makes Tim sway on his feet, inches away from a dead faint and barely able to note that Dick eventually keeps talking.

“Right now, Tim, I honest to god hate you.”

Tim wheezes again, staving off the cut of vertigo by sheer force of will combined with an absolutely tragic lack of sensitivity towards the idea of being hated by his brother.

Dick forces in and out another few breaths in a slow, mostly regular cycle.

“I hate what you’re doing,” Dick states directly.

Pauses for another breath.

“And I disagree with it. Strongly,” he admits.

But he bows his head and squeezes his handlebars and tries not to sound quite so angry as he clearly feels as he explains, “But I’m your brother and I’m not gonna let you kill yourself.”

It takes a moment, but Tim does eventually pull fresh air into his lungs.

Barbara copies the motion, feeling nearly as unsteady as Tim looks.

It’s hard to tell through her own building tears, but she’s pretty sure that Tim is crying.

“So, stop gawking and get on the damn bike, already.” Dick growls, his own tearful desperation ringing clear. It makes it hard to take him seriously as he barks a weak addendum, threatening in a wilted huff, “Before I change my mind.”

Tim though… Tim takes it as the gospel truth.

Because while he’s been convinced successfully that Dick is willing to help him here, a miracle in its own right, he’s not going to be swayed today from the belief that the help being offered could be rescinded at any given instant.
Tim scrambles onto the bike behind Dick and the instant his seat is secure, Dick takes off roaring – vanishing down the tunnel in just a few scattered seconds.

There’s a moment of silence when the roar of his engine has faded completely.

It’s a necessary pause.

Even those few who can fully accept what just happened need a moment to digest it.

And then Alfred squeezes Barbara’s shoulder.

“Miss Cassandra is taking care of Miss Stephanie,” he says quietly, loud enough to hear but low enough to avoid disrupting the welcome ease of quiet. When Barbara looks over to where Cass has Steph snuggled up in a mountain of blankets, she feels a bit of the ache in her chest ease. She nods approval, acceptance, and lets the strain of that worry go.

“And I shall handle Master Bruce,” Alfred declares, after her moment to consider Steph and Cass has run its course.

Alfred gives her another moment, to breathe in the relief, feel how it lets her lungs expand, and accept that it’s another worry that she does not have to feel the pressure of needing to handle personally. It’s good to let go, and she trusts no one more than Alfred with it.

When she nods again, Alfred then looks towards the tunnel – more specifically, to the ramp leading to the garage area in front of it.

To the place where Damian’s legs have given out on him and he’s simply collapsed in a limp slump of utterly defeated kiddo on his knees.

“Master Damian could use some care-taking, if you could possibly bear it,” Alfred mentions gently. It’s truly a suggestion, not an order.

And if Barbara says she can’t handle it, Alfred will not judge her for it.

He will simply take over talking to Damian, leaving Bruce to stew for as long as it takes to get Damian back on his feet. Bruce can wait, Damian is more important.

They both know it to be true.

Even Bruce would say so.
But they also both know that Bruce is not what he is out of malice or disinterest, or even simple disregard. Bruce is not the monster here because he doesn’t care, but because he cares too much and knows almost nothing of what he ought to do about it.

And Barbara’s still got a bit of fight left in her.

She is a Bat after all, and damn her if they don’t have a helluva stubborn streak in common… It’s part of what unites them as siblings, and as more than blood-born siblings could ever naturally achieve.

“I got Dames,” she promises. “You go knock some sense into B.”

Alfred lets a subtle smile show and gives and dutiful, determined nod.

“We’ve been put through quite the wringer, my dear,” he sighs, stepping away.

The butler doesn’t move to leave completely even as his gaze turns to where Bruce is still standing like a statue.

He’s waiting.

For her to prove that she’s okay here, that it’s not just stubbornness that’s keeping her in this fight. It’s harder to tell with her for him – harder because she’s always seated these days and it makes staying upright easier when she’s about to drop, makes it easier to hide it effectively.

She gives a nod and smiles even though he isn’t looking.

The smile makes it into her voice behind the exhaustion as she says, “But we’ve been through worse before, and we always come out stronger for it.”

Alfred nods again.

Rights his posture.

Strides towards Bruce with firm resolution in his gait.

Barbara doesn’t watch as he approaches Bruce, doesn’t listen into to how they talk.

Some things, she knows, are best left private.

And besides, she has her own job to do.

It’s tricky wheeling down to where Damian’s collapsed and angling herself to be able to lean down to him without the risk of rolling away, but she’s accomplished far more difficult feats. And
he’s a still target to track to, he barely reacts as she draws near.

His only response is to curl his fingers in from where his hands splayed as he fell.

A cursory, half thought to keep his fingers from being run over by her wheels.

“Hey, kiddo,” she calls softly, leaning down to be close, but keeping her hands to herself for the moment. “I need you to tell me what’s going on in your head here.”

Damian shudders.

Adjusts his seat to be more balanced on his feet, folds his hands together in his lap.

Self-comforts with a ginger, but painfully contorted pull at opposing fingers.

“Come on, Dames,” Barbara says, sweet and encouraging. Carefully without the edge of desperate pleading that she feels. “It’s just me, Damian. You know I won’t tell Dick or Bruce.”

Another beat of quiet passes.

“I don’t know,” he admits, syllables slow and almost silent.

He doesn’t mean to refute Barbara’s claim that she won’t tell Dick or Bruce, or even the assertion that she knows he’s aware of her position on confessional confidentiality.

He means to give an answer to her request.

Damian doesn’t know what’s going through his head.

Which is exactly what Barbara expected.

How could it be any way otherwise, after all?

With how limited Damian’s experience is with emotional matters, and with how complicated and confusing this Family is to even people who’d grown up in a heathy and emotionally aware environment… Poor kid honestly never stood a chance.

“That’s okay,” Barbara assures him. “What matters is that you’re willing to let us in.”

She reaches out a hand, holds it out in front of him though every instinct she has wants her to grab his shoulder and haul him up into a hug.

They have to do this right, have to respect each other’s differing needs.
They *have* to, especially now considering all of what’s happened with Tim showing the consequences of failing to do so with such a glaring clarity.

She has to let Damian come to her.

He eyes her hand like he wants to, like he wants to grab hold of it and to accept all the heart and loving support that comes with it.

But he does not reach out.

His fingers curl with tangible reluctance and his hands clench into fists on his knees.

“Did you hear what he told me?” Damian asks, clarifying, “Last night. At the end.”

“In the Batmobile?”

Damian gives one stiff downward jerk of his chin.

“Yes. I heard him.”

She hadn’t listened in while it was happening.

She’d been preoccupied with listening to Alfred and Bruce.

But she’d gone back and looked at the car’s recordings when she’d woken up this morning. Listened to exactly how Jason and Damian had talked Tim into getting into that car, knowing full well that Jason would not be coming to the Cave with them. Listened to what Tim said to Damian after he relented to the context of their pressuring, listened as he said one thing while clearly planning fifteen others.

Always ten steps ahead in the game, Tim was.

Never caught without a back up plan.

The only one among them to truly embrace the idea of all possibilities being equally plausible in the right circumstances.

And unflinching when he felt it necessary.

“Do… Do you think he… his cognizance was compromised to start with, and he was still under the fear gas influence,” Damian rambles, glare growing sharper with each less than perfectly
articulate step his ramble takes. “He said it because he was drugged, because he thought I needed to hear it and his inhibitions were chemically muted. Not because…”

“He meant it, Damian,” Barbara promises. “He meant every word."

Damian blinks, almost believing it.

So close to accepting it as truth – surprisingly close, honestly…

Which means the context is bothering him more than the content, a surprise, certainly, but a very promising one. Tim convinced Damian that the Family needs him, that it’s okay for him to care about them as much as they do him. And Damian almost believes it.

But the way he did it…

“He’s coming back, right?”

Damian’s looked up while Babs got lost in her own thoughts.

He’s searching her expression carefully, watching as it shifts while she considers what he’s asking and weighs an appropriately honest response.

“I believe he is,” Barbara tells him. “And Dick’s help improves his odds a lot towards it.”

Damian accepts the answer with a deep breath, still searching her expression for some tell of something deeper in her awareness of his question.

He needs to push the matter fully, to voice his exact concern before he’ll be able to move passed the agony of carrying the weight alone.

“But will it be because he wants to?”

Barbara heaves a sigh, lifting her gaze away from Damian’s stare at the vast darkness looming over them – knows the sun is shining somewhere high above with a glaring blight of brightness that makes her far prefer the night.

“Yeah, Dames, I think it will be.”

Damian huffs, but takes her hand and lets her pull him up.

Barbara keeps hold of his hand and make sure they’re eye to eye as she tells him, “I know he’s willing to die. And I’m scared he might think he ought to. But I don’t think he wants to.”

Damian nods and lets Barbara pull him into a tight, lingering hug – one he openly returns.
When she lets him lean back, she smiles at him and says, “Now, how about we go make some sandwiches for lunch? I don’t know if you ate breakfast, but I’m absolutely starving.”

With a disdainful snort, Damian huffs, “Failure to maintain an adequate level of sustenance consumption is an unexpectedly juvenile mistake from you, Gordon. It must be corrected immediately, lest the others become inclined to believe you’ve lost your edge.”

Barbara doesn’t quite smother her laughter and Damian steadfastly ignores the way his cheeks visibly heat up as he marches towards the elevator, tapping his foot impatiently when he arrives to find that she has yet to follow.

Alfred and Bruce have long since disappeared, as have Cass and Steph.

It lets Barbara breathe all the easier as she rolls up to be beside Damian in the lift.

As the doors close and they start to rise, Barbara feels the weight of the world slide heavily off her shoulders.

They’re going to be okay.

They’ll come out of this swinging and stronger than they’ve ever been before.

She has to believe it.

Because she loves her Family, and she wants nothing but the best for them.

She refuses to accept anything else.

Because, as she’s only just recently come completely to terms with, they all have very little real control over who and how they love.

But they do love each other.

They’re Family.

And nothing will ever take that away from her.

From any of them.
there's a high we keep on choosing (‘cause we don’t want to change it)

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, just poor EVERYONE in this...
Also, I'm aware that you guys don't know the content of the conversation that Dami and Babs are referring to here, I couldn't find a way to make it sit naturally in the narrative, but don't worry, Tim goes over most of it explicitly a little later on in this angst-fest).

But I'm hoping to get a third chapter up for you by Saturday (because Yay SHARKS!).

NEXT TIME: Timmy's view of things going sideways.
people (call us foolish)

Chapter Summary

Tim's view of waking up in the Bat Cave's medical bay.

Chapter Notes

It's still SHARK WEEK!

So to celebrate, here's a third chapter!
(If you can't tell, I adore sharks).

And little Timmy's all super angsty for you guys:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty Eight – people call us (foolish)

It's Dark where Tim wakes.

Darker than it being the result of another night spent stuck inside a blacked out box of blankets with just enough air flow to keep him breathing, and only enough to manage it if he successfully keeps himself calm.

He remembers the Fear Gas.

Remembers the blood loss.

Remembers the bangings and bruises and countless scrapes and cuts.

He remembers it all, well enough to know that he’s probably not really awake yet.
It’s a sort of fugue state; he’s quite familiar with a variety of them, sadly.

Some are the sort where his brain’s blacked out and his body goes through the motions of living well enough on its own to buy him time to catch up on his sleep debt.

Others, like this one, are kind’ve like comas, but with more localized and distinct results in terms of affected brain region. For all relevant purposes, Tim’s dead.

Clear headed enough to think over his life, and in some cases rail in futility against the blackness as he fights to get back to living, but totally ineffectual at doing much of anything.

Even just controlling what he’s thinking about is tricky.

It’s all clear as day with three shots of espresso, but it’s too flimsy fluid to wrangle into any genuine submission.

Objectively, it’s not unpleasant.

It’s too strange a sensation to sit with any true ease, but it’s not a bad strange per say.

Like the weightlessness dilemma that astronauts face – all the training in the world can’t really prepare a human for how it feels to be in an environment consistently without gravity.

It’s a lot like that, actually, but significantly less puke-y.

Less bodily altogether.

His body, in actuality, is likely immobile, but highly active on a cellular level – basically running an emergency repair and reboot program.

If it works, he’ll wake up at some point.

If it doesn’t, well… he’s made arrangements.

He told Damian about them last night – about their existence, at least, he’s pretty sure he didn’t quite spill the secret on how to access those arrangements prematurely.

There’s always the chance that they won’t actually be necessary.

Normally, Tim wouldn’t have said anything about them at all.

But none of this shit was Damian’s fault, and the poor kid was barely well enough equipped with the tools of socialization to understand what was even happening… He’d needed something to latch onto and Tim had the means of assuring him that the Family would be safe and sound and well
provided for in every regard no matter how things here worked out.

Or … things wherever they were now.

They’re back at the Cave, probably.

Tim remembers talking to Damian in the Batmobile.

And he remembers how insistent Jason was about him allowing Damian to take him to get all doped up with neutralizers and such.

Tim has to admit he had a pretty solid case for it, he remembers how he hadn’t tried to be all sentimental with the ‘they all love you and are worried and just want to have you home’ shpeal that Tim would’ve gotten from any of the others (barring Damian).

Instead of dropping any of that drivel, Jason had pointed out the facts.

After Tim had panicked at the vague idea of Jason leaving, they’d both settled back down into a comfortable quiet… but, the panic hadn’t really gone away.

The physiological aspects of it had gotten progressively worse over the course of the next few minutes – Tim hadn’t really been able to grasp any exact measure of time.

His heart rate had accelerated to an alarmingly staccato throb, and even his most aggressive attempt at controlled breathing had developed into shallow, forceful gasps. His vision had been going woozy for a while, but around that point was when the black spots began to out number the vaguely clear spots.

If he’d been standing, he would’ve swayed… possibly even fallen.

Even all curled up like he was, Tim’s pretty sure he shlumped awkwardly into a limp blob of bony goo against Jason’s CPU.

When he got enough air in him for his vision to clear up again briefly, Jason was leaning forward over his knee with a suspicious squint on his face.

He’d figured out pretty quickly that Tim wasn’t doing so hot with the whole coming safely down from his overdosing of Scarecrow’s Fear Gas. He’d gone over the evening mentally, calculating how many times Tim had been hit, how much he’d gotten in his system, made a pretty close guestimate of how much neutralizer Tim had been able to stash on his person…

Recognized that it probably wasn’t even close to enough.

Jason didn’t approve of how close to the line Tim was toeing, and he didn’t take very kindly to Tim’s assessment of his ability to survive the overdosing regardless. Still, Tim knew he’d be fine, eventually, it would just take a while and hurt a lot more than it would if his dosing hadn’t been quite
Tim knew he’d be fine, and he was willing to wait it out.

Jason was not.

The wonderful warmth and calm of their bizarre, but refreshingly easy peace had dissolved very quickly after they’d found that point of impasse.

And then Damian, of all people, had crashed the party very shortly after that.

Very literally.

He’d dropped forcefully onto the fire escape outside Jason’s window and kicked his way through the glass as he rolled through his landing, popping up to his feet with his katana drawn and ready as his inertia spun itself out.

“The Family has been looking for you, Drake,” Damian had asserted in his usual haughty way, obnoxious enough to make Tim roll his eyes. “You are to return with me to the Manor, post haste. It is simply unseemly of you to neglect your condition like this. It’s distracting Father and Grayson to the point of making them ineffectual. It’s pathetic, and I require that you fix it.”

As his speech continued, he’d latched onto the shoulder of Tim’s cape and began hauling him out of the cozy spot Tim had gotten tucked up into at the start of this.

The obnoxious little gremlin might not have anything on Tim in terms of size, but he’s still remarkably strong considering that and with Tim in no real shape to effectively resist, Damian managed to yank Tim out until he was sprawled across the floor of Jason’s bedroom.

While continuing to disparage Tim’s admittedly lackluster self care, Damian kept his sword angled towards Jason as he prodded Tim up to his unsteady feet.

Jason meanwhile had been standing very still.

Tim’s not sure when he’d stood up, exactly, even in the perfect clarity of the memories he’s sorting through… all he can see is that Jason was sitting across from him – fury clearly building in him by the second – and then, the very next image he has of Jason is with him standing up as he glares down the gremlin’s katana like he might be able to melt it.

With his vision blurring, and his focus consumed almost entirely with just staying on his feet, Tim couldn’t definitely say whether or not Jason was shaking as his fists balled up at his sides, but he thinks it’s a pretty good bet.

There was talking then, words thrown back and forth between Damian and Jason, and words being lobbed by both of them at Tim – trying to convince everyone involved that Tim needed to get back to the Cave as immediately as could be made feasible.
Tim didn’t really start attempting to resist Damian’s rough coaxing until he got out on the fire escape and realized that Jason’s boiling aggression might make him jump back onto the track of action he’d been intent on before the Arkham breakout: leaving Gotham.

It’s probable that Damian didn’t even notice Tim freeze, as by the time Tim realized what his fearful thoughts had caught on, the gremlin had already turned around and was addressing Jason directly, saying, “Do not leave town, Todd. Father has a few questions regarding your involvement in all of this that you are required to answer.”

The command had struck Tim through with fear, thinking that such a statement would do nothing but antagonize Jason and spur him on to leaving Gotham all the sooner.

But, of course, Jason surprised him.

“I ain’t goin’ anywhere, you stupid little Bat brat,” Jason growled, voice dripping with a forthright viciousness that yanked cold claws along Tim’s shoulders and made him shiver violently enough to nearly toddle off the edge of the fire escape. “But it ain’t because I’m willing to just jump to any hoops B might be hopin’ to get me through.”

“It hardly matters to me why you stay,” Damian had returned, fixing his attention back onto Tim as he sheathed his katana. “Only the resulting action is relevant.”

Damian was blocking Tim’s view of the window as Jason snarled incoherently in response to the gremlin’s pretentious nonchalance, and he didn’t get an opportunity for another glimpse inside the room as Damian forced his hands through the motion of securing a repel line from his belt to the railing of the fire escape – and then promptly pushed him over the side of it.

His line did its job and slowed his descent before releasing automatically, dropping him safely into the Batmobile (parked in the alley below and waiting with its roof open to accommodate the arrival of passengers from above).

Tim recalls being too fuzzy to do much as he adjusted to the new environment – and at that point the effects of the Fear Gas combined with the exertion was making his breathing too ragged to forcibly maintain his usual, meditative calm.

He knows it was the panic that first convinced his mouth to run, but there was enough of him left in there to regulate exactly what details he spilled. Even if the build up of anxiety had only worsened as he’d spoken, it had mostly been fear that Damian wouldn’t let him finish – and he’d needed to get a few things out before Damian made him stop.

Because, of course, the brat had been quick to shut him up.

In fact, it’s likely due to the lingering effects of the sedative Damian had dosed him with on the ride back to the Cave that Tim was even in this pseudo fugue state to start with.

Tim doesn’t exactly blame Damian for it.

The kid has, at the very least, never pretended to care when he didn’t, and Tim has always found that trait to be an even mix of annoying and refreshing.
Tim gets where the kid is coming from, with all his nastiness and biting defensiveness and such, and as much as his antics and his personality grate on Tim’s nerves, he loves Damian. And he knows that Damian doesn’t have the capability to return that feeling in any way that makes sense to most people.

But Tim’s not most people.

And Tim understands.

When Damian gripes and whines about Tim’s lateness to arrive causing delay in an operation debrief, it’s because he was worried Tim might be hurt and not able to come at all.

When Damian complains about Tim’s lackluster vigilance in staying aware of his surroundings at home, it’s because he’s never once been able feel that home is a truly safe space that’s free enough of the threat of imminent attack to make truly relaxing there permissible.

And when Damian picks on him for being the Family’s weakest link, it’s only partly out of a desire to prove himself as strong enough to be worthy of his own place inside the Family. It’s also, at least a little bit, because Damian is afraid of what might happen because Tim’s weak – because he’s afraid that Tim won’t be able to protect himself when it matters.

Tim has to wonder if Damian took any of what he said in the Batmobile that night to heart, if he was even listening to any of it.

It’s unlikely that Damian would’ve been able to take him seriously, but it would be nice to think that the kid had some niggle of willingness to trust what Tim promised about his place in the Family and how it could never be threatened.

He has pre-recorded messages for everyone all prepared in case anything truly unsurvivable happens to him, messages that lay out more or less exactly what Tim was trying to communication to Damian that night, but having a guarantee that Damian would listen after Tim was gone wasn’t as rewarding as the idea that he might be able to reassure the angsty little gremlin of his place without dying.

Either way, Tim can’t do much about it from here, so he lets the worry go.

It’s remarkably easy to do so, to let the thought itself and all the anxiety attached to it just float away into the mulling dark.

How cool would it be to be able to do that sort of thing when he wasn’t in a coma?

Useless wishful thinking is just as easy to dismiss, and Tim quickly moves on to wondering what time it is, and how long he’s already been out, and where Jason’s gone off to – because it is staggeringly unlikely that he stayed put, even though he’d promised, but Tim thinks that it’s just barely possible he didn’t actually run…
And if Jason’s still in Gotham, Tim still has a chance at this.

Well, maybe.

He should back off… let things roll on their own. Let the rest of the Family handle all of it and arrange for Jason to come back into the fold in a way that prevents Tim’s interference from messing it all up again.

But… maybe just one more thing.

He needs to make sure that the conversation is legitimately open between them all, to make sure that Jason is actually able to fully participate, and to speak to the Family in a manner that is not strictly work related, so they’ll all be able to actually grow.

So.

Just one more push, one more meaningful conversation… and Tim’ll back off.

Of course, he has to wake up in order to make that plan at all viable, and Tim still has no idea if he even will wake up, let alone if it will happen in time for him to do anything…

Things are less Dark where he is, just then, less endless black and more roiling grey – like storm clouds rolling in over the bridge at midnight.

It’s probably a good sign, but it could always be that whole ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ bit people talk about. But there’s not really a tunnel here, not even in the most broadly metaphorical sense… If Tim lives, and he can ever reconcile with Jason, Tim will have to ask his predecessor for his account.

Jason actually died after all, maybe the experience is different than what the survivors of near death experiences encounter.

Of course, if Tim actually dies here, he won’t need to ask.

Tim’s not sure how long he gets caught in that little loop of illogical considerations.

But time is different in the Dark, regardless, so it doesn’t exactly matter.
All he knows is that, one minute he’s running himself in circles in the thick of full Dark and the next, he’s in a different darkness, the kind that hides deep behind his own eyelids – still quite distinctly not conscious, but not that sort of bodiless pure nothing of the other thing.

And from inside his body, even while still pretty firmly unconscious, Tim has a bit more leeway with control. He can start taking stock, at least.

His shoulder hurts. Obviously.

Three… or maybe it was four… but either way, multiple impacts from gunshots, at least two at a fairly intense close range, would do a lot of damage to a shoulder – even one that’s been well covered in high tech armor.

The rest of him feels a bit banged up as well, but nothing like the searing in his shoulder.

It’s probably just a standard round up of excessive bruising.

Nothing that Tim hasn’t fought his way through to functioning often enough before.

It’s fine. -ish.

Fine enough.

He just has to wake up a little more to make himself useful.

It takes a bit of wrangling, and feels like it takes forever, but eventually, Tim manages to pull himself up by the boot straps and back into a semblance of consciousness.

He doesn’t quite wake up, not entirely.

But he can feel the cold numbness of what has to be an IV stuck into the back of his hand, and he can feel the sting of brightness in the room beyond his eyelids…

He can hear the regular beeps of the heart monitor and the low sounds of shuffling that inform him he is not alone.

A sigh rips its way out of his lungs, despite the fact that of course he wouldn’t be alone.

After attacking Dick in order to get free of a suicide watch, it’s a wonder that they’re even willing to let him wake up, at all.

Admittedly, it’s unwise, medically speaking, to put a patient in a coma on any kind of sedative until they first wake up themselves. Even most pain killers are considered rather risky as the comfort of a floaty, drug-induced painlessness might be the tragic nudge that makes a mild catatonia
tip over into a slow roll towards actual death.

So, it sort of makes sense that Tim’s being allowed to surface into consciousness, and also makes sense that he’s being closely monitored by at least one guard (probably two, since sounds of movement seem to be coming from both sides of his bed).

As Tim pushes further up into the loud and bright and cold of wakefulness, the sounds around him change. The heart monitor gets erratic, the slow shuffles become more pronounced as his guards move to check over the readings, and low whispers hit his ears.

*Steph*’s whispers.

There’s no verbal response, but Steph continues like she got an answer, so it’s probably Cass on his other side, then.

It’s a relief to know that at least one of the die being thrown here has landed in his favor.

One and a half, if you count Steph.

She won’t support the plan he’s arranging, but she also won’t be in any kind of shape to really stop him from pursuing it. Tim feels a little bad about using her emotional distress over his safety to render her ineffectual, but not enough to change course.

He needs to see Jason.

ASAP.

Just one more conversation, but it has to happen *now*.

Or at least, as close to now as physically possible.

With that thought, Tim manages to move his muscles.

The stretch *burns*, but it’s enough to get his blood moving a little, enough to get his muscles to start consistently responding.

A few moments later, he gets his eyes open.

A few blinks and he manages to *keep* them open.

Shifting and struggling, he pushes back against the pillows until he’s angled up enough to eye the other occupants in the room.

Steph is a wreck, too overwhelmed with it all to say much of anything.

And Cass is working on getting the IV out of his hand.
“I—” Tim’s voice feels like gravel in a blender, and he struggles to clear his throat.

Cass proffers up a straw and Tim takes a long deep pull from it, trusting that Cass won’t have put any chemicals inside it like Dick might’ve.

The water is cool and wonderful, and though he almost chokes on it when he tries to clear his throat again, it provides enough lubrication to make the movement happen.

“I’m calling in—” Tim pants hoarsely as he rolls his gaze to follow Cass, “—my Favor.”

Cass looks at him, a moment. Frozen.

Her expression shifts to sad, resigned.

She nods and Tim relaxes.

Favor trading in this way might be something out of Ra’s al Ghul’s wheelhouse, but it’s effective and Tim’s never been one not to take a good technique and run with it – no matter where he learned it from.

With Steph inert and Cass resigned, Tim focuses on getting himself upright.

When he’s more or less sitting, upright enough to be considered freestanding, he pauses and in the little victory of breathing steady, he pants, “Where’s Jason?”

Cass does nothing but look towards the door.

Tim makes his gaze follow and finds Dick and Bruce and Barbara all right there, squeezed and angled awkwardly to all fit within the gap.

“He’s at a safe house in Crime Alley, approximately ten blocks southwest of where he was last night,” Barbara says, bright enough to carry and calm enough to let Tim know she’s sure.

He nods his thanks and nods again to himself.

Barbara supports him.

That’s another point of chance that’s landed in his favor.

It’s kind of miraculous.

Almost makes him giddy (though that could also be the vertigo).
Tim knows that a run of luck like this isn’t something that could last for him, but while it’s still sliding things his way, he asks Babs for clarification, “The one by the river? Or the building on Hanover?”

Babs answers his question, and then redoubles his confidence in it by asking a question of her own, “He has a building on Hanover?”

Tim can hear the smile building in her voice, even though he’s busy looking at his own feet as he makes slow progress towards standing on them – feels the smile break as she realizes there should be more to her question and goes on, “Wait, Hanover Court, or Hanover Drive?”

*Neither.*

The tug of a smirk twitches Tim’s expression as he thinks it.

Hanover Gardens is an affordable housing block built on the border of Burnley, originally with a bit of a park arranged at the center of the micro-neighborhood. It hadn’t lasted long at all, but the spit of concrete where the greenery had once been is still regarded as something of a little park by the locals. Jason’s building on Hanover overlooks it, and from there he watches over the little community like a guardian angel with no concern for the fact that most of the people living there are prostitutes and runaways.

Barbara will have to look into it.

She’s gonna have several hours of aimless circling before she figures it out.

The tricky little kid in him still finds it funny to have pulled one over on her.

It’s another little victory and it’s enough to help him stand.

The slow shuffle he manages towards the door is excruciating, and more than mortifying, but the physical pain and the humiliation of being so scarcely able to bear it still isn’t enough to stop him from moving forwards.

Chapter End Notes
I know it's getting a bit repetitive to see the same few scenes from a different PoV, but it's been really engrossing to explore these mindsets so deeply!

We well be having substantial plot movement starting up again soon! I'm gonna try to post more often than once a week, but with classes starting up for me again, I might not be able to manage it right away. We'll see what I can do!

NEXT TIME: Tim's view of the conflict in the Cave and his rapid egress with Dick, with a very significant bit of reflection on his relationship with Damian. ^_^~
foolish (part II)

Chapter Summary

The second half of Tim's PoV on the fight in the Cave.

Chapter Notes

Hoo boy. So, I wanted to keep posting at a quicker rate and then work EXPLODED. This is the first time I've even had time to open my laptop up... I should still be able to get at least one chapter up a week, but we'll have to see. Anywhoo, this is the last chapter rehashing the Cave fight. After this we start moving forward pretty quickly, but again, looking at Tim's PoV of this critical moment is fascinating.

On to epic Timmy Angst!

^_~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty Nine – foolish (part II)

Tim’s struggling to breathe as he gets out of bed, struggling to keep enough oxygen in his bloodstream to keep from passing out, but each inch he moves forward is a success to build on.

He is going to make this happen.

Even if it kills him…
“Tim.”

It’s Batman’s fiercest disapproving growl.

But Tim’s not in the mood to even pretend that he still cares.

Batman’s approval or disapproval hasn’t meant a thing to him since he asserted himself into the role of Robin, and it doesn’t mean a damn thing now that he has a chance to save the man behind the reason he put on the pixie boots to start with.

Tim’s been ignoring Batman’s abject disapproval for years at this point and nothing Bruce could ever do to him would be enough to stop him.

“Tim,” Bruce tries again, softening by a noticeable degree, “You can’t leave right now, you have to rest.”

That makes Tim look up.

It rips his gaze away from the awkward shuffle of his feet to glare daggers at Bruce. He must look a sore sight, half dead and fully feral, and still like hardly a threat.

“Make. Me.”

He means it, and he wants to make sure that Bruce knows it.

That he leaves nothing at all unclear about his intentions or his determination.

If Bruce wants to stop him, he’s going to have to bodily prevent him from leaving. And Tim is not planning to go down lightly if that’s the case.
Which, based on how much good luck he’s already used up, it probably is.

Barbara wheels herself away before Tim makes it to the door, another sign of tacit permission and genuine support that would make Tim heave a sigh of relieved disbelief if his ribcage weren’t already giving out screaming signals of protest at simply breathing normally.

Dick is slumped against the frame, not really in the way but also not exactly out of it.

It’s only Bruce that moves to actively block him, proactively shifting to fill the doorway.

Tim makes it to standing right before him, leans a forearm against his chest. He’s not really trying to push Bruce back, just testing the waters on Bruce’s willingness to be moved while he takes a moment for a quick breather.

There’s no give in Bruce’s frame as Tim pushes against it.

None at all.

Utterly predictable.

It’s why Ra’s al Ghul’s respect for him can only ever go so far.

(Ra’s explained it to Tim once, hilariously enough. Not that Tim ever really cared why Ra’s seemed to like what he saw in Tim so much better than what he saw inside Tim’s mentor, but it was a refreshing ramble to listen to as a background monologue while Tim plotted his escape from his semi-annual ninja-kidnapping …).

A bit of labored breathing, a chagrined moment of recognition, and then Tim starts to sidle around the man blocking his way. It goes better than he expected.

Tim makes it mostly around, successfully avoiding getting tripped up over Dick’s feet, and is almost in the clear when Bruce swivels to grab at his elbow – realizing finally that Tim will not be stopped by any means but direct and physical ones.

Tim doesn’t manage to evade entirely, but he gets away enough for Bruce to only grab his wrist instead of gaining full purchase higher up his arm.

It’s with a slow, reluctant resignation that Bruce grabs him.

And it’s with an unrepentant, blazing fury that Tim responds.

It’s a move Selina taught him, well, one she showed off enough for him to pick up (and shown off in a way that made it seem probable that she wanted him to acquire it) a twist and a spin – pulling away to escape and lashing out to ensure distance is maintained, all with a jarring flare of
sultry style that disguises the vicious bite behind the smoothly executed motion.

It’s not as smooth when Tim does it as when Selina does, and this time it’s not half as smooth as even Tim’s usual imitation. It’s a jerky, jarring, and ridiculous motion, and it wrenches Tim’s shoulder terribly to try it, but it successfully frees him from Bruce’s grasp.

And seems to shock Bruce into giving Tim a moment of peace as he struggles to maintain his balance in the recoil of his landing.

Bruce stays still as Tim slowly turns towards the door.

He only moves again when Tim’s almost made it out of reach – grabbing again for his hand like he thinks it might work better this time. Like he can be *prepared* this time for the moment when Tim decides to try to pull away.

But Tim knows Bruce far better than Bruce knows Tim.

The hand that tightens around his wrist is firm, firmer than what Bruce would ever grab another child with, but Tim’s more than ready for it.

He yanks his hand away, tears it free while screaming through the pain of doing so.

Bruce had weighed the odds, figured that a little fight was reasonable, but that much more would be unthinkable. Tim doesn’t care if he loses his arm to this. Doesn’t care at all.

Tim sways dangerously again as he struggles to maintain his footing after pulling out of Bruce’s hold. It takes an extra spin and a few awkwardly hopped steps, but he stays standing.

His vision is full of black spots as he glowers at Bruce, but fortunately it doesn’t quite tip over into a full blown black out. He grits his teeth and pants harshly through the swirling splotchiness until his vision mostly clears and his pulse settles down in his ears enough to hear Bruce say, “Tim, I can’t let you do this.”

Tim’s snarl twitches.

“If you want to stop me, you’re gonna have to kill me.”

The declaration clearly rocks Bruce.

Tim takes a grim satisfaction from it.

He lifts his head a little, proud and certain of his abilities, as he lobbies, “I can’t beat you,
Bruce. But I can keep you from winning long enough that I drop. You know I can. And even with the supplies in the med bay being right here, I can hold out long enough to make saving me almost impossible. You have to fight me, Bruce, really fight me. And it's at least an 89% chance that you'll have to break the Rule to win.”

Bruce does not respond; he doesn’t even move.

“Cass and I have a deal, so she won’t stop me,” Tim continues, pressing the advantage while he has it. “Steph can't stop me, and Babs clearly won't. Dick could manage it, if he were willing to use the necessary force, but I don't think he's capable of it right now. Even if you get Damian to tranq me, I'll fight through it until the dosage gets to lethal. I can do it, Bruce, you know I can. So. You decide what kills me: are we having it out now, or will you let me take my chances with the big bad Red Hood?”

Tim’s estimate leaves an 11% chance that Bruce could manage to subdue him without killing him. It’s not a lot of room to work with, but Bruce is careful and calculated and Tim knows that even the slim chance is still tempting.

He’s preparing for the worst as the tension rachets up around him.

And then the tension snaps.

It’s Alfred.

The one last obstacle Tim anticipates potentially being a real problem.

If Alfred tries to stop him, or even just advocates for having one of the others stop him, it's going to be a lot harder to get out of here.

But Tim’s resigned to having even Alfred hate him if that is what it takes to save Jason.

It will just complicate things.

But it’s Alfred, and Tim should have known better than to doubt.

“Now that is quite enough of that. I'll not hear another word about any such horrors as killing and dying today, particularly not regarding any possible deaths within the Family,” Alfred chastises. He’s clearly furious with Tim for being so cavalier with discussing his less than guaranteed survival, but he’s equally furious, if not more so, with the others for creating the circumstances around his plausible demise.

“If Master Bruce would kindly cease this nonsense with holding hostage a child he has vowed to care for, perhaps we can move on towards finding resolution, here,” Alfred suggests.
Bruce, obviously, doesn’t exactly stand down, but Alfred’s directed fury is rebuke enough to make him mostly accept defeat. Tim still wouldn’t put it passed him to try physically intervening in Tim’s exit one more time – particularly as he’s still pretty sure that Damian’s lurking in the rafters somewhere – but it’s enough to make Tim feel like getting out of here in one piece may just be possible.

That hope dims, if only slightly, when Alfred turns his gaze on Tim.

There’s an aching sadness in the butler’s eyes.

“Now then,” Alfred starts, sadness dripping into the resignation Tim’s been so desperately waiting to hear. “You really ought to pace yourself, Master Timothy. I have to insist that you at least come upstairs and eat something before you go.”

It’s blunt acceptance.

Utter and absolute.

The relief that hits Tim in that moment almost makes his knees give out.

Which unfortunately reminds him of exactly why he cannot acquiesce.

“I know, Alfred,” Tim admits, apologizing, “But I can’t do that. Sorry.”

Alfred doesn’t say anything, and he doesn’t nod, but Tim doesn’t need another grand gesture of encouragement to make him believe he has Alfred’s support.

Without any reservations, Tim turns his back on the Family and resumes shuffling towards the nearest Cave exit.

He makes it less than a dozen yards before Damian slinks out of the shadows and into his path, blocking the way forward with his katana drawn and ready.

The kid clearly has doubts about what he’s doing, and his resolve to follow through on his course is clearly wavering.

“You are necessary, Damian,” Tim had told him. “It’s not just that you’ve earned a place here, a place in the Family. You’re a vital part of it. Especially as… I’ve been able to hold them more or less together so far, but as things move forward… they’re going to need you to be the one to make hard calls on things in their best interests, no matter how much they don’t like it.”

Damian had scoffed, and pretended that he was too focused on the road to answer.
“I mean it, Dames,” Tim had pressed on, “The others… they can’t always step back from things to evaluate the bigger picture. You’ll need to do it for them on some things, especially things involving the state of the Family itself. You can make decisions based on how the outcomes affect the Family over all, with none of your personal feelings getting in the way as you consider all the possibilities.”

Again, Damian had pretended that he was ignoring Tim completely, but his hands had tightened their hold on the Batmobile’s wheel.

“Bruce and Dick… they aren’t always right, Damian,” Tim had continued, sure his audience was rapt (and unbothered by the pretense otherwise). “They have good intentions, but they… they get bogged down in the mess of details when doing the right thing doesn’t feel right. You’re still learning how to navigate it all, but you’ve come so far since you first got here and I’m proud of you, Dames, I truly am – no matter how annoying and grumpy you are.”

Damian hadn’t been able to resist responding then, snarking through grit teeth, “Silence yourself, Drake. You may not bear much esteem, but even you are above such nonsensical ramblings of emotional drivel. Crane’s chemicals are making you sound positively moronic.”

Tim had cracked a smile at that.

It was the clearest confirmation he’d had in a while that Damian actually kind of cared about him – possibly even slightly for his own sake and not exclusively the Family’s well being.

“Thank you for doing this Damian.”

“I’m not doing anything for you, Drake. Father and Grayson are being rendered utterly ineffectual, wrought with senseless worry over your deteriorating mental and physical condition, and the situation requires immediate correction,” Damian snarled.

Yep. Damian did sort of care.

It was almost sweet.

But even if he didn’t, he was still demonstrating the aspect of his character that Tim knew the Family would need to rely on heavily in the coming years.

“I know, you stupid little gremlin, but that’s why I’m proud. You’re doing what’s right for the Family and keeping the others out of things that would’ve simply caused them strife.”

Damian had growled – squeaked really – some unintelligible response that attempted to cover up his embarrassment with anger.

His distress had merely gotten Tim refocused on the original purpose he had in running his mouth there to start with. “I need you to know that I have arranged things for you at WE so you can start taking the place you want as Bruce’s heir,” Tim explained urgently, sure that Damian wouldn’t permit him to ramble on much longer without enacting intervention. “I know you won’t be able to
take over for me immediately, but I have things in place to help you start moving forward as soon as you want to pursue it. I’ll be out of your way, soon enough. I’ll be out of everyone’s way... As soon as this thing with Jason is handled, I’ll stop complicating everything, and you’ll all be able to move on – to move forward.”

“Cease this at once, Drake. You are being ridiculous.”

“It’s not ridiculous, it’s the truth,” Tim had insisted, hoping desperately that the Fear Gas didn’t make him sound too contestably hysteric. “I don’t wanna be in the way anymore.”

Apparently, he hadn’t managed the sounding sane side of things, because while he’d been speaking Damian had begun to maneuver them both to secure a sedative patch to the side of Tim’s neck – much like Tim had done to Dick only a day before.

And when Tim had resisted, Damian had firmly persisted. Tim fought back long enough to get his words out, but Damian had succeeded in the end.

As Tim began to succumb to the sedative, he’d heard Damian sounding almost openly worried as he whispered, “You are a fool, Timothy.”

Tim’s not quite sure why exactly it made him smile, but he’s pretty sure it did.

And he’s equally sure that as he faces off against Damian now, that the late night, last resort, conversation is going through Damian’s head just like it is his own.

Because Tim had made things very clear, in a way he knows that Damian understands.

‘As soon as this thing with Jason is handled, I’ll stop complicating everything…’

But this thing with Jason is not handled, not yet.

And until it is handled, Tim will be the one making hard calls.

Whatever they might be.

“I will end you, Gremlin,” Tim sighs.

He can beat Damian, even in this state... It just won’t be pretty... And that messiness might include the kind of brutality that would stop Damian. Permanently.
Tim doesn’t have the luxury of pulling any punches right now.

Damian continues to waver, but he doesn’t back down.

And as Tim takes a step forward, he adjusts his katana in one last move of warning as he prepares to take a genuine swing.

But then they both freeze solid as a vicious whisper shout from Dick echoes over to them.

“Fucking hell.”

Tim doesn’t look back at him, but he tenses as he hears Dick’s stomping footsteps approach – ready to fight back if necessary.

It proves not necessary.

Dick marches straight passed him and Damian, though Tim cannot begin to fathom why.

Tim has no frame of reference for what’s happening here, and that makes the situation as Dick stomps over to his bike incredibly dangerous. Tim is aware that he cannot predict the outcome of this, but the others may believe they understand what’s happening and might attempt to act accordingly. But there is nothing here that is happening in a way that makes sense, so any move on anyone’s part, could only make things even more fraught.

Fortunately, it seems like everyone else is as stunned as Tim.

And even Damian seems just as terrified.

Dick wrestles his bike into order and then drives it up to pause right next to Tim and Damian. He pointedly does not look at either of them as he proffers up an extra helmet.

“Get on,” he snarls.

It clicks for Tim then, an utterly impossible idea but one that makes sense of all the little details that don’t quite fit here.

When Dick shakes the helmet at him, practically shoves it into his arms as he takes a tentative step forward, Tim relents to putting his hands on it – to holding it up as Dick lets it go.

Nothing happens for another beat, and then Dick again bites out, “Get. On.”
Tim can’t.

He can’t… can’t understand what’s happening, or understand that if what he thinks is happening is actually happening how it could honestly be possible… can’t understand why…

“To go where?”

His voice sounds pitiful, but he needs to know for sure what Dick’s answer to that question is far more than he needs to maintain any illusion of competence.

Dick explodes at the question, pounding his fist against his bike hard enough to leave visible damage and howling, “To find Jason, damn it.”

Tim jumps at the violence of it, at the fury in the tone and the furor of the physical motion – flinches away from all of it viciously.

Because Dick would hurt him.

It’s not even a question.

Whether out of love or duty or just that streak of righteousness that makes Dick into the hero that he is – that he always has to be – Dick would hurt him, would lie to him, would break him into as many pieces as it takes to keep him safe.

And if Dick attacks him now, Tim’s not sure his brain is moving fast enough to counter.

Or if Dick is lying… if he’s gonna take Tim clear across the city… Tim won’t be able to do much about it, not in any time to be effective (he’s fighting a losing battle already and he’s pretty damn sure that he’s got less than an hour of life left in him, let alone consciousness).

And Tim can’t quite let himself believe that Dick isn’t lying.

While Tim’s been sluggishly trying to work his brain through the possibilities implied by what is happening around him, Dick has bent forward over his bike.

Bowed like that, and sounding utterly defeated in a way Tim hasn’t heard since just before he’d been convinced to go talk to Dinah after that horrible string of incidents with Tarantula and Blockbuster, Dick confesses, “I hate you.”

His voice is hoarse and broken, but also irrevocably honest.

“Right now, Tim, I honest to god hate you.”
It’s only fair, Tim supposes.

Tim’s ruined an awful lot about the warm, cozy world view Dick’s been trying to maintain, and he’s been doing it for years now. Honestly, it’s a little surprising that it’s taken this long for Dick to hate him, or maybe just to admit that he hates him.

That makes more sense.

Dick’s a good big brother in that he tries his best to be one. He’s not actually very good at a significant portion of it, but he tries. Over and over, no matter how much resistance he faces from the others to being brother-ed, Dick tries with every fiber of his being.

And as such a good big brother, admitting to himself that he hates one of the kids who’s supposed to be a sibling under his protective wing must be incredibly difficult.

It took the impetus of Tim legitimately threatening to kill Dick’s favorite little brother to get him to say it out loud, after all, which means he’s probably only been honest about thinking it to himself for a few months at most.

That’s okay though.

Like Tim told Damian, as soon as this thing with Jason is handled, he’ll be backing off. He’ll stop complicating things and everyone else can just move on. They can reorder their lives and possibly find genuine peace.

But not until this thing with Jason is handled.

Handled in a way that Tim can be certain of allowing to resolve without his further interference. With Babs so firmly on his side, he’s sure that all he needs is one more conversation, just one more little push, and then he can disappear and know things will be fine.

Dick still isn’t looking at him as he elaborates bluntly, “I hate what you’re doing. And I disagree with it. Strongly.”

Again, Tim finds the statement totally fair.

But then Dick says something that completely blindsides him: “But I’m your brother and I am not going to let you kill yourself.”

Tim doesn’t know what to do with that.
Dick supplies an action to respond with in lieu of a verbal answer, ordering, “So, stop gawking and get on the damn bike, already. Before I change my mind.”

Tim does as commanded.

Scrambling to do so, just in case Dick meant it when he mentioned the possibility of this miraculous kindness being rescinded.

Tim still doesn’t know what the hell is going on, but he thinks this could be a massive step towards helping the Family pull together instead of breaking apart in whatever aftermath results from his last gesture of excessive entitlement as he manipulates the Family focus.

Anyway, it feels a little more like Tim is breaking apart as he squeezes Dick tight when they roar out into the daylight, but it also feels a little less like that’s so terrible.

“Thanks Dick,” he mutters while he feels it’s due.

He knows that Dick’s involvement is going to muck things up with any possible approach Tim could feasibly make when they actually reach the safe house where Jason’s staying… but until they get close enough for that to become an actual problem, Tim wants to bask in the warmth of whatever nonsense this moment of insanity is.

people call us foolish ( they don’t know how foolish tastes )
So yes. Timmy's edged well past any possibility of being okay without dramatic action. Fortunately, Jason and Dick have enough dramatic tendencies between them to make things happen.

NEXT TIME: ROY GETS A CHAPTER! He showed up after what was supposed to be a five minute phone call, and stuck around for what seems to be the rest of the story... But Roy Harper is utterly amazing and I'm pretty glad he's wedged his way in here.

^_--<3
i feel so lost (in this city)

Chapter Summary

In one last burst of recap, Roy runs through everything that’s happened in this fiasco since he’s gotten involved, and he pushes the plot forward because lingering on even the freshest hurts isn’t helpful to anyone.

Chapter Notes

So work is still hella chaotic, but I have gotten enough of this drafted to be safe in saying that I WILL have a chapter up for you guys at least once a week, EVERY week until this thing’s entirely finished!

WARNING: there IS a bit of a cliff hanger here, not a super painful one, but definitely a cut-off in the middle of a moment of Clear Importance. ^_^~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty – i feel so lost (in this city)

When Jason first called him, Roy knew right away that something Big was up.

Jason’s not exactly good at the whole ‘asking for help’ thing.

He tries, Roy knows, but he also tries not to be a bother… It’s a delicate line for anyone to walk, and for someone with as little historical precedent for having people genuinely want to have him around as Jason… it’s gotta be a killer kind of indecisiveness cached in the dilemma.

So, when Jason makes a voluntary throw to find a life line… Roy knows it’s gotta be bad.
Last time it happened – the first time, really, when Jason decided that enough was enough and that he needed to have someone help him yank himself out of his own head – it had been because he’d nearly killed the kid who’d replaced him as Batman’s little side kick.

He’d done that a couple of times before, Roy knew, but this time… it was different. The first two times he’d nearly killed Tim Drake he’d still been pretty damn fresh from the Pit. The time he’d done it last year… he’d been pretty clean by then, and clear enough to feel he should’a stopped himself from doing it.

So, when Jason called, requesting an extraction and sounding half dead himself, Roy pretty much assumed that little Timmy Drake was on his way to fully corpse-ifying.

Hearing that the kid somehow wasn’t dead was surprising.

Getting Jason to explain the details was only a touch like pulling teeth, and that was mostly because Jason was distracted with the baby bird’s pretty much continuing alive-ness.

Distracted with his own rampant desires to keep that alive-ness going.

It was clear to Roy, as things spiraled, that Jason’s personal investment in keeping tabs on the Bats’ baby bird had changed since they’d had their little detox session on the Island.

He and Roy as shared a couple moments on the beach, just them boys without any of Kori’s female sensibilities there to make sense of the human twists of deep emotionality, and Roy knew that Jay had been just about utterly in love with the kid once.

But that had been Before.

They’d barely both been teenagers when Jason died.

A dude’s first love might’ve been forever, but it wasn’t quite the kind of thing that could really go much deeper than showing someone who they really are inside their core.

At least, not usually.

Roy knew of, like, maybe two whole couples in his pretty massive list of contacts who’d been childhood sweethearts and matured into truly loving adults.

And even they were iffy, because Barry and Iris had basically been siblings, and Supes and Lois Lane had met when they were both out of high school. And Ollie and Dinah’s whole romance-y schtick is just too convoluted.

(And the Hawks totally don’t count at all because they were both immortal assholes and finding your reincarnated soulmate at five years old is totally cheating on the whole finding love that
lasts front. They were both definitely grown ups when they’d first first met like a thousand frickin years ago…)

But even though he’s rarely seen any kiddie kind of love develop into something deeper, he knows what it sounds like when someone talks about a person they cannot live without. He knows what it looks like when people fight each other because of love instead of despite it.

Initially, he hadn’t thought Jason had really meant it that way when he’d been talking about Tim and sounding like a lover. Roy knew that feelings that deep could run from Family roots, or even just particularly valued friendships.

Jason had never said anything about wanting Tim, after all… not like that, not romantically, or even just sexually – not in the present, anyway.

But seeing them fight together, back to back like nothing but the world ending could ever make their teamwork stutter… and then seeing Jason on that rooftop, holding Tim over a drop that would kill him and waiting desperately for any indication that Tim would try to save himself… Roy knew that Jason was a goner.

He would die for Tim, because of Tim, and wouldn’t even regret it when it happened.

And when he picked a fight with Batman… when they all argued over how they should go about trying to wrangle the Fear Gassed baby bird back to the safety of the nest… Jason was a martyr for a cause he truly believed in, one he felt he truly needed to make a difference for, and even if it was only his dying that would make a difference, that difference would be worth it.

It sticks with him, that thought, as he gets Jason into his truck – cleaning himself up enough to be an almost presentable person when he pops in on the kid.

Roy doesn’t really plan to broach the subject, not just then, at least, but he knows they have to talk about it sometime and when Jason starts the conversation with ‘what the fuck am I doing, Roy’ he pulls the truck over and settles in for a Talk.

‘Cause they damn well need one.

Even if it has to be on Jason’s terms.

“You tell me, Jaybird,” Roy nudges, solemn and patient.

The hands Jason has covering his face slowly fall away as genuine confusion smacks Jason’s distraught spiral square in the jaw.
“What are you talking about?”


Jason lets his hands slide off his face entirely and they fall heavily into his lap. Honestly, idiotically perplexed.

“Roy, just... what?”

“You mean it, Jay. You mean it. Seriously. I knew he was an old friend, your first real crush and whatnot, and I know he's been... tricky to deal with since you got back,” Roy lays out carefully, gingerly, “But I didn't realize... dude, you're... you're a different person for him. For him, not because of him. He doesn't do anything but ask and... and even if he doesn't ask... like, you stand up to the Bat for him, not just defending yourself when the Bat takes a go at you, but, like active face off for a cause, man... I think... well, I dunno, but... he's... he's good, for you.”

Jason snorts, still too confused and too full of self doubt to see it straight, and snarks reproachfully, “You giving me your blessing to, like, woo the idiot or shit?”

“I guess, yeah,” Roy admits, hopeful that Jason can be coaxed to see it clearly from this point since he’s gotten halfway there already. “Yeah. I am.”

Resistant, but edging closer to the truth of it, Jason asks, “What the hell?”

There’s no real snark in it.

It makes Roy think Jason will accept him shooting straight.

“You see serious, here, Jason,” Roy sets up, following up with just the lightest brush of hesitation, “You and Tim... That somethin', or what?”

Jason hears his hesitance and pushes back, defensive.

“It’s something. It’s me repeatedly almost murdering the idiot.”

“Not what I mean,” Roy insists gently, sure of what he’s seeing but still needing Jason to just openly confirm it on the record.

Jason sobers. Softens.
Puts the sass and snark aside to give an honest answer.

“I… yeah, Roy. It’s somethin’,” Jason admits.

Just speaking that little bit of truth seems to make his shoulders lighter by ridiculous degrees… but it also makes something strong inside him wilt.

“But it’s also nothin’.”

Jason hangs his head and Roy waits patiently for him to sort himself enough to speak.

“I killed him, Roy,” Jason admits, like he did that night on the beach when they first got close enough to really talk like this. “I stopped his heart and left it that way for a god damn minute. More than once.”

Jason lets his eyes drift closed – reliving the bad or indulging in the daydream of a seemingly impossible good, Roy can’t quite tell.

“Even if it could be something, it shouldn’t be.”

But Jason clearly wants it to be.

It’s close enough for Roy.

It’s progress, certainly.

And it means that Roy knows exactly where he stands in all of this convoluted Bat-brained complicated chaos.

He pulls back onto the road and resumes driving to Jason’s safe house.

He only notices the message scrolling out on his speedometer because it flashes at him in staccato warning. It makes him roll his eyes, but he relays the message anyway.

“Your Bat Brat’s on the building across the street to the west, looking into your bedroom window with a parabolic mic on the glass – your creepy hacker chick says he's not using special lenses without cause and that the mic is rigged to only catch sounds over 50 decibels, so you're quiet convo's private enough, but you start shouting with Pit rage and ninja brat will rain down katana fury on you in a second.”

Pausing briefly to shake his head, Roy explains, “She's using my digital speedometer to text, by the way, which is a thing I seriously did not know was actually connected to the internet, so hella creep points to the Original BG for that… but seriously, you're good.”
Looking over to make sure that Jason’s really listening, he assures his friend, “They’ll keep you from doing real damage if you relapse, and you'll keep the little idiot you love from doing himself damage, a’ight?”

Defeated, Jason huffs out a breath and shakes his head.

“The hell am I doing, Roy?”

“The only thing you can.”

It's true enough.

It gets Jason to pull himself to his feet and slide out of the truck’s cab.

Roy watches him make his way inside.

Gives him a nice long ten count of a head start.

Then he also gets out of the truck, but he makes his way up to the roof across the street.

As promised by Oracle, the baby bat is up there, lurking like a prickly little guardian angel – and Roy checks, makes sure that the mic is turned down pretty low, and the binoculars are not electronically enhanced with their own specialized lenses, and that the kid’s domino slits are still their normal white for simple starlight filters.

No one else needs to know the details of exactly what might happen between Jay and Tim in there, and they deserve as much privacy as possible.

Being a Bat, the kid on surveillance duty doesn’t miss Roy’s arrival.

He draws a katana without looking in Roy’s direction, without even blinking as he watches his two tense targets, and demands icily, “State your intentions.”

Roy simply chuckles.

Kid’s intense, but like an angry kitten kind of intense.

“I'm just here to say 'thank you', brat,” Roy huffs.
“You have no reason to thank me, nothing I am doing is at all meant for your benefit intentionally,” Damian retorts, earning another low laugh.

This family is all kinds of messed up, man, but Roy can tell the kid cares.

Probably more than he even realizes. A lot more.

“I know, kid,” Roy admits with a sigh and a chagrined shake of his head. “Don’t care, though. I don’t have any best friends to spare here, so you lookin’ out of the one I do got... well, it means somethin’ to me, even if it don’t mean anything to you.”

He means it, with every shred of whatever makes him human.

And he thinks the kid can tell by how uncomfortable it makes him.

“It doesn’t mean anything to me,” the brat insists under the pretense of being strict about his grammatical leanings. He attempts to reinforce that façade (while directly undermining it), by grumbling, “Your grammar is atrocious.”

“Don't care 'bout that much, neither,” Harper repeats just to be prickly.

Then he mentions softly, “And I think... I think you do care, somewhat. About both of 'em. I know I do, even if Jay's the one I care about most. Either way though, carin' or not carin', you bein' here is keepin' Jay safe. So... thanks... for that... seriously, kid.”

Roy doesn’t know what he’d do without Jason, and he doesn’t like his chances of surviving in a world where Jason didn’t, so he presses just a bit more firmly on the notion of his gratitude, “I mean it: shukraan lakum, li'anak tamasuk qalbi.”

It throws the kid for a loop.

It’s not proper Arabic, not book learned grammar.

But it has the ring of poetry, and the gravitas of the street markets where it’s sung.

‘ Thanks to you, because you’ve taken up my heart to hold.’

It’s not a phrase for lovers, though it probably could be. The story it’s from is about twin brothers – from the moment when one gets sick and the other goes to war, and the soldier thanks his neighbor for keeping his brother alive while he goes off to fight. His chances of surviving are much
better if he’s not distracted with his worries back at home.

(Both brothers die in the end, but it’s mostly beside the point, because while they die less than a decade later, it’s after being poisoned by a confused lover in a jealous rage.)

The point is that it’s a line from Damian’s mother tongue, from a poem about two brothers facing down a war that can’t be won and holding up each other through it – with a touch of outside help being needed to let them do it.

It’s a line of heartfelt thanks, cached in deeper echoes of meaning.

And Damian will be able to appreciate all the layers of it.
Possibly enough to connect its nuance to his own circumstances.

Damain covers his surprise with a snort.

“Your pronunciation is appalling,” he squeaks.

"No, it ain't, gremlin,” Roy retorts confidently as he sidles back around and hops down to the easy exit of the fire escape. "And it don't matter much, but I'm glad you do care."

Roy leaves Damian to his own thoughts, and to the likely welcome distraction of his surveillance duties, and rolls his truck a few blocks south to another of Jason’s safe houses in Gotham. It’s one of the few Roy has a key to, and one of fewer still hooked up with decent wifi.

Knowing that he can’t cook half as well as Jason, but acutely aware that he’s starving and that Jason will be too whenever he manages to show up, Roy orders a fast food feast. Three different kinds of chicken wings, enough onion rings to feed the population of Nepal, and two whole pizzas with literally everything on them.

Just shy of an hour later, he’s camped out on the couch with his mouth full, his feet up, and the brightly British drone of a lighthearted crime story set on a tropical island playing in the background. He doesn’t get worried until Netflix asks if he’s still watching.

That worry doesn’t get turned into action until he’s considering the merit of boxing up the leftovers so they don’t go inedibly bad before Jason gets there… Roy’s just about resigned to box everything up and then go hunt down his best friend when the very idiot in question slinks inside through the kitchen window like the spazzy ass bird brain his is.

“Why do your apartments even have doors, at this point,” Roy grumbles as Jason adjusts to seeing him in here – to seeing him up and awake and still ready to talk all this shit through like he promised. “Foods up, on the coffee table. ‘S all cold, now, but it’s still damn tasty and I can turn the oven on if you wanna warm it up.”

“Cold’s fine,” Jason accepts cautiously, sounding exhausted and a little bit afraid.
Roy ignores the disquieting sound of it and turns back towards the fridge as Jason edges towards the couch. “I’m grabbing a beer,” Roy calls, “You want one?”

He’s already standing up with two glass bottles in his hands and he’s popped the tops off both of them before Jason’s murmur of ascent reaches him.

He sets one down on the table in front of Jason when he gets back to the couch, and he tips his own back for a nice long swig as he settles down to wait.

Jason’s polished off half nearly the food when he starts complaining about Roy’s choice in tv shows to let drone on in the background.

“I know it’s stupid, but I like the music and all the snazzy accents,” Roy returns. “And besides, you watch frickin’ Border Patrol, not even, you watch Border Patrol New Zealand, and Canada, and shit. You got no right to judge, buddy. Your taste is crap.”

“At least it’s real crime and snazzy accents,” Jason defends weakly. “Not this nonsense.”

Roy recognizes an opening when he sees one, and he knows they’re both too tired to make a huge ordeal out of dodging around the real point of this conversation, so he nudges things along by softening to say, “It’s beachy, you know? Reminds me of the Island. It’s good background noise, and it being on just reminds me how to keep my cool a little better.”

Looking at the hot wing in his hand like he suddenly can’t imagine eating it, Jason hmms a vague agreement.

After a brief spell of frozen indecision, Jason gives up on the hot wing, scrubs his fingers off on a relatively unscathed napkin from the pile, and then grabs his beer for a chugging few swigs as he leans back into the welcome softness of the couch cushions.

The quiet lingers for a steady moment longer.

“I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, Roy,” Jason confesses.

Roy gives a huff of solidarity and promises, “That’s okay, bro. This shit storm’s a pretty nasty butt load of nonsense.”

Jason nods distantly. Then he pulls a slow breath in, holds it as long as he can manage, and lets it out just as carefully. He’s trying desperately to center himself – trying and failing, it seems, as his expression looks lost and floaty.

With a slow, broadcast movement, Roy lifts the hand not holding his beer and leans his
elbow on the back of the couch between them. He swings his hand out at a measured crawl until he can brush his thumb in slow strokes over Jason’s shoulder, just lightly – just enough to let Jason feel it without the presence of pressure or warmth behind it to distract him.

It’s sometimes far too easy to sink into the relief of another person.

The first time Roy had tried to deal with his issues, he’d ended up just falling into bed with a shit ton of people – some of them he may have loved, but some he only felt in love with for how they made him forget about the shit beyond the bedroom for a brief few moments.

Now, that said, Roy is perfectly comfortable with the idea of fucking Jason’s brains out here if that’s the route he wants to take – they all got more than close enough on the Island for a bit of meaningful carnal release to truly help them without complicating anything – but Roy’s pretty sure that Jason doesn’t want to go that route… not tonight, not for this issue.

It’d be distraction, not release.

And Roy knows that Jason’s aware enough of everything to feel the difference. He won’t refuse Jason, if that’s the decision he makes, but he also won’t encourage him to make that decision lightly. He won’t let it be a conclusion made simply out of frustration being funneled into lust and displaced longing.

So there’s no warmth in the hand on Jason’s back, no nape grab, or shoulder clasp of enduring support. There’s nothing in Roy’s action to let Jason fall into the swirl of being with another person – there’s just the light brush of his thumb against the top of Jason’s shoulder to remind him that Roy’s here, a grounding presence in the present.

“What do you need?”

It’s one of the most difficult questions they ever make each other answer.

Jason shudders violently as he works himself through evaluating the basics.

“Sleep,” he comes up with eventually.

Roy gives a slow nod. He’s been up for about 30 hours at this point, and he knows Jason’s been up for longer – possibly even twice as long, at this point.

With food having been taken care of already, sleep is the next priority.
It’s tricky here, to coax Jason into making decisions without asking any leading questions, but the Outlaws all have enough practice with it on each other.

Instead of asking if he wants to be in bed or on the couch, which puts the bias of preference on the first option in a way that might put subconscious pressure on Jason to choose because of external influence, Roy asks simply, “Where?”

“Here,” Jason replies, free hand pressing firmly into the couch cushion.

Instead of asking if he wants the lights on or off, or the TV, or if he wants company, or any of that, Roy says, “Set the scene for me.”

It was a hard practice to fall into, but they’ve all gotten it down by now.

The words come slow, as Jason considers the variables, and eventually he lists out exactly what he needs.

“Stove light, on. Overheads, off. TV, on. Couch, flat. Air con, on. Blankets and pillows.”

Roy moves through the apartment, checking things off the list at almost the same rate as things get added to it. He’s just returned from the linen closet with an armload of soft things, and is about to yank the lever to make the daybed that is the couch drop it’s back flat to create a mattress that’s just a touch smaller than a queen, when Jason’s fingertips ghost over his arm.

“Stay. With me. Just sleep.”

Roy looks up at him and gives a slow, deliberate nod. Even though Jason’s resolutely looking straight ahead, Roy knows he can see the action by the way some of the tension in his frame dissolves with his next tremulous breath.

As Jason relaxes into it, Roy finishes arranging things to his specifications and then slides into bed beside him. Jason’s out cold before Roy even throws a blanket over him.

Feeling the pull of exhaustion himself, Roy curls around his friend, close enough for a shared warmth to mingle in the space between them, but far enough away to keep them feeling like distinct entities instead of a communal tangle of limbs. The only contact Roy makes with Jason is a hand on his ribcage loosely draped and there solely to remind Jason of his presence.
Jason stays still as he sleeps, likely too conked for anything solid enough to be a nightmare to take shape.

Beside him, Roy finds a slim sliver of peace as well.

They get longer than expected to recover in oblivion.

And by the time any awareness of the morning rolls around, they’re both in a better position to handle what it means.

Roy wakes up first.

He gingerly slips out of bed and takes a shower with the bathroom door left wide open – so that Jason can tell exactly where he is if he wakes up.

When Roy gets back to the main room, having pulled on a spare pair of Jason’s sweats, he finds that Jason has indeed woken up – though he hasn’t moved other than opening his eyes.

Taking a seat and leaning back against Jason’s middle, Roy asks, “What do you need?”

“Food,” Jason sighs. He rolls away from Roy, but it’s just a stretch of aching muscles and with his voice still at ease he adds, “To take a piss, maybe nab a shower.”

Roy grabs Jason’s shoulder and gives a firm squeeze.

“Bathroom’s that way,” he says, promising, “I’ll order up some grub. Any requests?”

“Something with bacon,” Jason manages as he pushes himself upright after Roy’s move to stand leaves a draft of cold air in his wake.

Roy snorts as he makes his way over to the counter where he left his phone to charge, muttering all the while, “Man, it’s like you don’t know me at all. Just ‘something with bacon’ he says. Idiot. It’s not allowed to even be considered ‘breakfast’ without bacon.”

His complaints make Jason crack half a smile, encourage him to swing his feet over the side of the bed and lumber off in the direction of the bathroom.
While he’s gone, Roy gets a massive breakfast ordered and then sets about cleaning up the apartment. There’s a niggle in his gut, a worry over something that he can’t quite put his finger on but he knows better than to doubt his intuition.

Leaving Gotham ASAP seems like a good plan, but Roy’s pretty damn sure it’s not going to be that easy to just disappear. And he’s not entirely sure that running away is really a good plan right now… he’s not even sure if that’s still what Jason wants.

It’s gonna be a delicate trick to find a way to help Jason start sorting out his thoughts.

With breakfast ordered and the apartment back in daytime conditions (the daybed levered back into being a couch, the excess of blankets put away, and the blinds flung open to accommodate Gotham’s meager offering of midday sun), Roy moves to stand in the hall, kicked back against the opposite wall of the bathroom door a few feet further down.

The door’s been open for Jason’s shower, and Roy makes no comment on how long that shower has been as he listens to the shuffling sounds of Jason finishing up.

As the water turns off completely and the flap of fabric replaces the rumbling sound as Jason dries himself off, Roy asks, “So, you wanna tell me how last night wrapped up?”

“Not really,” Jason barks immediately.

Roy brushes off the snark; waits for a real answer.

A ragged sigh echoes from the bathroom after a long few minutes of hush with the only sounds in the apartment being the rouche of terrycloth and the distant mumblings of the TV.

“Kid needed neutralizers,” Jason huffs eventually. “We, uh, we disagreed on that point.”

“Demon had to intervene?”

“Yeah,” Jason admits heavily.

Roy nods to himself. It was the expected outcome, after all, that’s why they sent the stupid little ball of anger out to watch over Jay and Tim in the first place.
“Seems like you’ve still got all your limbs, though,” Roy mentions cautiously. “Demon just burst in to break you guys up before things got sketchy?”

“Yeah. Nothing major happened,” Jason explains, sounding both pained and relieved by the circumstance. “But things would’ve... it wouldn’t have turned out well without the brat, and even with him there... even though the whole damn point in going was to save that stupid little fucker’s life... I almost just shot them both.”

“But ya didn’t,” Roy points out firmly.

He crosses his arms even though Jason can’t see the action and switches which leg he has kicked out in front of him as he leans back against the wall outside the bathroom. He leans his head back against the drywall’s thin sheen of paint and tips it to the side to cast a worried glance at the steamy shapes still dissipating through the doorway. “And we knew it was a possibility that the Pit would make things go a little wonky. That’s why we sent the demon.”

With a shaky breath, Jason admits, “It didn’t even feel like the Pit, Roy. Just the last bit when I wanted to shoot both of them, that was definitely the Pit... but the first part? I wanted to strangle him, bash his head in, something... I don’t even—”

“That’s just ‘cause Pretty Bird’s a fucked up, frustrating little idiot, Jay,” Roy explains with a touch of real amusement building in his chest.

Jason doesn’t share his enjoyment.

Not even enough to curse him out for it.

A quiet moment passes, but the tension remains stagnant with unresolved anxiety.

“When the brat took your bird away, he go willing?”

“Yeah. Mostly.”

Roy nods to himself again, checking off another box in the ‘necessary for sanity’ column he’s got running (for Jay, and for the rest of the crazy ass Bat brood as well, since keeping them sane enough to function rationally is pretty relevant to ensuring that Jason can as well).

“Hey, that’s an accomplishment right there, Jay, you got the kid in the middle of killing himself slowly to willingly head back to the frickin Manor. Gold Star for the psychopath in red, right there,” Roy applauds, meaning the praise far more than the sarcasm suggests.
Jason’s just never been one to take a legit compliment well.

“Mostly, Roy, I said ‘mostly’ willing,” Jason protests.

“Willing enough to get him to actually go,” Roy counters.

When Jason doesn’t say anything in response, Roy elaborates, “I’ve seen that jackass draw a line in the sand, and I know just as well as you do that if he was still gung-ho on the running away thing, ain’t nothin’ was gonna get that pert little ass back to the nest. Kid would’a totally killed himself tryin’ to get away if you hadn’t said something that convinced him not to fight it. So, quit your bitching and just accept that you helped the idiot, a’ight?”

There’s still nothing but silence from Jason’s side of the bathroom doorway, but it’s a slide less strained than it was before.

It’s enough to let Roy feel confident in walking away from the bathroom hall when a knock at the door summons him to the front room.

It should just be their breakfast delivery, but Roy still grabs a handgun from behind Jason’s toaster as he approaches – holds it steady and hidden behind his thigh as he reaches for the door knob, primed to fire. He gets a lot closer to trigger happy as the door swings open.

It’s not breakfast.

It’s Dick Grayson.

And he is pissed.
Chapter End Notes

Poor /everyone/ at this point... I just can't seem to say it enough.

And, FYI, the Outlaw technique that Roy employs here with Jay is actually a very useful one for giving the power of choice back to victims of Trauma, but it's not the first one you use. Scene setting can be overwhelming to some victims, so unless you have a Significant relationship and a solid awareness of the victim's needs, this kind of thing is better left to professional discretion. (Even if you DO have a Significance and Awareness, I'd still recommend consulting a professional, just in case, because Trauma is a tricky bitch and the last thing you wanna do is poke it half-cocked).

NEXT TIME: Roy catches up with Dickie over drinks... and they BOTH need the alcoholic courage boost to get through the conversations...

<3
lost (part II)

Chapter Summary

Roy faces down his old friend and sets Dick Grayson straight about a few very important somethings that will impact the way this dust up with the Bat Family will turn out.

Chapter Notes

SO, I've been playing pretty fast and loose with canon, here, and this chapter gets a little dramatic in terms of futzing with Jason's backstory. It's nothing hugely out of line with canon events but the motivations shift pretty far sideways.

And Roy delivers the news in a way that pretty much guts Dickie... so tissues ready? Good news is that the end of this chapter is mostly not a cliff hanger and it's also mostly happy, so yay?

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty One – i feel so lost in this city (with all its traffic and tricks)

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Roy gets a lot closer to trigger happy as the door swings open.

It’s not breakfast.

It’s Dick Grayson
And he’s pissed.

His expression is dark enough to curdle milk and he’s not surprised at all when Roy reveals his weapon by raising it up to level the barrel at Dick’s forehead.

Grayson huffs a few heavy breaths as the strain within the stand off builds.

A muscle in his jaw gives a stuttering twitch; then he raises his chin slightly as a push of furious defiance breaks out of whatever vice he’s attempting to lock his emotions inside and he lets his posture slide a few degrees off center – allowing room for one half dead Tim Drake to limp his way up to lean against the door frame.

“I need,” the broken little birdie pants heavily, “to talk… to Jason.”

Grayson’s still got his eyes on Roy’s gun, but Drake’s gaze brushes passed it like it’s not even there – which, for some strange reason, is just so much more unnerving… Roy’s always been a bit overly cavalier with his non-concern over the dangers presented by weapons, but this is a new level of ridiculous.

No wonder everyone always seems to kinda want to smack this kid.

But at the same time, the kid’s dismissal of the threat Roy’s weapon poses is not entirely without merit. It’s mostly for show, for insurance, really.

Roy’s not going to shoot either of them unless something happens that makes it utterly unavoidable, and even then, he’d be going for non-lethal because killing a Bat in Gotham is just… not even remotely survivable. And the rest of the whole god damn universe would feel the reverberations from whatever hell those ‘Family first’ assholes would rain down.

Tim clearly knows that, and he’s certain enough in the supposition that Roy knows it to have already completely dismissed the flimsy threat for the façade it truly is.
Dropping the charade, Roy lowers the gun.

He gives a heavy sigh that turns into a groan before he runs out of air, his head hanging on protesting shoulders as he tries to think through the possibilities.

A tiny gasp makes him look up again.

The bird with a brain too big for his britches is looking over Roy’s shoulder – with an expression of hope and joy that’s so pure and bright and shiny, it makes even Roy’s unromantic heart ache with the sudden need for a Disney level happy ending for these idiots.

The kid ain’t any good for himself, but a face like that could inspire a lot of good in somebody else – especially someone like Jason, whose feelings for him already run deep.

A quick look behind him confirms to Roy that Jason’s there – dressed in cargo pants and a black t-shirt because he’s still not quite comfortable enough with a few of his more prominent scars to leave them at all exposed for any reason.

Jason doesn’t have a weapon in his hand, and his expression is lost and scared – too shocked to be terrified into anger, and too awed to feel anything but numb. There’s hope there, too, and relief… and a pained little twist of pride.

All exposed because Tim just does that to him, blows through all his barriers like an ICBM goes though drywall.

Even on the Island… it was always when Tim came up, even if it wasn’t by name directly, that Jason wound up being truly candid.

Tim doesn’t flinch away from even the fiercest firestorm and he’ll call Jason out on his bullshit in a heartbeat.

Yeah… Tim’s not good for himself.

But he’s probably pretty good for Jason.

Pretty damn good, to be honest…

And even the most socially awkward idiot in the room can tell that they need a minute.
Or ten.

Hell, given enough privacy, they might actually just fuck it out right now.

Well… that might be too optimistic, what, with the baby bird already starting to sway from whatever aggravations he’s inflicted on his injuries, and with Jason lookin’ sick enough to be a few sweet words away from keelin’ over outright… but still, Roy can live in hope.

And he can make himself useful.

He sighs again and takes a careful step away from the door, slowly enough to avoid startling anyone. He makes it to the duffle bag he dropped by the coffee table last night and trades the gun in his hand for a fresh t-shirt. He shoves his feet in his boots and then marches towards the door as he grabs his hat.

“You are one crazy little dude, feathers,” Roy huffs with a shake of his head as he nears the duo at the door. He places a hand on Tim’s shoulder – almost regrets it when he has to use the hand he’d slapped down in solidarity to keep the kid on his feet by forcibly holding him a bit steadier than he can manage free standing – and then says, “I trust you to take care of him.”

Tim nods with the kind of grave severity best suited to the funeral of a national hero.

It makes the tightness in Roy’s chest give a squeeze.

“Meanwhile, Dick-ass here is gonna buy me a drink. Start workin’ off that tab he owes me for like a hundred frickin’ bets he hasn’t paid,” Roy grumbles, latching onto Dick’s arm and hauling him out the door.

It’s easier to drag the acrobat out of the apartment than Roy anticipated – Dick must be more on board with this whole shit show than Roy’d figured from his storm cloud glower.

That’s good. Makes things easier.

The walk around the block to one of the many bars already open for business in this part of the city is a quiet affair, with Dick dragging his feet while putting up no genuine resistance.

They get settled at the quiet end of the bar, a very healthy tab opened up on Dick’s Wayne Enterprises black card with two cold beers in front of them, and Roy just turns towards Dick with an eyebrow arched in silent question.

The bartender has moved away from them and the larger group of patron on the bar’s opposite end ensures that Dick and Roy have more than enough privacy for the conversation Roy
knows is necessary to have happen next.

Dick is making a valiant attempt to pretend that he’s very interested in reading the stupid pearl of wisdom quoted on the underside of his coaster.

“So, uh, h-how’s Kori?”

“Nuh-uh, you ain’t usin’ your frickin’ tragic backstory with that chica to get out of talking about this thing with your idiot baby brothers,” Roy shuts down immediately.

Dick sighs dramatically, overacting at being put out by Roy’s demand.

Then he leans back, letting a finger trace the lip of his glass, collecting the spill of foam off the edge. “You’ve been hanging out with Jay for too long if you’re callin’ anyone ‘chica’ that easy,” he muses, a darkly pained nostalgia creeping up his throat.

“He’s my best friend, Dick,” Roy admits, low and sober.

“He’s… he’s not one of the good guys, anymore, not one of us at least,” Dick confesses, staring into the foam of his drink like it holds the answers to the Universe. “He’s not a Bat.”

“He wants to be,” Roy mentions, downing a long gulp as Dick processes his words and slowly drags his gaze over to stare at Roy.

Disbelief, and the desperate ache of hope, is pooled in Dick’s expression as he asks quietly, “Does he? Really? Because he hasn’t exactly made it obvious.”

“I’m not sure he knows how much he wants it,” Roy explains with a half shrug.

“He still kills people, and he knows that it’s the one thing he can’t do if he wants to come back to us,” Dick laments. He’s a diva, but Roy can tell that he’s genuinely trying here – being as honest as he knows how and looking to Roy for real answers.

He should already know some of these answers, but Roy can hardly fault him for getting so wound up with maybes that he doesn’t know how to keep track of what’s real.

With a slow exhale, Roy points out, “You know he’d rather have you hate him because of something he’s doing intentionally than to have you still be disappointed in him after having tried his best to live up to your standards.”
“He’s tried to kill Tim,” Dick counters, voice cracking as the well of emotion he’s got tamped down finally starts to boil over.

Roy can hardly bear to look at him.

Flicks his gaze over just enough to gauge a response as he mentions cautiously, “You get that they’re special, right? To each other?”

Dick nods, taking a long drink of his own beer. “Always have been.”

“It’s not exactly healthy, but it’s the best they got right now,” Roy lays out.

A shuddering sigh wracks his lungs as he elaborates, “It’s the only thing that’s purely good in Jason, that’s so unalterably good that it couldn’t be burned out by the Pit, at least.”

He’s looking into the depths of his drink as he feels Dick’s gaze searching his expression.

With the weight of a confession that’s not rightfully his to deliver, Roy says, “Jay didn’t almost kill your little baby bird, Dick. He did kill him. Stopped his heart and left it that way.”

Dick is sitting in silent horror as Roy pauses long enough to drain his drink.

“First time, I think it was forty seven seconds,” Roy details as he gestures to the bartender for another round. “Then something he was seeing broke him out of the Pit’s fugue state and he personally restarted the thing. Tim woke up, sorta, and it brought the Pit back to the forefront. Jay killed him all over again – strangled him, left him on the floor for sixty three seconds, long enough to make it to the windows… to make it halfway outside. But he looked back, and the fugue state broke again.”

With another shuddering pause, and another long pull from his beer, Roy goes on with slow deliberation, “He restarted the kid’s heart, packed his wounds, pumped him full of adrenalin, morphine, and antibiotics – made sure his suit still functioned enough to register the dosings – and stayed with him until help arrived. He was in the ceiling by the time Superman got through the Tower’s glass, but he didn’t even look up from the kid until the Kryptonian started the process of breaking in.”

“The cameras were disabled,” Dick mutters, voice caught awkwardly between hope and horror and dripping with disbelief. “Every sensor in the Tower was turned off.”

“His helmet was recording. Dumped the footage over to a redundant server with an
emergency back up function I’m pretty sure Jay didn’t even know was there,” Roy explains. “I found it about a year after he came back, around a month after we started hanging out again.”

“Does he know? That you know?”

“Yeah,” Roy admits, “We talked about it on the Island…”

There’s a long moment of silence between them.

Roy shakes his head, hangs it heavy on his shoulders.

“It sounds insane, but… honestly? Killing Tim..? It saved your brother, Dick,” Roy promises. “Saved him in a way that nothing else ever could… He changed. After his attack on Titans Tower, he changed. It wasn’t just about revenge anymore. He wanted to do good.”

He lets Dick chew on that a moment, solidifies his resolve with another swig of liquid courage. “That’s why he started getting things organized in the Alley, consolidating power and getting the worst of the street scum out of the way. It’s why he contacted a few of us outsiders before we became the Outlaws and started workin’ contracts with us to start buildin’ up a real team. Me, Star, Artemis, Bizarro, and a couple others who’re still… less able to be spotlighted without warrants and such problems comin’ out of the woodwork. But seriously, Jay’s the one that really got us doin’ any kind of significant good.”

“He’s got a couple duffel bags full of severed heads that might want to say otherwise.”

“Yeah, the heads of drug lords, pimps, murderers for hire, and rapists,” Roy counters.

Dick shakes his head, too familiar with that argument spiral from having exchanged words around it with Jason repeatedly over these last few years to fully commit to having it again now with Roy. He’s got better cards to play right here and they both know it.

“If he was already on the Outlaw path when he came back to Gotham after his attack on the Tower, if he was trying to do good by breaking a few rules and whatnot, why he go after Tim again? He sought him out, Roy, isolated him. Made sure that none of us could get to him, but also made sure that we all knew exactly what was happening… what he was doing…”

“You don’t know anything,” Roy returned heavily. “He stalked your boy for months. Kept his distance, dodged the little freak when he came pokin’ around for Jaybird – kept tabs on him, mostly to avoid him, kept tabs on the rest of you just to piss you off. Well, mostly Bruce.”

Dick pulls a breath in, lets it out in shallow pants.

“Jason targeted him, probed his defenses, got him on his own,” Dick retorts.
“That was mostly habit.”

“It was intent.”

“A little, maybe, but not bad intent,” Roy levels earnestly on Jay’s behalf, “He was just checking up on the little idiot.”

Dick is not amused. “Then why did he attack?”

“I dunno. Not exactly. Jay doesn’t exactly remember it, not well enough to explain it as much other than the Pit. He’s got fragments, things that keep him up at night, but nothing solid enough to isolate the trigger that set him off.”

Air slides hotly through Dick’s teeth. “What did his Hood record?”

“Not enough, but more,” Roy explains, elaborating, “Seems like Bruce sent the kid in to bust up an arms deal. Solo. Jay took exception to that. Stopped things before they started. Beat the kid up to send a message to Batsy about how easy it is to lose a little birdy, especially one that Jay felt that Bruce really cared about.”

Dick rolls his head on his shoulders over to level a dark glower right at Roy.

“He didn’t just beat him up, he eviscerated him – sliced deep enough holes in his back to try pulling his lungs out through his ribcage,” Dick bites out venomously.

“You ever wonder how the kid survived that?”

“Let me guess, he didn’t,” Dick deadpans.

“He didn’t,” Roy confirms. “Jay made sure of it. Kid was dead, Dick. Heart stopped, bleeding out, brain waves on flatline… for a solid minute and a half there, that stupid little kid was dead. Seein’ it made Jason’s biometrics go haywire. I’ve never seen anything like it, man, Jason had a heart attack. As literal as it gets without an actual coronary obstruction.”

Roy shakes his head, but Dick isn’t buying into the awe the situation warrants.
Giving in, Roy gives Dick the information he’s waiting for, “Jay restarted his heart and then gave him a live transfusion, like battlefield style emergency care – executed well enough to have me hella impressed. Tim had some sort of insta-seal bio goo in his kit, Jay slathered it on him. Popped him antibiotics, adrenalin, and this experimental immune boost slash muscle regenerate that he’d been working on with me and Bart and Barbara … went Jekyll and Hyde there for a bit, going back and forth over wanting to crush his chest straight off and wanting to compress it regularly enough to keep air in his lungs – that’s where the broken ribs came from, not from any pounding beforehand.”

“He still killed him, Roy… even if he did save him, too, he still killed him.”

Roy cedes the point with a nod. “Yeah. And it scared him more than dyin’ did.”

It’s enough to make Dick down the rest of his beer. He hangs his head and laces his fingers over the back of his neck, with his elbows sitting white with strain against the bar top.

“What am I supposed to do, Roy?”

Dick sounds like he’s breaking, like the little pieces of himself Roy knows he’s spent years carefully duct taping back together are all starting to crumble into shards too small to hold onto.

“Lotta people askin’ me that today,” Roy huffs. “An’ I wish I had an answer for ya.”

A slow breath in, and a slow breath out, repeated a few times while the bartender gets both Roy and Dick a refill. It’s enough to let Dick find a slice of his focus again.

“The detox thing – when he disappeared with you and Kori, he called it a ‘mental health retreat’ where he killed a couple bad guys and worked out his issues,” Dick starts.

When he doesn’t immediately elaborate, Roy comments, “Accurate enough description.”

“What triggered it?”

“Hm?”

“If it really was… if it really was an attempt to go-, to get clean,” Dick says slowly, pained in a way that makes even Roy’s limited empathy abilities kick up a storm. “What triggered it?”

“Tim,” Roy states, obviously.
“But what about Tim?” Dick asks, bowing so low his forehead’s nearly on the bar.

“What, you don’t think he just woke up one day and realized, ‘oops, love of my life here, killing him on accident or because of psycho Pit rage is a very bad idea’?” Roy replies.

The attempt at a joke doesn’t do much to clear the air.

“We know Jason attacked Tim directly on two occasions with intent,” Dick lays out, voice a low murmur of despondency. “We know Jason kept a close watch on him and that he responded with pointed, dramatic violence whenever Tim stepped out of bounds. And we know that Tim was getting hurt a lot more often after Jason got back; there’s a dozen cases we know of where Jason was involved at some point and Tim broke a bone or required a transfusion. And we know that Tim disappeared pretty regularly to hide his injuries and bull shit us that Jason didn’t have anything to do with it. It was a pattern, and then it stopped…”

A ragged breath is drawn in and out of Dick’s lungs.

He shifts his posture, head still down and hands still clawing at the back of his neck, but twisted so he can look Roy in the eye as he asks, “So what did Jason do?”

Roy’s gaze softens with sympathy.

“Do you really want to know?”

“No really. But that doesn’t mean I don’t still need to hear it.”

“Does even really matter? If he tried to kill him again, it’s just one more black mark on his record, isn’t it? And if he didn’t… well, it doesn’t do much to clean up his rep, either, does it?”

Dick just lets one of his hands fall away, a gesture that’s somehow incredulous and pleading all at once. “Tell me what you know, Roy,” Dick says. “Please.”

“I don’t know much,” Roy admits seriously. “Jay wasn’t wearing the Hood, and he doesn’t remember much at all. He knows the baby bird surprised him, knows that he reacted badly to it… He knows he didn’t want to hurt him, though, even as he did it. The Pit got him good, but this time he was clear enough inside the fog to see what he was doing and… to not like it. And to realize that he couldn’t stop it.”
Dick has raised his head by now and is looking at Roy intently as he stops to take another long drink of alcohol. The literal bitterness helps wash the emotional sort away from his tongue.

“Apparently, it was all he could do to pitch the kid off a roof and into the harbor to keep himself from finishing the job. Wasn’t entirely sure that wouldn’t kill him, but figured it was better than slitting his throat again,” Roy tells Dick, his own expression going hazy with the memory of that first desperate phone call.

Roy had never heard anyone sound that broken before.

Never heard it since, either.

And with his role in the world, he’d made plenty of midnight phone calls to families of fallen heroes, and gotten those calls himself. And he’d gotten calls that said the entire operation was blown, calls that said all the people he’d suffered through losing in a campaign were suddenly worth less than it cost to stamp their tags.

He’d seen wars end, worlds be destroyed, entire peoples vanish under genocides…

And hearing Jason Todd explain that he’d just killed Tim Drake because his body moved without his mind’s consent is still the worst confession he’s ever been party to…

“He didn’t wanna do it, Dick,” Roy swears, pulling on every bit of faith his comrade had ever once invested in him. “He didn’t. And he doesn’t now. He wants to be one of the good guys, so badly that it’s killing him and your little Red Robin is the only thing he knows how to hang on to when things get bad.”

Roy waits for that to sink in on Dick’s consciousness before he adds, “Admittedly, it’s also that kid currently making Jay crazy, but if the rest of you would quit over reacting, that can probably be dealt with. Tim just seems to want to get all of you on the same side again, seems like he’ll get it done by any means necessary.”

“Tim would walk straight into Hell for Jason, would face down the Devil himself for a trade without a drop of fear or hesitation,” Dick accepts.

“And Jase would shoot him dead before he could even try to sell his soul,” Roy agrees.

“So, what do we do?”
Roy notes the ‘we’; understands that it means Dick’s turned a corner. He still hates this, clearly – he hates everything about this… but he’s willing to do what needs to be done to fix it.

To make as much good as possible come out the other side of this shit storm.

“Jason needs calm, stability – he would prefer acceptance, but for now that’s probably negotiable,” Roy explains. “But all this nonsense with Bats running around trying to oust him, with Tim popin’ up on him with a suitcase because he’s runnin’ from a suicide watch? Yeah, that’s all gotta stop. Right now. We need things to go back to some sort of status quo.”

“We can’t go back to how it was before this started,” Dick warns, “Tim will not accept that. He’s gonna keep trying to kill himself until we move forward on his plan. It’s nothing more than a tactic now, a bargaining chip that he’s more than willing to spend.”

“And Jason is not willing to let him cash it,” Roy presses. “So. Forward. What’s that look like in Tim’s world? Is any of it doable?”

“Tim won’t let up until Jason’s one of us again, at least in some sense of an official capacity, though he’ll probably accept something less than a full homecoming,” Dick describes with a cautious hopefulness building in his voice. “An agreement to negotiate terms at a later date might be enough for today – if it comes straight from Bruce, at least.”

Roy can’t help his incredulity.

“You think that’s actually possible?”

“If that’s what it takes to get Tim to accept medical care, then… maybe,” Dick responds with the ache of an acute understanding. “Bruce loves them both so much that he hasn’t been willing to listen to them. But this is pretty cut and dry. Bruce listens or Tim dies – and then Jason goes back to having that vendetta all fresh and shiny. The rest of us can all see that now, and we can make Bruce see it… probably.”

“The rest are really on board?”

“You heard them on the rooftop before Jason went to talk Tim down out of the Fear enough to let him come home… Babs is the one who facilitated Tim leaving this morning, Cass has some sort of agreement with him, Steph… I don’t know what her deal is exactly, but she knows what’s best for Tim and is willing to give a lot up to make it happen. Damian hardly understands what’s happening, but he’ll back off and reserve judgement if I ask him. I hate everything about this, but I’m not so stupid that I can’t do the math here. And even if Bruce can’t bring himself to admit the truth, I think… I think the rest of us can override his call…”

“There’s a lot more ‘if’ in that than optimal,” Roy huffs with a desolate shake of his head as he eyes the last of his beer. “But it’s also a lot better than half the ops I’ve run this year, so it sounds like a solid plan to me. We heading straight for the Manor?”
“Should we try to get Jay and Tim on board? Tell them what we’re trying to do, let them know we’re on their side?” Dick’s voice is hopeful, but his face is already resigned.

He knows it’s not possible, he just need Roy to say it for him.

Tim and Jason are not going to be in a place where they’ll be able to listen to anything from them. Nothing about plans or any kind of intentions. They’re in similar states of mind, each of them are likely very delicate and already convinced that only the very worst is true.

Words won’t be enough to even scratch the surface of belief like that…

“Let’s just focus on setting up the battlefield for them,” Roy sighs.

That makes Dick blink.

“You think they’ll go back to the Manor? Willingly? Without anyone dragging them?”

“How long you think Tim has left with standing on his own right now?”

“Twenty minutes, max.”

Roy nods and takes a few hurried gulps of his beer. “And how much you wanna bet Jay’s not gonna like that? He’s gonna want to bring the Baby Bird right back to the nest. He can’t keep him sedated and contained out here, none of his safe houses are equipped for that… The Manor’s the best bet he has for getting Tim to take a nap.”

Finishing off his beer, and nodding to the remains of Dick’s drink, Roy explains, “He’ll probably be planning for a drop off at best, but again… Tim won’t accept that and I’m pretty sure he’ll hold a gun to his own head if it’ll make Jason stick around a little while.”

Dick sighs and drains his glass.

“This isn’t gonna be fun,” Dick warns.

“That’s pretty much how we can be sure we’re doing the right thing,” Roy agrees.

Because it’s an incredible demonstration of Dick’s skills with understatement. This isn’t just gonna be ‘not fun’, it’s gonna be a butt load of awkward, uncomfortable, and there’s always the chance that somebody’s gonna get shot or sliced to ribbons…

The things Roy is willing to do for his friends… truthfully, it’s almost embarrassing.
But if it’s for Jason, Roy knows there’s really no limit to his loyalty.

Man saved his life, more times and in more ways than can ever be explained.


And he’s not shy about owning up and making payments on his debts.

“Let’s just get it done.”

---

*i feel so lost in this city,*

*with all it’s traffic and tricks…*

*( as if we didn’t have enough of our own problems to fix )*
YAY! Forward progress! Positive momentum!
With Dickie on board, there's only a handful of things that could derail this operation!

NEXT TIME: Jason's view of the morning, including his little chat with Timmy after Roy and Dick head out to the bar.

^_~
Chapter Summary

Jason's view of the morning after the crisis point.

Chapter Notes

Classes for my new semester start today! And to celebrate, I'm taking a long weekend up in the Adirondacks with my Associated Human and Family. I'll be back in time to get next week's post up right on time, and I'm still getting most of my work-week in, but I've got a few days to just BREATHE.

It's gonna be cool.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty Two – take me (home)

Jason wakes up wishing that he’d died.

Really died, and stayed that way.

He feels as cold and empty as he did when he first crawled out of his god damn grave.

Last night starts out as an aching blur in his memory, but the fragments render soon enough into something he can recognize. It doesn’t make him feel much better.

In most ways, it actually makes him feel worse.
A *lot* worse, in all the worst regards.

But Roy makes it better.

Just by being here, Roy makes everything about this shit show better. Easier. *Saner.*

And Jason knows that Roy’s still here, he can hear the shower running down the hall.

He opens his eyes to stare down the drywall of the empty hallway to keep his mind from going over every detail of the night before.

It helps to have a little bit of sunlight to keep his head out of his darkest mental corners.

Roy’s shower wraps up and a minute later he steps out into the hall wearing a pair of Jason’s sweats. He doesn’t quite flash Jason a smile, that would be a step too far towards normal to reconcile with the current circumstances, but he does give a nod and a bracing look of solidarity as he makes his way over.

As he takes a seat on the edge of the bed, Roy leans back into Jason’s torso – lending warmth and support without implying any pressure.

Their breathing syncs and Roy lets him have a few calm cycles of it before he asks quietly, “What do you need?”

It’s always the hardest question they ever make each other answer.

But they’ve all gotten pretty good at it over the years, and they both know that nothing else is allowed to happen here until Jason gives his honest answer.

So, Jason runs through the basics.

He’s had enough sleep to keep him going for another day, but the chicken wings and cold pizza he’d downed last night are already starting to fade.

“What, food?” he croaks, voice still crinkly with the night’s disuse.

He clears his throat and adds, “To take a piss, maybe nab a shower.”

His muscles ache and his bladder is screaming, but the bathroom feels too far away to make the stroll feel even distantly worth it.
Roy bears no quarter on that front, giving Jason’s shoulder a sympathetic squeeze and saying, "Bathroom’s that way. I’ll order up some grub. Any requests?"

“Something with bacon,” Jason manages as he fights to push himself upright.

The effort is exhausting, but he successfully accomplishes the feat.

Roy’s in the midst of loosing a string of complaints, muttering, “Man, it's like you don't know me at all. Just 'something with bacon' he says. Idiot. It's not allowed to even be considered 'breakfast' without bacon.”

His griping makes Jason crack half a smile, encourages him enough to attempt clambering up to his feet. He manages the effort, if only just.

Begins shuffling towards the bathroom.

Roy’s chatter makes him feel human enough to relieve himself while feeling calm enough, and also like he almost deserves to feel it.

His shower is a slightly different story.

He gets the water hot enough to scald before he even considers how it might do more harm to his sore muscles than good. But as he steps under the stream with a shudder, he thinks that the hot water is at least not at all reminiscent of the Pit’s icy sort of burning.

Jason stands under the water for a solid ten minutes without doing anything.

By the time he starts to actually wash up, it’s been over twice as long as he usually spends in the shower, period. He moves through his routine at a snail’s pace, and he lingers a long while after rinsing. Miraculously, he manages to keep his focus on the swirl of water instead of on the chaos swirling in his mind.

Mostly.

Eventually, the magical calm of staring at the flow of water fades into flashes of the night before… ghostly images of Tim on his bedroom floor, of Tim bleeding out beneath his hands – his blood gushing hot and fluid through his fingers…

Tim. Dear god.

What he’s done to Tim…
Hopefully, that idiot is still alive right now.
The Demon brat should’ve been able to ensure that much.
Probably.
Jason’s still kind of a lot fuzzy on the exact circumstances of how Tim left last night.

He shuts the water off before he lets himself sink into the temptation of trying to remember… he knows that whatever happened probably can’t be good.
The haze of his memory has far too green a tinge to make whatever happened good.

Unfortunately, avoidance is unhealthy and friends don’t let friends ignore the glare of details they would rather not consider.
Roy’s camped outside the bathroom, far enough down the hall to make his presence not a pressure, but close enough to speak audibly without having to shout as he says, “So, you wanna tell me how last night wrapped up?”

“Not really,” Jason barks immediately.
Roy gives him a moment of peace, but Jason knows that he’s waiting for a real answer.
A ragged sigh pulls itself out of Jason’s lungs.

Sorts through the flashes of what he knows occurred last night.
Fixates on the pieces that he knows are real.
“Kid needed neutralizers,” Jason says eventually. “We, uh, disagreed on that point.”
Roy understands the implications.
“Demon had to intervene?”

“Yeah.”
The heavy admission doesn’t hurt quite as much as Jason was expecting.
Maybe he’s just finally followed suit with the rest of the Family and sunk to a level below having any expectations for himself.
A moment passes before Roy cautiously prompts, “Seems like you’ve still got all your limbs, though. Demon just burst in to break you guys up before things got sketchy?”

Jason lets himself consider it, thinking carefully over just the moments directly adjacent to when the Bat Brat broke his window.


It’s a relief to remember that he hadn’t had a weapon on him, and he’d still been too sluggish to effectively acquire one before Damian had shuffled Tim on out the door.

Or window, as it were…

But he remembered wanting to intervene, remembered planning out how to do it.

He has to cop to the truth of it, Roy needs him to be honest.

So, he says, “But things would’ve... it wouldn't have turned out well without the brat, and even with him there... even though the whole damn point in going was to save that stupid little fucker's life... I almost just shot them both.”

“But ya didn’t,” Roy points out, voice firm with a confidence in his statement that Jason hasn’t a clue how he manages to feel. He can’t know that for certain.

He can’t.

Roy wasn’t there, and Jason hadn’t been wearing his Hood. Roy’s usual MO is to back off, observe retroactively from a point a little ways down the timeline, but there weren’t any cameras that could’ve captured it.

Roy can’t know for sure.

But he’s still so entirely confident in the assertion that he’s got no drip of hesitation in speaking it aloud for the official record set between them.

And Roy’s not done speaking.

Still flush with that cool confidence, Roy adds, “And we knew it was a possibility that the Pit would make things go a little wonky. That's why we sent the demon.”
With a shaky breath and his eyes squeezed closed as he admits it to himself as much as to Roy, Jason counters, “It didn't even feel like the Pit, Roy. Just the last bit when I wanted to shoot both of them, that was definitely the Pit... but the first part? I wanted to strangle him, bash his head in, something... I don't even—”

Roy almost chuckles, which makes Jason’s fists squeezed closed in an unexpected burst of hurt – Roy doesn’t usually take these things so lightly, he knows better than to do something that stupid. But then Roy tells him, amusement still chiming in his chest, “That's just 'cause Pretty Bird's a fucked up, frustrating little idiot, Jay.”

It’s not a joke, and Roy should know better.

The blow to Jason’s lungs hurts even more for that redoubling of how unexpected it is.

Roy sobers after a long minute of tense silence, sobers enough to ask seriously, “When the brat took your bird away, he go willing?”

“Yeah. Mostly,” Jason reports.

He still doesn’t quite remember the exact details of it.

But he does know that Tim left.

There was a bit of man handling from Damian, a bit of jostling and verbal cajoling, but even though he can’t remember the exact circumstances, he knows there wasn’t much of a fight put up by the baby bird to resist Damian’s strong arm encouragements.

“Hey man, that's an accomplishment right there, Jay, you got the kid in the midst of killing himself slowly to be willing to head back to the frickin Manor. Gold Star for the psychopath in red,” Roy applauds, only halfway sarcastic.

The clench in his lungs somehow eases slightly. Significantly.

Enough to let Jason protest, “Mostly, Roy. I said ‘mostly’ willing.”

“Willing enough to actually go,” Roy counters immediately.

Maybe.

But Jason can’t remember that, not for certain.

When Jason doesn’t say anything else, Roy elaborates, “I’ve seen that jackass draw a line in the sand, and I know just as well as you do that if he was still gung-ho on the running away thing, ain’t nothin’ was gonna get that pert little ass back to the nest. Kid would’a totally killed himself tryin’
to get away if you hadn’t said something that convinced him not to fight it. So quit your bitching and just accept that you helped the idiot, a’ight?”

It’s… well, it’s actually a pretty solid point Roy’s making.

Jason’s already been trying to make it to himself… he’s just not as convincing inside his own head as hearing the same argument laid out by a third party.

And Jason is so close… close enough that he almost manages to believe it.

When a knock sounds at the door, Jason assumes it will be the breakfast that Roy ordered. His shower must have taken even longer than he’d thought it did.

Roy, well enough convinced that Jason’s able to be left alone, goes to answer it.

Jason takes a few seconds to bask in the quiet as he finishes the process of drying himself off. Then he gets dressed in a set of cargo pants and a black tee. He knows that he doesn’t really need to get dressed, clothes are always optional around Kori and Roy’s never been the slightest bothered by how quickly he picked up her habit for bearing skin to sun.

On the Island, Jason picked the habit up himself.

But in Gotham… or anywhere on earth that’s not caught in the warm isolation of the Island, really… Jason… Jason can hardly bear to see his own skin when he’s entirely on his own.

Just the thought of walking out there without a shirt on makes him shudder.

So, Jason gets dressed.

Roy probably ordered enough food to feed a reasonably sized country, so Jason’s not worried about there not being anything left by the time he gets out there.

He’s almost genuinely looking forward to the food as he steps out to the floor.

That bubble of pleasant hopefulness dies the instant he sets eyes on the front door.

It’s not breakfast.

It’s Dick.
And he looks pissed – pissed enough to make Roy keep his weapon up and aimed right between the golden boy’s pretty blue eyes.

The confrontation doesn’t go anywhere.

It’s hardly a handful of seconds before Dick cedes ground, backing down entirely and moving halfway out of the door.

Moving back far enough to let Timothy *fucking idiot* Drake to step up.

“I need—” the idiot pants heavily, “—to talk… to Jason.”

Nothing happens for a few seconds.

And then Tim spots Jason by the bathroom.

A pin drop could be heard in the quiet, so Tim’s breathless little gasp sounds off like a fricking ten ton explosion.

It makes Roy look over his shoulder at Jason – who wants to look him in the eye, desperate for any kind of hint his friend could give him about how in the *Hell* he should attempt to handle this. Jason can’t meet Roy’s eye though, because his gaze is caught in the unbearably hopeful vice grip of Tim’s.

Jason can’t move, can’t react, and is pretty sure he can’t remember how to breathe.

But then, jarringly abrupt, the situation changes.

Roy huffs out a breath and moves away from the door. He heads to his duffel bag and exchanges his gun for a shirt. Pulling the fabric over his head and then shoving his feet into his boots, Roy makes his way right back to where he was, grabbing his hat along the way.

“You are one crazy dude, feathers,” Roy informs the room as he addresses Tim with a tone
that sounds too impressed to be a real chastisement. “I trust you to take care of him.”

That throws Jason for a loop.

Gets his brain off the rails for long enough that he barely registers the motion of Roy latching onto Dick’s arm and dragging him out of the apartment – muttering something about bets and beer tabs as they go.

It’s not until the door slams shut behind Tim as the bird brain shuffles entirely inside the apartment that Jason is jolted back to the present moment.

Or at least, present enough to look Tim over with a real splash of field assessment.

Idiot doesn’t look good.

Barring the hope that he’s not currently bleeding out (at least, not that Jason can currently see), the kid looks even worse than he did on that roof top a few weeks ago right after he got blown up in the meth lab in New Town.

Actually… he looks a lot worse.

Hair mussed, skin sallow, bruises all over every inch of him that Jason can see (which is, admittedly, not much, but still)… he’s holding his ribs funny, and standing with clear favor for one leg… Well, mostly standing. He looks one stiff breeze away from passing out.

But Jason’s eyes linger on his shoulder.

The one he know took at least three bullets last night, two of them from Jason’s gun.

“That shoulder’s dislocated,” Jason blurts, in lieu of anything else coming to mind.

Tim snorts. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“It needs to be reset,” Jason replies, numb enough to be immune to the usual rise of furry he’d be feeling if Tim had just popped up on him without warning.

Tim frowns, arching a cautious brow as he looks over Jason’s expression. “You offerin’?”
“Maybe.” Jason looks as the kid shifts his weight anxiously, watches him chew on his lower lip as Jason crosses his arms. “Yeah. I’m offering.”

Tim blinks and then takes a step closer, angling his hurt arm towards Jason.

When Jason doesn’t move, Tim takes another step – and then again, when Jason holds his ground he takes another step and then another until he’s within easy reach.

Squeezing his eyes closed and turning his back to Jason, Tim forcibly relaxes his muscles as much as humanly possible and says, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Jason hesitates.

His hands hover half an inch above Tim’s body, ghosting over the curve of his neck and his upper arm. The last time he laid hands on Tim in those places (or really, last time he touched him, at all) it was to throw him to his death off a building…

The last two times he touched Tim like this… maybe even the last three times, if you discount the whole ‘carried to safety’ bit from a few weeks ago and skip to that last encounter the two of them had pre-detox…

There’s no rational reason for Tim to trust him like this.

None.

But that shoulder does need to be reset.

Jason jerks through the motion before he can rethink it, surprising himself with the action as much as Tim. The kid gives nothing but a low grunt at the white hot strain of having his joint jammed back into place – either he’s in too much other pain to really register the full report of the nerves in his shoulder, or he’s closer to passing out than Jason even thought.

Either way, Jason lets go of Tim like the contact burns.

His fingers tingle in the aftermath like it actually does.

“Thanks,” Tim pants, turning back around to face Jason.

He opens his mouth to say more, but there’s another knock at the door before anything actually comes out of his mouth.

Jason approaches the door to escape the look that Tim’s giving him. He doesn’t even grab a weapon before he swings the thing open.
The delivery girl offers a bright smile and squeaks something that’s probably friendly, but pitched too high for human ears. Jason fishes a hundred out of his pocket, trades the tip for the prepaid bag of food, and then slams the door in her face.

Moving mechanically, Jason makes it to the kitchen counter and begins unpacking the haul Roy arranged. There’s enough food to feed more than just a small country, more like several small countries. There’s enough bacon alone here to feed a small country.

Jason sets one of the little bacon filled cartons aside and barks at the shrimpy idiot he can feel pinning laser eyes against his back, “Quit staring and come nibble on a few pieces of the good stuff before you faint from hunger pangs.”

A Spanish omelet and a stack of pancakes stay out on the counter while the rest of the haul makes it into the fridge. Jason’s settled on the side of the counter inside the kitchen while Tim remains standing in the center of the main room, leaning towards the counter like he wants to step forward. Jason’s not sure if he just can’t trust that he’s actually allowed to join Jason at the counter or if he’s physically unable to make it over here.

Looking up to check is something Jason can’t quite make himself do just yet.

Instead he cuts off a chunk of omelet and sets it on the lid of the container with the pancakes. Then he nabs half the pancakes and sets them on the lid of the container with the omelet. He keeps the one with the bulk of the omelet and pushes the other one towards Tim.

Then he sets the bacon box in between the pair of them and finally looks up.

Tim is too exhausted to be putting on a mask.

His face is raw with swirling emotions, terror being the most prominent one.

“I’m not gonna hurt you, Tim,” Jason promises quietly, turning his attention to his food.

“I know that,” Tim replies immediately, not quite so quick that it’s entirely a lie.

He still doesn’t take a step forward, which makes Jason glance up again.

Tim’s stood there like a dead fish, or dying fish as it were – his limbs all floppy and his mouth gaping open and closed in a silent struggle.

“I know,” Tim repeats eventually, adding, “I just— what are you doing?”

“Eating breakfast, what’s it look like?”
“But I thought you were leaving,” Tim whispers, despondent.

Jason’s plastic fork stills halfway through sawing off a bite of omelet. He can’t force himself to look up. He doesn’t think Tim will have wanted him to be gone already – it was Tim who’d made him promise not to leave, after all – but still… it’s not like… and he might…

“I told you,” Jason mutters, “I ain’t goin’ anywhere… I promised…”

“I thought… I thought it wouldn’t matter,” Tim chokes out after a long minute of saying nothing – probably with the dead fish look still on his face. “I thought you just said it because I was strung out on Fear and needed to be placated or something. I wouldn’t blame you for it, I mean, it’s what anyone else in your position would’ve done.”

“I don’t break promises that easy, twerp,” Jason growls, despite the fact that if Roy hadn’t been here to make him actually feel a little more human than not, Jason probably would have run for it… Maybe… he’d been exhausted, and starving, so maybe he wouldn’t’ve… but he’d certainly have thought about it.

“I know, I just, I—” Jason can hear Tim flinch, hears his teeth click together with how hard and fast he snaps his mouth shut. “I just… It wasn’t a real promise. It would’ve been fine.”

“I don’t break promises, shit head,” Jason snarls, dropping his fork and pushing the omelet a few inches away from him as a wave of vicious nausea crashes over him. “I don’t care if I made ’em drunk, or high, or to someone out of his brains on Fear. I don’t even care if everyone involved is already dead. I don’t break promises.”

Tim squeaks, a wheezing little thing that was probably supposed to be an apology.

It makes Jason’s lungs clench up.

Makes the queasiness in his gut swirl viciously.

“Just… just come over here and eat some bacon,” Jason grumbles.

Tim squeaks again, but this time the sound of shuffling feet accompanies the wheeze.

A moment later, a chair scrapes back.

The lid is popped on the bacon and Tim’s too-pale, too-bruised hand slips out a piece of it. Jason’s gaze follows the hand back up to Tim’s face. The kid nibbles warily on the little slice of
seared pork heavenly goodness like he thinks it’s been poisoned.

It makes Jason’s gut churn, but not so viciously that he can’t force down that bite of omelet he gave up on earlier. And with that one down, the next bite goes a bit easier.

They sit in silence for a while.

Jason finishes off his omelet and his pancakes. And he steals one of the ones he left Tim, to completely finish off demolishing the hunger.

He then takes up a few slices of bacon for himself.

Tim’s made it through about five slices.

Drizzled the last couple of them in a few extra calories of maple syrup.

Seeing it has Jason caught halfway between a furious bought of worry and an odd sort of pride that he’s trying to eat something despite his clear anxiety fueled queasiness.

At the risk of ruining whatever weird truce they’ve somehow managed to establish here, Jason kicks back with his bacon and sighs.

It makes Tim look up fearfully and Jason catches his eye, holding his gaze firmly as he asks straight out, “What’re you doin’ here, Tim?”

Tim’s teeth crunch through his bite of bacon.

He valiantly swallows down what’s already in his mouth, but then edges the rest of the piece into the container with the pancakes he’s supposed to be eating.

“I, um… I just… I had to see you,” Tim admits stiltedly. “I had to stop you from leaving.”

“But I’m not leaving.” Jason points out.

Clearly wishing to be swallowed up by some unnameable cosmic force, Tim nods and flicks his gaze down to where he’s started to twine his fingers together. Those big ol’ baby blues pop back up to meet Jason’s again, and then hop between up and down a few more times before he settles on down to confess, “Yeah… I didn’t… I, um, I didn’t really plan for that.”
“What were gonna do after you got me to say I’d stay?”

“I, uh, yeah… I didn’t exactly plan that far ahead,” Tim owns up. “I didn’t really plan for much more than getting here and trying to make you listen.”

That’s fair, Jason supposes… from anyone else, it wouldn’t be at all suspicious.

But Tim’s the kind of bullet proof boy scout who makes the IRS’s plan for collecting taxes in the event of a zombie apocalypse look like the shallow end of a paranoia kiddie pool.

The idea that he just didn’t plan ahead for this… well, it doesn’t ring very true.

“You didn’t think I’d agree, did you?”

Wincing, Tim keeps his eyes down and confirms, “Not really.”

Jason’s glad he’s finished his food already. Because he’s fairly certain that he wouldn’t be able to get any more down him right now.

“So, what was your plan then, eh, big shot?”

Still refusing to look up, Tim says, “I was… gonna follow you until you gave in.”

Jason arches an eyebrow, more that a little disbelieving.

“I wouldn’t give in to a pint sized half dead little birdie if I’d been set on leaving.”

Curling around himself by pulling his heels up to the seat of his chair and pressing his forehead to his knees, Tim squeezes his arms close around his thighs (not doing any favors to that wrenched shoulder of his, Jason notes distantly) and then concedes, “I was gonna follow you until you gave in, or until you gave up and just decided to kill me… Or until I just dropped dead myself… Whichever one of those things came first.”

That statement somehow doesn’t bother Jason as much as he thought it would.

Not nearly as much as it probably should.

(But that’s something to talk over with Roy at a later point in time.)
“If that fucked up nonsense was the frickin’ plan,” Jason starts, gravel in his voice covering up the welling concern. “How in the Hell did you get big blue to drive you out here?”

At that, Tim almost relaxes. Well, the kind of ‘relaxes’ that means he’s so far beyond lost out to sea that he’s gone mostly boneless. Jason’s not sure if that’s actually any better than tense as a tin piano, but it does mean he’s pretty certain that Tim’s next words are honest.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Frustrated, Jason huffs, “Well, what did he say about it?”

Tim shutters up again, closing off as best he can in his condition.

Which reminds Jason yet again that Tim’s supposed to be in bed for the next few weeks.

But more than that… it reminds him of that dislocated shoulder he walked in with…

Now, Jason doesn’t remember last night exactly, but he’s pretty damn sure that Tim didn’t walk out of his apartment with his joint hanging out of its socket.

And even if he had, there’s no way it would gone unset all night once the Bats got him back to the Cave and under Alfred’s care.

So, it happened this morning.

Even Dick working on his own wouldn’t have let the baby bird get far with a dislocated shoulder if he knew about it directly, so it’s unlikely that Tim started showing significant symptoms of it until after they were on the road.

So… it’s plausibly related to what motivated Dick to offer Tim the ride.

Someone tried to stop Tim from leaving.

By force.

In a way that made Dick willing to ferry Tim out here to execute a plan the kid wasn’t really intent on surviving.

It could only be Bruce.
“B dislocated your shoulder, didn’t he?”

Tim’s face pinches up in a wince that Jason can just barely glimpse from the angle he’s got his head balanced on his knees.

“Technically, he just held my wrist. I dislocated my shoulder… pulling out of his hold.”

The familiar creep of fiery green fury pulls itself into Jason’s consciousness.

“B dislocated your fucking shoulder… his own god damn kid,” Jason snarls with a truly violent vehemence. He kicks at the cabinetry under his breakfast bar hard enough to smash his foot straight through the cheap construction.

“Damn it,” Jason yowls, slamming his hands down on the counter top as he struggles to extricate himself from the shattered cut-rate plywood. “Fuckin’ hell.”

By the time Jason gets himself free, Tim’s leapt up from his seat. He’s moved back out into the center of the room and is poised in a sloppy stance of instinct driven fight readiness.

He’s panting like a panicked bunny rabbit and looks about half as threatening.

“Damn it, kid, I didn’t mean to scare ya,” Jason groans with the ache of a whine pulling at his throat. “I just… I’m pissed at B and I’ve still got issues with the whole control thing. And last night… I mean, I’m still— I’m on edge a bit, still, a’ight? It’s not… I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“I know you won’t, Jason,” Tim promises.

His voice has a bit of a keening wail in it, and Jason can’t tell if that makes him sound desperate, but like he still really believes it and wants Jason to know he believes it or, if it makes him sound despondent like he just really wants to believe it.

Jason doesn’t get very long to think about it before the kid sways violently.

He manages to recover before Jason gets around the counter and back out into the main room, but Jason’s still moving on instinct enough to be reaching out to grab the kid’s arm.

Tim looks down at the hand that appears on his bicep, blinks at it like he doesn’t quite understand what it’s doing there. He gives a gentle tug, like he’s testing how hard it would be to pull away, but he doesn’t give a legitimate yank that would indicate a real desire for freedom.
As he realizes that the hand on his arm is attached to Jason, Tim gives a belated involuntary flinch. He still doesn’t try to yank away, and Jason’s not terribly confident in his ability to stand unaided, so Jason just loosens his hold and shifts it closer to Tim’s elbow.

Stabilizing, not restraining – making sure to broadcast that staying within Jason’s reach is optional. Tim leans on the arm Jason’s holding, more heavily than he seems to realize.

He’s not doin’ so hot.

“You need to get back to the Manor, kid,” Jason comments in a low murmur.

Tim looks like the suggestion makes him physically ill. His already sickly pallor shifts towards inhumanely pasty and gains a slight tinge of green. His eyes drift closed, and he bites down hard on his lower lip.

After taking a few distended seconds of panting shallow breaths to recover, Tim shakes his head and looks straight at Jason. “Only if you come with me.”

A snarl pulls immediately at Jason’s expression, instinctively repulsed by the idea.

Tim flinches slightly again, and for the second time it’s a noticeably belated action. It proves to Jason that Tim needs medical care. ASAP.

And he needs legit care, not the semblance of medical scraps Jason could scrape together in a safe house like this one. He needs Alfred. Maybe the Teen Titans could handle it, but Jason would feel a lot better about leaving Tim in Alfred’s capable hands than in anyone else’s.

Of course, leaving Tim with Alfred also requires that Jason leave Tim with Bruce.

And Bruce dislocated Tim’s fucking shoulder.

Jason realizes that he’s started to squeeze hard on Tim’s elbow before Tim does. He’s already loosening his hold by the time Tim gives a distressed squeak.

Honestly, Jason’s not entirely certain the distress and the squeak it caused was even triggered by a pain response.

It makes the anger in Jason at Bruce deflate slightly.
Tim needs help.

And Jason knows that he can’t provide it directly, but even with Bruce being a complete tool, and standing as an obstacle right now… Jason might survive getting Tim to the Manor…

Might not even be too bothered by the prospect of not surviving it…

“Why the hell you even want me back there?”

“You’re Family, Jason,” Tim replies immediately, conviction ringing clear through every fiber of his being. “You belong there.”

“I didn’t belong there even when I was there,” Jason counters, and he’s not too proud to admit that there’s a raw tightness in his throat at the admission.

Tim doesn’t budge an inch. “Just because Bruce is an asshole, and absolutely shit at showing you how much he cares, that doesn’t mean you didn’t belong. You’re a part of the Family, even now. Your place is empty, right now, but it’s still there. Everyone orbits through the gaps you’ve left, and even if they can’t tell what’s missing, they know it’s something important.”

“It’s not… I’m not,” Jason flounders.

“Yes, Jason,” Tim sighs, all desperate and dreamy.

He’s clearly starting to slip away from the conversation, weight falling more and more heavily into Jason’s hold by the second as he struggles to speak.

“You are. You’re the most important thing in the world.”

Jason almost thinks he hears a breathy little *especially to me* tacked on to the end of Tim’s already outrageous statement, but he almost certainly imagined it. And Tim doesn’t have the breath to clarify anything before consciousness bleeds out of him entirely.

He collapses into Jason’s arms, limp and vulnerable.

Leaving Jason with a choice to make.
There’s less immediate pressure on him to save Tim by any means necessary than there was when Tim showed up on his rooftop all blown to bits, but that somehow doesn’t feel like enough to change the inevitable answer Jason arrives at as he delibrates his options.

He has to get the baby bird back to the Manor.

He has to.

So, with only the barest edge of hesitation needling his muscles as he moves them like a puppet, Jason scoops the almost lifeless figure into a sustainable carry hold.

Thankfully, Tim only looks lifeless.

Jason can feel Tim breathing, steady and smooth and easy, and he can feel Tim’s frantic little heart beating at its tragically typical bunny rabbit rate.

When he gets Tim downstairs, he finds Roy’s truck parked where he must’ve left it last night. He doesn’t see any sign of Dick’s vehicle, doesn’t even know if he came in a car or on a bike (though for Dick’s own sanity’s sake, Jason hopes he came in a car… because taking Tim anywhere on a bike right now seems idiotically risky).

(He doesn’t really care what the hell Dick and Roy are getting up to, but as he’s setting Tim gently into the passenger seat of Roy’s truck there’s some twist in the back of Jason’s mind that wonders when the last time he hoped for anything for Dick’s sake had been."

Roy’s behemoth hasn’t successfully used a key since Roy first got digging into the old machine’s guts, but Jason learned to hotwire cars before he learned to read.

The ride is slow as Jason battles with his trepidation, but the traffic Roy loves to whine about isn’t any obstacle (not at this time on a weekday, and certainly not in this direction), so they make it over the Kane Memorial Bridge before Jason’s come to terms with his decision.

He gets that this is necessary… but still… he just…

But he survived the last run in with dropping Tim off for medical aid, and that was when Tim was in significantly more dire straits. He’s not doing well right now, but he’s not bleeding out or facing any kind of immediately life threatening injury.

This might… might not go too terribly.
The odds of the outcome going decently improve as Tim jolts suddenly back to awareness. He looks around frantically, gathering all the information possible as he shudders through a leap to fight readiness that’s complicated by a washout pain response.

It takes longer than it should for any Bat in half decent shape, but eventually, Tim settles into a tense wariness of passenger compliance. He’s staring out the window, disbelief propping up his figure at least as much as the hope and surprise inside him does.

Cautious, and so painfully tied up in the fear that he’s evaluated the data wrong, Tim keeps his wide eyes on the road and asks, “Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you home, baby bird.”

“Home,” Tim breathes… too quietly for Jason to interpret the ache inside it.

The word feels painfully awkward on Jason’s tongue.

Tastes metallic and bitter.

But it doesn’t quite taste wrong.
Chapter End Notes

YAY PROGRESS!
These idiots are actually GETTING somewhere!

^_^~

End Notes

So... This story WAS supposed to be like a two- or three- shot at most... and it's kind of... spiraled.

I don't know exactly where it's going yet, or how long it will take to get there, but we can ride this angst train together I guess... ^_^'<3

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