After the Fall of Olympus

by Killthespare

Summary

The League has fallen. The team is dead. All that’s left is for Dick Grayson to pick up the pieces and move forward.

Easier said than done.
Dick Grayson opens his eyes and everything hurts like he decided to have a fist fight with Superman.

He sits up--*ow*--and reaches immediately for his mask. Still there. Good. He’s protected.

Now, he just has to remember what happened. Where is he? Where’s Batman? The team?

He blinks and all he can see are corn fields and small fires and what looks like twisted pieces of metal and--

Oh.

He remembers.

The aliens. The zeta ray. Bruce’s--*Batman’s* ship exploding. The League falling. Artemis. Kaldur. The mission--his mission, his idea, his orders his--

He remembers thinking he was going to die. And that was okay because it meant the mission was successful. The world was safe.

But then, Wally.

Wally, turning to him and…

“I’ve got an idea, okay?”

Speed and Wally carrying him and vibrating so fast Dick thought he’d vomit and then they were outside the mothership and they were going to *survive* and then…

And then, the explosion went off and Wally tripped and Dick fell, caught in force from the explosion, and rolling too fast, too quick to catch himself before he hit the ground hard.

*Wally.*

Dick scrambles off the ground, ignoring the pain, and runs back in the direction of the mothership and--

In front of him, the mothership is gone. Debris, still on fire, littering the ground for miles around. But, that’s not what Dick’s looking at.

He’s looking at bright red hair and brighter blood and a torn yellow costume, caught under a piece of what used to be the ship. He’s looking at…

*Wally.*

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It’s minutes or hours later and Dick can’t tell and that would honestly terrify him if it were in any
other situation. Right now, Dick doesn’t care.

His training’s still there. He remembers checking for life signs, not finding any, and then it all goes dark and Dick doesn’t know…

Anyway, it’s minutes or hours later, and Dick’s locked in a service station bathroom a few miles away. It’s old, an outside one stall bathroom in a mom and pop style station that was too easy for Dick to sneak in without anyone noticing.

His mask is off and his wrist computer is up, pulling up the databases, checking the news, the status of the League heroes. The comms are down or maybe there’s just no one on them anymore.

There’s a soft ping as the computer connects and then the list of the dead come scrolling through, too many for Dick to really processes them.


And so many more….

There’s other names, too. Just with the designation “Missing” beside them, the destruction so widespread that even the Watchtower supercomputer hasn’t cataloged everyone yet. He absently notes his and Wally’s code names with the “Missing” designation.

He gets to the next names and his heart thuds loudly in his ears.


There’s a video file linked to it, something from the Watchtower surveillance satellites, and Dick clicks on it before he has a chance to think.

The explosion from the mothership. Too close and--Dick should have thought of that, should have ordered them further away, he was their leader, he should have…

The computer blinks off, leaving Dick alone under the bathroom’s cold fluorescent light and Dick’s finally crying, curling into himself to make himself smaller--a training move to protect against blows when you’re too weak to fight back.

They’re dead. His team is dead. The League is dead. Batman is…Bruce is… Dead. Like his parents. Like everyone.

For the second time in his life, Dick’s world is falling down around him.

A loud knock echoes off the bathroom door.

“Hey, whoever’s in there, you alright? Door’s been locked for awhile.”

Dick takes a shuddering breath, looking up at the door as another knock comes.

“Hey, you okay in there?”

“...no,” Dick answers in a shaking breath before he can stop himself.

“Ah, shit.” The voice sounds old, male, slight Midwestern accent--probably the gas station owner. “You sound like a kid. You hurt or something, kid? In that explosion?”
Dick doesn’t say anything.

“Come on, kid, give me something. Just want to know if I need to break out the med kit or call an ambulance or what.”

“No.” Dick’s bruised. That’s it. He’s bruised and everyone else is dead.

“Alright, alright….good...that’s good.”

There was silence and Dick wonders if the man had left—he didn’t wonder, not really, no sound of footsteps, shadow still under the door, Dick’s stupid training still cataloging the sound of light breathing.

“Aw, kid, I don’t know...I don’t know if you know yet. Maybe it will help. They stopped the aliens. The heroes did. All of the aliens. They’re gone now. Saw it on the news, all across the world. Their ships just started falling out of the sky like dead birds.”

A hive mind. The speed the ships were able to respond, the formation, the numbers. All of it pointed to a hive mind linked to the mothership. It was what he had predicted. It’s why he made the plan.

The plan that meant all of his team was dead.

“I don’t know...I don’t know if you lost someone in the invasion. Shit, with the numbers they’re reporting, I think *everyone* lost someone. And the League—*the* League, the reporters are saying it’s just *gone.* ”

Dick curls into himself a bit more.

“But, ah, take it from an old man like me, kid. No matter how bad everything seems right now. The world’s always gotta way of fixing itself back up. Always. Doesn’t matter how dark it gets, sun’s always going to come up again.”

Dick stays quiet.

“....I’ll just leave you here then. Stay as long as you need. Not like we’re planning on any customers with this stuff anyway. If you need someone to talk to, I’ll be inside.”

The sound of footsteps. The shadow disappears from under the door. The breathing goes away.

Dick looks up.

Barely ten minutes later, the window to the bathroom is open, a set of clothes and a bag are missing from the store’s shelves, and there’s a crumpled set of bills held down with a batarang by the register and a note with shaky letters reading, *Thanks.*

Dick is already gone in the direction of the nearest zeta tube.

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It's almost dawn by the time Dick makes it back to Gotham. Not surprising, considering how long it took him to find a still functioning zeta tube.

His Robin suit is still crumpled and torn in the bag he’d managed to grab from the service station. With scratches on his face and baggy not quite fitting clothes, Dick looks practically unrecognizable
from any other Gotham city regular--right down to the blank expression and dark, dark eyes.

Still, Dick takes caution in remaining unseen as he scales the fence and dodges the security sensors with a familiarity that could only come with long experience.

When he is finally at his destination, Dick holds his breath and knocks on the door.

He counts the seconds.

One….Two….Three….Four.

The door swings open with a speed too sudden for the normally calm man.

“Master Dick?”

A world of expression passes in those two words--fear, surprise, relief, joy, hope.

Dick catches Alfred’s eyes flicker behind him, just briefly as he looks for someone else and….

“I’m sorry,” Dick says, softly. “It’s just me.”

Alfred’s eyes meet his and Dick sees a grim acceptance settle behind them before suddenly, Dick finds himself pulled forward as deceptively strong arms wrap around him.

“Never be sorry, that it’s you. That alone, I believe, is a miracle enough.”

Dick hands clench, wrinkling Alfred’s suit as tears rolled down. “I couldn’t save him, Alfred. I couldn’t save any of them.”

“Hush now, Master Dick. Let’s get you inside.”

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The following months pass much too slowly for Dick to bear and much too quickly for him to process. Dick finds himself fading through the moments, noticing things absently rather than interacting with them.

It’s a strange dull contrast to the helpless anger he’d felt when his parents died. And Dick honestly thinks this might be worse. At least, the anger was better than this dark, oppressive blankness distancing him from the world like a shroud.

There are a few bright moments.

Roy’s alive. Zatanna and Rocket, too. A few of the heroes, mainly small time local ones and a number of retired, made it through the invasion.

Other than them, all heroes associated with the League are dead.

There had been funerals. Too many were dead to hold individual ones so instead there was a mass funeral roughly a week after the invasion followed by a service at the destroyed League headquarters to dedicate a monument.

A few cities held memorials for their local heroes as well.
Robin had been to all of them.

They’d all been hard in their own ways. The soldier that Aqualad saved had spoken at the League memorial. Jay Garrick had given a eulogy in Central City. There was a small monument dedicated to the team in Happy Harbor and only Roy being there had kept Dick sitting in his seat.

The worst had been the funeral. Everyone speaking about bravery and dedication and all Dick could think was that it hadn’t saved them. They were the best of the best and they’d died. They’d saved everyone and now they were dead.

And there, Dick was, still here and with no idea where to go next.

Zatanna had come up to him after the service, bright blue eyes still red from crying. She didn’t even say anything. She just looked up at him, pleading for something to do, for something to fix, for something to make the world seem right again.

And Dick….couldn’t answer.

He doesn’t know.

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The fog around him doesn’t start to clear until two months later. And when, it finally does, all that he feels is anger.

The old man at the service station was right. The world’s rebuilding. Slowly and cautiously, as people keep checking the skies for heroes that are never coming back, but the world is rebuilding.

Five months after the invasion ended and the world decides to hold a service other than a memorial.

It’s an award ceremony. For the heroes that fought and, miracle of miracles, managed not to die.

Dick doesn’t want to go but Roy makes him.

“It’s not even for us,” Roy says. “Not really. It’s for them. The people. They want to see they still have heroes left.”

“Do they,” Dick asks and maybe that’s cruel. Maybe that’s unfair because it’s not like Roy was the one who led his team to death.

Still, neither of them have been on patrol since the invasion.

Roy sighs. “The team would’ve wanted you to go.”

Dick goes.

He sits with Roy and Rocket and Zatanna. He watches as they play the video on large wide screens--the last transmission that M’gann, Conner, Wally, and him had sent right before the mission. He stands as someone from the United Nations pins a medal to his chest.

There’s a speech and it drones on and Dick stops paying attention, zones out until after the ceremony when they’re walking back to the zeta tube.

A hand catches in his cape and he turns to see a little girl that can’t be older than five, wearing a
bright Wonder Woman shirt.

“Thank you, Mr. Robin,” the girl says.

An older woman comes up and grabs the girl away, whisking her up in her arms.

“Honey, don’t bother him,” the woman scolds.

“I just wanted to thank him for saving us.”

The woman sighs, smiling apologetically at Dick before turning back to her daughter. “Of course, he did. That’s what heroes do.”

The woman carries the girl back into the crowd and Dick stares after them until Roy comes up, pulling Dick to the zeta tube.

“You’re quiet,” Roy mutters. “Quieter than usual. What are you thinking?”

Dick shakes his head. “I remembered something.”

Roy raises an eyebrow but Dick doesn’t elaborate.

The fog’s clearing and Dick’s seeing the frightened faces looking for someone to help. And Dick can help. Dick has the means and the training to help and even more than that he can’t not help. Not now that he finally feels awake again.

The fog’s clearing and he’s angry at himself.

Dick is Robin and he’d forgotten what that meant.

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A week later and they finally have a funeral for Bruce Wayne.

Batman’s funeral had been with the rest of the League’s and practically it makes sense not to have Batman and Bruce Wayne die at the same time. But, with the mass civilian casualties of the invasion, no one would have questioned it. Even then, six months after the invasion is a long time for a pampered billionaire to still be considered “Missing”. Dick suspects that Alfred had been waiting for Dick to be ready.

Truthfully, Dick still doesn’t know if he’s ready but he does know it’s time. So, he sits with Alfred on his left and Barbara, his closest civilian friend, gripping his hand on his right.

They bury Bruce’s empty coffin next to his parents and a few plots away from John and Mary Grayson.

There’s other legal work to do, aided by the Wayne family fortune and the intrinsic corruption of Gotham’s government officials. Dick officially becomes the ward of one Alfred Pennyworth and the sole heir of the entire Wayne estate.

Personally, Dick spends more of his time in the caves under the family estate.

Gotham is….a weird city, really. Dick’s known that since the moment he stepped into it and every step from there has only cemented that fact. In the months since the invasion, crime has been
unusually standard when it came to Gotham. Outsiders may think that the city was in mourning for its fallen crusader or, at the very least, that the stagnation was out of some kind of respect.

Dick knows better. At her very core, Gotham is two things: a survivor and an opportunist.

The absence of Batman means change and all but the most desperate of criminals are waiting in dark alleys to see what that change will mean for them. Better to let someone dumber try it out and fail so they could see how to adapt. But, as the months pass, the opportunist side of Gotham is on the rise. The criminals of Gotham--be they desperate or simply straight up psychotic--are gearing up to try their chances once again.

A new wave of crime is on the horizon and Robin is going to stop it before it begins.

In his research into the last few months of Arkham Asylum breakouts--because let’s face it, there’s always breakouts--he finds one major surprise.

An escape notice followed quickly by a death certificate.

The Joker is dead. Used the chaos of the invasion to escape his cell only to be killed minutes later by the zeta ray. An anticlimactic end for someone that always reminded Dick of a cockroach. It might not be very heroic but Dick can’t even pretend to be upset.

Robin starts to patrol again.

The first few weeks are hard, constantly looking over his shoulder for a larger, darker shadow before reminding himself viciously that Batman is never going to watch his back again.

Honestly, the threat of Batman lurking unseen in the shadows hurts his enemies more than it ever does Robin himself. It keeps them distracted, keeps them waiting, and easy prey for Robin to take down on his own.

The threat can’t last forever though. Eventually the criminals seem to accept that the Boy Wonder really is alone with no protector there to strike vengeance. The criminals start to hit harder and quicker, start to laugh mockingly that one little boy is going to take them down. But Robin has been doing this for a long time and with much bigger threats than common Gotham thugs. He makes sure that they don’t keep laughing for long.

Not everything’s easy. Okay, actually nothing’s easy. Disconcerting even with emphasis on the dis. But some things are harder than others. Some things you can’t just punch down.

The non-criminal element of Gotham seems divided on how to feel about a Robin without Batman. It’s unsurprising. There had always been that element--the more morally conscious of the citizenship--that questioned whether it was a good idea for a child to fight crime. This faction has only increased now that Robin was acting alone.

But the thing is it's working.

Crime is starting to drop again, escaped criminals are being put back in their jail cells, the Gotham residents are starting to feel a bit more hopeful again.

The survivalist side of Gotham has always won out against the morally conscious and now is no different.

Robin once again flies through the night.
Another disconcerting thing, Dick gets injured. A lot. Of course, he does.

Thankfully, nothing major or even big enough for him to take a break from patrols but there’s still a lot more close calls than Dick ever had when working with a partner. Not enough for him to stop—never enough for him to stop—but enough for him to push himself harder and harder into getting better, into becoming someone who can handle these things by himself.

Funny enough, Alfred doesn’t have the same mindset.

“Master Dick, as happy as I am to see you….well, more yourself, are you sure a break wouldn’t be for the best? Even Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

“But it burned in one,” Dick returns, “and Gotham’s a whole lot less stable than Rome.”

Alfred looks unimpressed. “Up for debate. You are aware you won’t be able to help Gotham at all if you wind up in a full body cast. Or worse.”

“I’m being careful, Alfred,” Dick reassures. “I’m working to be better. I know I’m not…I’m not Bruce but I can still do this. I have to.”

Alfred lays a hand on his shoulder, waiting until Dick meets his eyes. “I know, Master Dick, I know. It’s why I still support you doing this. But even a small break might give you a chance to think clearer.”

“I can’t,” Dick says. “If I stop….Alfred, I’m not sure I could start again. And if I stop, I’ll just be back where I was. I’ll be falling.” Dick picks at a loose thread on his shirt. “Mom told me there was only two options when things go wrong: keep falling or try to fly. I have to keep doing this or I’m going to fall.”

Alfred sighs. “Alright, but even birds stop to rest eventually.”

Dick gives a small smile and waits until Alfred returns upstairs, leaving him alone in the cave.

“Not when there’s nowhere to land.”

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A couple months into patrolling and something interesting happens.

Well, more interesting than usual.

It’s a slow night for Gotham and Robin’s only had to stop three muggings, one assault, and an attempted jewelry heist. The night wears on and Dick’s seriously contemplating Alfred’s advice to end patrol early. It will at least make Alfred happy.

And, then, he sees it. Barely a few blocks over, someone’s leaping between roofs with the kind of height and distance that only means one thing.

A metahuman. A metahuman in Gotham. Aw, man, Dick takes it back when he said it was a slow night.
Dick swings over to tail the metahuman, staying in the shadows, and trying to determine whether the meta is friend or foe. Foe, it’s a simple if not exactly easy plan of action. Friend...metahuman allies in Gotham is where it gets complicated.

This close he can make out that the meta is obviously female with a dark black costume with the slightest shimmer and light reflecting off….arm bands?

The meta also doesn’t seem to be heading anywhere particular. Instead, she stops every few roofs or so and glances around the surrounding area. It’s almost like she’s lost. Or looking for something.

Either way, she doesn’t seem like a villain so Dick lands lightly on the roof behind her. Faster he talks to her, faster he can get her out of Gotham before anyone notices.

He coughs lightly and she twists around, pulling out a bright silver lasso seemingly from nowhere. Crap, maybe he was too quick in discounting her as a villain.

And then she spots him and her eyes widen, her mouth twisting into a smile.

“Robin. Finally, I’ve been looking for you for hours.”

A metahuman had been in Gotham for hours without him noticing? Double crap, even more chance of her being spotted.

“Well, you found me,” he says. “Now, mind telling me what you’re doing in Gotham and why you’re looking for me? Might want to throw in who you are for good measure.”

She rolls her eyes and Dick notices that she doesn’t look that old. Barely even older than him. Probably around Wally’s age or at least the age when he-- Stop. Breathe. Not on patrol. Don’t think about them now.

“I’m in Gotham, looking for you, of course,” she answers and then she’s coming forward and extending her hand. “I’m Donna Troy.”

Dick takes the hand because that seems like the thing to do. “Robin. And again why were you looking for me?”

“I’m Wonder Woman’s sister,” she says, hands on her hips as if that should explain everything.

And maybe it does for her but Dick’s still kind of at a loss. “Oh. I’m...I’m sorry about your sister. She was, um, really, really awesome. I’m sorry I didn’t see you at the funeral.”

The smile wilts on her face, replaced by something much more subdued. “We had a private one on Themyscira. I am also sorry to hear about your mentor and your team. I’m sure they were brave and honorable like my sister.”

Dick swallows. “They were.”

Donna turns back to him with a new fire in her eyes. “But, I am not here to talk about the past. I’m here to discuss the future. I want to continue the work of my sister and protect the people of Earth.”

She looks at him expectantly again

“That’s great,” Dicks says. “I’m sure your sister would be proud.”

Donna nods. “Earth needs protectors. And that means I want to work with you, Robin of Gotham.”
Dick blinks, pausing to think.

“Gotham doesn’t really do metas,” he tries to explain gently. “If you’re anything like your sister, I’m sure you’re really qualified but trust me, metas and the kind of criminals in Gotham really don’t mix. Like serious un mixable here. They take it as a challenge. Which is why we need to get you out of here as quickly as possible.”

Donna crosses her arms. “I don’t mean I want to work with you in Gotham. No matter how crime ridden, Gotham’s still just one city. I want to work with you to protect the world.”

“What do you mean,” Dick asks with an ominous sense of foreboding.

“I need your help reforming the League.”

Dick stops, feeling cold all the way down to his bones.

“No,” he says simply.

And then, he’s already turning away. Meta or no, it doesn’t look like she’s planning on staying too much longer and Dick can’t have this conversation right now. Maybe ever.

“Wait,” she calls after him, catching his shoulder. “Please, I need your help. The world needs our help.”

“No, it doesn’t and I already failed once.”

“Your team stopped the invasion.”

“And everyone died,” he nearly snarls, turning abruptly to face her. “I’m not doing it again.”

“You have to,” Donna insists. “I can’t do this alone. I just left Themyscira a week ago. No matter what my training, I need someone who understands this world.”

Dick sighs. “Look, if you want, I can hook you up with some other heroes I know. Maybe some of them would be interested and--”

“Why not you,” Donna interrupts. “You’re Batman’s protegee. You have experience. With the heroes we have left, you have the most experience. You’re already helping Gotham. The world needs you. You’ve worked on a team before.”

“That’s why I can’t do this,” Dick says, pulling away. “I’m sorry. I wish you luck.”

He’s off the roof and back into the shadows before she has a chance to respond.

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Dick hoped that was the end of it. Dick really hoped that was the end of it.

But just like a few months ago, now that Donna has brought it to his attention, it’s all that Dick can see.

Gotham hadn’t been the only one in danger of falling apart without a hero. In fact, now, ironically it looks like Gotham is the only one holding strong.
Dick had been stupid, naive, hopeful in thinking that crime could be handled on a city by city basis, that new heroes would step up to replace the ones that were lost. The League had been formed to take care of the problems too big for one city. Even Dick’s team had been formed because of that.

And now that the League is gone, those problems are still happening and slowly getting bigger.

The monitor is on in the cave while Dick gets ready for patrol. Somewhere in Taiwan, Red Arrow is fighting some plant based thing. All in all, he’s doing fairly well with getting the civilians to safety but it’s still just too big of a problem for one hero, forcing him to focus on evacuation.

The people are safe. That’s the important thing, Dick reminds himself and tries to crush a gnawing sense of guilt telling him that he should be doing something.

He is doing something. He has patrol.

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Dick tries to check up on people. He likes people, he always has. And it isn’t as if just because he’s focusing on Gotham, he forgets his other friends exist. He knows he isn’t the only one grieving.

And he knows what it’s like to lose your parents.

“So, you’re moving,” Dick asks, sitting on the bed.

Zatanna nods, levitating the last of the boxes in her room to a neat orderly pile. “My great aunt never liked New York City anyway. She just wanted me to finish up the school year.”

It’s amazing how things can change people. A bit over half a year ago and Dick would have had very different feelings about being alone with Zatanna in her room. Things are different now and any chance of a romance between them had died in the combined weight of losing the team and Zatanna’s father.

Dick likes to think they’re still friends though.

“I’m sure I’ll like West Coast, too,” Zatanna continues, though she doesn’t sound too enthusiastic. “I can practice magic anywhere, I guess.”

Dick shifts almost imperceptibly. “So, you’re going to continue the magic? Continue being a hero, I mean?”

“Yeah,” Zatanna frowns, leaning on the door frame and folding her arms. “I want to help. I’m not like you though. I don’t have the training to try to protect a city alone.” The frown deepens. “I still keep up with Raquel, too, you know. She’s been trying to hold Dakota City without Icon but…”

Zatanna shakes her head, fingers gripping tighter into her arm. “I’m scared, Robin. Lately, the magic feels...chaotic. With Dad gone and what happened to the League, I’m scared what’s coming.”

Dick has learned that it was better to stay quiet than to offer false reassurance. Zatanna wouldn’t have believed him anyway.

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“Hey,” Dick says, eyeing the cave’s newest intruder. “Did Alfred let you in? Good job with that thing in Taiwan, by the way. I saw it on the monitors.”

“The plant monster?” Roy rolls his eyes. “It was more annoying than dangerous. Took too long though. It took out an entire neighborhood before local law enforcement and I contained it.”

“But not any people,” Dick reminds.

“Yeah, not any people,” Roy sighs. “Look, I need to talk to you. Got an interesting visit yesterday.”

“What about?”

“About forming a new League.”

Dick groans to cover how his heart beats faster. “So, Donna found you, too.”

“Who’s Donna?” Roy shakes his head. “No, this is worse. The visit was from Lex Luthor.”

Dick straightens in his chair. “Lex Luthor wants to reform the Justice League?”

“Essentially,” Roy agrees. “Well, he’s not calling it the Justice League exactly. Too disrespectful even for him. Luthor’s League is the proto-name, I think. He called me because apparently it would be good press to have a former hero there and I’m the only one old enough to vote but young enough not to be in a retirement home.”

“What did you do?”

“Stormed out before he could get me arrested for attempted murder,” Roy answers, grinding his teeth.

“This is bad,” Dick mutters. “If Luthor’s running it, this can’t mean anything good.”

“Yeah, how long do you think it’ll take before his new League starts demanding favors for protection,” Roy leans on the work table beside him. “Anyway, that’s not all.”

Dick waits.

“You remember…you remember how the team thought there might be an alliance behind things? Cadmus labs, the Venom formula in Santa Prisca, the Belle Reve breakouts.”

Like Dick, Roy hardly ever brings up the team. Only when he has to.

“I remember. The League thought the Injustice League was behind it.”

Of course, Dick remembers. It was one of the last missions the team ever went on. A bit over two weeks before their last one.

“I’m not sure,” Roy admits. “I’ve been looking at the Injustice League members and… I don’t think they’d have the resources to pull all that off, let alone the organization. They weren’t exactly team players.”

No, “team player” had been one of the last phrases possible to describe the Joker.

“You think there’s another group at play,” Dick surmises, running back to the earlier conversation, “and you think Luthor’s a member.”
Roy rubs the back of his neck. “I think that I don’t trust Luthor as far as I could throw him with my hands tied. And I think that if there’s some kind of evil society, Luthor would at least know about it if not be a member himself.”

Dick stops, head jerking up. “You don’t think they were involved in the invasion?”

Roy freezes.

“No,” Roy says eventually, “not even Luthor would risk sending humanity down the toilet like that. But, he would be willing enough to capitalize on it after the fact.”

“And thus Luthor’s League.”

Roy nods, looking grim. “Rob, things are getting bad out there. You’ve got Gotham covered and that’s great, amazing even considering what a shithole the place is. But Gotham’s not going to matter much if the world’s falling apart around it.”

Dick looks down. “I can’t be part of a team again. I can’t.”

“I understand, Rob. You know I do. But the world might not be giving us much of a choice.”

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Things get worse.

Across the world, crime rates are rising dramatically and people are terrified.

During yet another disaster, a minor earthquake that the League would have been able to handle in an hour but now leaves over a thousand homeless, Luthor officially announces his plan to start his own superhero League.

The public is understandably less than enthusiastic given Luthor’s reputation.

Still, there are a few voices slowly getting louder asking the same question: If this is our best option, how can we not take it?

Dick finds that he really hates watching news reports.

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There are a few unspoken rules of the Batcave. First, try not to get blood on sensitive equipment. Second, always label your test tubes. Third, if the phone in the Batcave rings, you answer it.

This is because there are only five that have the number: Bruce, Alfred, Dick, the Watchtower, and the Justice Society of America.

Dick supposes there are only three that had the number now.

The point is that Dick answers the phone.

“Hello?”
“Hey, Robin.”

Dick knows that voice. He knows that voice like he knew late night sleepovers, video game marathons, and nerdy science puns.

“...Jay?”

“Yeah, kiddo,” Jay Garrick answers. “You got a second to visit? I could zeta to you. My legs aren’t what they used to be.”

“I can come to you,” Dick says. “Now?”

“If you got time.”

Dick does. So, in roughly thirty minutes, he finds himself in civies riding to the nearest zeta tube and then walking to the Garrick residence.

Jay smiles as he opens the door but his eyes still look tired.

“Hey, kid,” Jay says, pulling him in for a quick hug before opening the door further to let Dick inside. “Sorry, should’ve thought about fixing something up for you. You’re a growing boy. Joan would’ve….she would’ve baked cookies or something.”

Jay Garrick had survived the invasion, even saving some elementary children. Joan Garrick had not survived.

Dick swallows. “It’s fine. I’m sure Alfred has something back at the cave anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess he would,” Jays says, leading him into a sitting room and Dick can almost still see Wally sprawling on the couch. Dick’s throat feels tight.

Jay must notice. “I’m sorry about other things, too. I should’ve checked in on you more after...well, after. Just with Joan and Wally and Barry and Iris…”

“I understand,” Dick interrupts quickly. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Oh, kiddo,” Jay says and Dick can’t decide if the sympathy there is comforting or suffocating. “It’s okay. You don’t have to be fine. How could you be? How can any of us be?”

“I do have to be fine,” Dick corrects. “...At least, a little bit.”

“I saw you were still patrolling Gotham.”

Dick nods.

“Wally always liked patrolling Central. He thought it was fun.”

He shrugs, not really knowing what to say to that. Gotham is...well, fun isn’t the right word but Dick does find he enjoys it. He’d enjoyed it more with Bruce but even now there’s still a thrill of the wind running through his hair or taking down a thug.

“So, I reckon you heard Luthor was starting up his own league,” Jay interrupts his thoughts.

“Yeah, Roy gave me a heads up before Luthor announced it.”

Jay nods. “I also heard an interesting rumor about Roy and you lately. Something about reforming
Dick shrinks down into himself. “I’m sorry, you heard wrong. I don’t want to restart the League. Not with me, at least. Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Ah, kiddo, why would you ever think that would disappoint me?”

Dick blinks. “...You don’t want the League restarted?”

Jay smiles wryly. “Honestly, I called you over here to try to talk you out of it.”

“Why?”

“We put too much on you kids.” Jay sighs. “We still do. Kids shouldn’t be fighting these battles. Heck, after this, I’m not even sure adults should. We put all this pressure on you, all these dangers, and it’s no wonder someone was killed.”


Jay snorts. “If Luthor wants to run himself into the ground trying to fix the world’s problems, then let him. Better him than you kids.”

There’s an odd buzzing in Dick’s ears that he’s trying to ignore.

“And what happens when Luthor’s actual plan comes around,” Dick asks, “What happens when he starts extorting people for saving them? When he tries to use his League as leverage against nations?”

Jay looks away, clearly uncomfortable. “I’m not saying Luthor’s a good option, Dick. I just think he’s the only option.”

Dick’s hands are shaking from where they’re held carefully in his laps.

“There is another option.”

Jay looks up. “No. See, this is exactly what I was talking about. We put too much pressure on you. This isn’t your responsibility. It’s not either of ours. Not anymore. Leave it to the adults in charge.”

“I can’t. They’re dead,” Dick replies bluntly.

“...Kiddo...Dick, listen.”

Dick shakes his head and his heart is beating fast enough in his chest to be painful. And why? Why? These are exactly the thoughts he’s been trying to avoid. Why was he thinking them now that someone finally said it was okay to not?

He knows why.

“When I first started this,” Dick says. “I told Bruce that if I could help someone, then I had to help someone. This isn’t any different. It’s not any different at all, I just didn’t want to see it.”

Too afraid. Too selfish.

“Bruce never should have let you go out to begin with,” Jay says.

“He didn’t...he didn’t let me,” Dick corrects. “I choose this and then I made him let me come along.
So, I could help him. That’s all this is about. That’s all any of this is about. Helping people, no matter how hard it gets.”

He’s standing and heading to the door before he consciously makes the decision.

Jay lets him go. “Kid, don’t do this. You could die. A lot of people could die.”

Dick smiles, though it’s not a very happy one.

“People can always die. I just gotta try to save as many as I can.”

-----

Dick has barely made it to the zeta tube before he’s texting Roy a set of coordinates and a time.

An hour and half the country later and Dick sees him hopping the fence and walking through the door.

He’s not alone.

“Thought you didn’t know Donna,” Dick asks.

“She caught up to me a few days later,” Roy says and Donna grins widely. “She was with me when I got the text, asked if she could come. Where exactly are we by the way?”

“One of the old towers the League bought up,” Dick answers. “They never got around to the renovations.”

“And why are we at an abandoned League tower,” Roy asks.

“I….”

The utter conviction Dick had at Jay’s house threatens to leave him.

Dick breathes. “I didn’t want to have this conversation at the Headquarters or the Cave. It would feel….too much like an end than a beginning.”

“A beginning for what?” And Roy has to know, but it looks like he’s going to make Dick say it anyway.

“So, about that idea for restarting the League, I think… I think I’m in.”

Dick barely finishes before Donna’s reaching out and hugging him quickly before pulling away.

“Yes! This can actually work.”

Beside her, Roy nods, still serious but a bit more relaxed now.

“And you were thinking this could be our new base,” Roy asks.

Dick shrugs. “It’s a good choice. Out of the way but not too remote, easy to connect to the zeta beams, sturdy, good structure for installing security in.”

“It’s perfect,” Donna says and with the sun shining down and a quiet confident smile then, yeah, the resemblance to her sister becomes uncanny.
“We’ll still need more members,” Dick adds. “More than the three of us, definitely. Ideally, we’d want at least seven so that we can set up monitor duty without overwhelming anyone.”

“I might have another recruit already,” Roy mutters but doesn’t expand.

“Zatanna and Rocket will probably be willing, too,” Dick admits, thinking back to his last conversation with the former. “We’ll all need training, though. More than just individual. We need training to learn to work as...work as a team.”

And if Dick’s stomach still drops at the last word then, well, hopefully he’s able to cover it well.

“We’ll need a leader, too,” Donna says and then her and Roy share a look before turning to stare at...

Dick’s blood turns to ice.

“No,” Dick says, already shaking his head. “No way. I can’t.”

Donna smiles, somewhat apologetically. “You’re our best choice. Roy and I already talked about it...for if you decided to join, I mean.”

“I’m fourteen! I have to be the youngest here. No one’s going to listen to me.”

“I’m only fifteen,” Donna says, “and from what Roy tells me this Rocket and Zatanna aren’t that much older.”

“You’re the one with the most experience,” Roy points out. “They’ll listen.”

Dick glares. “Only five years, you’ve been doing it four. That’s only one year difference and you’re the oldest. Why don’t you do it?”

Roy gives him an unimpressed look. “You know I’m not the best with teamwork. There’s more than one reason I didn’t work with the team much. Not to mention,” Roy clears his throat. “Not to mention, how my partnership with Ollie ended up. I don’t have good experiences with teams, you do.”

Dick looks, almost desperately, at Donna

“I’ve worked in teams before, but not here,” Donna admits. “I don’t know enough about the outside world yet to lead a team here.”

“I can’t,” Dick repeats. “Look, there’s a reason that I wasn’t chosen to lead Young Justice. A good reason. I didn’t communicate enough, I expected people to understand too much, I acted too much like I was still working with Batman.”

Roy sighs. “Robin, you don’t need to be perfect to be our best choice. And, right now, I think we could probably use someone who expects too much. I know you can do this. I know you’re the one who led the team during the invasion.”

“And they all died,” Dick yells. “Why don’t you get that? I led the team to their deaths! How could you ever want me to lead a team again when that’s what happened last time?!”

“The League died, too,” Donna says softly. “Everyone nearly died. The team you led is the only reason they didn’t.”

Dick turns to Roy. “I can’t. Look, there’s something….there’s something I never told you.
Something about the last mission. I knew, okay? I knew it was basically a suicide mission. I didn’t…I didn’t think Miss Martian or Superboy or Martian Manhunter or...or even Wally were going to all die. But I knew the odds meant someone would. I knew it was likely all of us would die. I knew if we were going to blow up the ship someone was going to have to stay back and die. And I made the choice anyway. I planned the mission because it was the only way I could think to stop the invasion.” Dick shakes his head, scrubbing a hand under his glasses. “I can’t do that again. I can’t chose to sacrifice everything to complete a mission. But the thing is…I know if I had to make the choice again, to choose between the team or the world, I’d do the same thing. And that’s why I can’t be a leader again.”

He trails off, breathing heavily and when he looks back up, Donna and Roy are both staring at him.

Roy breaks the silence first if not the most eloquently.

“Fuck.”

For the third time today, Dick’s pulled into a hug--which honestly, might break his normal record for the entire year. Alfred and Bruce have never been the most physically affectionate.

The difference though between this one and Jay’s and Donna’s is that Roy keeps holding on.

“Shit, Rob, is this what you’ve been holding onto,” Roy asks as Dick’s still gripped in his bear hug. “Fuck. Shit.”

Finally, Roy pulls back and looks him straight in the eye. “You made the right choice. There’s not a member of that team or the League that would have said anything different.”

“I don’t want to do it again,” Dick whispers.

“We’ll try to make sure you don’t have to,” Roy promises. “But, Dic-Rob, look, this team needs a leader. You’re the one who’s been holding Gotham for months. You’re the one who with the experience. You’re the one that’s been part of a superhero team before.”

“It’s not like we’re going to make you,” Donna says quickly. “That’s not how team’s work. It’s your choice.”

Roy nods. “You’re our best option, but it’s still your choice. And personally, I think you’ll be a good leader.”

Dick sighs, closes his eyes, and tries not to feel like the weight of the world just got dropped on his shoulders.

“I’ll think about it.”

Donna and Roy don’t press.

It’s probably because they already know what a yes sounds like.

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If they’re really rebuilding the League--and it looks like they are--then Dick knows there’s one place that he really has to go to next.

It’s a real shame that the only way there is a zeta tube that he’s not entirely sure won’t kill him.
Muttering under his breath, Dick punches the buttons on his wrist computer with a tad bit more force than is considered necessary for programming. A few more lines of code and…

*Access Granted. B01-Robin.*

It really is very lucky that the Watchtower used the same type of programs as the Cave.

*Here goes nothing.*

Dick steps in the tube and holds his breath as the beam energizes around him.

He rematerializes and his ears immediately pop and water rushes around him too fast for him to grab his respirator and then, he’s drowning and dang it, Dick *knew* this was a bad idea.

Then, the water shifts around him until he’s landing on damp marble stone and coughing up water.

When he finally feels like he can breathe, he looks up and one of the most beautiful women he’s ever seen is looking down at him while her hand glows bright blue.

“Your Majesty.”

“You must be Robin,” Queen Mera of Atlantis says. “My husband and Kaldur spoke quite highly of you.” She frowns. “I admit I wasn't aware that zeta tube still functioned.”

Dick coughs again, pushing himself to his feet. “I, um, might have reprogrammed it a bit. Sorry, it was the only way I could think to get down here.”

Queen Mera hums. “Then I assume you must have an urgent reason for being here if you are willing to risk possible drowning.”

“I need to speak to you,” Dick says, trying to pull up his shoulders and remember his circus training so maybe he looks a little bit less like a fourteen year old quite literally out of his depth.

He’s not sure it works but Queen Mera starts down the hall, the pocket of air she created following after her as Dick trails behind. She’s still wearing black mourning clothes, the black gown flowing down over her clearly pregnant stomach.

They end in the throne room, alone, with the Queen looking down at Dick from one of the two high thrones.

“This is official business then,” Queen Mera asks. “I hope you won’t be offended if I admit you’re not the one I’d expected they send.”

Dick decides not to waste words. “We’re planning on restarting the League.”

Queen Mera nods like she was already expecting it. It’s entirely likely she was.

“We?”

“Red Arrow; Donna Troy, Wonder Woman’s sister; and me,” Dick says. “Plus a few others that haven’t officially joined yet.”

“And I suppose you wish to renew the League’s former alliance with Atlantis.”

Dick nods. “We three can only handle so much, having Atlantis’ support would be invaluable.”
Queen Mera tilts her head. “And what do your older heroes on the surface say?”

“There’s not many older heroes left to say anything at all,” Dick answers truthfully. Then, because it’s always a bad idea to withhold things from a potential ally--especially things easily found out--he continues, “Jay Garrick, formerly of the Justice Society, thinks we’re too young to fight.”

The Queen laughs. “In Atlantis, we train children to fight at a much younger age than you.”

Dick releases a breath he wasn’t aware he’d been holding

“Then, I can count on Atlantis’ continued alliance and support?”

“However,” Queen Mera continues, “just because we train them to fight does not mean we allow our children to lead our battles.”

“The world’s getting ready to fall apart,” Dick says. “Someone needs to do something.”

“Agreed. But is that someone a fourteen year old boy and a pair of heroes only a few years older?”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty. If we’re the only ones standing up to do it, then yes,” Dick says back, struggling to keep his temper in check. To think through the problem rather than just react. “The world will fall if no one stands.”

Queen Mera regards him intently. “I agree that someone needs to stand but if you think you can handle it and you’re wrong then all it will result in is more broken bodies. Even with your team. I can’t support something I believe will fail.”

Dick stops, holds his tongue, and then shrugs. “Then, Your Majesty, I look forward to seeing you on the surface to battle yourself.”

Queen Mera raises an eyebrow.

“We both agree if nothing’s done, the world will fall,” Dick says. “If you wish to stop me and my team from acting then the only way we will is for you to step up yourself.”

“Are you challenging me,” Queen Mera asks and her voice is positively icy.

Dick’s grown up fighting Mr. Freeze. A little ice doesn’t stop him. Queen Mera is powerful and dangerous and Dick is rightfully wary of pissing her off. But Dick’s fought the Scarecrow, fought Two Face, fought the Joker. Dick’s seen everything he loved burn down in front of him.

He respects Queen Mera but she does not scare him.

“No,” Dick answers “I’m not challenging you. I’m asking for your support. The world’s falling. Atlantis needs to stand united with the surface. However, if I don’t have your support, I’ll continue anyway. I’m not begging for your aid, all I’m asking is that you don’t stand in my way.”

Queen Mera is staring at him and the moment is weighed down with the entire force of the ocean suspended above them.

Finally, Queen Mera’s lips turn up in a smile and she leans back in her throne.

“I’ve always been curious how a nine year old convinced the Batman to take him on as an assistant.”

Dick smiles sharply. “Not an assistant, a partner. I told him that since he couldn’t stop me, we might as well work together.”
Queen Mera laughs again, a bark of laugh that seems both harsher and more real. “And now you’re telling me….Alright, you have my support.”

“You won’t stop me,” Dick asks, just to be sure.

Queen Mera shakes her head, still smiling. “Oh, even better than that. I have someone I’d like you to meet. An old friend of Kaldur’s, actually, who’s taken a recent interest in the surface. I think he may be interested in this team you’re putting together. His name is Garth.”

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Now that they have what’s looking more and more like a full team roster plus the official support of the League’s biggest ally, they finally let slip to the press that a new team of heroes is forming.

Dick hasn’t smiled a lot in the past few months but the look of shock on Luthor’s face when an interviewer tells the man has him grinning all afternoon.

Once it’s announced that Robin, Red Arrow, and Troia--as Donna’s decided to call herself--are going to be on the team, the public reaction is overwhelmingly positive. Far more supportive than Luthor’s League had ever dreamed of achieving. One newscaster goes so far as to call the new team’s formation a “New Dawn in the Age of Heroes”. That phrasing still has Dick shifting uncomfortably when he thinks about it for too long.

Needless to say, there are still the detractors. Outside of Gotham, there is an even more vocal faction questioning the idea of teen heroes. An interview with Jay Garrick has the idea described as “brave but misguided”.

Dick isn’t sure about the morality but he knows about responsibility. He knows that, for the first time in nine months, what he’s doing feels right.

He isn’t going to lie though. Having one particular person’s support helps immensely.

“I’m proud of you, Master Dick,” Alfred tells him one morning a day after the announcement.

Dick pushes some cereal around his bowl. “You don’t think we’re biting off more than we can chew.”

“In my experience, you’ve always had a tendency to rise to the occasion.” Alfred smiles.

Alright and that did make Dick feel a little bit more warm. More brave, too. Brave enough to ask the question….

“Alfred….are we too young?”

Alfred pauses and then, in a move that Dick has rarely if ever seen him do before, he pulls out a chair and sits beside Dick at the table.

“Truthfully, Master Dick, yes, I do think you all are too young.” Alfred holds up a hand to forestall Dick interrupting. “Let me finish. I thought you were too young when you first put on the Robin costume, too. And since then I’ve seen you go through terrible, terrible things. However, through them, I have also seen you thrive.” Alfred sighs. “Over the past few months, I’ve learned three things, Master Dick. First is that the world we live in is much too dark to focus only on what should be done rather than what has to be done. I think the world we live in needs heroes, no matter how
young they may be. Second, I think that there are some people—you and your friends among them—who have adapted to grow better in that kind of world and that trying to stop you now would only be undermining all the progress you all have made since.”

Dick swallows. “What’s the third thing?”

“The third is that Master Bruce would be very, very proud of you.”

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Ten months after the invasion, seven teenagers meet in an abandoned tower located on a small island just off of Jump City.

One of them is more of a surprise than the others.

“This is your new recruit,” Dick asks Roy.

Roy shrugs. “She found me after the thing in Taiwan. She’s got her reasons.”

“I’m doing this for Artemis. She was my sister,” says Jade Nguyen—Cheshire and apparently former assassin.

Dick knew that, actually. He’d found it in Batman’s files a month or so after the invasion when he was trying to track down some kind of next of kin for all the team members. Even through the numbness, it had been a surprise back then. But, it didn’t explain the situation now.

“I thought you two didn’t get along,” Dicks says. “Why are you becoming a hero for her now?”

Jade arches a single eyebrow. “You obviously don’t have siblings.”

Dick decides to let it go. Roy seems to trust her and truthfully the team can use all the help they can get. One thing he can say about Cheshire is that she’s experienced.

Besides Jade, the team is comprised of Dick, Roy, Donna, Zatanna, Raquel, and Garth. They all have their own motives. Garth, Donna, and Jade are standing in the place of fallen friends and family. Zatanna and Raquel want the training, want to learn to be heroes on their own. Roy’s doing it because it’s what he knows best.

Dick’s doing it because….well, actually, Dick guesses he’s doing it for the same reason they all are. They want to help.

“We’re not actually calling ourselves the Justice League, are we,” Raquel asks. “It seems so….well, morbid.”

“Not Young Justice either,” Zatanna adds.

Jade shakes her head. “People think we’re young enough already.”

“I can’t believe we’re actually doing this,” Donna admits and there’s an excitement there, an energy that runs through the whole room.

“If the heroes have fallen, someone must stand,” Garth says somberly.
Roy scratches the back of his neck. “What comes after heroes fall?”

And Dick smiles because he thinks he just found their new name.

“What about….The Titans?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Following chapters will have a significantly quicker pace and be progressively lighter as the team moves through their grief.

As always, comments and kudos welcome!

Up Next: Year 2: Robin Must Die
This pillow sucks.

It’s not soft at all and weird groves are pressing into his cheek. All of this is particularly annoying since the alarm clock is probably going to go off sooner rather than later which means that the final moments of Dick’s rest are being ruined by a stupid, way too hard pillow.

“Master Dick, I can’t imagine that to be the most effective method of research.”

“Whaa….” His head shoots up.

Alfred is looking down at him with a single eyebrow raised.

Dick looks at the butler then down to his uncomfortable pillow--er, he means keyboard. The keyboard which is hooked up to the cave computer. The computer where he was supposed to be researching the recent string of robberies. And not falling asleep.

Right.

“Far be it for me to question your vigilantism, young sir,” Alfred drawls, “but perhaps a good night’s rest might be in order rather than your usual evening patrol.”

“It’s fine, Alfred,” he says, making sure to look at least a little bit apologetic, “I’m good. I was out late with the Titans taking care of the Cult of Kobra stuff.”

“Another reason a break might be a good idea.”

He grimaces. “I can’t. I’m pretty sure the Royal Flush Gang is behind the robberies. If they follow their pattern, they’ll strike the Gotham First bank tonight.”

Alfred looks at the screen rather sharply. The search page still shows a random string of letters from Dick’s impromptu nap earlier.
Dick takes the hint.

“Look, I’ll just stop Royal Flush, wait for the cops to get there, and then come right back and get some sleep. I promise. I won’t even patrol after.”

Quite obviously deciding that’s as good as he’s going to get, the butler sighs and offers a small nod.

Dick grins, hopping up and heading off toward the R-cycle while slipping on his mask. By the time Alfred makes it back up stairs, he’s suited up, out of the cave, and heading toward Gotham First bank.

Alfred’s worrying too much. Dick can handle some sleep deprivation now and again. Besides, the Royal Flush Gang is important….and so were the Cult of Kobra shipments….and so are his Gotham patrols….and training with the Titans. Alright, he might get Alfred’s point a little.

But, the thing is everything’s going really well right now. Better than well, actually. It’s been five months since the Titan’s first mission and the team is starting to come together. Zatanna’s getting faster and better with her spells. Raquel’s taking to training like a force of nature. Garth and Donna are adjusting quickly to their new home. Roy’s as good as ever and Jade’s finally getting a handle on working with a team.

And Dick….well, every successful mission has him feeling a little bit more like he can actually do this. Like he can lead a team into more than just a suicide mission.

If that isn’t worth a few less hours of sleep, he doesn’t know what is.

The R-cycle pulls into the alley by Gotham First a few seconds before the alarm sirens go off.

Which means Dick’s late. Great.

The Royal Flush Gang is the latest but not the first of Gotham’s….more eccentric residents to start work again under the cover of Gotham’s night, this time absent one prominent bat.

Dick feels like he’s being tested.

It’s Gotham, he’s not putting it passed her.

Last month, it was a close call with Two Face. The month before that it was Clayface. Before that, Mr. Freeze. Then, the Mad Hatter. Then, Killer Croc and so on and so on.

Batman’s rogue gallery is coming back. And this time, Robin is facing them alone.

He’s been doing alright so far. A few close calls but they were all back in their cells for however long that was going to last. But, Dick knows that all it will take is one time, just one second too slow, just one wrong move and that’s it. He doesn’t have backup waiting for him anymore. Not in Gotham at least.

That’s why nights like this are important, he thinks, letting out his signature cackle just to watch how one of the gang fires randomly up at the ceiling, missing him by a mile.

Nights like this are a message. To show everyone that Robin can handle things like this. Villains like this. That Gotham can lose Batman and still keep standing. That Dick’s strong enough to keep Gotham safe.

He pulls up his wrist computer and cuts the power to the bank.
To prove it to everyone. Dick drops down from the ceiling, landing his foot right in the King of Spade’s face.

Ten minutes later, the police finally show up only to find a tied up and partially unconscious Royal Flush Gang.

Commissioner Gordon’s the only one that looks to the roof and Dick waves back cheerfully before launching off to the next building over.

He’s grinning. He needs nights like these where plans go off without a hitch, villains are caught, and Dick comes out without even a scratch. Perfect.

The R-cycle’s already locked away in one of the many storage units Batman kept around the city and Dick...Dick feels like flying.

He front flips off of one of the higher roofs, letting gravity try to pull him down before he fires a new line.

Alfred’s going to be thrilled. Dick’s going to be back so early he’ll even have time to sleep for a full four hours. That’ll be awesome. Maybe then he can revamp the training program for the Titans. Or go over his brief for the meeting in Atlantis. Or run another check on Blackgate’s new security program.

He almost laughs. Maybe he can even do his homework. That’ll be nice. Definitely make Alfred happy. Maybe even Bruce will--

Dick slips on a patch of wet tiles and falls off the roof.

A last second twist and a creative use of a batarang slows his fall and has him landing hard on an overhang three stories below rather than the pavement five stories down.

“....Ow.”

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“....so to conclude, public opinion is still highly in favor and the team continues to function successfully.”

Queen Mera regards him pointedly.

“Oh, and Garth seems to be taking to the surface well,” Dick tacks on.

She sighs, newborn baby Artur shifting slightly in her arms. “Robin, I know when we set the terms of the new alliance, I stipulated semi-annual progress updates; but, I really would’ve understood if you had to postpone. Especially, since Garth tells me you’re injured.”

“It was just some bruised ribs and a sprain,” he reassures quickly. “I’m fine. Garth already healed most of it.”

“As talented as he is, Garth was still my apprentice.” She waves her free hand in a complicated movement and Dick feels the last ache in his ribs soothe away as if it was never there.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”
Queen Mera waves the words away. “I’ll admit when you began your leadership of the Titans, I
presumed that the team would also begin helping you in Gotham. Not that you’d be trying to do both
at once.”

He frowns. “Crime rates in Gotham are still down and the team has a perfect mission success rate.”

“I’m not arguing your accomplishments; I’m arguing their continued probability.”

“I can do it,” Dick says simply.

“You need help,” she returns just as bluntly.

He shifts slightly on his feet. “Your Majesty, as highly trained as the Atlanteans are, metas in
Gotham is a really terrible--”

Queen Mera snorts, the sound strikingly undignified in the opulent palace.

“Oh please, my offer wasn’t for my people to swim in Gotham’s sewage infested harbors. You can
keep them for yourself.”

Dick relaxes. “Then, what were you offering?”

“Something much more basic. Advice. From one ally to another...and from someone else who
knows quite a bit about taking up responsibilities in the face of loss.”

Baby Artur coos softly and the Queen of Atlantis looks down at him with a smile before turning
back to Dick.

“If you try to balance too much alone, then it is inevitable that something will fall,” Queen Mera
says. “Leading the Titans. Protecting Gotham. Either of those tasks are work enough on their own,
not to mention the last one you insist on doing alone. If you continue to try them both together…”

She trails off but the implication is clear.

“I can do it,” he repeats. “Both of them.”

“Maybe,” she says, “but then again you also have to find time to eat and sleep.”

Dick smiles. “Trust me, Your Majesty, I find time to sleep just fine.”

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“Dick?”

This pillow isn’t that comfortable either.

“Dick?”

Still, definitely better than the keyboard. Smoother if a bit cool and--

“Dick!”

Dick’s eyes fly open, cataloging his surroundings immediately.

“Um, hi, Babs?”
Barbara Gordon stands above him, hands on her hips. “If you’re done taking a nap, class is about to start.”

He groans, laying his head back on the desk. “Then, why’d you wake me up?”

“Crazy enough, some people actually believe listening to class is necessary.”

Dick narrows his eyes, not believing her for a second. This is math class. He and Barbara could have tested out of it years ago if Bruce hadn’t thought it was important for Dick’s cover and Barbara’s dad hadn’t wanted her to overwork herself. If there’s a surefire class for him to sleep through, it’s math. Well, that or computer science. Or chemistry. Dick’s Robin training had always been pretty advanced.

The point is that, apart from a few aggravated comments about class conduct, Barbara normally lets him sleep.

He continues to stare at her until she finally gives him a sidelong glance.

“The teachers are acting nervous,” she admits under her breath. “The principal and vice principal have already been around twice to check the classrooms.”

Dick feels completely awake now. “You think something happened at the school…something they’re trying to hide?”

Barbara nods. “Either something’s already happened or they think we’re in danger.”

He itches to pull up his wrist computer and check into the official Gotham police channels but there’s no way he can slip away without Barbara noticing.

This would be a really terrible time for her to find out her best friend’s a superhero.

Dick looks over to Barbara, who’s furiously typing on her phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking Gotham’s police channels,” Barbara says. “Duh. I hacked into them ages ago.”

Dick grins. Barbara’s awesome.

Her phone vibrates and her eyes flicker briefly across the screen before stopping. “….Never mind. Looks like there’s no need. They just issued a news report.”

As she says it, his phone—along with the majority of their class—buzzes.

Dick pulls up the report and his chest tightens as he sees Gotham Elementary School.

And then he reads the report.

Beside him, Barbara swears. “Dick, this looks really bad.”

Posted in bright colors at the top of the report is a picture of Gotham’s elementary school playground with large letters smeared across the pavement in what’s very obviously blood.

Robin Must Die.
The public is in a state of panic. Gotham’s police department immediately issues a general statement that yes, Robin is alive, well, and—most importantly—still able to patrol.

Dick likes to think there’s some general concern there, hidden under Gotham’s many layers of self preservation. He gets it. They just lost their biggest hero a little over a year and a half ago; they’re understandably terrified of going through it again so soon.

As soon as the sky gets well and truly dark, Robin drops down lightly on the roof of the police precinct.

Commissioner Gordon’s already waiting on him

“You are alright. I really didn’t want that statement to be a lie.”

“I’m okay,” he reassures.

Gordon sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I take it you’ve already done your own preliminary analysis.”

Dick nods.

Pig’s blood. Thankfully, the words were just in pig’s blood. Based on the results, likely from a breed of pigs not traditionally sold in the Gotham area. That was good; that was a clue.

“Thank all the saints, it wasn’t worse,” Gordon says, interrupting Dick’s train of thought. “With this city, you can never be too sure. Video security footage of the school was erased, by the way. Night security was found unconscious and tied up in a cleaning closet. Both men say they were hit from behind. Based on their statements and the hours missing, we’re thinking it was between four and five in the morning.”

Dick had already tracked the traffic footage from around the school at that time but it looked like anyone who came through either traveled by foot or knew how to avoid the cameras. Both options would point to a Gotham local.

“Robin?”

He looks up as the Commissioner rubs the back of his neck, suddenly looking a lot older than Dick ever noticed.

“Look, you okay, kid,” Gordon asks. “I don’t mean physically. Threats like this can shake even an experienced officer.”

“I’m fine,” Dick says. “I just want to focus on catching whoever did this.”

Gordon hesitates for another second before speaking again.

“I’m sorry about Batman, by the way….Don’t think I ever told you back then. He was a good man. A good friend.”

Dick swallows. His eyes, under the mask, shifting imperceptible to focus on the roof behind the man rather than Gordon himself.

“Thank you.”
Gordon nods. “You’re doing good work, kid. Don’t let this city kill you for it.”

He looks like he wants to say something more but then Dick’s comm pings in his ear. He taps it, listening to the message.

“I gotta go,” he says, already heading to the roof’s edge. “There’s a situation in Patras where they need the Titans.”

Gordon hums, head turning down. “Well, that’s different. Normally, I don’t get a warning before one of you disappears.” He looks back up. “Go on, then and--”

Robin is already gone.

Dick hears the echo of the Commissioner’s chuckle as he swings away to the nearest zeta tube.

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“So, this is new.”

Roy raises an eyebrow and releases his shot. “Are you complaining?”

Thirty yards away, an arrow impales an android straight in the eye before exploding to take out its new neighbors.

“No,” Dick takes out another with a well placed batarang. “But, seriously, Ivo must really be losing his touch. I’m unimpressed.”

“Emphasis on the un,” Donna teases before ducking quickly as an android aims an Amazon powered kick at her head.

“Ivo hasn’t adjusted his methods yet,” Roy says. “These guys were designed for a team with more metas. He’ll learn. I’m sure.”

A moment later, Garth is thrown back and hits the wall hard enough to leave cracks. “All of you, please stop insinuating that the super powered robots sent to kill us should be better at it.”

Above them, Zatanna finishes the spell to take down another two, one getting alarmingly close to a downed Garth. Dick moves closer to give him time to recover.

It’s true. Ivo’s newest Amazo androids were obviously expecting more meta powers to copy. With a team consisting of three regular humans, one Atlantean, one Amazonian, one belt-assisted meta, and one magic user who’s powers apparently didn’t compute with the android’s programming, the robots are severely under powered.

But, an army of androids is still an army of androids and Amazonian and Atlantean powers aren’t anything to sneeze at.

Dick throws two more batarangs, embedding in the metal before letting out an electric pulse to fry the circuitry.

His comm beeps.

“Robin,” he answers.
“It’s Cheshire. We found Ivo. Rocket has him secured. I’m working on shutting them down remotely.”

“Copy. Estimated time?”

“Now,” answers the cool voice and in less than a second, the androids all stop moving as if someone had cut their cord. Which, effectively, is exactly what happened.

“Androids are stopped,” Dick reports over the comms. “Nice job. Drop Ivo off at the nearest holding unit and meet back at the Tower.”

“Copy,” comes Raquel’s voice. “See you in a bit.”

Dick clicks the comm back off, turning to the remaining team. “Troia, you mind grabbing one of the droids for the road? I want to catalog any changes he made.”

“Sure, Rob, make me do the heavy lifting,” Donna says with a wink, lifting what had to be easily a three hundred pound robot as if it were a practice dummy.

Garth eyes it skeptically. “You sure it’s a good idea to keep the formerly murderous robot in the Tower?”

Dick pauses. Okay, fair point.

“Second thought, drop it off at the League’s old arctic test center. Should only be accessible by zeta.”

Zatanna smiles. “I’ll come with. I, um, always love going to the arctic.”

Behind the mask, Dick narrows his eyes. “Alright. Meet back in the Tower when you’re done.”

He waits until the three are gone before turning to Roy.

“And then, there were two. Amazing coincidence that. Especially since I never remember Zatanna caring about the arctic. In fact, last mission there I think she called it an ‘abandoned frozen wasteland’.”

Roy shrugs. “The team might have wanted me to talk to you.”

“About what,” he asks, just restraining a sigh.

“About what? You got a death threat this morning. We still get the news even in Star City, you know.”

“It’s Gotham,” Dick waves him away. “I get death threats all the time. It’s basically how they say hello.”

“It was written in blood.”

“Okay, an enthusiastic hello.”


Dick smiles. And if the smile looks just a bit too tense than it should. A bit wild. A bit desperate. Then he….well, he just hopes Roy can figure out why.

“I’m fine,” he says again and for what feels like the millionth time. “I’m fine.”
Roy sighs, giving him a look that tells Dick he sees right through him.

“No, you’re not,” Roy says. “But, what you are is a stubborn asshole. And I’m the idiot lucky enough to know that when you’re like this, you’re not going to listen to reason until something comes by and proves you wrong.”

Dick winces but doesn’t say anything in denial.

“When you do realize it though, I’ll be there. So will the team,” Roy says, slinging the bow back over his back. “And not all of us are metas. I’m sure Gotham could handle me and Cheshire stopping by every now and then.”

Dick smirks, grabbing the chance to deflect and hoping Roy lets him. “Oh, both you and Cheshire?”

Roy blushes red enough to match his hair. “Shut up. It just...it just kinda happened, okay?”

Dick cackles, heading for the zeta beam.

He pauses right before stepping in, turning back to look at the fallen robots.

“Hey, Roy? The team did good today, didn’t they? Even better than last month with Mr. Twister. They’re….they’re coming together.”

Roy comes up behind him, throwing an arm around his shoulders.

“Yeah, Rob. We did good.”

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Sitting in the cave a few nights later, Dick hums slightly under his breath while he runs a maintenance check on his utility belt. The local radio is turned on in the background, playing out some hit song he vaguely recognizes.

“Alright, Gothamites ,” announces a way too cheerful voices, “time for our daily evening segment, ‘The Batwatch’....though I guess we might as well call it ‘The Birdwatch’ now. Call in and share your thoughts. First we have Lucy from Midtown”

Dick groans, standing up to change it before the first call chimes in.

“Poor Robin! Like my little sister goes to Gotham Elementary and she’s going to have nightmares for weeks! I can’t imagine how he feels. It’s amazing he’s still even here!”

“Thank you, Lucy, and we have our next caller: Winston from Burnley District.”

“I mean I think the real question isn’t why Robin’s still here, it’s can he be? He’s a kid. It made sense when Batman was still alive but now, it’s just weird. It’s Batman and Robin, you know? Robin alone doesn’t really work.”

“Moving on to Stephen from Old Gotham.”

“Agreed. How can Robin even operate without Batman? He can’t. It just doesn’t function long term and now, we’re finally seeing it. Really, it’s the Gotham PD that should be stepping up and--”

Dick turns off the radio.
If there’s one good thing about being left a message in blood, it’s that blood has a lot of traceable elements. Based on the levels of coagulation, the pig’s blood was older and had been frozen at least once before. That suggests some kind of meat locker. And the only place in Gotham that had sold that particular type of pig breed was an old butcher shop in Gotham’s East End, shut down last year when the owner was arrested on organized crime charges.

The shop was still technically tied up in the investigation so closed off and unable to be sold, not that anyone would really want to buy a shop so close to Crime Alley.

Dick suspects the shop isn’t quite as abandoned as reported.

He drops down into the alley beside the shop, checking through a tear in taped up windows. No one home. Or, at least, no movement and the lights are off.

He slips inside.

The front of the shop still looks perfectly normal. The counter and display shelf are there, stripped bare and covered with a layer of dust. The ground however…

Dick pulls out a flashlight, looking at the dirt on the tiled floor to see shoe prints. Someone has been here recently. Probably multiple male adults, judging by the size and different set of prints.

The prints lead to the back of the store, back where the meat locker would be.

Dick moves in the direction, keeping an ear out for visitors.

He hears the flies before anything else.

Sitting in front of the closed meat locker is a black plastic trash bag emitting the distinct smell of rotting meat. Dick wrinkles his nose, coming closer and carefully cutting open the bag to see...yep, dead pig, same breed, and definitely showing signs of exsanguination.

Well, that solves one disgusting question.

He tilts his head, still eyeing the closed meat locker. Whoever had been working out of here, they’d obviously abandoned it along with the rotting trash. Still….Batman had always taught him to be thorough.

Dick opens the meat locker.

The first thing he notes is that this clearly hadn’t been used as just a meat locker. And that fact alone is terrifying enough. There’s cords everywhere, showing that someone had been handling some heavy electronics here earlier. Work tables line the walls on one side of the room, no dust on them indicating recent use. Everything had been cleared out now, probably around the time the message was placed. All that was left was a piteously wilted desk plant, forgotten in the corner.

Something breaks under Dick’s boot and he looks down to see part of a beaker.

A lab. Someone’s been running a lab out of the back of the shop.

Making what, though?
He reaches in his utility belt and pulls out a some swabs, going to the abandoned work tables to collect any residue they might have left behind.

As he approaches, the plant shoots back up and sprays some kind of liquid right in Dick’s face.

_Not forgotten_, he thinks frantically, knees hitting the ground as his throat starts to close. _Plant was decidedly not forgotten._

It was a trap. And Dick had been dumb enough to fall for it.

He’s laying on the floor, hands on his utility belt though he doesn’t even know what type of poison this is. He tries to catalog the symptoms. Closing throat, sweating, he’s pretty sure his temperature’s spiking, his vision’s going dark and…..

No, no, this isn’t good. This isn’t good at all. This isn’t how he wants to die. Not with the Titans and Gotham and…he hasn’t even really helped yet…

There’s the sound of a door banging open and Dick turns his head to the sound, even though everything’s blurry and hard to make out.

There’s a flash of orange so deep its red and Dick has a second to think it’s beautiful before he registers a black mask with tips and… _Batman?_

“Hey! Hey, stay with me what happened? Tell me what’s wrong?”

That’s not Batman’s voice. It’s female, younger. It sounds worried and Dick can’t ever remember Batman sounding like that. Bruce did but…

“Robin, focus! What happened?”


“Crap! Oh crap, your heart rates really fast. What kind of poison? I thought Poison Ivy only did hormone manipulation stuff.”

Dick coughs out something like a laugh if only he had more air. “Not as often…as you think. New stuff.”

“New? How do I get an antidote? Who could make one?”

Dick shrugs. Or at least he thinks he does. Everything’s getting really dark now. “Cave...Tower, maybe?”

He’s falling asleep and the reasons why he shouldn’t are becoming increasingly hard to find. Sleep is nice…

“No, Robin! Stay with me. I don’t know where the cave is and Titans Tower is like five states away. How do I get you there?”

Dick slurs something that might sound something like, “zeta.” It doesn’t matter, he feels warm and there’s cool hands on his face and he’s so tired.

The world goes dark.
Dick wakes up with the worst headache he’s ever experienced in his entire life.

“Ngh.”

The lights above him dim enough that he actually feels motivated enough to open his eyes again and try to see where he is. He stops when he registers a figure sitting beside him and sharpening knives.

He falls back to the bed with a groan.

“So, I guess I’m at the Tower.”

Jade nods and, in an elegant flip, slides the knife back into the sheath. “Do you remember what happened?”

“Mostly,” he says, sitting up again to reach for the water by the bedside. “Went out to investigate a lead, got hit by one of Ivy’s plants, and...someone came to help me.” Dick frowns. It was a girl, right? And the costume? Had he seen it right or was that just the poison affecting his brain? “Who was she?”

She shrugs. “Don’t know. On our side, the Tower received notification that the zeta beam was hacked--”

“The zeta beam was hacked.”

“Apparently,” Jade says, looking entirely unconcerned. But then again, she tends to always look like that except maybe around Roy. “Then, you fell out at the Tower, unconscious and nearly dead. We took you here to medical and I was able to stabilize you.”

“You saved me?”

She smiles but not in a very nice way. “I do know the most about poisons.”

….That’s true. And terrifying. Once again, he finds himself appreciative that Cheshire decided to swap career paths from horrifying assassin to slightly less horrifying hero.

“Thank you.”

“Well,” Jade pauses, considering, “we are a team.”

Dick smiles.

“So, what’s the prognosis,” he asks after he finishes the water. “Am I good or still going to fall over dead any second?”

Jade rolls her eyes. “Lucky for you, it was a fast acting poison designed to kill in minutes--”

“Oh, yeah, I’m feeling real lucky.”

“--which means that it wasn’t designed for any long lasting effects,” she finishes. “You should be fine now that it’s passed through your system.”

“Good.” Dick says, stretching and already feeling the urge to get out of bed. He’s also starving. “How long was I out for anyway?”
“Roughly thirty hours or so.”

His head shoots up. “Wait, then that would make it…”

“Monday, about six a.m.”

“Crap,” Dick yelps, diving out of the bed and nearly stumbling on his feet.

Jade sighs, reaching over to steady him. “When I said you were fine, I meant the poison. You’ve still been cramping in a bed for a day.”

Yeah, and he can definitely feel those cramps now. But that’s not important.

“Why are you in such a hurry,” she asks.

“I’m late for school!”

-----

Barbara gives him another weird look. The fifth one of the day.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Dick?”


She stares at him and Dick decides to tone down his grin because it might be getting a hair too close to manic.

“Well, besides the fact that you missed first period…”

“I overslept,” he insists.

“You’re not, um, sick, are you?”

And then, there’s Barbara’s patented worried-but-not-going-to-quite-go-out-and-say-it look. The fourth of the day.

Weird, Dick’s pretty sure he doesn’t look that bad. No one else has said anything.

“I feel fine,” he says, honestly. “Why?”

She shrugs, a millisecond too quick to be normal. “Huh, guess it’s nothing. I’m just stressed about ah, ballet, I guess.”

“Ballet? I thought you quit. You said you were too busy.”

Barbara bites her lip. “I joined back.”

“That’s great,” he says, bumping into her shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’ll definitely be at your next recital.”

“I’m not back full time,” she corrects quickly. “Too busy.”

“With what?”
“Just…” she gestures wordlessly. “Just busy.”

Dick frowns.

Barbara’s eyes widen and she points. “Look, there’s Alfred. You shouldn’t keep him waiting, Dick. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He gives her another strange look, but obediently heads over to where he sees Alfred’s town car.

“Hey, Alfred,” he greets, slipping into the passenger’s seat. “Does Barbara seem like she’s acting weird to you?”

Alfred raises an eyebrow. “I can assure you, young sir, that you would have a much better chance of measuring that than I would.”

“Okay, fair.”

“I can say that I am very happy to see you yourself, Master Dick,” Alfred says, putting the car into drive. “When I received the call from the Tower, I was quite worried.”

“I’m fine, Alfie.” He tries to summon up what he hopes is a reassuring grin. “Cheshire already fixed me up and everything. It was just a dumb mistake. My dumb mistake. I’ll be more careful next patrol.”

Alfred hums, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

“Actually,” Dick says, face falling into contemplation, “there’s another thing. A girl was there. I’m pretty sure she’s the one that hacked the zeta system and got me to the Tower.”

“Then it is a shame vigilantes don’t send fruit baskets. The situation certainly warrants one.”

“Yeah, but how did she know I was there?”

Alfred pauses, a finger tapping idly on the wheel. “That is indeed a very good question, young sir.”

“Something else,” Dick says with a frown. “I’m pretty sure she was dressed like Batman.”

-----

The next week, dead robins are nailed to every school door in Gotham.

It makes the national news.

Dick’s honestly more concerned with the news part than the threat. More attention tends to make Gotham villains eager rather than nervous. Escalation would be bad. Dick can handle some pig’s blood and a few dead birds.

Unsurprisingly, not everyone shares these priorities.

“Are you sure you don’t want any help,” Garth asks, looking wide eyed at the news coverage. The rest of the Titans sit around the table for the weekly team meeting. “I mean yeah, Gotham’s harbor sucks, but I think I can manage for at least a few hours.”

“I’ve gotten much better at my force bubbles, too,” Raquel says. “I’m sure Dakota City can manage
if I miss a day or two.”

“Thanks, guys, but I can handle it.” He smiles. “Nothing that bad’s even happened yet.”

“Except you getting poisoned,” Jade adds, decidedly unhelpful.

A wince. “Alright, yeah, except for that. Really, though, that was more me not being careful than anything. I’m being much safer now. I don’t even have any bruises.”

Okay, maybe a few minor ones but nothing big. Taking down even common street thugs still takes some force, after all.

“This still doesn’t look good, Robin,” Zatanna says, worrying her lip. “I mean these look like pretty serious death threats. Are you sure you don’t want one of us...just to come with you on patrol even?”

Dick sighs, rubbing the back of his head. “Look, guys, it’s not that I don’t appreciate the offer. Trust me, I really do. But Gotham doesn’t do well with metas. The everyday criminals see them and get desperate and the more eccentric criminals take it as a challenge and go even crazier. A few years ago, Superman once stopped by for lunch and two banks blew up that night. Trust me, you don’t want metas in Gotham. It gets bad.”

“And this isn’t bad,” Donna says, gesturing at the monitor just as *Robin Must Die* shows up. “It’s not like they can get much crazier, right?”

He doesn’t say anything. Which is really kind of answer enough.


He grins. “I’m not leaving Gotham. It’s home.”

“Even if it sucks,” Garth mutters.


Dick stops, unsure how to say that giving Gotham up to another city’s heroes feels too much like defeat. Like admitting he failed. That he couldn’t hold up the legacy.

His eyes flick over to Roy, who’s looking back at him like he understands even if he doesn’t necessarily agree.

“I’ll call them if it’s necessary,” Dick concedes eventually. Donna glares. “No, really, I will, I promise. If I need their help, I’ll call them.”

Donna looks like she’s getting ready to argue when Roy puts a hand on her shoulder.

“Give it up,” Roy says. “That’s as good as we’re going to get for now.”

Donna rolls her eyes, but stays silent.

“Allright, then,” Dick announces, turning back to the group at large, “unless anyone has anything else, I think we’re good for this week’s meeting. Group training tomorrow at the usual time.”

As the meeting ends, the team gradually stands, talking to each other as they do and moving slowly towards the tower’s living area. Dick watches them go, checking his wrist computer for the time before heading in the direction of the zeta beam.
A hand catches his shoulder.

“And where do you think you’re going, Boy Wonder,” Donna asks.

He smiles apologetically. “I gotta go early for patrol. New threat and all, don’t want the Gothamites to get worried if they don’t see Robin.”

“They can wait a bit until your usual patrol hours,” Donna says. “Come on, weekly Titans’ movie night. It’s a tradition.”

He hesitates. “What if there’s a new lead?”

“Dick,” Donna says, voice威胁ingly sweet and careful not to carry, “our dear, dear fearless leader, please understand I say this with the utmost respect. You nearly died this week. The team watched you nearly die this week. We need to see you’re alright and you need a few mind numbing hours where you can focus on something other than the many things trying to kill you. So, no, you will not be missing movie night even if I have to get out my lasso and tie you to the chair myself.”

Dick stares at her. Donna smiles back.

“....What movie are we watching,” Dick asks.

Donna shrugs. “Who knows? It’s Garth’s night to choose so probably something with excessive ocean metaphors.”

-----

A few hours (and one movie) later, Dick is swinging across the skyline of Gotham and taking down low-level criminals. He’ll investigate the dead birds more later. Tonight, he has two different goals in mind. The first is to make sure that Gotham knows he’s still alive and patrolling. The second….well, let’s just say he’s following up on a hunch.

A good hunch, apparently, as it only takes a few hours before he catches a glint of red reflecting in the night sky behind him.

He lands in a crouch, turning and waiting.

“I know you’re there,” he says.

A second passes and nothing happens. Then a few more and finally a figure in black emerges from the darkness.

Dick catches the symbol and his heart beats faster.

The girl in the batsuit smiles. “I guess you figured it out after the incident last week. You’re looking much better, by the way.”

Dick didn’t comment. “How long have you been following me?”

“Just a few months,” she says, still smiling. “I had to wait until I was good enough I thought you wouldn’t spot me. I must’ve succeeded if it took this long….or you’ve been preoccupied.”

Months? That was concerning. Very, very concerning that he hadn’t been able to notice what was apparently an amateur trailing him for months.
He doesn’t say that but the girl shrugs anyway. “It’s not like I followed you every night.”

“Why are you following me at all?”

“To learn,” she says, abruptly serious. “I want to help.”

“No. It’s too dangerous.”

The girl frowns and Dick is sure if it was less dark, he’d see she’s glaring. “Like you’re one to talk, who saved who last week?”

“And I’m grateful. But that was a mistake on my part that I won’t make again. Gotham is dangerous. You need to go home.”

“Gotham is my home,” she says and yeah, definitely glaring. “Exactly as much as it is yours. You don’t have the right to tell me to stop.”

He sighs. “I have training. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Then, train me. It’s Gotham, everyone gets hurt. I just want to make sure people get hurt less.” She shakes her head. “Anyway, this isn’t even what I needed to tell you. I’ve got a lead on the dead robins.”

Alright, that’s definitely not what he was expecting.

“What is it?”

“Security footage outside a store caught footage of one of the guys putting up the birds,” she says, crossing her arms. “No matches on the police database, but I found him anyway. Rory Winston. No arrests but brought in for questioning no less than ten times on various cases over the years, all with one major trend.”

He waits.

“All organized crime cases in the South Channel Island district, right off the river.”


The girl nods. “Or was. The last time he was brought in was five months ago. Still, I bet the Penguin knows something.”

“I’ll find out,” he promises and then hesitates. “Thanks for the tip but this is still too dangerous for you.”

The girl huffs, frustrated. “When are you going to get that I just want to help you? I got you to the zeta, didn’t I?”

He cocks his head. “How did you hack the zeta system anyway?”

“I’m good with computers,” the girl says simply and she’s already walking to the edge of the roof.

“Wait,” he calls because he has to know, “why….why that costume? The symbol?”

The girl stops, looking down at the black bat that was so, so familiar to Dick’s eyes.

“Well,” she says, “I wasn’t going to call myself Robinette.”
“Then, who are you?”

The girl smiles and it’s a little bit sad, a little bit wistful, and a whole lot more determined.

“Call me Batgirl.”

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Alfred sets down a cup of chamomile tea gently on the work table—a subtle reminder that it is getting far past the time Dick should retire for the night.

“I just want to check a few more databases,” Dick says, distracted.

“For this….Batgirl, I presume.”

“Yeah.”

The computer pings, reporting no results found. Again.

He holds back a groan, turning in his chair to face Alfred. “It’s like she appeared out of nowhere.”

“If what she told you is true, perhaps she did. She certainly wouldn’t be the first to be motivated by last year’s losses. Something, I believe, you know well.”

“The Titans all had training beforehand,” Dick argues. “At least some. This girl…I don’t know. She was able to navigate the roofs pretty well, so she probably has at least some kind of athletic background. She seems young, maybe about my age but she was able to hack the zeta system and based on her tip, she has access to Gotham’s police system.”

Alfred hums. “I’m afraid I don’t have an answer for the police access. However, as for the former attributes, it is possible she developed the skills prior to her apparent interest in vigilantism. Similar to your acrobatics, young sir.”

“But I had Bruce to train me,” he mutters, looking down.

Alfred’s hand lands on his shoulder, squeezing slightly. “You did.”

Dick stays silent, reaching for the tea cup more to have something to do than anything else.

“….Alfred. Did…did Bruce ever have to deal with this? When he first started as Batman, I mean. Not the…not the Batgirl stuff but just…” He makes a vague outward gesture that could be the cave or Gotham or everything.

Alfred hesitates. “Master Bruce always had his own way of dealing with matters. A way that I did not always agree with.”

“But he managed,” Dick says, shoulders slumping. “Even when he first started out, he was already handling it better than I am.”

“I never said that, Master Dick” Alfred corrects with a frown. “I’d also like to remind you that Master Bruce had quite a bit more training and did not have the responsibilities of the League during his first years. However, if you want to know what truly helped him manage the most, then that didn’t come until a few years later.”
“What was it?”

“You,” Alfred says softly. “In my opinion, what truly aided Master Bruce the most was having a partner. Batman always needed a Robin.”

Dick stares and Alfred smiles back softly.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I believe it is time for an old man like me to retire for the night. When you are ready, Master Dick, more tea will be waiting upstairs.”

Dick nods, not quite able to swallow passed the lump in his throat to bid the man a proper goodnight. He watches as Alfred leaves up the stairs, the entrance to the batcave closing behind him with a soft click.

Dick doesn’t know how to say it, doesn’t have the words to tell anyone, but a fear that had always been tugging in the back of his mind was now settling into certainty.

If Batman always needed Robin, then Robin always needed Batman, too.

And Batman was gone.

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“I thought I told you this was dangerous,” Dick says, not in any way surprised when Batgirl lands quietly on the roof.

“Oh, please, you really think I’d let you do this without me,” she says, taking a seat on the roof beside him. “I’ve been monitoring this place since before I told you.”

He sighs, resigned. It’s not like he can really stop her short of knocking her unconscious or handcuffing her to the roof. And in Gotham, either of those options are more dangerous than just letting her tag along. He might as well use it to his advantage.

“So, what do you want anyway?”

“I told you. I want to help.” She rolls her eyes under the mask and the expression tugs at something so entirely familiar that Dick has to stop a second as he tries and fails to place it.

He frowns. “Are you trying to join the Titans or something?”

Batgirl snorts. “No, Boy Wonder, you can keep the new league to yourself. I’m a local girl. I just want to protect my home and, honestly, you seem like you could use some help.”

The weird thing is the last part isn’t even said like a taunt. Her voice goes softer, her eyes gentler. It’s almost like she cares about him.

Dick refrains from literally shaking the thought away. The talk with Alfred must still be getting to him.

“So, what’s the plan,” she asks, obviously deciding she was through with his interrogation for now.

Dick gestures. Across from them, floating just off the docks, is the Iceberg Lounge--home and base of operations to one Oswald Cobblepot, better known as Penguin.
“Penguin’s still short on hired thugs since the police raid last month,” he says. “That means he’s relying on the new top of the line security system.”

“Which we’re planning on cracking,” Batgirl surmises and there’s a sharp grin on her face that gives Dick that same weird sense of deja vu.

He nods. “Hack into the system from the roof, drop down, and surprise Penguin in his office with a few questions. That is,” his smirk turns challenging, “if you can keep up.”

And with that, he’s gone—disappearing into the shadows and sneaking across the docks in a series of complicated maneuvers that Bruce taught him during his very first year.

When he makes it onto the roof of the Iceberg Lounge, he’s alone. Good, he reminds himself, this was going to be hard enough without him worrying about a fresh faced vigilante getting caught along with it.

Of course, that train of thought doesn’t last more than five minutes until she was dropping down beside him and glaring. “You’re teaching me how you did that.”

Dick shrugs, feeling an odd mix of reluctantly impressed and annoyingly pleased. She is tenacious. That he could at least admit.

Too bad being tenacious didn’t stop you from being killed. He knows that from experience.

He breaks into a wiring box on the roof, attaches his wrist computer to it, and gets to work on cracking the security system.

Five minutes later and he’s still working and the top of the line security system just might be more difficult than he expected. He can handle it, though. He has to, the lead is too important so he has to figure it out.

“Let me,” a voice orders quietly and then Batgirl is pulling on his arm, bringing the keyboard over to her side.

Dick opens his mouth, probably to say something like it’s not as easy as it looks, but then there’s a sudden ping.

“I’m in,” she says, satisfied, before turning to meet his stare. “What? I told you I was good with computers.”

His mouth clicks shut. Alright, now, he’s definitely at least a little bit impressed.

“Come on,” she says, “we’ve only got twenty minutes before the system does another maintenance check. How are we getting through?”

Soundlessly, he moves to pry open the hatch to the building’s ventilation system and drops down. He hears Batgirl follow.

The thing about Gotham’s absurdly high number of career criminals is that breaking into their hideouts has become almost second nature by now. Dick barely even has to check the schematics on his computer while he navigates them deftly to the hall in front of the main office—Penguin has actually learned enough not to have a air duct inside his office.

A simple knockout gas gets rid of the two thugs guarding the door and then Dick’s dropping down to run a scan through the door and make sure there’s no hidden surprises waiting in the office.
One body. Judging by the shape and rather unique bio-metrics, it’s almost definitely the Penguin.

He narrows his eyes before turning to Batgirl behind him. “I don’t suppose I can convince you to guard the door? Penguin’s a threat even alone.”

Batgirl gives him a look and Dick shrugs, handing her a spare gas mask. “Worth a shot.”

Without the alarm system, he easily picks open the door to the office. He throws in another knockout gas, a lighter one this time meant to disorient, and uses the smoke to cloak his entrance. Batgirl’s right behind him.

If all goes according to plan, the gas will disorient the Penguin and give Dick enough time to secure him just long enough to question him about the dead birds.

The smoke is starting to clear and Dick moves in closer, readying a batarang behind his back.

The smoke clears. Penguin is sitting at his desk, wearing a gas mask.

Oh.

The Penguin regards him as if he’s a particularly irritating stain on his suit. He sighs heavily, slipping off the gas mask and sitting it on his desk. “Look, we could do the usual show and dance. I try to kill you, you try to stop me. But, frankly, I’m a busy man who’s been made significantly more busy by idiotic cops and their imbecilic raids. I haven’t had time to set up my new operation and do not have the time to entertain a child,” he gives an assessing look to Batgirl, “or children, I should say, no matter how meddlesome they can be. Ask your questions and leave.”

Dick blinks. Okay, not quite what he was planning but who’s he to look a gift penguin in the mouth.

“What do you know about Rory Winston?”

Penguin snorts, already turning back to his desk. “An idiot. One of my former employees and an incompetent one at that.”

“Former?”

“Yes,” Penguin says, a smirk blooming on his face. “Sadly, I don’t think the associate I traded him to fully comprehends the weight of Winston’s inadequacies. Pity.”

“Who did you trade him to?”

Penguin leans back in his chair. “Oh, just an associate of mine with some big plan to kill one small caped crusader. I think you may know him actually, goes by the Scarecrow.”

Dick’s heart thumps loudly in his chest. “Why are you telling us this?”

“Why, because I don’t like Crane,” Penguin says with a sneer. “He’s chaotic and tends to play with his food rather than just finishing the job. The only reason I gave him Winston was so he’d leave quicker. I don’t have time to waste on elaborate over dramatic schemes that are doomed to fail. I’m a businessman.”

Call Dick crazy but that seems a little bit too good natured for Gotham’s foremost crime lord.

“That’s very...generous.”

Penguin blinks before throwing back his head in an outright laugh.
“Oh no, little Robin, don’t misunderstand.” The laughs fade off into a wide grin. “I’m merely saying when I come to kill you, you won’t see it coming.”

The Penguin sighs, almost regretfully. “Now, I’m afraid that’s all the time I have for questions. Goodbye, children. I hope you don’t mind the cold.”

With that, the floor drops out from under Dick and Batgirl and they’re plunged into the dark, freezing waters of Gotham Harbor.

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Dick is still shivering slightly when Alfred brings him another blanket. He takes it, gratefully, and wraps it around his shoulders.

“So, I take it that, despite your near exposure to hypothermia, the conversation was a success?”

Dick nods eagerly. “It’s all fitting together. Scarecrow was reported missing from his cell two months ago and has been practically unseen since then. He was planning this. He must’ve recruited Poison Ivy, too. That explains the plant.” He pauses. “Though, it doesn’t tell me how many more might be working with him.”

“A terrifying thought,” Alfred agrees. “One that would almost certainly warrant assistance.”

He bites his lip, glancing up at Alfred cautiously. “You think I should contact Roy?”

“Though I am sure Mr. Harper’s aid would not be amiss, I was actually suggesting a more permanent option. Someone more local and already involved, perhaps.”

“Batgirl’s a civilian.”

“So were you all at one point in time,” Alfred reminds. “And, by the looks of it, this Batgirl seems determined not to stay a civilian for long. You did mention she helped hack into the security system tonight. There’s undoubtedly been less auspicious starts to heroism.”

“I thought you disproved of kids becoming vigilantes,” Dick asks. “Why do you think we should push her into it?”

Alfred raises an eyebrow. “Don’t mistake me, young sir. I do not believe we should ‘push’ anyone into anything, especially not something as risky as this lifestyle. However, I remember also saying that certain people could not be stopped from choosing it themselves. If that’s the case with Ms. Batgirl, then providing her with additional support becomes merely a necessary kindness.”

Dick frowns.

“I will also admit, Master Dick, that it would ease my mind considerably to know you would no longer be protecting Gotham alone.”

He sighs and turns back to the computer. “I’ll think about it, Alfred. First, though, I’m figuring out who she is.”

“I assume you have a lead,” Alfred asks, allowing the change in subject.

He holds up a small evidence bag. “I grabbed a few strands of hair while she was hacking into the security system. Running it through the cave’s databases now.”
He pulls up the ongoing search, almost finished, and smiles. The cave’s databases are the best in the world. Not just Gotham criminals but from every police precinct around the globe. Not to mention, all the various organizations—legal and otherwise—that Dick or Bruce had managed to hack into. And the private files that Batman had kept on every Wayne family associate. And the other files on League members and their families. To put it nicely, Batman had always leaned a bit far towards the paranoid.

The computer pings in the satisfying tone of a search being finished and he pulls up the results, feeling triumphant.

The results come up. Dick stares.

Behind him, Alfred lets out a quiet, “Oh, dear.”

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The next night, Dick is in his Robin uniform and standing on a roof without making even the slightest move towards the cover of shadows. He doesn’t need to; he wants to be seen. He’s waiting. He doesn’t have to wait long.

Batgirl drops onto the roof barely thirty minutes after he arrived. “Hey, nice to see you waited. I heard that Scarecrow’s been spotted by Park Row so looks like Penguin told and--

“Barbara.”

Batgirl stops, cuts off right in the middle of her sentence and stares at him with wide eyes.

“So it is you,” Dick says and something in his chest feels like it’s sinking. “You’re Batgirl.”

“Yeah,” Batgirl-- Barbara-- admits slowly and let’s out an awkward laugh. “How’d you figure it out?”

He holds up the evidence bag. “Grabbed it last night and ran it at the cave.”

Her eyes narrow. “The cave had my DNA on file?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dick says, even though it does. It so does, because this is Barbara. This is Babs, his best civilian friend now staring at him under a mask. “I’ve have to go after Scarecrow. Don’t follow me.”

With that, Dick’s heading to the edge of the roof and reaching for his grappling gun, not even daring to look back.

“Wait! You’re not just going to leave me here! We’re working together.”

“No, we’re not,” Dick says, voice firm.

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am.”
Dick doesn’t bother answering, aiming with the grappling gun.

Behind him, Barbara swears. “Dang it, Dick, quit being such a freaking martyr all the time!”

Dick freezes, turning back slowly to face Barbara.

She’s glaring at him, as much anger as it is something unreadable.

“I know it’s you, Dick Grayson,” Barbara says quietly. “I’ve known for half a year. You’re my best friend. Did you really think I wouldn’t notice all the bruises, how you’re always tired the day after a big Titans’ mission, the way you’re always busy at night, the scars.”

He swallows. “Why didn’t you…”

“Say anything?” Barbara shrugs. “You had enough on your plate already. Why make it harder?” She takes a breath, steeling her nerves in a way that’s so utterly familiar that Dick feels like an idiot for not recognizing her sooner. “I’m not trying to make anything harder for you, Dick. I’m trying to make it easier.”

“Please, Babs,” Dick says even though he knows it’s hopeless. “You can’t come. Not on this.”

“No, Dick,” she says and she’s already walking to stand next to him on the roof. “You just can’t stop me.”

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Un-affectionately nicknamed “Crime Alley”, Park Row is a bad street to be on even by Gotham standards. Other than the wide and varied illegal activities, the only conceivable reason to go there is a small long closed theater that hosts the memorial for Martha and Thomas Wayne.

Dick prays that’s not an omen.

Park Row is also where the Scarecrow was last reported.

Barbara’s still behind, staying as close as a shadow, as Dick makes his way across roofs and alleys. Her presence is a weight in his chest that makes him feel like he’s drowning and as bad as it would be for Gotham, he hopes that they don’t find anything tonight.

It’s a hope without reason. By the looks of it, Barbara will just be back the next night and the next night and then every night until she…

Dick takes a breath and focuses.

Scarecrow’s a genius but he’s not subtle. He likes a show too much.

Two hours into the patrol and Dick sees him. Crane is in full costume and ducking between buildings in all his gangly glory. He grimaces when he sees the costume; it’s too blatant. He’s starting to get careless, eager for a confrontation. Dangerous.

Dick turns to Barbara and presses something into her hands.

She tilts her head quizzically, holding up the syringe.

“Antidote for fear toxin,” Dick whispers. “It’s formulated from the last we had available so Crane’s
likely changed it by now. It still should be mostly effective. If you get hit, use it immediately.”

Barbara nods and finally there’s a hint of fear there, he almost asks her to stay on the roof, but then the fear turns back to determination and the chance is gone.

Scarecrow’s approaching an old warehouse so Dick motions that Barbara take one side and he takes the other so they can corner him. Optimistically, he will already have subdued him before Scarecrow can act. In Dick’s experience, optimistic outcomes rarely see the light of day in Gotham.

Barbara’s already disappeared to the other side so he swings down and catches himself on the side of a warehouse window.

He waits and when Scarecrow comes running into the warehouse, Dick throws in some knockout gas and follows it quickly with a bola aimed directly at Scarecrow’s feet.

The Scarecrow just laughs, twisting out of the bola’s path with all the sharpness of a spider.

“Nice try,” Scarecrow taunts, “but Penguin already dropped me a warning, avaricious as it may have been. And I’m simply afraid now’s not the time for the grand finale.” The masks’ smile stretches unnaturally wide. “I wouldn’t want to rush your death after all.”

That’s all he gets before Barbara hits him hard from behind.

The laughter stops and Scarecrow leaps back out of range, slashing out at Barbra with too sharp gloves that Dick is sure are covered in toxins.

Dick flies into the fray, his kick landing on Scarecrow’s face with a satisfying crunch and knocking the man to the ground. Scarecrow recovers quickly and Dick has to duck a half a second away from being clawed in the face.

Barbara’s coming up on his right and Scarecrow notices as soon as he does.

“So, you brought more to die,” Scarecrow spits out and then he twists his arm forward with enough power to sink sharp tipped fingers right into Barbara’s throat if she moved just a tiny bit slower.

Dick panics, throwing out a block to stop the arm and not paying attention to what Scarecrow does with his other hand.

A sickly green smoke explodes between the two groups. Dick’s heartbeat starts beating erratically as Scarecrow laughs unseen behind the fog.

“Until next time, little bird. Don’t worry, I made friends, too.”

The toxin’s starting to kick in with whispers at the back of his mind and Dick pushes it away to track the sound of Scarecrow’s footsteps. To the left and getting further, he gets ready to swing after him and--

Barbara screams.

Dick freezes as if cold water is dropped down his spine. He looks around frantically until he sees Barbara on the ground, looking around with wide terrified eyes while the antidote syringe is clenched tightly in her hands.

Crap. Crap, Dick should have thought about this. No one can truly expect the effects of fear toxin the very first time, much less keep stable enough to administer the antidote.
He eases down gently by her side, careful not to make any sudden movements as he tries to pry the syringe out of her hands.

“D-dick?” Barbara’s eyes are slowly trying to focus on him and Dick nods, reaching out his free hand to grab hers.

“Yeah, Babs, it’s me. I’m here. Just give me one second and you’ll feel a lot better. Trust me.”

He finally gets the syringe and sticks it as gently as possible in Barbara’s arm. He pushes it down and watches as Barbara’s breathing starts to get slower.

“You’re not dead,” she asks and her voice is so painfully hesitant.

Dick swallows. “No, Babs, I’m right here. I’m fine.”

*Failure,* a voice whispers in the back of his mind, a reminder that he still needs to take the antidote himself. *Mistake. Not Worthy. Never Worthy.*

Dick eases Barbara off the floor, supporting most of her weight on his shoulders.

Just for a second, the shadows warp, getting darker until a figure appears from the shadows.

“You failed me,” booms the deep voice of Batman. “You failed everyone. How many will you lose now? How did you think you could ever be Robin without me?”

Breathing heavily, Dick stares at the shadow and carefully administers the second antidote into his arm.

The figure doesn’t fade from his view until long after they’ve left the warehouse.

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Barbara’s still out of it, most likely from lack of exposure to the antidote rather than the toxin, so Dick takes her back to the cave to recover. It’s not like he has many more secrets to protect.

By the time dawn breaks over a bleak Gotham Saturday, both the toxin and antidote have run through their systems, leaving Barbara’s unconscious and curled up in the cave’s med bay, while Dick sits by the computer, exhausted but far too nervous to risk dreaming. Instead, he does what he can by running the new fear toxin through the computer and formulating a better antidote. They’re lucky, Crane hadn’t had time to modify it much. Though, that does raise the much scarier question of what he was doing instead.

The question is answered a few hours later when the cave computer blares out an alert before pulling up the Gotham News Network.

“Breaking News: Gotham Police and experts at Gotham Mercy General hospital are advising parents to keep children indoors and under constant supervision,” a reporter announces, face grim as she stands outside a local playground. “Fear toxin has been found in child sized Robin masks, distributed in bulk over playgrounds and residential neighborhoods. No deaths have been reported but at least twelve children have been hospitalized. If your child has been exposed, please report to Gotham Mercy General immediately for treatment.”

Standing stock still, he watches as the newscast runs, continuing on into symptoms of fear toxin and
police efforts to clear the masks from the streets. Dick feels sick. In fact, he kind of thinks he might throw up but he pushes that down and reaches for the keyboard with shaking hands.

He pulls up Gotham Mercy’s medical files and starts reading. Twelve cases. Twelve children, all under the age of ten. All of them poisoned though, thankfully, with a dosage too low to cause permanent damage. Who knows how many would come by the end of the day?

“Shit,” he swears under his breath and looks to his own Robin mask, basically identical and laying innocently on the cave’s table.

His stomach boils and Dick has a crazy urge to just…to just crumple up the mask and throw it away. To burn it. It and all his other Robin gear until it’s just nothing. Until it’s just ashes, fit enough to buried outside next to Bruce’s empty coffin.

“Dick?”

He doesn’t turn around.

“Dick,” Barbara calls, coming to stand behind him. “What’s wrong?”

He wordlessly pulls up a write up of the news report and waits.

As she reads, Barbara’s hands go white where she’s clenching his chair.

“...oh,” she says finally. “Well, I guess this explains the text from my dad.”

She holds her phone out to him and Dick sees the text, have to work late, stay inside, followed by Barbara’s short, ok.

Wonder what the Commissioner would think if he knew Barbara had never even been home?

He tries to swallow around the lump in his throat and doesn’t look at her.

“Dick,” she says again, softly, turning his head until he has to look at her, “tell me what you’re thinking. Please.”

Dick feels like he can’t breathe. “....I’m sorry.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, voice breaking on the last word. “This is my fault. All of it. You getting hurt. Those kids getting poisoned. All of it. I thought I could do it. I thought I could be Robin without Batman but I can’t. I can’t, Babs! And the longer I try, the more everyone’s going to get hurt until there’s nothing left. Until everything I care about is dead and I’m….”

Alone. Failed, again.

“Oh, Dick,” he hears her say and then he’s being folded up into a hug, “you self-flagellating, sacrificing idiot. When are you going to learn you don’t have to carry around the weight of the world all the time? That not everything that happens is your fault?”

“Babs, I can’t do it,” he digs his fingers into her shoulder, holding her closer. “I can’t be Robin like this. Not without him. I can’t be Robin alone.”

“You don’t have to be,” she whispers. “I’m here. I can help. I won’t let you be alone.”
Dick’s heartbeat stutters. “I can’t lose another friend, either. I can’t lose you, Babs.”

Barbara pulls back, holding his hands snugly against hers. “I can’t lose you either, Boy Wonder. Gotham’s not the only one I want to save.”

He doesn’t realize he’s crying until she brings a hand to wipe away a tear.

“Train me,” Barbara says. “Give me as much training as you think I need and I’ll keep going. But, don’t keep pushing me away, Dick. Don’t tell me to leave again. You’re my best friend. And I’d give up the world for you, Dick Grayson, but I’m done giving you up for the world.”

He breathes. “...Babs.”

Barbara smiles. “I told you, Dick. It’s Batgirl.”

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“I’m not saying they’re not doing good work,” says Jay Garrick as another reporter shoves a microphone in his face, “I’m saying it’s work they shouldn’t be doing. They’re children. Every time they put on a mask, they’re encouraging others to do the same and it’s only a matter of time before someone gets killed. Trust me, I know. The kids poisoned by the Robin masks are just a small part of a much larger problem.”

Barbara reaches around him to click off the news feed. “Stop listening to that, Dick. It doesn’t help anything.”

“He might be right,” Dick admits.

“Or he might be wrong,” Barbara says with a shrug. “Or the entire issue might be pointless because ‘children’ or not, we’re the only ones actually getting things done. It doesn’t help much to say something’s a problem if there’s no other solution.”

Dick doesn’t know if agrees with that but he offers her a small smile anyway.

“Now,” she asks, “what have you been doing besides beating yourself up?”

He rolls his eyes and obligingly pulls up the other computer tab. “Nothing on Scarecrow. Cameras picked up the Riddler out by the Burnley Freight Yards.”

On the screen, the Riddler swings his legs while sitting on an unused train compartment, twirling his cane as he goes.

Barbara frowns. “What’s he doing?”

“By the looks of it, absolutely nothing. I think it’s a trap.”

“Penguin said Scarecrow was trying to recruit other villains,” she says, worrying her lip. “And Scarecrow said he had ‘friends’. Riddler probably knows something and we know where he is, it might be our biggest lead.”

“I know,” he sighs. “But a trap’s still a trap.”

Barbara smiles. “And that’s why you have me as backup.”
He doesn’t answer, flipping his mask over in his hands.

“Dick, don’t push me out.”

He sighs and stands, heading for a case right beside the batarangs. He tosses her a comm. “Stay in the shadows but in a place where you can still observe the freight yard. Riddler might not know about you yet and if we need it, it’s better to have the element of surprise.”

Barbara nods, putting the comm in her ear and slipping on her mask.

“And, Babs….please, be careful,” he says quietly.

Her smile goes soft. “You, too.”

She’s heading to the cave exit with Dick right behind her when his phone buzzes with a text alert from Roy.

_Saw the news, looked bad. Need help?_

Dick hesitates and looks up briefly to see Barbara waiting for him.

He texts back before following her.

_Actually, I already have some._

-----

By the time Robin approaches the freight yard, the Riddler is merrily swinging his cane to bash in the windows of old trains.

When he sees Dick, he spins around to point the cane at him.

“Riddle me this, hmmmm, what’s a bird without a bat?”

Dick doesn’t react. “I want to ask you about Scarecrow.”

The Riddler sighs dramatically, bringing the cane back in a wide arc until the steel tip smashes against the train with a loud _crunch!_

“No, no, no, that’s not how the game works, you see. Let’s try again. What’s a bird without a bat?”

He stays quiet.

“Ahhh, maybe I should rephrase. What’s one tiny, little, bright colored bird without _the Bat_?”

Dick grits his teeth.

Riddler pouts, his mouth turning down in a garish parody of sympathy.

“Well say, I suppose _you_ don’t know either.”

“I need to ask you about Scarecrow,” Dick repeats.

“Oh! A new game,” Riddler says, clapping his hands together. “But, now the question is this: am I willing to play it?”
“Unless, you want to end up in Arkham’s maximum security ward next time you’re admitted.”

The Riddler laughs, delighted. “That’s not really much of a threat now, is it? Hmmm, some things never really start and never really end, you know? You put me in Arkham, I escape, we fight, put me in Arkham, escape, fight, Arkham, escape, fight, Arkham….It’s like a circle! Just like a circle really, no beginning and no ending.” The Riddler tilts his head in consideration. “You know I think I will tell you about Scarecrow. Would you like to know why?”

Dick gets the feeling that he really doesn’t. “Why, Riddler?”

“Because some things do have endings, don’t they,” the Riddler asks. “It turns out bats have endings, after all?” The Riddler lowers his voice, leaning closer like a child at a sleepover. “Can I tell you a secret? ….I don’t really like endings much, do you? Not like how the Scarecrow wants.”

Dick blinks. “You don’t want me to die?”

The Riddler snorts, looking for a moment entirely sane. “Well, I’m not the Joker, am I? That maniac’s dead.” A wide smile breaks out on Riddler’s face and the madness is back. “Besides, I’m fine with just Robin. Joker was right about one thing: you always have had the prettiest screams. The more the merrier, I say! You all die so easily, after all, and I really do loathe endings.”

Dick fights back an instinctive shiver because really, it can never be understated just how truly insane Gotham can get.

“So, Robin,” the Riddler chirps happily, “riddle me this. One big bad Scarecrow wants to get rid of one itsy bitsy bird. So, who does he call? Not the Riddler! No, no, this Scarecrow is very, very rude and not all interested in the fun games the Riddler can offer. Instead, he gets help from some other friends. Another fat, greedy bird gives him a few helpers to play with. A pretty rose gives him some new toys. And last, a big old pig gives him somewhere to play. Here’s the riddle now: where would the mean Mister Scarecrow go?”

Dick runs the information through his head. “Penguin lent Scarecrow the men, Poison Ivy gave the lab equipment, and Professor Pyg supplied the hideouts.” He takes another second. “That means Scarecrow’s working out of the slaughterhouse.”

“Hmmm, maybe.” the Riddler shrugs. “If so, you certainly didn’t hear it from me.”

There’s the sound of a train approaching and Riddler grins. “Now, that sounds like either my ride or yours. Tick tock, Robin, who knows what Scarecrow’s working on next? I do hope it doesn’t kill you!”

The train flies by beside them and, before Dick can say anything, the Riddler jumps, catching his cane on the railing and swinging himself on board.

Dick lets him go. There are more urgent things to do.

He clicks on his comm. “Batgirl, meet me down here. Scarecrow’s at the South Channel slaughterhouse.”

“Gotcha,” Barbara’s voice comes through. “What’s our next move?”

Dick smiles grimly. “I say we surprise him for once.”
“Okay,” Barbara says, focusing the binoculars on the slaughterhouse. “I know we said that the thing with the Riddler was probably a trap and in turns out, he just wanted to offer his creepy version of help. But, this here? This is definitely a trap.”

“Yeah, I know,” Dick agrees, “and probably a lethal one, even by Scarecrow’s standards. That’s why I’m going to spring it.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I don’t need to tell you how crazy that sounds, right? Like you can hear it, too. Please tell me you can hear it, too.”

“Believe it or not, I actually do have a plan.”

“Which is?”

Dick takes a breath, stalling more for himself than he is for Barbara.

“It’s dangerous… I’m going to need your help,”

Barbara smiles. “Anytime, Boy Wonder.”

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Surprisingly, even when walking into a trap, Dick isn’t stupid enough to use the front door.

Instead, he uses the window.

Swinging down from the roof, he hits the window using his full momentum, shattering the glass and landing in a crouch inside.

“Give it up, Scarecrow,” he calls. “I know you’re here.”

Speakers in the ceiling spark to life and Dick hears Crane laugh. “Right on schedule for your grand finale. Trust me, Robin, it will be a real scream.”

Green gas starts flowing from the ceiling and Dick quickly sticks on his rebreather, scanning the room for signs of Scarecrow.

A shadow moves through the fog.


The shadow moves and a cleaver swings down, missing Dick by centimeters. Under the pig mask, Professor Pyg scowls at him, clenching a cleaver in one hand and a scalpel in the other.

“Not perfect,” Professor Pyg mutters, mainly to himself. “Nowhere near good enough. Maybe after some work.”

“I told you,” Scarecrow says over the speaker. “I’ve got friends now, too.”

Professor Pyg dives forward with the scalpel and Dick deflects using the armor on his arm.

“Where are you, Scarecrow,” Dick calls into the fog.
“Here,” a voice whispers directly behind him and Dick barely has time to duck before claws emerge from the fog, aiming directly at his head.

Dick moves quickly, positioning himself to where they’re both in view and holding up his escrima sticks in a defensive position.

Under the mask, Dick can just make out Crane’s grin.

“Ready to die, little Robin,” The Scarecrow asks, brandishing gloves with sharp points coated in some kind of liquid. “Good news, I finally had time to reformulate my toxin. This one is much more potent than the one I was forced to use on the masks.” He pauses for a moment in false contemplation. “Why, I’d say even one little scratch and you’ll die screaming. If you don’t go insane first, that is.”

Beside him, Professor Pyg lets out a warning growl. “That’s not the agreement, Crane.”

“Right, right.” The Scarecrow moves around the edges of Dick’s defense, looking for a weakness. “Pyg here wants a crack at you first--a special little doll for his collection.” A shrug. “Personally, I think he’ll fail but it will be so entertaining to watch him try.”

Professor Pyg thrust forward again with the cleaver and Dick barely bats it away before dodging quickly to the left to avoid Scarecrow’s claws.

“You said there was another,” Pyg mutters, stabbing forward with the scalpel. “I wanted two for the next experiment.”

The Scarecrow tilts his head, the motion as sharp as the claws. “Where is your new friend?”

“She couldn’t come,” Dick pants out, hitting Pyg hard as he moves too close.

Scarecrow’s nails barely miss his throat, driving Dick closer to the wall. “You’re alone, then? How very….ill considered.”

Dick grins. “Who said I was alone?”

Just then, police sirens blare out from the front of the building as red and blue lights up the windows.

The Scarecrow snarls, whipping his head around to face Dick. “Exactly how many more do you want to die, Robin? Did you really think I don’t have more fear gas? How long do you think your cop friends will survive under it? How many do you think will die crying out for their hero?”

Dick’s face pales dramatically. “No, wait! Scarecrow!”

The Scarecrow turns to Pyg. “Keep him occupied while I take care of our visitors up front.”

“I’m not your lackey, Crane,” Professor Pyg snipes back but Scarecrow’s already disappeared.

Dick doesn’t have much time. Not if he wants to get out with everybody alive.

“Not his lackey, at all. I’m an artist, you know.” Pyg moves closer, holding up his scalpel. “I’m going to make you all…. perfect.”

Professor Pyg swings the cleaver forward directed right at Dick’s stomach and Dick decides to stop holding back.

He jumps, dodging the blade in the air and using Pyg’s shoulder as a springboard to flip over him
and land behind him. Pyg growls, swinging blindly behind him and Dick kicks at his knee, sending him down hard before he can land the hit.

Pyg’s fast when he needs to be. Still on the ground, he throws the scalpel right at Dick’s chest and by the time Dick’s deflected it, Pyg’s already up and charging forward with the cleaver.

Dick throws a batarang that Pyg’s cleaver knocks out of the air as if it were a fly. Dick gets ready to dodge again before…

A bola comes from behind, wrapping around Pyg’s arms and legs and sending him to the ground. Barbara lands behind him, wearing a smile. “How’d I do?”

“Amazing.” Dick kicks the cleaver away before aiming a well placed punch to Professor Pyg’s head, knocking him unconscious. “Scarecrow bought it entirely. He’s still up front handling the ‘police’.”

Barbara frowns as he makes sure Pyg is out and secure. “The lights and siren sound effects won’t hold him back for long.”

“I know,” Dick says. “He’ll be back in probably a few seconds. How long until phase two of the plan?”

“Roughly three minutes,” Barbara says.

“Then, let’s take him out quick. Avoid the gloves, they’re coated with the new fear toxin.”

She nods and that’s all they have time for before a figure comes tearing out of the darkness.

“A trick,” the Scarecrow sneers, swinging his claws down fast and deadly. “A clever little trick from a clever little bird and bat. Not clever enough though.”

It was a hard lesson to learn but Dick has come to understand that there is a time for quips and a time for focusing your entire attention to making sure you don’t get disemboweled. This situation falls in the later category, unfortunately.

Dick flips up above Scarecrow and aims a kick to the back of his neck. Scarecrow turns lightning quick and Dick has to dodge in midair as the claws almost catch his leg.

A batarang flies by, exploding a bit too close for Dick’s comfort but does the job of knocking Scarecrow away and disorienting him for half a second. Barbara hits him the moment he goes down, kicking at one of his arms hard.

There’s the sharp sound of an impact and Scarecrow growls. Dick sees his opening.

Scarecrow is focused on Barbara, injured arm drawn further in as the other one lashes out. Two batarangs spin out of Dick’s hands and into the air.

There’s a sound of slicing fabric and the batarangs embed in the wall.

The gloves fall to the ground and Scarecrow’s eyes follow them.


Barbara punches him and the Scarecrow steps back, right into the path of Dick’s bola before going down hard with arms wrapped secured tightly at his side.
“Secure the gloves,” Dick calls, already leaping forward to snap bat cuffs around Scarecrow’s unprotected wrists.

“Got them,” Barbara answers and Dick throws her a glance to see the gloves wrapped carefully in a spare piece of fabric that might be her cape.

The Scarecrow laughs from where he’s tied up and cuffed on the ground. “So, the two little children think they took down the Scarecrow and a pig, do they? But, how long can they hold us? How long until I get out? How long until I watch them scream and moan until their little hearts give up out of terror?”

Police sirens go off outside of the building. Real ones this time.

Dick smiles. “Guess we’ll find out. If you manage to get out of Arkham, that is. I hear they updated their security protocols but I’m sure you’ll see for yourself real soon.”

The Scarecrows snarls again, mouth opening under the mask to spew out another vicious threat when Barbara steps forward and covers it with good old fashioned duct tape.

Dick almost laughs.

After Scarecrow and Professor Pyg have been hauled away in a maximum security transport van and the entire scene is covered with police tape, Commissioner Gordon steps out the back of the building and into the moonlight.

“Nice job in there. DA’s going to put them away for life, as much good as that ever does.”

Still in costume, Dick steps out from the shadows.

“Thanks, but I didn’t do it alone.”


Somehow, Dick doesn’t think he’d be saying that if he knew who was under the mask, but that’s not his secret to tell.

“Truthfully, kid, I’m just happy you’re not working alone anymore.” Gordon sighs, looking towards the city. “Gotham’s hard enough, you need a partner to get you through it. Even if you’re Robin.”

Dick frowns, weighing his next words against his tongue. “…Commissioner, I don’t know if I feel much like a Robin anymore. I think… I think whoever I was then might have died with Batman.”

Commissioner Gordon regards him carefully. “Son, let me tell you something I’ve learned from a long time working with things that aren’t quite what they seem. It doesn’t matter what you call yourself, what matters is what you do.” Gordon shrugs. “Don’t feel like calling yourself ‘Robin’, then don’t. Just keep doing what’s right. And when you figure out a name that fits, make sure you let me know. Robin or whoever you are, Gotham needs you.”

Dick smiles and when Gordon next turns around, he’s not surprised at all to find himself standing alone.
“Jonathan Crane and Lazlo Valentin, alternatively known as the Scarecrow and Professor Pyg, were arrested last night in connection with various death threats and the Robin mask poisonings. They are currently in holding at Arkham Asylum until trial later this month. Police have issued a statement that the arrest was thanks to none other than Gotham’s very own hero, Robin. But, that’s not all, sources close to the station reveal that Robin might be working with a new—”

Dick mutes the television as Barbara wonders into the manor’s living room.

“Hey,” she greets, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear and folding herself next to him on the couch, “Alfred let me in. Sorry for having to run off so fast last night, didn’t want to chance running into my dad.”

“It’s fine,” he reassures and she smiles, quirking an eye at the news channel.

“You look pleased. Glad to see that Gotham’s finally got their head out of their ass and remembered why Robin’s a hero in the first place?”

He shrugs. “Public opinion’s fickle. Trust me, they’ll be right back to demanding our capes hung on the wall come the next Blackgate breakout.”

Barbara flicks him in the head. “Pessimism doesn’t suit you, Dick Grayson.”

“Ouch, sorry.” He grins. “Anyway, that’s not what I was thinking about.”

“Hmm?”

“I think…” Dick takes a breath, “I think I’m going to give up being Robin. I can’t do it. Not without Batman.”

“Dick.” Barbara straightens beside him. “We talked about this. It’ll be okay just give it time and—”

“I know,” he says simply. “Let me finish. I’m giving up Robin but I’m not giving up everything else. Protecting Gotham, the Titans, they’re who I am. Robin, though. Robin was Batman’s partner. It was my mother’s name for me. I chose it to honor their memory and then it became so much more than that but…” Dick shakes his head. “It will always be important to me but it’s not who I am anymore.”

“Then, who are you?”.

His expression softens. “Let’s just say I think I got an idea for a name change already.”

“It’s not…” she hesitates warily. “It’s not Batman, is it?”

Dick’s head shoots up in surprise before shaking his head immediately. “No. Definitely not. Actually, it doesn’t even have anything to do with him, really. It’s an old Kryptonian story Superman told me once. A story about rebirth.”

“Oh,” Barbara relaxes, “okay, that sounds….that sounds better.”

“Yeah,” he agrees softly before clearing his throat. “There’s something else I was thinking about, too?”
“More than just a name change,” Barbara teases.

Dick nods seriously. “I was thinking that... that just because I’m not Batman’s partner anymore doesn’t mean I don’t need a partner.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “And I’m not saying I’ll always be a good partner. I’ll... get worried and I still reserve the right to freak out if you get hurt and... and, well, just don’t... don’t di-- get too hurt. Just please, if you can, don’t do that. But yeah,” he looks up, “if you still want that training, what do you say?”

Barbara doesn’t smile, instead she just looks at him as if understands how hard that all was for him to say, how much harder it’s going to be to do. Dick thinks he might love her even more for it. She doesn’t smile but there is a light there that wasn’t there before, unique and different from the one that went out two years ago.

“Partners,” she agrees.

She doesn’t smile and neither does he. But, there is hope and that’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Comments and kudos are always appreciated!

Next Chapter: Year 3: A Judas Among Titans
Chapter Notes

Because of length, this chapter is split into two parts to make it easier to read. The second part posted tomorrow.

Also, as a note, I've actually never watched the early 2000's Teen Titans cartoon (not sure how that happened, I've been meaning to watch it for years). As a result, characterizations and story arcs are based largely on their comic book counterparts rather than the show.

Last, I promise I'm really trying not to character bash any characters (except I suppose villains). However, some characters will be in ideological opposition to others without being inherently "bad" or villainous characters.

Ages of major characters:
Dick Grayson (Nightwing): 16
Roy Harper (Red Arrow): 20
Donna Troy (Troia): 17
Garth (Tempest): 18
Jade Nguyen (Cheshire): 21
Zatanna Zatara: 17
Raquel Ervin (Rocket): 18
Barbara Gordon (Batgirl): 16

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s nearly dawn when Barbara and Dick stumble back to the cave, practically collapsing.

“Dick,” Barbara groans from the computer chair, “tell me that was the last one. Please, tell me that was the last one.”

Laying on the floor, because Dick gave up silly things like propriety four hours ago, he checks his wrist computer. “Yep, last of the Blackgate escapees are officially back in their cells.”

“Finally. And they better stay there and not plan a breakout for at least another six months or so help me, Dick, I’m throwing Warden Strange into a cell next to them.”

He grunts in agreement, focusing instead on the feeling of the cool cave floor on his back. Why don’t they have comfier seating in the cave? Probably a ploy from Alfred to get them to spend more time in the actual manor.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to feel my arms for days.”

He hums. “Yeah, we should probably double our strength training. Maybe endurance, too.”

“Dick,” comes Barbara’s muffled warning from where her head’s laid on the desk, “let me have this. We can talk about various training regimen changes in the morning.” A pause. “Later in the morning, I mean. What day is it?”
“Thursday. Breakout was three days ago,” he answers, feeling absurdly glad it’s summer and they
don’t have to manage school on top of this.

She murmurs something in response, already sounding half asleep and he smiles, feeling bizarrely at
peace as he relaxes against hard stone. There’s an odd sense of reflection only attained by those not
quite yet asleep. Strange stretched out moments where current worries are set aside and the brain
goes deeper to the things no one ever has time for when awake.

Dick thinks about time.

It’s been a year and a half since Barbara officially became Batgirl. She’s better now, faster, more
dangerous. Dick’s not as afraid every time they leave for patrol even if he doubts the fear will ever
go away completely. With the exception of a few training sessions, Babs is still firmly refusing the
offer to join the Titans. She says Gotham’s where she’s needed and, well, she’s not definitely not
wrong. The city’s come to know her just as well as they do Dick--maybe even more so since he still
gets called ‘Robin’ half the time instead of ‘Nightwing’. Barbara’s always been amazing; but, as
Batgirl, she soars.

Dick’s just happy to fly beside her.

The Titans, meanwhile, are a month away from their second anniversary, which still feels too big and
too strange to fully accept yet. They’re amazing. They’re so amazing and Dick is so, so lucky that he
still has them, that he can count them as teammates as well as friends. And, sometimes, in the quiet
time in between seconds when he’s just sitting in the Tower and watching, he allows himself to
wonder what his old team would’ve thought if they could see them now? He hopes….he hopes
they’d be proud.

Time is a weird thing.

Dick is sixteen years old. He’s been Nightwing, partners with Batgirl, for eighteen months. He’s led
the Titans for twenty-three months.

And it’s been thirty-three months and ten days since the invasion. Three months shy of three years.

Come to think of it, there’ll be another memorial anniversary soon. He’ll probably have to speak at it.
They always ask him, for some reason. He’s not sure why. He still doesn’t know what to say.

The cave computer and the one on his wrist buzz simultaneously with an alert, probably for the best
judging by the direction of his thoughts. Barbara jumps awake in the chair, barely keeping from
unbalancing.

“What is it,” she asks, groggily. “Not another breakout. Please, say it’s not a breakout.”

“No another breakout,” he says, pulling up the report. “An alert from the Watchtower space station.”

“I thought that was shut down.”

“The sensors are still functioning,” he answers as he begins reading the report. There’s a picture.

His blood freezes.

“I’m calling in all the Titans,” Dick says, already up and grabbing more batarangs. “Babs, I need you
to stay here and do a world wide scan for news reports. Anything, anything unusual, send out an
immediate alert.”
Barbara’s fully awake now. “What’s wrong, Dick?”

“According to the report, a small comet just broke Earth’s atmosphere and is set to land in an isolated stretch of Yellowstone Forest.”

“A comet? That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Yeah, but this doesn’t look like a comet.” Dick holds out his computer to show Barbara.

The picture’s grainy, taken from one of the Watchtower’s old surveillance cameras and of an object going at a high velocity. What is distinguishable is a circle too flat and smooth to be a comet with metal wings sticking out from the side.

An alien ship.

The first one since the invasion.

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There is a palpable tension in the air as the team makes their way through the forest, closing in on the newly landed ship.

“Maybe they’re friendly,” Raquel suggests quietly, “like Superman or the Martians.”

Based on the speed and last known coordinates, the ship made land ten minutes ago in a valley just further down. Ten minutes can be a very long time. During the invasion, ten minutes saw a tenth of the League dead--more members than the current entirety of active heroes.

“Maybe,” Dick allows but no one, including Raquel, makes any move to relax their guard.

“And if they’re not friendly,” Jade asks, tone expressionless.

“If they’re not friendly…” He hesitates before saying what they’re all thinking. “We can’t withstand another invasion. If they move to attack, we don’t have the option to retreat. We hit them hard here, contain the risk before it even has a chance to move on to civilian areas.”

Grim acceptance meets the order.

Donna moves to cover his back. “What’s our plan of action if they have zeta rays like before?”

“Move. Remember never try to block them. Don’t forget evasion training. Dodge them and keep moving until one of us is in position to take it out.”

He shares a look with Roy. He and Roy are the team’s best at long distance attacks. If it comes down to it, they’ll be in charge of taking out the weapon.

That’s all the time they have before they top the hill and are hit by the smell of disturbed dirt.

The sight of the ship greets them next and…it’s not what they were expecting.

Zatanna speaks first. “Nightwing…that doesn’t look like a landing to me.”
“It’s a crash,” Garth says.

A long streak of still smoking dirt and metal marks the place where the ship skidded across the ground. The ship’s hull, meanwhile, looks like its been through the space equivalent of a trash compactor, bright pink color scraped off and one circular wing crumpled nearly on top of it.

“Someone could be hurt,” Donna says, already tensing to get closer.

“Wait,” he says before she can move, “it might be a trap. I’ll go down and check, advance on my sides and keep me covered, alright?”

Donna pulls back, nodding, and the rest of the team spreads out as he moves into the valley towards the ship.

The closer he gets, the more Dick can see that the ship is obviously not from Earth. There’s no edges in the metal, nor discernible places for bolts or screws. It’s almost like the ship was built complete. Not exactly surprising, but it’ll make it difficult to open if whoever’s inside actually is injured.

Before he can wonder any longer, the top of the ship burst open with an audible hiss and a hand comes out to grab the side.

He gets ready and around him, he can feel the team tense.

The alien pushes out of the ship and onto the ground and they all get the first look at…

….The most beautiful girl Dick’s ever seen.

Bright glowing entirely green eyes blink before focusing on him and a warm orange face tilts to the side, curly red hair falling over her shoulder and onto purple armor.

She opens her mouth and a strange almost melodic language flows out, followed with a gesture towards him before pointing to the rest of the team.

“I, ah,” Dick’s blushing and he doesn’t even knowing why. “We don’t speak your language. We’re the Titans and we--”

She says something again, obviously confused, and he really wishes they had some kind of Martian on the team, who could at least translate emotions. Maybe there’s something at the old League headquarters that will work

“Sorry, but if you would come with us, we can--”

And that’s as far as he gets before she’s launching forward, directly at him before he can even block. Dick doesn’t even have time to curse his stupidity before soft lips meet his and hands come up to frame his face.

She’s kissing him.

Dick’s brain shuts down. There’s really no other word for it; all thought process kind of just...stops and goes into a long form internal freeze without even a helpful error message.

Then, she pulls back and smiles at him.

“Salut! Tu es très mignon, oui?”

He blinks, brain rebooting enough to helpfully processes the words before promptly shutting right
Someone coughs behind him.

“So, ah, I guess she’s not attacking us then,” Raquel asks.

“Not unless you’re Nightwing and have a very loose definition of the word ‘attack’,” is Donna’s light response and...yeah, she’s definitely going to mock him about this later.

“What did she say,” questions Garth. “That sounded like French, right?”

Dick blush goes impossibly redder before he’s luckily saved from answering by the girl exclaiming, “Oh, English! You’re speaking English!”

“And now so are you,” Jade states flatly. “How?”

Disregarding the accusation in the tone, the girl’s smile brightens. “I am from Tamaran. My people absorb languages through touch.”

“And kissing’s the only way to do that,” Roy asks.

She shrugs. “No, but it’s one of the most enjoyable.”

Dick decides to speak up for the benefit of both the team and his continued sanity.

“Tamaran,” he asks, shooting for friendly instead of an interrogation. She doesn’t seem hostile yet and he would prefer to keep it that way. “Where is Tamaran?”

The girl turns to him, smile dimming only slightly. “Tamaran is the eighth planet in the Vega system, roughly twenty-six light years away from this one.”

“Then, why are you here on Earth,” Zatanna asks.

“Tamaran was…” The girl frowns, expression sitting oddly on her face. “My home was destroyed a long time ago, I’m afraid. When I was only a young child.” She shakes herself, turning to them. “My apologies, friends, I have failed to introduce myself. I am Koriand’r. It is a pleasure to arrive here on your planet. It looks very, ” a pause and glance at the trees, “…green. It is beautiful, I love it.”

Garth smiles and Dick thinks it looks just a bit sad. “Not everywhere’s like this. There’s Atlantis and that’s...well, I mean just wait until you see a city. Or even the Tower.”

“Tower?”

“The Titans Tower,” Dick explains. “We’re the Titans, kind of like Earth’s protectors, I guess.”

“‘I guess,’”” Roy rolls his eyes. “Way to sell us up, Rob.”

Dick ignores him, focusing on Koriand’r. “We help people.”

“Protectors…” Koriand’r repeats, trailing off as she takes in the armor of their costumes, Roy’s bow, Donna’s lasso. She turns back to Dick and grins.

“Then, in that case, I would like to join your Titans, please.”
They take her back to the Tower for lack of better options. Then, they call an emergency team meeting.

“....well, at least it’s not an invasion,” Donna begins.

“She’s hiding something,” Roy says bluntly and Jade nods at his side.

“Agreed,” she says. “She smiles far too much for a recent crash victim from a destroyed world. In my experience, people who use smiles like she does are trying to cover something else.”

Dick smiles at Jade, innocently.

“Exactly,” she concludes.

“I wonder what happened to her home world,” Garth says, looking up from the table. “Did anyone else notice that? She didn’t really say, just kind of…”

“Changed the subject,” Roy finished.

“Yeah.”

Dick frowns. “We definitely don’t know everything about her--”

“Or anything,” Jade says.

“But,” he continues, “we can still find out. From the sound of it, she lost everything and just landed on an unfamiliar world with complete strangers. Given that, would \textit{any} of us tell our full life story the second we landed?”

A contemplative silence follows before Raquel smiles at Jade. “We’ve all had our secrets.”

Jade doesn’t look convinced but she does look a fraction less hostile. To a very large degree, Dick agrees with her and, truthfully, he feels a bit conflicted that he’s not more with Jade. Batman would have \textit{never} trusted this big of an unknown. Dick...he doesn’t think he can either--not yet, not until he can investigate--but, well…

Batman also taught him is to trust his instincts.

As if reading his mind, Donna looks at him. “Do you trust her?”

He hesitates. “....I don’t think she’s trying to hurt us. Or Earth.”

That’s not trust but it might be enough for now.

“She did ask to become a Titan” says Raquel. “That’s gotta be a point in the ‘not evil’ category.”

“Or she’s waiting until we let our guard down,” Jade suggests but not with much heat.

“Still,” Roy says and for the first time since the alert, he sounds more like he’s weighing an arrow than getting ready to shoot it, “I didn’t think we were accepting applications for new Titans.”

“Actually,” Zatanna says. “I, um, might have gotten an interested party a couple of weeks ago.”
The team turns to stare at her.

“Lilith Clay,” she says. “She’s a psychic with an affinity for magic. Tracked me down and asked if she could join.”

Dick blinks. “Why didn’t you mention it, Zee?”

Zatanna shrugs. “Like Roy said, I didn’t think we were exactly accepting applications.”

“Are we accepting new Titans,” Raquel asks, turning to Dick.

He pauses, thinking through the options.

“Adding new members is a team decision,” he says eventually. “It won’t work unless everyone’s on board. What do you guys think?”

Raquel starts first. “I think...I think there’s a lot of people out there who want to help. People like Zatanna and I used to be, who could use some more training before they start out."

Zatanna nods in agreement.

“If we’re being honest, we could use the help, too,” Garth says and he’s back to staring at the table. “Super villains aren’t that rare. It’d be good if we had backup, too.”

Roy sighs, crossing his arms. “There’s also Luthor’s League to consider. We’re more popular and more active but they’re still around, handling some small stuff.” His nose scrunches like he smells something unpleasant. “I hate to admit it but Luthor isn’t the type to quit. If it gets to where the Titans can’t meet demand, I’d bet anything Luthor’s League will be ready for a comeback.”

“That doesn’t mean we should let untested members out in the field,” Jade objects. “Without training, they’re just as much a liability as an asset.”

“But where would they get training except for us,” Donna points out. “We had mentors, older superheroes who had the time and ability to show us the ropes. There’s nothing like that anymore and there won’t ever be unless we’re the ones to start it.”

Conversation stops and no disagrees with her.

Donna speaks again. “We’re the only active heroes the world has and without a way to train new heroes, we’re all that there ever will be. Training new members isn’t just for now, it’s for the future.”

Dick clears his throat. “Jade’s right we can’t accept new members without any idea of their training, it’s too much of a liability. But, Donna’s right, too. What do you think about setting up some kind of training program for potential Titans? Like a probationary period?”

“Who would run it,” Zatanna asks.

“All of us. We take on shifts like we do with monitor duty so none of us are overwhelmed and the members get a variety of training experience.” Dick feels a twinge in his chest and ignores it. “I can grab some of the old training plans set up for Young Justice to start them out.”

The room looks at each other before slowly nodding their acceptance.

“I’ll contact Lilith,” Zatanna says, getting up from the table. “Someone should probably go tell Koriand’r, too.” A smirk lights up her face. “That is unless Nightwing wouldn’t prefer to tell her personally.”
He rolls his and ruthlessly suppresses a blush.

“Maybe very personally,” Raquel teases, wiggling her eyebrows outrageously as she moves to join Zatanna by the door.

Dick takes back every nice thing he ever said. His team’s terrible.

Gradually, the team makes it out of the meeting room and to the tower’s living quarters.

Dick snags Donna’s hand before she can go.

He loves everyone on the team—really, he does, all of them—but if Dick had to pick a member he’s closest to, the answer is unquestionably Donna. Which is why Donna’s the one he turns to and asks, “Is something up with Garth? He seems...I don’t know, off. Even after we found out it wasn’t an invasion.”

Donna eyes the door before leaning in closer, speaking softly enough that even those with augmented hearing wouldn’t pick it up. “Tula broke up with him.”

“What? When? How did that happen?”

Garth and Tula had been dating since before even the invasion. He visited Atlantis almost religiously every two weeks, always with a big dopey smile for the team to laugh at.

Donna shrugs. “Apparently, she couldn’t do the long distance thing anymore. He just got back from Atlantis two days ago. Garth’s really broken up about it. Last night, he listened to whale noises for hours. Hours, Dick. I would have strangled him if he didn’t look so bad.”

He frowns

“Nothing we can do, Boy Wonder.” She slings an arm around his shoulder. “Only one thing fixes a bad breakup and that’s time.”

“Time, huh?”

“Yep.” Donna winks. “Well, that and a really good rebound.”

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Probably unsurprisingly, the Titans don’t have to wait very long before they find their next recruit. Or rather until a news team finds their recruit for them.

Newmark local news posts footage of a teenager, who looks to be half machine, holding up a crashing bus from landing in the middle of a crowded park. The Titans go to investigate. A day later, a slightly stunned Victor Stone—codename Cyborg—first enters the Titans Tower.

With Vic, Lilith, and Koriand’r all signed up, they officially have three new recruits and the new Titans Training Program is announced to the press along with the recruits’ new codenames.

The next day, Dick gets a call.
Jay Garrick, looks uncomfortable, as he sits in the Titans meeting room.

Dick can relate. A lot, actually, as the silence between the two passes the ten minute mark.

He didn’t know speedsters could be still for this long.

“Would you like some coffee, Mr. Garrick? Tea? I’m pretty sure we still have tea somewhere.”

“What were you thinking, Dick?”

Dick thinks he’s not talking about the tea.

“A training program?” Jay shakes his head and his foot starts tapping so fast it starts to blur.

“You’re actually encouraging this? You’re letting more children join into this….into this war .”

Dick frowns. “Mr. Garrick, it’s not like we’re grabbing kids off playgrounds. Cyborg and Starfire are both sixteen, Omen’s fifteen. That’s older than a lot of us were when--”

“Teenagers, then. As if that’s much better when they’re forced to do things even adults shouldn’t.”

“We’re not forcing anyone,” Dick argues. “They asked to join.”

“Then say ‘no’,” Jay sighs. “Dick, I thought you understood. Or that, at least, you would understand. I get it. You want to help and thought you had, too. And that’s brave. That’s so brave, kiddo. Just like Barry was. Just like Wally .”

Dick’s eyes sting and he tries to hide it.

Jay sees anyway and smiles sadly. “It’s brave but I thought you’d have realized by now. I thought you would’ve seen how dangerous this is, would’ve understood what I’ve been trying to tell you. The Titans is a brave idea, Dick, but it’s wrong. It’s dangerous and you’re going to get everyone killed. You have to stop this. It’s already gone on too long and now you’re trying to expand .”

Jay finishes, looking at him like a kind grandfather forced to tell their kid they couldn’t play in the street.

Dick releases a breath.

“What do you want us to do, Mr. Garrick,” he asks, “Do you want us to just let people die? Let Atomic Skull set off a bomb in Metropolis? Let a tsunami destroy a town too slow to evacuate? Let Count Vertigo plan a violent takeover? Let Luthor’s League extort those desperate enough to need help? Let millions of people die until you think we’re old enough to try to help?”

“Dick--”

“Or,” he continues, not caring that his voice has gone cold. “since the Titans are so doomed to fail, maybe all either of us have to do is wait. Wait until we all die off and there aren’t any heroes anymore. After all, a few years ago, the world only nearly fell; maybe that’ll be the final straw to really kill it off.”

Ringing silence greets his words.
He looks down. Jay’s foot has stopped tapping.

“Dick,” Jay says evenly, “I don’t want anyone to die. That’s why you need to stop the program.”

For a brief second, Dick allows himself to close his eyes.

Then, he looks back up.

“I can’t. I think you should probably go, Mr. Garrick. I’m sorry.”

Jay Garrick stands. “...yes, Dick, I think I should, too. I’ll show myself to the zeta tube.”

-----

An hour later and Dick’s sitting high up on the tower’s roof with his heart still thumping heavily in his chest.

He doesn’t even know what it’s beating with now. Anger? Guilt? Or is it just fear that Jay Garrick might be right and the Titans really are doomed?

He scrubs a hand over his face. It’s probably all of them if he’s being honest. Oh, the many joys of emotional dissonance.

It doesn’t really matter. Dick isn’t disbanding the Titans. He can’t, not while the world still needs them. Not even for Jay Garrick.

The sound of the roof opening catches his attention.

Koriand’r beams at him to which he manages a half-hearted smile in return.

“I did not know you also enjoyed rooftops,” she says, coming to sit beside him. “This is a fortunate surprise.”

His smile becomes a little more genuine. “Did you come up here to practice your flying?”

Koriand’r nods, looking wistfully at the sky. “Donna was showing me videos of the team. You did not tell me you could fly as well.”

“Acrobatics aren’t quite the same as what you do.”

“But flying just the same,” she insists. “I like it. It would be boring if we all moved the same. Yes, Rob?”

“Oh, Rob’s just an old nickname I can’t get Roy or Donna to quit calling me. You can call me--,” Dick, he catches himself from saying and what’s wrong with him, “--Nightwing.”

“Nightwing,” she rolls the name on her tongue. “It fits you. Since you have given me another name, I’ll give you one as well. You can call me Kory if you wish. Donna came up with it and I find I enjoy it.”

“Kory,” he repeats and she smiles. “I’m glad you’re getting along with Donna. How’s living at the Tower?”
“Wonderful,” she says, seemingly sincere. “I like this new planet very much. Some parts, especially.”

The last part she turns and directs straightly at him and Dick fights back a blush.

She swings her legs off the side of the roof as the wind blows through bright red hair. “Is the man I saw leaving through the transportation beam also a Titan?”

“Hmm?” He pulls back from staring to process the question. “Ah. No, that was Jay Garrick, he’s….a hero. Retired, now.”

“Retired?”

“He quit. A few years ago when he got older.”

“I didn’t think one could quit being a hero.”

Dick almost laughs though he’s sure it would be bitter. “Yeah, I don’t either but that’s what he wants the Titans to do.”

“Why?”

“It’s….complicated.” He sighs, vaguely regretting bringing up the topic at all. “Basically, he says we’re too young and we’re sacrificing ourselves needlessly.”

Koriand’r turns back to the sky. “Some sacrifices will never be ‘needless’. Even those made by the young….maybe, especially those.”

She falls silent and he watches her carefully.

“Like Tamaran? Was that something you had to sacrifice?”

Without looking at him, Koriand’r nods and brings up a leg to clutch to her chest.

Dick clears his throat. “I don’t know what happened but the old Watchtower has some pretty impressive tech. If there’s anyone you miss, someone you want us to contact, your family maybe--”

“No!”

He stops.

“I...I’m sorry,” she shakes her head, finally looking back at him. “But no, there is no one left for me. My family is...my family is dead. No one is left for me to miss or to miss me.”

And she looks so abjectly lost that Dick reaches out and grabs her hand on instinct. “I find that hard to believe.”

She looks up with wide eyes and Dick blushes.

“Um, I just mean that you’ve only been here a week and I think you’re, ah...pretty miss-able. Just really, really easy to be missed….in the good way?”

Koriand’r blinks and Dick kind of hopes that a giant monster will attack right now before he can say anything more embarrassing.

And then, she smiles and her hand tightens around his. “You are very sweet.”
His blush deepens and he decides to actively change subjects. “So, what were you doing before you landed on Earth?”

She shrugs. “Merely wandering. Since Tamaran, I never stayed anywhere long enough to take note.”

“What was Tamaran like?...If you want to talk about it I mean.”

Koriand’r looks at him, surprised, and then her face lights up brighter than the sun.

It’s night by the time the two make their way back inside, Koriand’r still gesturing wildly as she talks about Tamaran’s dark purple seas and strange animals.

When she finally stops, she turns to him with a peace he had never even noticed she lacked before. In a split second, he thinks about Jade’s words and fake smiles.

Then, Koriand’r reaches out and wraps her arms around him. Too quick for him to even react.

“Thank you, Nightwing.”

Dick feels warm. “Anytime...Kory.”

They’re standing still, too close for the large entrance hall, and she’s still smiling at him and Dick feels….a second away from panicking and a second from flying and he can’t decide which is worse.

The sound of a pointed cough and they both jump.

Propped against a wall, Roy smirks at them,

“If you two are finished talking, I’ve got a new Titans recruit for you.”

Dick pulls away and resigns himself to a life of eternal embarrassment. “Um, you do?”

Roy gestures to someone behind him. “She found me while I was patrolling Star and helped take down five gang members. Guys, meet Tara Markov.”

A petite blonde girl, maybe a year or so older than Dick, steps forward with a shy smile.

“Please, call me Terra.”

------

“Late,” Barbara singsongs when he catches up to her on patrol.

“Long day,” he says and then conversation momentarily stops as the rising gang leader they’ve been tracking pulls up to the warehouse below, followed by representatives from the Falcone crime family. They move for a closer view as Barbara quickly snaps pictures of the meeting members while Dick activates the microphones they set up earlier.

The meeting starts and when it becomes clear there’ll be at least ten minutes of requisite bad guy posturing, Barbara turns back to him.
“Want to talk about it?”

He shrugs. “Jay Garrick wants me to disband the Titans.”

“Which you aren’t.”

“Which I’m not,” he agrees, “which--big shocker--didn’t make for a very fun meeting.”

“I bet. That what took so long?”

He shakes his head. “No, actually it was the short kind of unpleasant. Then, I mainly just talked to Kory--Koriand’r. I mean Starfire.”

“Kory, huh,” she teases. “Getting closer, then? Has she tried learning any more languages yet?”

Something in Barbara’s tone seems off but he attributes it to her focusing on the meeting.

Dick groans. “I’m never going to hear the end of that, am I? Why did I ever tell you about that kiss?”

“Because if you didn’t, Zatanna or Rocket definitely would have,” she says before moving to a more serious tone. “Did you find out any more about her?”

“A bit. Tons interesting about Tamaran but nothing that useful about her.” He pauses. “Actually, there was something...It’s small, though...Really, there’s probably a lot of explanations for it so....it’s probably nothing.”

Barbara waits.

“She kept saying ‘Tamaran is’. Never ‘Tamaran was’.”

Barbara frowns. “I thought you said Tamaran was destroyed when she was a kid.”

He nods, turning back to the meeting.

“That’s what she told us.”

-----

“Ooh, and another four down for Cyborg bringing him up to--,” Donna turns to Roy. “What was it again?”

“Twenty-six,” Roy answers, glancing down at a notepad.

“Twenty-six! Let’s hear it, folks, for the Silver Fisted Champion!”

“Technically, I’m pretty sure that’s steel,” Dick comments. “Also, even more technically, don’t you think we should be helping rather than keeping score?”

Donna raises an eyebrow. “It’s the Toymaster, Rob. The Toymaster. I’m pretty sure my grandmother could take him down, blindfolded.”

“Your grandmother’s an Amazonian warrior.”
“Details,” she dismisses. “The point is let them have their fun and take down the bad guy. They’ve been training for weeks.”

On the street, below the building they’re perched on, Tara brings up a wall straight from the ground and crushes half a dozen toy bird explosives.

Roy lets out a low whistle. “That puts Terra up to forty-two, Starfire at thirty-eight, Cyborg twenty-six, and Omen sixteen.”

Donna frowns. “Telepathy really doesn’t help much with the physical stuff. We’ve got to get her in more hand to hand.”

“Agreed,” Dick says, already making a note to alter training.

“Frankly, I’m most impressed by Terra,” Roy says.

Donna winks. “So is Garth.”


“What did I tell you, Boy Wonder? Rebound.” Donna grins. “Now, I just have to decide on asking him if it’s earth-shattering or if it’s the motion of the ocean.”

“Ugh, no,” Roy says, “both of those are terrible.”

Dick laughs. “Roy’s right. Why pick?”

Roy and Donna stare at him.

“Um, guys?”

“You laughed,” Donna accuses.

“Well, it was a joke so…”

“No, but like a real laugh. Not just like a snicker or that creepy cackle thing.” Donna tilts her head. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh before.”

“I…I laugh,” he insists. He can’t remember when the last time was exactly but he’s sure it hasn’t been that long.

Donna smiles, almost apologetically. “You kind of don’t though. You smile and you make jokes and you definitely look amused but…”

“You never laugh,” Roy confirms. “Not in years.”

Dick blinks, rocking back on his heels.

“….and it wasn’t even that good of a joke,” he eventually manages, giving a small smile.

Donna grins, poking him in the side. “Watch it, Rob. It must just be you’ve finally realized how utterly hilarious I am. It’s okay, true genius takes time to be understood.”

“Or true insanity,” Roy mutters, dodging her next poke. “It’s probably not even you, anyway.”

“Oh?... oh,” she says, following Roy’s gaze. “You think Kory’s been putting Rob in a better mood.
Yeah, that checks.”

“No names in the field,” Dick says, just to be petulant. “Also, you sound like Batgirl after I told her about the kiss.”

Both give him a strange look.

“You told Batgirl that Starfire kissed you,” Roy asks as if he had just said maybe Luthor wasn’t such a bad guy.

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “Trust me, I’m regretting it, too. She hasn’t stopped mocking me about it since.”

Donna groans, head falling into her hands. “Why are you like this?”

“Anyway,” he says, pointedly turning back to the battle where the recruits are just finishing off the last killer toys, “both of you are wrong and nothing’s going to happen with Starfire. I don’t have time for a relationship.”

“Yeah?” Donna looks up as the first few news helicopters finally brave the scene. “Too bad, I think she’d be good for you.”

He doesn’t answer and all of them focus on the fight.

Tara has Toymaster secured in a heavy casing of stone while the last few toy planes fire mini torpedoes at the rest. Donna was right. They’re doing well, the training already starting to show. Tara is obviously the most capable but not too far behind—and no, Dick is not being biased, thank you—is Kory. Which, when he thinks about it, is slightly strange.

Tara admitted to having some kind of training from her martial arts father before he died in the invasion. Vic is already in shape from years of sports but didn’t have any prior combat training. Lilith didn’t have any kind of training and, according to Kory, neither did she.

Even with the different alien physiology and meta-powers, he doesn’t think Kory should be quite so good this soon.

A news helicopter swoops in dangerously close to the scene and Dick almost hacks their radio frequency to order the pilot back when it swerves up to avoid a new flock of toys.

Kory flies up to intercept before they can hit when suddenly….she stops.

A few seconds of hesitation and the toy planes redirect and fire straight at her.

Dick already has batarangs ready.

“Starfire!” Cyborg’s arm cannon takes out the toys before they can hit her.

Kory snaps out of the moment, gently floating back down to where the very last of the toys have been taken care of.

“What was that,” Roy asks.

“Nerves?” Donna frowns. “And she was doing so well before. Why now?”

Dick shrugs because he doesn’t really have any idea either. “Nerves can happen anytime. Especially the first fight. I’ll go talk to her. You two help Terra make sure Toymaster’s secured.”
“Got it,” Donna says, leaping off the building with Roy zip lining down behind her.

By the time Dick makes it down, Vic’s just finished checking on Kory, heading off to help the others while she hangs back, looking uncomfortable.

She smiles wanly when she sees him approach. “I apologize, Nightwing. I do not know what came over me.”

“It’s fine, Starfire,” he reassures. “I just wanted to check that you were okay. No one quite knows what it’s like during their first mission. A lot of people get nervous.”

“It’s not...I wasn’t...” she sighs, looking chagrin. “Thank you for understanding. In the future, I will endeavor not to be in a position that forces my teammates to save me.”

“Hey, that’s what a team’s there for,” he points out. “The Titans formed because no one can handle everything on their own. I can promise you that whenever you need it, the team is there for you.”

She hums, allowing Dick to guide her closer to where Roy is shooing away the last reporter. “And you, Nightwing? Will you be there for me, too?”

Dick smiles. “Always.”

-----

Dick lands lightly on the roof of an old drug store.

“The Bowery is clear,” he says. “Nothing but a couple of attempted muggings….Oh, and one old lady’s house being robbed.”

“Did you save the lady,” comes Barbara’s voice over the comms.

“Saved the robber. She’d was beating him with a two by four by the time I got there.”

“Gotta love Gotham. Pretty quiet here, too. I’m finishing up Robinson Park about to head to Old Gotham.”

“Copy. I’m moving on to check the warehouses.”

“Have fun,” Barbara says followed by the soft click of her signing off the comm.

Dick grins, firing a line and launching himself high into the air.

Against all expectations, Gotham’s actually been almost quiet in the weeks since the Blackgate breakout….Which probably means a dozen or so criminals are sitting in their jail cells, plotting something even bigger, but Dick’s decided to enjoy it while it lasts.

And that means treating himself to the warehouse district, filled with cranes and tall stacks of shipping containers just waiting to be vaulted over.

His next line catches on the top of a crane and he swings himself up, landing lightly on the highest point. Around him, Gotham’s lights flicker through the ever present fog and it’s almost like the city’s breathing peacefully.
Dick falls backward, bending in the air to shoot another line. Or at least as peaceful as Gotham ever gets.

His feet touch down on a metal crate just for a second before he’s spinning off into a flip, followed by a cartwheel, and then spinning into the air again with his eyes closed, the wind in his face, and a laughter stuck somewhere in his chest.

Dick flies.

Then, without any noticeable warning, his eyes jerk open and on instinct, he twists quickly in midair. A bullet cuts through the air a millisecond later, grazing his thigh as he lands sharply on the roof.

Dick doesn’t stop for long. In the next moment, he’s off the roof and ducking in between the openings of the crates, using the shadows for cover. Another two bullets tear through the wall behind him and he takes in the angle, placing the shooter high on a pile of stacked crates just to his right.

Keep moving.

The crates aren’t thick. Not against whatever type of rounds the shooter’s using, they tear through the metal like aluminum foil. Still, he can use the crates to hide his position. Use the shadows between them so the shooter can’t find his trail. Never stay on the ground for long so it’s harder to guess his location.

Two options: run or fight.

Dick doesn’t think he’s able to run fast enough that the shooter won’t spot him before he can escape. Not with the gash to his leg.

So, fight. Okay, alright, he normally prefers that option anyway. Though, granted, normally with a bit more of an advantage.

He ducks into a slim crack between two crates, where he’s almost positive the shooter can’t see him, and clicks on his comm.

“Batgirl! Sniper in the warehouse district, I’m pinned down. Do you copy?”

Static greets him.

“Batgirl, repeat, do you copy?!”


Absolutely nothing. He’s alone.

The sound of heavy footsteps crunch down a few feet away and Dick holds his breath.

“I blocked your comms unit,” a deep male voice says calmly. “Pretty easy to shut down once I figured out the electromagnetic frequency. Your friends aren’t coming. So, you might as well come out from wherever you’re hiding.”

Dick stills. He doesn’t know where the shooter is….yet. He’s on the ground, making the gun easier to see and account for. Dick can feel him getting closer. This might be the only chance he gets.

“Come on, kid, I just want to introduce myself. I’m--”
Dick launches himself out of the shadows, kicking the figure in the face before hooking his other leg at the shoulder and latching his thighs around the man’s neck.

“There you go, kid,” the man chokes out from beneath a mask. Then, he brings his hands up and viciously digs his thumb into the gash on Dick’s leg.

Dick’s vision goes white and he bites his lip to keep from screaming.

He doesn’t let go but the man uses that distraction to sling him off and Dick hits hard into a metal wall.

His vision clears as a punch comes straight at his face and he ducks under it, swinging out with his elbow and catching the man in his ribs.

The man lets out a pained laugh and swings his leg out to try to catch Dick at his knees. But, Dick wasn’t a Flying Grayson for nothing.

He jumps, turning in the air and throwing two batarangs right at the man’s shoulders. Not deadly. But very painful and momentarily debilitating.

As quick as lightning, the man unsheathes a sword from his back--and how hadn’t Dick noticed that--and knocks the batarangs away like they’re toys.

“Bold move, there,” the man says, voice still infuriatingly calm. “What would Batman say if he saw you use a move like that?”

Dick growls, breathing heavily, and launches a smoke bomb before throwing himself at the wall and rebounding right back into the smoke with a kick to the man’s back.

The man turns as if the smoke isn’t even there, catching Dick’s foot and pulling so hard Dick has to go with it unless he wants a broken ankle.

He twists up, a batarang already in his hand and aimed for the man’s arm, when the man knocks it away and slams Dick into the wall so hard he sees stars. A large arm goes over his throat, pinning him there until he has to struggle to even draw air.

No. Dick is not going to die like this. Not here. Not now. Not to this man. He refuses.

“I’m not going to kill you,” the man says as if reading his thoughts. “Not yet. Not unless you make me.”

This close and Dick finally processes all the details he’d only been able to note before. Broad shoulders, clear musculature that could only be the result of extensive training. He’d apparently stored the sniper before coming to ground but a swords is still held in his free hand, sharp edges glinting in the shallow light.

Most notable is the mask--half black, half orange, with only one cut to show a single bright blue eye staring out.

“Like I said, I wanted to introduce myself. You can call me Deathstroke.”

Dick glares, choking out words in as dark a voice as he can manage. “What do you want?”

Deathstroke snorts, his arm pulling back and letting Dick fall on his knees.

“Put bluntly, kid, I’ve been hired to kill you.”
Dick tenses, almost moving to attack again when the edge of the sword lands at his throat.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Deathstroke says. “Not until you hear my offer. I wasn’t just hired to kill you, kid. I was hired to take out your team. Every single Titan.”

The sword cuts in slightly at his neck, warning against interrupting.

“You pissed off the wrong people. And more importantly, you’ve pissed them off for too long. So now, some pretty powerful people are tired of having their plans interrupted by a bunch of troublesome junior Justice Leaguers.”

The sword moves back an inch and Dick takes it as his cue to speak.

“Why the warning? Why not just kill me?”

“Because I think we can help each other,” Deathstroke says. “Fortunately for you, my employers were rather vague in their instructions. They want the Titans ‘destroyed’, never able to threaten their interests again. They never said that had to be ‘dead’ and frankly, I’m not one for killing kids. Not when there’s another option.”

“And the other option is…”

“Disband the Titans,” Deathstroke orders. “You’re their leader. Tell them to quit. Tell them that if they ever think about putting on a costume that I’ll be there to put a bullet between their eyes.”

Dick’s breathing heavily. The sword’s still at his shoulder and a tiny trail of blood runs down his neck. The back of his head, where it came in contact with the metal wall, feels wet and sticky which probably means he has a concussion. Dirt and sweat have dug into the bullet graze on his leg and it aches sharply.

And none of that matters when Dick launches up, faster than Deathstroke can blink, and stabs a batarang hard into a nerve point in his shoulder before finding himself slammed back against the wall with the mercenary’s free arm.

None of that matters when he glares up with blood in his teeth and snarls, “You will not touch my team.”

The mercenary blinks and then laughs, one arm still dangling uselessly at his side while the other pins Dick to the wall.

“You’re lucky I heal.” Deathstroke tilts his head, the blue eye narrowing in consideration. “I was right about you. You’re a fighter. Ruthless even with all those pointless morals you use to chain yourself.” The arm over Dick’s neck shifts until a hand pats his cheek in some bizarre imitation of comfort. “Here’s the second part of the deal. Disband the Titans and come work with me as my apprentice.”

“You’re insane.”

Deathstroke laughs again. “If you want insane, go to Arkham. I’m an opportunist. The Titans will fall, either by death or voluntary retirement. You don’t have to fall with them. Join me and I can give you the training you’ve never allowed yourself to dream of.”

The hand disappears a second after and this time, Dick doesn’t move to attack.

“Think about it, kid,” Deathstroke says, already sinking back into the shadows. “You still have some
time left. Just don’t take too long.”

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“So some crazy villain’s trying to kill us,” Raquel shrugs. “What else is new?”

“Deathstroke’s not just some villain,” Jade cuts in, voice tense. “He’s not a garden variety lunatic, he’s a mercenary--well-trained, almost meta-level reflexes and healing, and very successful in his assassinations. Even the League of Assassins respects him.”

“What do we know” Roy asks, turning to Dick.

Dick pulls up a file on the monitor. “Real name, Slade Wilson. Formerly of the US Army. Volunteered for a highly controversial medical experiment, following a falling out with his wife. Survived with increases in agility, strength, and cognition. Left the army to begin work part-time as a mercenary and taking it up full time after the death of his ex-wife in childbirth. As Jade said, he’s made a name for himself as unbeatable.” He pauses to let that sink in. “From what Barbara was able to hack, he was hired two months ago by an exclusive underworld organization called H.I.V.E., that we’ve been monitoring for the past two years.”

“Why don’t we just track down H.I.V.E,” Donna asks. “Cut off the money at the source and stop Deathstroke’s contract?”

“H.I.V.E.’s gone underground.” He pulls up another file. “Deep underground. It’s going to take time to find them.”

“But we will find them” Garth insists, gripping Dick’s shoulder. “We’ll track them down and show them why it’s a terrible idea to challenge the Titans. Just like we always do. And, in the meantime, all we have to do is handle one more mercenary. Powerful famous assassin or not, it’s like Raquel was saying, things have tried killing us for years. We’ll stop him, too.”

A silence meets his words before Zatanna smiles, elbowing him in the ribs. “Well, aren’t you optimistic?”

“Deathstroke’s not any threat,” Dick says and Jade nods at his side.

“Then we’ll train more,” Raquel says. “We’ll fight harder and be more careful when we’re out on missions. It’s not like Deathstroke’s the first big hitter we’ve faced.”

Dick frowns, trying to find the right words to argue.

“It’s not like we’re not taking the threat seriously,” Zatanna speaks up before he can. “It’s just…well, what other choice do we have? We’re not disbanding the Titans and we’re definitely not letting you go work with a creepy weirdo.”

“Besides we have help now,” Garth points out. “The training program’s going great and a few of the trainees are showing impressive results already.”

“Like Terra maybe?” Zatanna smirks. “Or was that someone else I saw you sparring with last night?”
Garth grins. “She’s a, ah, really good fighter.”

“Oh, is that all,” Raquel teases.

“Can we please go back to making fun of Dick about Kory,” Garth laughs, shoving her away.

“Nothing’s going on with me and Kory,” Dick insists quickly just as Roy sighs.

“Regardless of what’s going on with either,” Roy says. “Garth’s right, the trainees are showing improvement. Especially Tara. We might want to look at making her officially part of the team.”

Jade frowns. “Really? This soon?”

“Maybe not the others just yet,” Roy admits. “But Tara already has more combat training than a lot of us had when we first joined. With that, and her meta powers, she can hold her own during a fight.”

“And I’m fine partnering with her while she’s just starting out,” Garth offers. “Show her the ropes a bit more during her first few missions.”

“How generous,” Donna elbows Garth in the side while he smiles at her.

Zatanna turns to Dick. “So, are we officially inducting Tara?”

“No yet,” Dick shakes his head. “Not until we handle this thing with Deathstroke. I don’t want to bring anyone new in yet when it’s just going to paint a target on their back.” He grimaces. “Well, a bigger than usual target. We wait, train them and employ them on smaller missions, and then talk about adding them once we deal with H.I.V.E.”

“But, who knows how long that will take,” Garth protests.

“So?” Jade crosses her arms. “We’re not in any rush. More time will just allow them to train more and give us an opportunity to find out more about them. We still know hardly anything about Kory.”

Dick hesitates, moving to says something but Donna beats him to it.

“I trust Kory,” she says. “She’s a bit shy about her past, sure, but she’s a good person. I don’t need my lasso to tell me that.”

Jade hums. “Even a good person can--”

An alert sound cuts her off and Dick clicks on his wrist screen.

“The Scarlet Horde just launched an attack on Coast City,” he announces.

Donna groans. “The Scarlet Horde? How do they even still have members? I’ll take it. Let me bring a couple of the trainees, too. It’ll be a good experience.”

“Lilith’s back home in New York,” Zatanna says.

“And Vic’s getting a check up in Newmark,” Dick adds, turning to Donna. “You okay with just Tara and Kory?”

“To handle those assholes?” Donna smirks. “Yeah, we’ll be fine.”

“Be careful,” Dick says. “Roy, you fine staying as backup?”
He nods and Donna grins, turning out of the room to go grab the others. Dick and Roy follow behind, heading to the towers monitors.

Roy waits to speak until Dick’s already pulling up the cameras in Coast City.

“You don’t really think H.I.V.E’s the one that hired Deathstroke, do you?”

“They definitely hired him,” Dick mutters back, not looking away from the monitors. “But, the strange thing is that they shouldn’t have had the money to. Not if our last data on their financials was true.”

“So, they’ve got an additional backer?” Roy stops. “Or you think H.I.V.E’s just a front.”

On the screen, a notification of a zeta to Coast City comes through and he finally turns to look at Roy.

“It’s just like a few years ago with the Injustice League,” Dick says. “H.I.V.E now with the assassination contract. The Injustice League then with the Belle Reve breakouts, Cadmus, and the new Venom formula. Both times, the trails lead back to groups that have the motives but not the resources.”

“Which means the group that’s really behind it could still be active,” Roy says. “And we still don’t have a single clue who it is.”

Dick nods and turns back to the monitor, pulling up the screen where the Titans just arrived on scene.

Another alert pings out from his wrist and he glances down with a frown.

“Another emergency?”

“No, a message from Babs. She sent me a news link.”

The links pull up and Dick starts reading. And then…

“Fuck! Are you kidding me!?”

His hand slams down on the table, rattling the metal as it lands, before he’s pushing to his feet and to the zeta beam.

“Roy, keep up monitoring,” he calls back.

“Something up in Gotham?”

“No,” Dick says, already stepping into the zeta. “Keystone. I’ve gotta talk to Jay Garrick.”

Chapter End Notes

Second part of the chapter will be posted tomorrow (Saturday, February 16th)

Thanks for reading! Kudos and comments are always welcome!
Jay answers the door before his second knock lands.

He moves to let Dick through. “I figured I’d see you soon.”

Dick waits until the door clicks shut before rounding on him. “Jay, what are you thinking?!”

Jay raises an eyebrow. “I’m thinking it’s time I start doing what’s right. Whether you like it or not.”

“You’re restarting the Justice Society,” Dick accuses, clicking on the news where the breaking announcement scrolls along the bottom. “Now?! With this as your goal?! Jay, why?!”

“Well, it’s more a policy group than anything” Jay corrects, smiling slightly. “You certainly won’t see these legs trying to pull off spandex anymore. As for why, it’s like you said, Dick. Heroes never quit, not when there’s someone who needs saving. The new JSA is about promoting safety for the important things: kids like you.”

“Well, you’re not helping me with this,” Dick yells. “Are you kidding me?! The news said that the Justice Society’s new goal was the prevention of teen heroes! Do you know how much backlash the Titans already got before all this?”

“Then maybe it’s time you listen,” Jay reaches his hands out to land on Dick’s shoulders. “Dick, I tried to go about this the easier way. I tried to convince you to stop this on your own. You’re the one who refused. But, Dick, I’m a hero, too. I can’t keep standing back while there’s something wrong happening. And no, I can’t exactly punch and run my way out of problems anymore, but I can still get people to see that children fighting their battles is wrong all on it’s own.”

Dick shakes him off. “It’ll never work, Jay. You don’t even have a back-up option to the Titans. Even if people do believe we shouldn’t fight, when it comes down to it, they’re still going to care more about being safe.”

“Maybe,” Jay agrees. “But then again, I still think there’s a number out there that put doing what’s right over even their own safety. After all, that same logic’s why both of us put on costumes, isn’t it?”

“Jay,” Dick says through gritted teeth. “Don’t start this. Please.”

“Sorry, kiddo,” Jay says and seems to mean it. “The longer you do this, the more all of you are going to get hurt. I can’t let that happen anymore.”

Dick’s wrist pings at the same time the news lets out another alert.

“Breaking News: Titans hero Troia was injured following a battle with the Scarlet Horde. Going to the footage now.”
The picture flickers before showing a clip of Donna, securing a red hooded figure, before turning and looking to someone right off screen. The sound of a shot fires and then Donna’s on the ground, blood clear from a wound in her shoulder.

Jay turns to Dick. “You see. All that’s going to happen is you kids getting hurt.”

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He makes it exactly two rushed steps into the Tower infirmary before an arm wraps around him and he finds his head pulled into dark black hair.

“Dick, it’s fine. *I’m* fine. Everyone’s okay and no one is going to die. It’s safe.”

And all the stress of the past day falls out of his body like it forgot how to even hold it up.

His arms come around Donna, pulling her in closer while careful not to jar the injury.

“You’re not fine,” he mutters into her shoulder. “You were shot. That is very much *not* fine. That is *un-* fine is what it is. *Dis-* fine.”

Donna laughs. “You’re a nerd and that last one didn’t even make sense. It was a through and through bullet wound to the arm. Jade already bandaged me up and, with my healing, it should be fine in a week. I doubt it’ll even scar.”

“It was still a gunshot,” he says, coming back so he can see that she *really* is okay. Not dead from a bullet wound. Not lying broken on the ground. Not gone in an explosion or--

“I’m fine,” Donna repeats, wrapping her good hand around his and maneuvering him down to sit next to her on the med bed.

He breathes, offering up a wane smile that she returns full force. She lets him sit there for just a few moments, focusing only on getting his heart beat under control.

“There’s something else I need to tell you,” Donna says, tone almost apologetic. “It’s about Kory. She froze a few seconds before I got shot.”

“I thought the fight was already over by the time you were shot. Why would she freeze?”

“I don’t know.”

Dick’s head slumps back against her, closing his eyes. “I’ve got something for you, too. Jay’s reforming the Justice Society. New mission: stop the Titans. Not sure if there’s any goal *except* that, actually.”

Her hand comes up to run through his hair. “What an asshole.”

“He thinks he’s doing what’s best for us.”

“What a morally righteous asshole.”

Dick smiles. “I don’t even know what the reformation plan is supposed to be for former teen heroes? Force us into college prep classes? Get us to work as camp counselors? What do normal teens even do anyway?”
“I don’t know. Sounds terrible, glad we’re definitely not doing that.”

“....I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks.” Donna grins, hopping off the med bed and pulling him up. “Now, come on, we’re having a surprise Titan’s game night. Slightly injured person’s prerogative.”

Dick lets her pull him. “Anything but Monopoly.”

“Killjoy.”

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“That’s weird,” Barbara says the moment he finishes telling her about Kory. “That’s really weird.”

Dick shrugs, leaning back against the billboard they’re perched on. “Maybe it’s some kind of delayed trauma? A reaction to falling adrenaline?”

“Only on that battle,” she asks. “And how does this one relate to the earlier time with Toymaster? She’s been fine on missions between then, right?”

“Exactly. She was completely okay during the covert operation with Omen and I down in Bialya and with the recon work in Nairobi with Cheshire. Both of which were arguably more dangerous than either Toymaster or the Scarlet Horde. I don’t get the connection.”

“Weird,” she repeats and Dick nods. A pause and then, “You don’t think she knew the shot was coming, do you?”

He shakes his head immediately. “No, based on the angle, the gunman was way too far away for Starfire to see. If the reaction was to the gunshot, then she would’ve had to known beforehand and that would mean…. Dick stops and shakes his head again. “She didn’t know.”

Barbara regards him steadily. “Okay. I trust you.”

“Thanks,” he says even as something turns uneasily in his gut.

A flash of orange catches in his peripheral and Dick jumps to his feet, only managing to disguise it as a stretch at the last second.

“I’m going to do a final run of the Diamond District? Catch you back at the cave?”

She nods, getting to her feet. “Alright, don’t stay out too much longer. You deserve a break, Boy Wonder.”

“Crime never breaks, Batgirl,” he intones just to see her eye roll before he launches off the billboard, laughing.

The laughter fades by the time he’s made it a block over, landing carefully on the shadowed roof, hidden away between two highrises.

“I thought you said I had time,” Dick asks the darkness.

A chuckle answers back. “I did. That was just a warning shot, kid.”
“A warning shot? Five inches to the right and it would’ve gone through her heart!”

“I don’t miss,” Slade Wilson says, emerging from the shadows with his mask already off. “And I told you, I don’t like killing kids.”

Dick scoffs. “Please, I’ve looked up your record. More than a few of your jobs had a civilian death toll. You don’t care about getting blood on your hands.”

“The civilians I killed were at least old enough to vote,” Slade says, circling closer like an animal stalking his prey. “And the Titans are far from what anyone would call civilians. Not too late for them to go back to it, though. Disband them, let them have normal lives, and I can help you, too.”

“Why would you care about helping me?”

“Funny thing, I guess,” Slade’s close enough that if he strikes, Dick will have to work to evade, “I just really hate to see wasted potential.”

Dick tilts his head up to meet the mercenary’s eye. “And is that what you think I am? Wasted potential?”

“Not yet,” Slade’s voice is soft, almost in a purr. “But, think about it like this. You’ve only had formal training since you were what? Thirteen maybe? It’s been nearly three years since you last trained with anyone more experienced. Sure, you’ve done a pretty good job learning from your teammates, adapting to their skill sets, but how much more can you really improve from that? How long until you go against someone more dangerous than your friends, than even Batman, could ever hope to be? How long until you go against someone like me?”

Dick doesn’t say anything, just glares back at the mercenary like he’s something poisonous.

Slade smirks. “The thing about holding up the weight of the world, kid, is it makes it really easy for guys like me to come and push you down. And in a place like this, if you’re not fighting to improve, you’re basically falling already.”

With that, Slade moves back, pulling his mask on and heading back to the darkness.

“Catch you later, kid.”

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The next week Roy and Jade’s apartment blows up. Their civilian identities’ apartment.

Jade catches his arm the second he walks into the ER waiting room and all but shoves him into a medical supply closet.

“Roy? Is he okay? Is he--”

“He’s in surgery,” Jade cuts him off. “Surface damage to his torso and arm, a broken rib, head injury, and a piece of shrapnel embedded in his right thigh that they’re trying to remove now.” She pauses. “He’ll live. The shrapnel wasn’t anywhere close to an artery and the doctors said the head injury was minor. He’ll have at least a month of recovery but he’ll recover.”

He sits hard on the floor, leaning his head back on a shelf.
“What happened?”

“The explosives went off while I was coming back from patrol. When I got there, I found him under the rubble and…” Jade shakes her head and her voice goes cold, an operative relaying facts. “I made sure he was stable, called in medical treatment, and did a preliminary analysis of the explosion before they arrived. Explosives were worked into the bricks of the walls—small, controlled, easy to get on the black market but impressive when used in bulk. Damage was almost exclusively to our apartment with no other resident injured, confirming a targeted attack.”

He nods, trying to breathe. “….okay….okay, I’m glad you’re alright. Have you already told the team?”

“Not yet.” She looks down at him with dark, sharp eyes. “Well, are you going to say it or should I?”

“Say what,” he asks even though he knows. He knows.

“There’s a traitor,” she says bluntly. “It was a targeted attack on our civilian identities. The only ones who know our identities are the team and the trainees.”

Dick scrubs a hand over his face. “Your identities could have been compromised in other ways.”

“Possible but highly unlikely. The explosives couldn’t have been there for more than a week. A week ago, Donna was injured and Roy and I took off our masks while treating her. The trainees saw us. The timeline alone can’t be coincidental.”

“A lot of weird things can be coincidence. It’s why it’s called coincidence.”

“You don’t believe that.” Jade accuses and there’s something mean in her voice now, a hint of the assassin she used to be. “You’re not thinking straight. You hate the idea so much that one of your precious teammates could betray their own team.”

“Your teammates, too,” he remarks sharply. “Remember?”

And Jade sighs, some of the fight going out of her as she sinks to the floor beside him.


Dick accepts the correction and the two fall into silence.

“Dick,” she starts again softly and he looks up because Jade is never soft. “The Titans aren’t Young Justice. We’re not innocents learning in the shadow of someone bigger. We’re not some small covert team able to call back to the League when things get dangerous. We’re a threat and when people come for us, they’ll come to kill. There’s no League to call for reinforcements.”

“I know that.” His nails dig in where he’s gripping his arm. “Do you really think I don’t know that? That I haven’t always known that?”

Jade shakes her head. “You do, but I think you forget that we know it, too. It’s not your burden to protect the Titans, we have to learn that on our own. It’s your job to lead us. And not all threats come wearing masks and pointing a gun.”

“….we still don’t know it’s a trainee yet.”

“You don’t believe there’s a traitor because you refuse to believe anyone could imagine hurting their own team,” Jade says, back to her usual quasi-comforting bluntness. “Especially after what
happened to Young Justice.”

“I’ll consider the facts, Jade,” Dick returns instead of denying. “...and if there’s evidence of a traitor, I’ll find them.”

“Do that,” she says, not entirely unkind, “before someone else nearly dies.”

——-

Dick dodges back a few seconds before he’s impaled.

He follows through with a kick to the ribs but his attacker knocks the foot away before it can land.

A flip over the attacker’s shoulder and then another dodge as the attacker swings in a wide arch, the metal almost connecting with Dick’s knees and knocking him down.

He lands in a handstand, quickly springing from it to get out of range, but the attacker follows through just as quick.

After that, it’s just the sound of metal against metal as his escrimas block against each blow, trying and failing to find any holes in the defense.

His arms are tired. He’s tired. But he’s not just going to give up not when--

The next hit forces his arm to fall back and one of the escrimas is knocked out of his hands, leaving him momentarily defenseless.

A sharp metal points lands on his neck, stopping just short of drawing blood.

“I yield.”

Mera backs away, the trident withdrawn from his throat to be hit against the marble floor with a resounding clink.

“Good match.” Dick says. “Really good match. Not that I ever expected anything different, Your Majesty.”

“Flatterer,” Mera accuses with a laugh, hanging the training trident back on the wall and retrieving her more ornate one. “You’ll have to tell that to my guards. Half of them still refuse to spare with me out of some warped sense of propriety. Ha! As if Atlantean leaders aren’t as much warriors as we are statesmen.”

“They’re probably just trying to avoid the bruises,” Dick puts a hand on his ribs where he already feels a bruise of his own forming.

She rolls her eyes, healing him with an absent wave of her hand. Dick really needs to badger Garth into learning more of those tricks. If he can manage to pull him away from Tara long enough...

Mera regards him steadily. “You’re distracted.”

“Sorry,” Dick says, walking to the edge of the training room to poke at the interwoven magic lattice keeps the water from rushing in and crushing him. “Long week. Well, weeks really. I take it Garth told you what happened.”
“With your teammates being attacked, the mercenary after you, or the reformed Justice Society?”

“Um, all of the above, I suppose.”

“Perhaps, I may lend an ear,” she offers.

Dick smiles. “I don’t want to burden you, Queen Mera.”

Mera snorts. “Dealing with my so-called advisers burdens me. Finding a proper nursemaid for my son is a burden to me. Convincing my guards to leave me alone for combat practice is a burden. Yet all of these I face because the outcome is worth it.” She looks to him. “You are not a burden. You are an ally, aiding each other is our privilege.”

Well, when she says it like that, Dick can’t really politely refuse, now can he?

“I’m honored.” He inclines his head in a small bow of gratitude. Then, he pauses, wondering where to start.

“I think there’s a traitor on the team,” he admits finally. “...and I’m not sure what I should do. I’m not sure what I can do.”

“Do you have any proof yet?”

Dick shakes his head. “Just suspicions. You know it’s kind of funny--I mean not in the ha-ha kind of way but just....I don’t know, back in--in Young Justice, Kaldur thought we had a traitor once and he didn’t tell us. We were so mad at him when we found out but now,” he shrugs, “hard to believe there was any better choice.”

“Kaldur’ahm was always wise beyond his years,” Mera admits quietly.

“Yeah, he was.” And the thing that always rests in the back of Dick’s chest aches almost pleasantly for once. He rubs it absently while his smile fades. “He always seemed to know just what to do.”

He sighs. “Cheshire thinks I’m blinding myself to traitor on the team because of how Young Justice died and I’m not sure she’s wrong.”

She hums. “Maybe….but I don’t think she’s completely right either.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t think it’s quite so simple.” Mera pauses before turning to him. “You know I never heard how you became leader of the Titans? When you first approached me, the decision had already been made even if you weren’t yet calling yourselves a team.”

Dick shrugs. “It’s not that much of a story, really. Troia and Red Arrow asked me to do it because I was the most experienced.”

“Did you want to do it?”

“I...” he hesitates, fighting back a flush that feels suspiciously like shame. “No, not after...I, ah, refused, actually. But...they told me I was the best option, so....” He trails off and restarts. “I love the team, though. Even if I didn’t want to be their leader originally, I don’t...it’s not like I regret doing it or anything.”

“And what about now? Now, if given the choice, do you want to be leader.”
Dick stops.

“I love the team,” he repeats, simply. “I’d do….I’d do anything for them. I just….”

He laughs quietly and abruptly, the sound scraping and jarring in his throat. Because he was Robin long before he was Nightwing. And when you’re scared and you’re Robin, you laugh. You laugh until you’re not scared anymore.

And maybe there’s something still to that because right now, he’s still scared….but he manages to say it anyway.

“....I’m not sure I’m what’s best for the team anymore.”

He waits.

A sigh echoes through the room. It’s not a disappointed one though and that’s how Dick still manages to keep his head up. It’s more like...understanding

“That’s the part they never tell you about decisions made out of necessity,” Mera says, soft like she’s speaking to herself more than Dick. “They make it so, so harder to believe they’re the right ones.”

She shakes the thought away. “Your team is being clearly targeted for the first time since its founding--not only by the mercenary but also by a possible traitor threatening your trust and this new Justice Society placing you under constant scrutiny. Based on that, it is not only understandable, but reasonable to be afraid,” She pauses. “However, your fear seems to not solely be centered on the dangers facing your team but on your ability to lead them through it.

She stops then, turning the trident in her hands almost absently, as she considers her next words. Finally, she looks up.

“If you want my opinion, I believe you’ve always made an extraordinary leader--far beyond what I ever expected when you washed up half-drowned in my throne room. However,” Mera inclines her head, a strange echo of Dick’s earlier bow, “I also believe that we’ve come to a time where the choice to continue as leader must be your own. Not made out of necessity, not because others tell you it’s the best option, but because you yourself want to lead. If not, you’ll never truly believe it.”

A quiet once again rings through the air, neither fraught nor quite at ease.

Dick doesn’t know what to say so, doesn’t know what she wants him to say, so for once, he just sticks with what’s safe. “Thank you for your advice, Your Majesty.”

“Of course.” Mera nods. “Either choice, you have earned my respect. Just remember the existence of fear is not in itself the mark of a bad leader. But, a leader must not only share his people’s fears, he must be the one to prove that they can face them.”

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After all that happened in the past week, Dick half-expects the Tower to be so thick with tension, it’s almost tangible.

Instead, he walks in and it’s just….strange. Like something’s wrong and he can’t put a finger on it.
Vic and Tara are sparring in the center of the room, the later letting out a wild laugh as she dodges a swipe of Vic’s arm. One their sides, Donna and Garth are shouting advice. Lilith and Zatanna have taken the other side of the room, making complicated hand movements around a set of weights that Dick can’t look at too long before he gets dizzy. Stretched out beside them with a tablet, Raquel’s taken monitor duty.

Only, Kory seems to be the outlier--hovering in the air by the trapeze ropes just far enough away from the others to seem awkward...if her discomfited expression hadn’t already given it away.

He almost calls to her before Tara notices him.

“Nightwing!” The slightly older girl disengages from Cyborg and rushes at him, eagerly. “You just got back from the hospital, yeah? How’s Red Arrow? How’s Cheshire? Are they going to release him, yet? He’s coming to visit soon, right? Tell him he has to because--”

Dick grins, holding up his hands to fend her back. “Red Arrow’s fine, just loopy from the pain meds. Cheshire’s staying with him. The doctors said he’ll be released tomorrow and yes, I did tell him to stop by when he feels up to it.”

“He better,” Tara says, holding up a high-five for Lilith, who returns it while smiling shyly.

Questions satisfied, Tara begins pulling a lightly-protesting Vic back to the sparring mats with Lilith right behind them.

The rest of the Titans move to stand by Dick at the wall.

“I’m glad Roy’s alright,” Raquel remarks quietly and Dick nods.

Garth gestures up to where Kory is still flying alone. “She doesn’t look very happy about it.”

“Oh, leave her alone,” Donna says, bumping him with her good shoulder. “We all handle things in our own way.”

“Is kind of weird she didn’t at least come down to hear the news, though,” Raquel admits.

And there it is--the tension he’d been expecting-- not absent, just kept hidden from the trainees.

The Titans knew there was a traitor.

“Lilith says…” Zatanna hesitates. “We’ve been working on Lilith’s latent mood sensing--she doesn’t have the full force of mind reading yet but at least this will give her a basic impression.”

“What are her basic impressions,” Garth asks.

Zatanna bites her lip. “She says Tara’s happy pretty much constantly, Vic mostly feels relieved, and Kory….that Kory feels guilty.”

A thick silence falls so deep that he can hear Tara’s kick land from across the room.

“What does she have to feel guilty about,” he asks because someone has to.

Zatanna shakes her head. “I don’t know. Like I said, it isn’t mind reading.”

Dick sighs. “I’ll go talk to her.”

No one argues and luckily, Kory is still by the trapeze equipment so all it takes is a small climb and a
simple jump to reach her…and if he throws in a few not strictly necessary spins and a flip before landing in a handstand on the swinging bar beside her…well, Dick’s always been a performer at heart.

She gives him a small smile. “See, it is flying.”

“Just not quite the same,” he says, dropping down to sit on the bar. “I need to talk to you.”

“I know.” Kory turns idly in the air, a trail of light following behind her. “It’s the team, is it not? They do not trust me. You have come to ask me to leave.”

“No.” Dick’s hand shoots out to grab her shoulder before she can get any further and she looks up in surprise. “We-- I don’t want you to leave, Kory. It’s just….it’s not that the team doesn’t trust you. It’s that we don’t know you.”

“What more is there to know,” she asks much too quickly. “I am only what I appear to be.”

“Kory….I think we both know that’s not true.”

Kory’s hand tightens around his in a death grip. “Nightwing….I….I can’t.”

And that’s when the Tower explodes.

A loud rumble shakes the tower and that’s the only warning they get before large parts of the walls break apart, crashing to the ground.

“ROCKET!” Dick yells. “FORM A BARRIER NOW! EVERYONE TO HER!”

A bright blue green lights up the room and Dick has just enough time to see everyone is within the perimeter before--

“I can help, too!”

“TARA! NO!” Garth shouts at the same time as Raquel’s “NOT INSIDE THE BARRIER!”

But Tara is already pulling up a wall of solid granite, breaking the edge of Raquel’s perimeter.

“TARA! WATCH OUT!”

One of the smaller pieces of rubble flies towards Tara, knocking her to the ground, not moving.

“NIGHTWING!”

The ceiling securing the trapeze gives out and Dick….

Dick falls.

Almost in slow motion, Dick can see the bar he was hanging from suspended above him, surrounded by falling debris, and there’s nothing to grab onto. Nothing to stop his fall, nothing steady enough to shoot a grapple to, nothing even to slow it down. He’s falling.

And then, arms wrap around him and there’s warmth and light and…


“Hold on, Nightwing,” she whispers back. “Just, please, please hold on.”
Pieces of the building are falling around them and there’s no way there going to be able to make it to Raquel’s perimeter before the building collapses on top of them. Maybe if Kory was alone, she’d be fast enough but…

“Just hold on,” she repeats and they make it to the ground. Kory has her hands up and…

Fire.

No, light.

Burning white hot light coming from her hands, much brighter and hotter than Dick had even contemplated she could manage. The crashing metal is melting around them faster than it can hit, falling in a circle around them before it can get close to touching either of them.

It can’t be more than five minutes and the tower has completely collapsed around them, leaving only an eerie silence in its wake.

Kory collapses to her knees the moment the last piece falls, light leaving her hands.

“Kory!” Dick is right beside her, a hand to her cheek and she blinks up at him, smiling tiredly.

“I am fine, Nightwing. We both are.”

“NIGHTWING!? STARFIRE?!” Zatanna’s voice echoes through the thick clouds of dust.

“Here,” Dick calls back. “We’re alright!”

“Raelc eht tsud morf eht ria!”

The dirt in the air vanishes and Dick can see Zatanna and Donna standing in the distance.

“Merciful Hera,” Donna shouts, running and wrapping her arms around him and she must really be shaken if she’s pulling out the Amazonian praises. She turns to Kory, still held in Dick’s arms. “Are you alright?”

Kory nods, pushing herself up with only a bit of struggle. “I am fine.”

“The team!” Dick’s already on his feet, heading in the direction Donna and Zatanna came.

It only takes a few more steps but then he can see them and finally allows himself to breathe. Raquel’s dropped her barrier and she’s standing beside Vic, looking in as Garth and Lilith crowd around the still form of Tara.

Lilith’s eyes are closed while her hands are pressed to Tara’s temples.

Finally, Lilith’s eyes fly open. “She’s alright. No damage, just knocked unconscious. She should be awake soon.”

Almost as soon as the words leave her mouth, Tara groans.

“Tara!” Garth’s hands land on her shoulders, trying to keep her steady. “Just rest for a bit. Okay, beautiful? You took a hit.”

“Yeah?” Tara cracks an eye open. “That why it feels like I got hit by a semi-truck?”

Garth laughs, holding up a hand until it glows with a very basic form of Atlantean healing. “Better?”
“Much better.” Tara pushes up, kissing him on his cheek. “Thanks to my big strong Atlantean!”

They’re staring at each other in a way that pretty much makes everyone around them look quickly in a different direction, Dick included.

He looks at the Tower. What’s left of the Tower that is. Only a few of the building blocks and then….just nothing. Only chunks of metal and glass spread out on the ground like…well, like an explosion.

“Nightwing!”

He follows Zatanna’s gaze, looking down at the rubble.

Black explosion marks. The same that were used in Roy and Jade’s apartment, only this time on a massive scale. Placed into the very walls of the building.

Dick closes his eyes very, very briefly. It’s still too long.

It’s still long enough for Garth to break away from Tara to see what they’re all staring at.

“You! You did this!” Garth yells, pointing at Kory with a tone’s still more surprised hurt but coming quickly on anger. “It had to be you! Only the trainees and the Titans have access to the Tower!”

“I….it wasn’t me. I promise.” But even Kory doesn’t seem surprised at being accused. Just resigned.

“Garth, back off,” Dick steps in between them. “We still don’t know what happened.”

“Bullshit!” Garth yells, loud and big as a hurricane in the way the calm Atlantean only rarely gets.

“Come on, Di- Nightwing! We know it has to be someone. It’s her! She probably did Roy and Chesh’s apartment, too! She nearly killed Roy! She hurt Tara! She destroyed the Tower. She just almost tried to kill all of us!”

“Garth--” Donna tries but is quickly interrupted

“What was that thing you did with the light,” Raquel demands, looking at Kory. “The thing with your hands?! That was much more than you ever showed at training! Why didn’t you tell us?”

Kory is paling at every word, stepping back in retreat until she’s finally against the few pieces of remaining foundation.

“I…,” Kory whispers. “I can’t tell you. I’m so sorry.”

And then she’s gone, bursting off of the rubble and into the sky fast enough that it’s like a shooting star against the night.

“Was that…. Zatanna swallows, tracing the last of the light in the sky. “Was that a confession?”

“That’s not what she said,” Dick points out and the excuse sounds weak even to his own ears.

Garth groans, hands in fists at his side. “She said she was sorry and then flew off. What else do you take that for?”

Dick can’t answer and Garth’s eyes narrow.

“Seriously,” he asks between clenched teeth. “She just nearly killed us and you’re still not even admitting it.”
Dick meets his eyes, sees the team watching cautiously at the sides, and he…

He goes with his instinct.

“I’m going after her,” he tells them. “Either…either way, we need to find her and I’ve got the best chance of getting her to talk.”

“Fine, fine, Nightwing!” Garth angrily scrubs a hand through his hair. “Give her one more chance if that’s what it’ll take to convince you! But the team’s done giving her chances. So, whenever you come to your senses, come and find us at….at wherever we can fucking find since the Tower’s gone!”

“The lighthouse,” Tara says softly, coming to grab Garth’s hand. “Remember that lighthouse we found, Garth? It’s perfect!”

Garth looks down at her, un-tensing just enough for a small sigh. “Yeah…we’ll be at the lighthouse.”

Dick nods and then….

The team leaves.

Each one giving him worried or outright concerned glances as they go and Donna looking a step away from dragging him with them but, in the end, Dick still finds himself alone.

And he’s standing in the wreckage of what used to be the Tower and feeling more lost than he has in three years.

If this was the choice Mera wanted him to make, Dick hopes he made the right one.

It doesn’t feel like it.

-----

All said, it actually doesn’t take much to find Kory. A few minutes with the satellite and one more of just plain old detective guesswork and he finds her, sitting on the tallest building in Jump City.

She doesn’t look up when he lands next to her.

“You should not have come after me, Nightwing.”

“You didn’t go very far.” He sits down beside her. “In my experience, people trying to run away go a bit further than the neighboring city”

Kory doesn’t respond.

“Almost like you don’t want to run away.”

“Regardless of my wishes, I can no longer stay here.” She sighs. “You should not even want me to stay.”

“That depends,” Dick says, slowly. “Did you blow up the Tower?”

Kory jerks up, finally turning to him. “I…. No!”
“What about Roy and Jade’s apartment?”

“No!”

“Did you know Donna was going to be shot?”

“Of course not!” She huffs. “But, I do not take you for a fool, Nightwing. I do not expect you to merely take me at my word.”

“I’m trying,” Dick admits. “I trust you, Kory. I don’t have a reason for it, I just do. It’s an instinct. But, for the team, I’m going to need more than just my instinct. I’m going to need the truth. All of it. I need to know what happened to Tamaran. What you’ve been doing since then. How you know how to fight. Why you didn’t tell us how strong your powers really are.”

Kory folds into herself, looking miserable. “I cannot give you the truth, Nightwing.”

“You can,” he disagrees. “You’re scared. I understand what it’s like to hide who you are,” Dick takes a breath and makes a really, really stupid decision. “But someone once told me that it’s more than just understanding the truth, it’s about proving we can face it, so….”

He takes off his mask.

Kory’s eyes widen.

“You can call me Dick Grayson.”

“What...what are you doing,” Kory whispers, a hand raised almost to touch his face before she lets it fall. “If I was the traitor, I could use this to kill you! Why are you risking this?”

Dick smiles as if his heart isn’t beating a mile a minute. “I trust you. I told you I’d always be there for you but...Kory, you gotta help me out a little, too. Trust me...please.”

She’s still staring at him, eyes getting brighter as tears slowly start rolling down. She closes her eyes, her head falling on Dick’s shoulder as her next words come out in an almost inaudible puff of air.

“Tamaran was not destroyed,” she whispers and the sentence sounds dragged from her. “It was I who was forced to leave it.”

Dick’s hands come up, wrapping around her shoulders. “Why?”

“I lied to you,” she says, face still hidden. “My full title is Koriand’r, daughter of Queen Luand’r and King Myand’r, second princess of Tamaran.”

“You’re a princess?”

“Not for many years.” Kory takes in a ragged breath. “I was trained to rule my people, sent away to be trained in combat, but my people were already in a century long war with our enemies of the Citadel. My father...he had no choice, our planet was on the brink of destruction, he traded me away to ensure peace.”

His arms wrapped around her tighter. “Kory…”

“It was my duty for my people. An honorable sacrifice.”

“You shouldn’t have had to make it.”
She leans back, a slight twist to her lips that could’ve been mistaken for a smile. “Should anyone?”

“How did you escape,” Dick asks in lieu of an answer.

Kory takes another breath, bracing herself. “After six years, the Citadel grew tired of me and I was traded to the scientists of Psions. My sister…I did not know, but in my absence my older sister Komand’r had allied with the Citadel and attempted a coup against my newly crowned brother. She lost, betrayed by her supposed allies and was imprisoned alongside me with the Psions. They…they experimented on us.” Kory looks down, her hand glowing with the same intense white light as earlier. “They gave me my strength…and my sister hers.”

There’s something dark behind Kory’s eyes and Dick touches her arm, gaining her attention. “What happened next?”

The light in Kory’s hand extinguishes and it folds into a fist. “A faction of my sister’s former allies attacked the ship to save her. I thought….I didn’t know about the attempted coup so I thought they had come to save me, too, but then….She attacked me. My own sister attacked me.” Her expression darkens. “I made it to an escape pod and tried to make it as far away as I could. I fled for nearly a year while my sister used her new powers to take the throne of Tamaran and declare herself Queen.” Kory looks down. “I didn’t try to stop her, did not try to help my brother or my people. I couldn’t…I just ran and I ran and I ran until my ship broke and I finally ended up here.”

“That’s why you wanted to join the Titans,” Dick says, “because we could protect you.”

She shakes her head. “No one can protect me. Not from Komand’r. She’s too...she is too strong , so much stronger than me. But...but you said you were protectors and I...I’m so tired of running. I thought that if I couldn’t help my own people. At least, I could help yours here.”

Kory closes her eyes. “....But I haven’t. I’ve been so scared. Scared of using my true powers. Scared of one of my sister’s forces picking up your Earth broadcasts and recognizing me. I wanted so much to be part of the Titans when I am not even brave enough to show you who I really am....it is no wonder they believe I placed those bombs,” Kory pauses, frowning, “though I am still unsure how I could…”

Dick freezes.

“No that I would even want to,” Kory adds quickly.

“No, that’s not...” He frowns. “How could you? How could anyone …because the bombs were in the wall and that would take….that would take drilling and reconstructing and...and that’s even if they were able to cover it up without anyone noticing. To do it in a week would be....that should be...impossible….unless...”

“....Nightwing?”

Dick thinks of the training room right before the bombs went off. Thinks of the wall. Perfect, seamless, not even a mark.

“Dick?”

“I’m an idiot,” he says flatly and then he’s pulling up his wrist computer and typing in commands almost as fast as he can think. “....Crap, crap, I’ve been such an idiot. Batman would….well, nevermind. I was so caught up trying to figure out how it wasn’t you and with Deathstroke and then the stupid Justice Society and....and wondering what I’m doing wrong that I didn’t look at the obvious. I’m a freaking detective, how did I....”
“Dick,” Kory says cautiously. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re not the traitor but someone still is,” he tells her. “And you’re right. Putting the bombs inside the stone walls that the Tower uses should be nearly impossible. Definitely without being noticed. Unless….”

He shows her the screen and Kory pales.

“….unless your power’s manipulating stone,” Dick finishes.

The smile of Tara Markov shined down on the them from the blue screen projection.

Dick minimizes the screen, already aiming his grapple in the direction of the nearest zeta beam. “Garth said they were going to the lighthouse. She suggested they go! It’s a trap, it has to be!”

“Dick, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, but I’m pretty good at thinking on the fly.”

He shoots a line and gets ready to jump.

“Wait!” Kory grabs his hand. “I’m coming with you!”

-----

Weeks ago, when Garth mentioned Tara finding an abandoned lighthouse off the coast of Hatton Corners that would work great to hide a zeta, Dick really didn’t think much of it beyond marking it down.

Now, he’s thinking about it. Small, isolated, far away from any existing zetas, and a small town the only thing for miles. Not to mention, surrounded by stone cliffs perfect for an earth manipulator.

When Dick makes it, he walks in alone.

“You’re here!” Tara calls from where she’s sitting with Garth. “Finally! Isn’t this place great?”

She’s smiling, big and wide and looking completely sincere, and….Jade was always right about fake smiles. They were just looking at the wrong person.

Donna picks up on the tension first. “Nightwing? You okay? Did you talk to Kory?”

“Yeah, I did,” Dick doesn’t take his eyes off Tara. “More important, I found out how the explosions were planted.”

Garth frowns. “How’d she do it?”

“Pretty easily.” Dick cocks his head. “Hey, Tara, how long have you had your powers?”

Tara laughs. “What are you talking about, you dork? All my life, duh! I was born with them.”

“But you weren’t, were you?” Dick pulls up a file on his wrist computer. “Tara Markov, daughter of combat specialist Viktor Markov, no reported powers or anything even slightly noteworthy all through childhood…well, unless you count the discipline warnings and a handful of unfollowed
psychiatric recommendations.”

“Nightwing, where are you going with this,” Garth says, low and warning, standing in between him and a still smiling Tara.

“See, that’s what I found when I looked into you ,” he continues. “So, imagine my surprise when I looked at what Batgirl found on H.I.V.E.” Another file pulls up, this time of an older man.

“Apparently, you’re dad wasn’t just a combat specialist, was he? He was a H.I.V.E mercenary….until he got on the wrong side of one of their elite---Frederick DeLamb, right?”

“Oh, Freddy!” Tara sighs. “What a frickin’ pretentious blowhard!”

Garth stiffens. “...Tara?”

“I know H.I.V.E gave you your powers, Tara,” Dick states. “But, how could you ever follow them after they killed your father?”

There’s a moment of complete silence that’s only broken by a wild laugh.

“Ah, so, who would have thought?” Tara grins, pushing a stunned Garth out of the way. “Nightwing still doesn’t have it quite right! H.I.V.E didn’t kill my father. I did . For H.I.V.E. Superpowers don’t come cheap, you know? I had to bring something in to convince them!”

Around the room, everything goes utterly still.

“You’re...you’re psychotic,” Dick mutters in realization..

“That’s what the shrinks say!” Tara shrugs, unconcerned. “But, hey, that’s better than you! You’re dead !”

And then her hand slams into the ground and a stone spikes flies directly at Dick.

Dick didn’t need the warning, already vaulting to avoid the spike and pulling a stunned Lilith out of the way.

“But...but, I don’t understand,” Lilith shouts. “You were always so happy !”

Tara laughs again. “Why wouldn’t I be happy? I get to kill the Titans! Do you know how many people I had to kill for this chance?”

She spreads her arms, and two walls of stone--so, so much more than anything she’d shown before--rise from the ground and nearly take out Vic and Zatanna.

“Not to mention the opportunities,” she continues, another wall coming up to easily block Dick’s batarang and Donna’s lasso. “I mean, for a mercenary, Dad was always so boring , ya know? H.I.V.E gave me a chance to work with real professionals. Isn’t that right, partner ?”

A shot rings out, coming inches away from hitting Raquel, and Dick looks up to see Deathstroke coming out of the shadows and onto the railing a few floors up.

_Crap, time to change plans...

“Don’t worry about him, though,” Tara confides. “ I get to be the real threat today. He promised! He’s just here to catch any I miss.” She winks and another boulder flies at Donna. “And I don’t plan to miss.”
Dick hits a button on his wrist.

“...Tara,” Garth says, still the closest to her and the only one yet to be attacked. “...what are you doing? Why? ”

“Sorry, babe, nothing personal” Tara frowns, looking almost apologetic for a half a second before it’s gone. “…Huh, though, I guess that’s kind of the problem, isn’t it?”

Then, two stone walls are coming from either side to pulverize Garth, faster than anyone can get there.

“Now!” Dick shouts.

There’s a blast of white light and the walls crumple apart to rubble before they can hit, two figures standing in the dust.

Standing beside Garth, Kory’s hands glow white.

“You are not the only one with hidden depths.” Kory advances on Tara. “But, I could never be like you.”

Tara smirks. “Fine, just one more to kill.”

Another shot rings out, this time at Kory, but Dick is already in the air, high above, with his foot slamming into the rifle barrel. The shot goes wide.

Dick doesn’t pause, grabbing onto the railing and swinging around into another kick until the rifle is knocked to the ground below.

He dodges as a large arm almost hits him off the ledge.

“Time’s up, kid.” Deathstroke swing his sword off his back. “Gotta make a choice.”

Dick brings up his arms, escrima sticks held steady. “I’ve made my choice.”

Deathstroke’s sword swings down at his neck and Dick flips up, using the railing to catch himself and aim a kick at Deathstroke’s knees. He sidesteps and Dick has to pull up quick to block a split second before he’s disemboweled.

Below them, there’s the sound of high pitched laughter clashing with the tremble of earthquakes.

“Are you sure about that?” Deathstroke doesn’t even sound winded as he follows through with a vicious swipe that cuts through the metal railing. “That girl down there, she’s...not exactly screwed on right.”

“Amazingly enough, I figured that out for myself, thanks.” Dick grits his teeth, twisting out of the way not quite fast enough to avoid a slice to his shoulder.

“She’s going to kill your team,” Deathstroke continues, batting away Dick’s escrima. “Painfully and viciously until you’re the only one left. And the longer you’re up here fighting me, the faster it’s going to happen. What kind of leader abandons his team like that?”

“I’m not abandoning them!” Dick flips over Deathstroke’s shoulder, landing on the other side only to get knocked further when Deathstroke’s foot slams into his chest.

“Aren’t you?” His sword comes down and Dick blocks with his escrima, having to use both hands to
keep the sword suspended barely a foot from his head. Deathstroke presses down. “You certainly aren’t down there fighting with them. How long do you think they can last? Without even their leader down there to protect them?....But, that doesn’t mean you can’t still keep them alive right here.”

The sword is grinding into the metal of his escrima, a horrible scraping noise as the sword moves closer by inches.

“Last chance, kid,” Deathstroke bares down on him until Dick’s forced to his knees. “Terra’s still young. Impressionable. She’ll listen to me if I order her to back down. All you have to do is join me and disband the Titans.”

A shout sounds from below but neither Dick nor Deathstroke dare to look down to see who it was.

Dick makes a choice

“No.”

Deathstroke sighs. “Pity and I thought heroes were all about protecting their friends.”

“They’re more than my friends.” He holds the escrima stick steady. “They’re my team. They can protect themselves; it’s my job to lead them.” He smirks. “And, trust me, they can kick Terra’s ass just fine!”

And then Dick kicks out at a rusted pole railing, already weakened by the sword, and the entire section goes falling.

With all the instinct of a trapeze artist, Dick catches himself and flips back into a crouch on the remaining railing.

Deathstroke isn’t so lucky. He hits the railing bellow hard and his extra weight makes the entire structure creak ominously, forcing him to grab onto the metal to steady himself until he can figure out how to balance without bringing the whole structure down

But if there’s one thing Dick’s got over Deathstroke, it’s balance.

Dick lands perfectly on the railing beside him, swiping out with his leg and kicking away the sword before Deathstroke can get a grip on it. He follows quickly with a kick to the gut that Deathstroke can’t deflect without loosing his precarious footing.

“Ruthless,” Deathstroke says and he almost sounds proud. “But, I don’t need the sword and the gun to beat you.”

“I think you have other priorities.” Dick points down.

Below, Tara’s laughter has faded off to incoherent snarls as her boulders are blown apart by the combined force of Vic’s arm cannons and Kory’s starbolts. The pieces they miss hit off of Raquel’s shields or are tossed aside by Zatanna’s spells.

“STAY STILL!” Tara shouts, just as another wall of stone is blown apart.

Her hands raise, ready to slam into the ground again, just as she’s pulled roughly off her feet.

“Yeah? You first,” Donna spits out, tightening the lasso around Tara until she can barely move.

Dick turns back to Deathstroke. “Even if you beat me, can you beat all of them without your sword
or your gun…. or your partner?”

Deathstroke pauses, looking down at the team in consideration.

Dick waits, tense and ready to move at the slightest shift.

Eventually, Deathstroke laughs. “You still vastly underestimate my skill, kid, if you think I can’t still beat your team.” He pauses. “…but not without risks. And you don’t survive in this game as long as I have without learning which risks to take.” Deathstroke regards him steadily. “Well played, kid…. for now.”

With that, the mercenary turns down, regarding is partner with a profound level of dissatisfaction that’s obvious even through the mask. He turns to Donna. “We’re leaving. If you don’t mind removing that lasso from my partner, before I’m forced to remove your arm from your shoulder.”

Donna turns to Dick, waiting for the order, when Tara lets out a wordless shriek.

“You...YOU COWARD!” Tara pulls at the rope around her. “YOU WORTHLESS TRAITOR! YOU TOLD ME I COULD HAVE THIS! YOU TOLD ME I COULD KILL THE TITANS!”

“Patience, kid. We need to regroup.”

“No!” She yells and Dick sees it a moment before it happens.

“TROIA! PULL HER UP!”

Tara’s back hits the ground, her hands coming in contact with the dirt, and a wall knocks Donna away from the rope.

“You’re trying to stop me,” Tara mutters, pushing the ropes away and standing. “I’LL KILL YOU! I’LL DESTROY YOU! I’LL DESTROY ALL OF YOU!”

And then her hands hit the ground and the lighthouse starts shaking.

“She’s bringing the building down!” yells Lilith.

“TERRA, STOP!” Deathstroke orders but Tara isn’t listening, laughing to herself as parts of the lighthouse start to crumble around them.

Dick looks to Deathstroke, and just for a second masked eyes meet a single blue.

Deathstroke sighs. “What did I tell you, kid? I hate wasted potential.”

And then, he’s gone, disappearing back in the shadows as the walls start to fall around them.

Dick doesn’t have time to go after him, already swinging down to the others.

“Kory fly Lilith out of here,” he orders. “Vic, Zatanna, you two behind them! Raquel, cover everyone as they go!”

Kory lifts Lilith into her arms. “What about you?”

“I’m get Garth,” he says before turning to Donna. “Go through--”

“TARA!” Garth shouts. “STOP! YOU’RE GOING TO BRING IT DOWN ON TOP OF YOU!”
Tara’s only response is a laugh as the tremors of the building double.

“Get out now,” Dick yells at Donna, already running to where Garth is trying to reach Tara.

“Tara, please, stop,” Garth begs.

Tara sneers and another wall flies forward, almost hitting Garth before Dick tackles him out of the way.

Around them, the lighthouse is tearing itself apart.

He grabs Garth’s shoulders. “Garth, we have to get out!”

“Dick, I…” Garth says, still partially in shock. “I don’t understand, Dick. We have to save her!”

Dick swallows, looking back to where chunks of stone are falling around a still laughing Tara.

“Garth….we can’t.”

And that’s when the light on top of the tower finally comes crashing down, bringing the rest of the tower along with it.

“Garth, we need to get out! We need--”

Something heavy and sharp hits Dick in the back of the head and everything goes dark.

----

Dick wakes up in a medical room that doesn’t quite feel familiar with Donna at his side.

Her lip quirks up. “Hey, Sleeping Beauty, new rule: no more falling buildings for at least a year. Titans order.”

“Where are we?” His throat is dry, scratchy.

Donna sighs. “The old Young Justice cave….sorry, we couldn’t think of anywhere else to go.”

He blinks, the not-quite-familiar feeling setting in his stomach to be replaced by mild unease. “How long was I out?”

“Just a few hours,” she reassures him. “You inhaled a lot of the dust though before Garth got you out.”

“Garth? Is he--”

Dick starts to sit up before she pushes him down.

“He’s fine…physically.” She sighs and Dick notices the other bed in the corner, curtains pulled tight.

“Tara didn’t make it out,” Donna tells him quietly. “Garth…he got you both to the water where he could protect against the largest damage but…there was nothing left, Dick. Just rubble.”

He looks down, not quite knowing what to feel.

Tara had betrayed them, tried to kill them and only killed herself in the process. Logically, there was
no reason at all Dick should feel anything like grief at her death.

But, still, she was one of them….Almost.

Grief doesn’t have to be rational.

“Garth has barely said a word since he pulled you out of the water,” Donna says.

“Let me talk to him.”

“Dick, you just woke up.”

“Donna,” Dick meets her eyes. “I need to see him.”

Donna sighs again, but nods, moving to help Dick out of the bed and across the room—which is great considering Dick feels like a giant bruise.

She pulls back the curtain and Dick sees Garth….just sitting on top of the still made bed, obviously awake with legs pulled up around him, but not even acknowledging them past a brief glance before his gaze fall back to the sheets.

Donna carefully helps Dick into the visitor’s chair before quietly slipping out of the med bay, leaving the two in heavy silence.

Dick’s kind of used to silences, even heavy ones, but that still doesn’t make it any less unpleasant.

He waits maybe ten minutes until it becomes obvious Garth’s not even planning on looking at him.

“I’m sorry about Tara. I wish...I wish we could have saved her.”


“Because she was one of us,” Dick says simply.

Garth laughs, bitter and broken. “But she wasn’t, was she? Not really. She was just using me--using us so that she could kill us later. She never wanted to be a Titan.”

“Just because she never wanted to be, doesn’t mean we didn’t consider her one.”

There’s a noise almost like a sob.

Dick moves down to catch his eyes. “It’s okay to mourn her, Garth.”

Garth buries his face in his hands. “....I’m so sorry, Dick. I was so...I was so stupid ! I thought it was Kory--I accused Kory--and thought you were just being blind because you have a crush on her but….but it was just. It was me and the team nearly died….I’m so sorry, Dick.”

“Garth, you couldn’t have known,” Dick says quickly. “ None of us knew. She was a professional, she knew us, none of us ever ever thought that--”

“Just leave, Dick.” Garth sighs. “Just….just please for now, I need to be alone.”

Dick hesitates, watching him, before pushing himself to his feet, ignoring the aches. “....Garth, when you need us, you know the team is here.”

Garth nods, but he’s looking down at the sheets again and a bit of the blankness is back in his eyes.
And...there’s nothing Dick can do. Nothing he can say. He can’t bring Tara back. He doesn’t have the words that’ll make her betrayal go away, he doesn’t even have ones that’ll have it make sense. There’s only one thing more that Dick can give him.

And that’s time.

Dick retreats to the med bay doors, the slowness only partly due to his aches.

The second before he leaves, the doors slide open and one of the last people Dick expects to see walks in.

“Garth?”

Garth looks up, eyes wide. “....Tula?”

Their eyes meet and then Tula’s coming to his side as if drawn by a magnet.


Tula’s hand closes around his.

“I’m here.”

-----

It’s….uncomfortable being at the Young Justice cave again. Except for a few runs to scavenge old equipment, Dick hasn’t been back since the invasion. It’s not like he’s been avoiding it exactly, there’s just never been much reason for him to come here. And now that he is here--now that he doesn’t have the excuse of the Tower to run away to--there’s so many memories that Dick finds himself pressed beneath the weight of them.

He’s not quite comfortable enough to go back to the med bay with Garth and Tula still there but running into Kory is more of a relief than he wants to admit.

“Hey.” He sits with her at the mountain’s back entrance.

She turns to him. “This place….this was the home of your old team, yes?”

“....yeah.”

“It seems nice.”

“It was,” he admits and they both lapse into silence.

Kory breaks it first. “I told the team. About Tamaran, about the Psions, my sister . Everything.”


“They deserved to know,” she states. “If I wish for their trust, I must give them my own first. And...and I have come to a decision.”

He waits.
“I want to stay with the Titans,” Kory says, voice firm. “If you all will have me, I want to fight by
your side.”

“What about your sister? Kory, I’m not going to lie to you, if you stay with the Titans, there’s a very
real chance she could find you.”

Kory’s eyes blaze with fire, almost literally. “Let Komand’r come. I am done running. I am done
denying myself a life out of fear of my sister.” She pauses and the fire doesn’t go out exactly but it
softens, turning into something bright if no less intense. “The Titans….for the first time in a long
time, I feel at home here. I refuse to give that up.”

She smiles. “You know there is an old Tamaran proverb that love must always be answered with
love. That is my people’s way. I thought I had forgotten but….I think I only needed a reminder.”

Dick’s throat feels tight as Kory turns to him.

“I want to stay here, Dick. With the Titans. With you.”

She’s looking at him, head tilted slightly, and Dick...Dick finds himself leaning in closer until almost
all he can see is the glowing green of her eyes, the warmth of her face, the fire in her hair...Dick feels
like he’s on the edge of the precipice and he’s leaning in about to jump when….

He leans back, his heart beating wildly in his chest.

“Glad to have you.”

Kory blinks, looking momentarily confused, before smiling at him.

And Dick...he can’t. Not here, not at this mountain with the memories just under the surface. Not
now when he still has a team he needs to talk to. He’s not...ready. Not now. Not here. Not yet.

He can’t kiss her. But, for a second, he really wants to.

-----

With a combination of Atlantean and Amazonian technology plus some additional funding by
Wayne Tech, the Tower is rebuilt in just over a month.

The first day the Tower is re-opened, there’s a ceremony open to the public.

Not a memorial. An induction ceremony.

Starfire, Cyborg, and Omen are officially declared new members of the Titans.

Dick’s grinning, clapping with the rest of the Titans, as the new three wave and answer questions for
reporters.

Somewhere in the massive crowd that’s gathered is a group that’s not cheering. That’s sitting, quiet
and reserved, holding protest posters with Stop the Titans. Keep Kids Safe and Children Are Not
Soldiers.

The New Justice Society of America.
For a second, Dick’s eyes land on Jay Garrick, a sign in his hands and the same steadiness in his face that made him a hero for decades before.

Jay nods at him and Dick turns away.

Some problems aren’t as easy as to be solved by punches and kicks.

Garth stands at Dick’s side, still quiet and hurting but standing just the same. Dick doesn’t have to look to know Tula’s hidden somewhere in the audience, there to support him as she has been for the past month. They’re not back together--frankly, Dick would be worried if they were this soon--but Tula’s decided to stay on the surface more and Garth is slowly getting better. It’s more than Dick can hope for.

After the ceremony’s over and the last reporter has finally been sent away, Roy catches his arm as Dick heads to the team’s after party.

Dick grins. “Hey, Jade told me you’re cleared for missions again.”

“Yeah, finally,” Roy huffs. “My leg was barely even injured.”

Dick has learned that, unless you’re Roy, it is generally a bad idea to disagree with Jade’s medical advice so instead he just says, “Nice to have you back.”

Roy gives him a look. “You seem….less tense.”

“Yeah, going a month or so without anything blowing up will do that for me.”

That earns him an eye roll. “Less tense than you were before things started blowing up.”

Dick looks up at him and this time, he doesn’t pretend to misunderstand.

“I made a choice,” he admits. “One I probably should have made a long time ago.”

Roy nods. He doesn’t ask what the choice was and Dick doesn’t have to tell him.

A handful of companionable seconds pass before Roy rolls his shoulders and changes the subject as if drawing another arrow.

“So, H.I.V.E?”

Dick smirks, “Babs just cracked their finances last week. All of H.I.V.E’s considerable and illegally acquired fortune has now been donated to save the bees from colony collapse disorder.”

Roy chokes on a laugh. “You’re a geek, who loves puns too much.”

“Guilty.” He shrugs.

“I take it without the funds, we won’t have to worry about Deathstroke anymore either.”

“His contract’s been cancelled,” Dick confirms and decides not to mention the note that was left on his favorite rooftop a few nights ago. See you soon, kid.

He frowns though, hesitating only slightly before pulling up a file on his wrist and showing it to Roy.

“Barbara did find something else, though.”

“H.I.V.E’s mysterious backer?” Roy leans over, reading the file before frowning. “Dick, I’ve never
heard of these guys before.”

Dick sighs. “That’s the problem. I don’t think anyone has.”

Five months ago, H.I.V.E received a single transfer in the form of five billion dollars. No bank listed in the transfer. No account numbers. Just two words.

*The Light.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Year 3 is now complete. Year 4 is next along with another important character that I’m very excited about. Comments and kudos always appreciated!

Coming Up Next: Year 4: Littlewing
Ages of Major Characters:
Dick Grayson (Nightwing): 17......Barbara Gordon (Batgirl): 17
Roy Harper (Red Arrow): 21........Donna Troy (Troia): 18
Koriand'r (Starfire): 17.............Jade Nguyen (Cheshire): 22
Garth (Tempest): 19...............Zatanna Zatara: 18
Raquel Ervin (Rocket): 19..........Vic Stone (Cyborg): 17
Lilith (Omen): 16

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Are We Failing Our Heroes?

METROPOLIS-- Just four years ago, the Invasion showed that the world is a much darker place without our heroes to protect us. But the question remains: does that very act of helping doom the protectors?

Earlier today, Jay Garrick--formerly the first Flash and the current leader of the newly formed advocacy group the Justice Society of America (JSA)--spoke at a protest outside the headquarters of the United Nations. The message was simple.

“We want to protect our heroes,” Garrick said in an interview. “Everyday those brave young men and women believe that grabbing a costume and stepping in front of a gun is the right thing to do. One day, the bad guy’s going to get a lucky shot. We’ve seen it before and the JSA wants to make sure it never happens again. The Titans are young. They don’t need to die that way.”

When asked about older Titans members, Garrick already had a response. “Twenty-one? Twenty-two? That’s not old. That’s the same age most kids are graduating college. We need to remember most of the Titans are teenagers. They don’t need more trauma, they need normalcy. They’re denying themselves any chance at a normal life. And we’re letting them.”

The new Justice Society of America so far remains small but active in pushing for widespread condemnation of teenage and young adult superheroes.

We here at the Daily Planet ask our readers does the JSA have a point? We love our heroes, but is it the best for them? Or are our heroes entitled to their own shot at a normal life? Contact the Daily Planet with your response.

“Dick, stop reading that crap.”

“I have to,” he says but allows Barbara to pull the paper away. “I need to know for when a reporter asks me about it.”
“*If* a reporter asks you about it,” she corrects, leaning at the desk, “then you can give the usual answer. Jay’s undermining our decisions, the world needs the Titans, we’re careful and well trained, and it’s more dangerous for everyone without us. There’s a reason the JSA’s got a problem recruiting members, Dick. The public’s still with us.”

“Yeah, *now.*”

“Not just now,” Barbara says, “they know it’s not the JSA that’s saving them. It’s us.”

Dick allows a small smile. “Thanks, Babs.”

“Anytime.” She turns to grab her helmet. “Now, the real question: what are you going to do while I’m following the lead. And, hint, the answer is not come with me.”

Dick tries very hard to hide his pout. Judging by Barbara's smirk, he’s not succeeding.

“You know when you think about it, two heads are always better than one.”

“Not on a one person job,” she retorts unsympathetically. “My lead, my mission. Them the breaks, Boy Wonder.”

“But what happened to *partners*, Babs,” Dick insists, hand held dramatically to his chest

“Nightwing and Batgirl. The Terrifying Twosome. The Daring Duet. The Pair of Punishment?”

“Three things.” She’s already double checking her utility belt “One, no one--not in the entire history of Gotham’s trashy superhero websites--has *ever* called us the Pair of Punishment. That’s horrible. Two, shouldn’t it be *Batgirl* and Nightwing. I did come first.”

“Only by like a week, I was first as Robin for years!”

She sticks out her tongue. “Still counts. Third and most important, it’s a one person job and I’m the one that got the goon to tell us Black Mask’s recruiting a meta from Central City.” Dick does pout this time and she laughs. “Just go on patrol again. You’re going to bore yourself to tears waiting in the cave.”

He gives her a look.

She smiles innocently. “As someone wise once told me, there’s no such thing as a useless task when it’s done to protect people.”

“Okay, Babs, I think we both know I said that so you’d help me search the sewers.”

“So, you admit it,” she accuses, finishing the last check on her motorcycle. “Hey, in seriousness, remember I can’t use the comms with a possible technology manipulating meta.”

“I know.” He hesitates. “Just...just be careful, Babs. Without the comms, I won’t know if you need backup so just...you know.”

Barbara’s smile goes soft and she walks forward, leaning down to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear. “I will. Trust me?”

“Always.”

She leans back, still smiling and heads back to the Bat-cycle. “I wasn’t kidding about finding something to do, Dick! Don’t drive yourself crazy!”
“Yeah, yeah.” He waves her off and watches her speed away, still feeling slightly antsy.

He makes it an entire five minutes of sitting in quiet stillness before getting up to pace the cave. He lasts another two minutes before his feet carry him to the old costume storage.

His Robin uniform’s there--all of them, actually, the ones he’d outgrown or given up for new modifications all tucked carefully into drawers. It doesn’t matter, anyway. It’s not a Robin costume that stands displayed in front of him.

He reaches out to run his fingers over the sleek black fabric of the cape, looking up at the tips of the cowl that he remembers being so much taller back when there was the man who wore them.

It’s all clean, carefully dusted in a way that means Alfred’s been here recently, and Dick can almost pretend that the costume’s still standing ready to be slung on for patrol. The thought hurts but it’s an ache now rather than a biting sharpness.

He doesn’t know why but he finds himself smiling.

Barbara probably has a point. He needs to get out of this cave.

Not that there’s many options.

He could go see if Roy wants any help in Star City….but, that feeling of having an outside hero in your city is always awkward at best. Jade’s on monitor duty tonight and, while definitely more open to conversation than two and a half years ago, she still might throw a knife at him if Dick showed up without anything important. Garth and Tula are out trying to have their first date since Tara’s death five months ago so that’s a definite no. Vic’s busy, trying to have an awkward bridge-mending dinner with his dad. And Donna’s having a girl’s night at the Tower with Kory, Raquel, Lilith, and Zatanna.

In other words, his options are stay in the cave and go stir crazy doing research or patrol again. Never mind that he and Barbara just got back an hour ago.

Which is how he finds himself, hours later, flipping off rooftops in Crime Alley to finish another patrol.

It’s the weird stretch of time that’s not quite dawn yet but still too late for anyone sane to still be awake. Dick wonders what it says that he still feels wide awake.

There’s nothing even slightly suspicious going on. Not even a small drug deal or a purse snatcher. Not even in Crime Alley.

It would definitely be un-heroic for Dick to be disappointed.

He sighs, grappling back in the direction of the Wing-cycle. Screw it, looking through old cases it is. Barbara can’t be that much longer, right?

He lands lightly at the alley where his motorcycle’s stashed when movement catches his eye.

Huh, so someone else is insane enough to be awake.

There’s the sound of metal hitting metal and Dick notices that the Wing-cycle’s been uncovered just at the same time as light reflects dully off an old wrench.

Dick grins. Oh, this is too good! Someone’s not only crazy enough to be awake but, by the looks of
it, trying to steal the tires off the Wing-cycle! Wait until he tells Donna.

He flips silently off the wall, landing on his toes right behind the dark shape, and clears his throat. “You know I’m pretty sure criminals should have better self-preservation!”

“Fuck!”

The wrench is flung at him and he catches it easily before focusing on the wide-eyed figure in front of him.

Dick frowns. “You’re a kid.”

The kid’s shock fades into a scowl, glaring at him from a worn out red hoodie. “I’m thirteen!”

“Yep.” Dick nods. “Definitely too young to be out in Crime Alley this late. What’s your name?”

“Yeah, right! Like I’m going to make it easier to book me!”

He rolls his eyes under the mask. “I’m not going to arrest you.”

The kid scoffs.

“Look, I’m not going to arrest you. I promise.” He points to his mask and the bright blue stylized bird on his suit, “I’m a hero. We help kids like you, not throw you in jail.”

The kid looks at the Nightwing symbol like he knows what it means but isn’t quite sure what it means for him. Finally, he mutters, “...Jason.”

“Nice to meet you, Jason!” He grins in a way he hopes looks trustworthy. “Though not sure about the location. You know there’s a lot better places to hang out than Crime Alley at night.”

Jason shrugs. “Most everyone turned in like an hour ago. Safest time to be here.”

So, he’s been in the neighborhood long enough to know patterns. Probably lives here, then.

Dick cocks his head. “Then, why’d you decide to steal tires from the one guy you knew was still up?”

The kid flushes red, looking down at his beat up shoes. “Saw you on patrol here earlier. Thought you already finished and stashed the bike overnight.” He huffs. “Look, I don’t….I don’t normally do the whole stealing tires thing, alright? I don’t steal from anybody unless they’re stupid mob guys that have it comin’. But, I...it’s kind of an emergency, okay? And I figured at least you could afford it unlike most people around here.”

“What’s the emergency?”

Jason’s jaw clenches briefly like he doesn’t want to tell him. “Rent. They evicted me last night.”

“Shouldn’t your parents be helping with that,” he asks without much hope. Parents don’t bring kids to live in Crime Alley—not if there’s another choice.

“Don’t have any,” Jason says flatly. “Dad’s serving life in Blackgate, not that he ever did much before. Mom...she died. A year ago.”

Dick lets out a slow breath, feeling his heart thump heavy in his chest. “You alone, then?”
Jason tenses. “I’m fine. You’re not going to call the fucking CPS on me, are you?”

“No.”

Dick doesn’t trust Gotham’s corrupt excuse for a social service program to take care of a used toothpick. Not if they’re anything like they were when he went through them. The Wayne Enterprise sponsored children’s shelters and foster program are a different story though. Jason certainly wouldn’t be the first he’d dropped off there. Or the last.

Jason is still glaring mulishly down at the pavement, hoodie down to reveal dark black hair. As if sensing his stare, the kid looks up and the fierce unyielding tilt of his jaw catches against something in Dick’s chest.

The words tumble out before he can stop them.

“Want to come with me?”

-----

This...is probably a really bad idea.

By Alfred’s deep silence over the cave communicator, he definitely thinks it is.

“It’ll be fine, A,” Dick whispers into the mic, careful to make sure Jason’s too far away to hear. Luckily, the kid’s still staring wide-eyed and frozen at the Batmobile in the storage hanger so Dick’s probably safe. “We just need to keep the entrance to the manor sealed. I’ll stay with him in the cave tonight.”

The sigh he gets back is the closest Alfred’s ever come to long-suffering. “The beds in the cave are meant for medical use. They are not a suitable sleeping arrangement for a thirteen year old boy.”

“A, it’s just for one night. I’ve slept in the med bay plenty of times.”

There’s another silence that Dick thinks is his only answer before Alfred clears his throat. “Just one night, young sir?”

“Just one night,” Dick repeats. “Any more would risk our identities. It’s too late tonight but I’ll take him to one of the Wayne programs tomorrow.”

Another beat of weighted quiet. “As you say, young sir.”

Alfred signs off the communicator and Dick frowns, wondering exactly what that meant before starting over to Jason.

He has to admit it is slightly comforting to see Jason, in the span of a few hours, go from attempted theft of the Wing-Cycle’s tires to obviously fanboying over the Batmobile. It almost makes him look like a normal thirteen year old.

“I didn’t know you still had this,” he breathes out in awe, hand just shy of reaching out to touch the black paint.

“Well, it’s not like I was going to throw it away,” Dick pats the bumper while Jason hesitantly touches it after him. “Just didn’t feel quite right to use it.”
Jason blinks, tearing bright blue-green eyes away from the car to stare up at Dick. “So, uh, was Batman like...was he like your dad or something?”

Dick tenses, but only for a moment.

“Or something,” he answers. He turns away from the Batmobile and feels slightly warmed to see Jason follow. “He took me in after my parents died. He...he wasn’t my father, not exactly. But he was...my partner, my mentor.”

*My family.*

“Wait, so he took you in...and trained you to be Robin,” Jason asks, slowly.

Dick nods. “He was a great man.”

Jason doesn’t say anything, looking busy with his thoughts, and Dick decides to leave him to it, leading him to one of the med bay beds--already cushioned with extra pillows and blankets Alfred had brought down earlier.

“This is where you’ll be sleeping tonight if that’s okay,” he tells him, before gesturing to the regular cot on the other side of the room, “I’ll just be over there. Agent A, one of the people I work with, already brought down sandwiches and water if you’d like some?”

Jason looks between the soft bed and sandwiches, hesitant but not wary. He seems to make a decision before turning up to Dick. “Um, thanks for doing all of this, er, Nightwing?”

“Of course.” Dick smiles. “Hey, I told you, it’s what heroes do.”

And that gets him a definite look from Jason but Dick ignores it, watching as the younger teen carefully grabs a sandwich.

Looking down at the surprised but pleased expression on Jason’s face, Dick can’t help think that maybe he was wrong.

Maybe this had actually been a really good idea.

And then there’s the beep of the cave’s entrance opening followed by the crunching sound of tires and Dick only has time to think, *Oh, crap,* before a voice rings out.

“Dick! I’m back! Mission was a success so you *better* not just be sitting at that computer or--- oh .”

Barbara stops in front of them, cowl already pulled down, as she comes face to face with Dick’s still masked face and a staring Jason.

Well, there goes the plan to keep secret identities out of it.

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For better or worse, there’s no real reason anymore *not* to take Jason up to the much comfier beds in the manor. Not after he’s seen Barbara’s face and heard Dick’s name. Not when Dick Grayson’s a household name in Gotham already.

So after explaining *all that* to Jason, stressing the secrecy part, showing him up to the manor, again
stressing the secrecy, and finally practically shoving the incredibly shell-shocked teenager his room, Dick finally gets back to the manor’s office and settles in for a very, very long night. He checks the window. Or, okay, a very long morning.

Barbara’s arms are crossed. “So….”

“Um, surprise,” he tries.

She looks at him incredulously. “When I told you to find something to do, I didn’t mean adopt a kid! A little warning would’ve been nice!”

“I didn’t adopt him,” he insists. “And your comms were off, how was I supposed to warn you?”

She throws up her hands. “Yes, my comms were off. Because of my mission. My mission as Batgirl. You know the identity that’s supposed to stay secret!”

Dick winces. “I’m sorry, Babs.”

She sighs and some of the fire goes down. “Look, Dick, you know I’m not mad at you for helping a kid, right? Granted, I’m more than a little annoyed at the lack of planning--”

“That’s fair.”

“--but I definitely understand wanting to help.” She pauses. “What I don’t get is why you didn’t take him to the Wayne shelters like normal?”

He sighs. “It was late. I was going to take him tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess we can’t now,” Barbara says. “Not until we’re sure he won’t tell our identities.”

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

She nods, accepting before frowning. “Why take him to the cave, Dick?”

“I…” He shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know. I just… I don’t know, it seemed right?”

There’s silence and Dick can feel Barbara testing the next words in her mouth.

Finally, she speaks.

“He looks like you.”

He frowns, honestly surprised. “He does?”

“You didn’t notice?”

Dick shakes his head.

The surprise seems to answer Barbara more than the words and part of her tension smooths away. “Okay…okay, we’ll figure out what to do later. Together. When it’s not five in the morning and I have class in a few hours.”

She leans forward and squeezes his shoulder, heading out of the office with a small yawn. “Don’t stay up too late, Dick. Promise?”

Dick nods absently, still caught up.
He can see it now. Kind of. The black hair, same acrobatic build though that’s probably more due to
Jason’s age, the blue-green eyes similar at a distance to his own. He can see how they look alike,
definitely not identical even compared to him at thirteen, but they could probably be mistaken for
brothers.

That’s not what he first noticed though. No, their faces are similar but there’s something more
prominent, the glint in his eyes, the set of his jaw.

Jason may look like him but he reminds Dick of Bruce.

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By the next morning--well, afternoon really--Jason seems to have shaken off most of the shock.
Dick’s still on the fence on whether that’s a good thing.

“So, how does this work,” Jason asks, pausing in between bites of egg.

“Well, it’s breakfast. Which means generally it’s a meal eaten before both lunch and dinner. Though
I guess, if you include the previous day, it’s really between the two.”

Jason glares at him which Dick’s beginning to think is a common expression.

“I mean the whole...you know,” he waves a hand through the air, “secret double life thing. You’re
famous. I saw you on a frickin’ tabloid cover last week. How do you keep the Nightwing stuff a
secret?”

Dick chews through his last piece of bacon. “There’s a legal agreement with the press for increased
privacy until I’m eighteen--don’t ask how Alfred got them to agree, it was right after the invasion.
Other than that,” he shrugs, “I’m careful. And Bruce was able to keep it up a lot longer than me, so
there’s that.”

“Wait!” Jason pushes the plate away. “Wait, wait, are you--are you telling me that Bruce Wayne--
the Bruce Wayne , playboy billionaire--was...was...”

“Batman?” Dick hides a smile because some things never get old.

Jason shakes his head. “No way. There’s no way . That guy was an airh--”

He cuts off, obviously deciding halfway through it’s probably a bad idea to insult his conversational
partner’s former guardian.

Dick just grins. “Bruce was a master of subterfuge.”

And the thing in Dick’s chest that’s been there since last night aches again a little fondly.

The shell-shocked expression looks in danger of returning before Jason literally shakes it off and
moves on to a new line of questioning.

“Huh, so you’re not eighteen yet?”

Dick shakes his head. “Not until December.”

“Then--hold on, it’s the middle of March--why aren’t you in school?”
“Why aren’t you?”

Ah, there’s that glare again.

Dick decides to take pity on him. “Babs and I graduated early. She’s majoring in computer sciences at Gotham University. It’s where she is now, actually. As for me,” a slightly sheepish smile, “it was suggested --rather forcefully and by several of my friends--that it might be a good idea to take at least a year off as a ‘break.’”

Jason eyes the air quotes suspiciously. “You’re a workaholic, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been called worse things,” he doesn’t disagree. Frankly, the Titans will be shocked enough he’s taking a personal day today.

Especially since he didn’t quite explain why.

Across the table, Jason is staring at him with a look that Dick recognizes, even if he’s never understood it. It’s not hostile. In fact, for the first time all morning, Jason’s face looks scrubbed of even his trademark wariness. Instead, he’s looking at Dick like he’s trying to piece together a puzzle and a bit amazed at what he’ll find.

It looks shockingly similar to how Bruce once looked at him. Right after he became Robin.

Seeing it again feels...it feels like Dick can’t quite catch his breath.

He doesn’t get longer before Jason speaks. “Okay, I know I saw it already. But, like you’re really him, aren’t you? Nightwing. Like the guy that beats up Killer Croc and Penguin on a monthly basis, former Robin, leader of the freaking Titans. That Nightwing.”

Dick rubs the back of his neck. “It sounds a lot more impressive than it actually is if you say it like that. Trust me, I’m just...well, me.”

There’s a pause where Jason tilts his head, watching him. Immature as it is, Dick kind of wants to throw a grape or something at him to get him to stop.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Jason says eventually before smirking slightly. “Honestly, you’re kind of a dick if you know what I mean.”

The surprised laugh that Dick finds slipping out is a welcome break. He hops off his seat to reach over and ruffle Jason’s hair, only to have his hand slapped away with an exasperated huff. “Jay, you already found out my secret identity. No need rubbing it in. Now, come on, let me give you a tour of the manor.”

Jason complies, letting himself be dragged into the hall.

Dick’s just glad he doesn’t ask what the larger plan is. He’s still trying to figure that out himself.

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Somewhat surprising, Jason’s uncontested favorite part of the manor turns out to be the library. Dick thinks it might even beat the Batcave. Which is convenient because it means Jason’s still upstairs, nose deep in classic literature, while Dick gets a chance to slip down to the cave for some much
needed research.

Jason Peter Todd. Thirteen as of August 16th. Father: Willis Todd, currently serving a lifetime term without parole in Blackgate on multiple charges of armed robbery, attempted murder of police officers, and gang related activity. Mother: Catherine Todd, died a year ago of a drug overdose. Almost no other record of Jason, except for a shoddy school report cards with good grades but a number of absences.

Dick sighs. It’s amazing Jason made it this long. Especially in Crime Alley.

If Dick’s being completely honest, he’s not sure what to do next. Bruce’s training never covered what to do when an orphaned teenager finds out your secret identity. Probably, because Bruce would never be so careless except…

Well, unless you counted Dick himself. But that had been different. That had been….

Frankly, Dick has never really understood why Bruce took him in after his parents’ deaths. Guilt? Fine, he was absolutely sure Bruce felt some responsibility--no matter how insane--from sitting in the crowd unable to stop it. But the sad fact is sometimes that’s just life for a superhero. You don’t get to save everyone. Bruce knew that, even then.

Guilt alone wasn’t enough. Kinship, maybe? There was a connection there born of unique understanding even from that first night. But, while a bond may have started then, the true partnership and ease of company didn’t come until later--not until Dick became Robin.

And if it wasn’t guilt or kinship, what was it that made Bruce Wayne--probably the most secretive, reclusive man on Earth--think that taking in an orphaned nine year old to live in his home was a good idea?

Dick still doesn’t know. And it’s been four years too late since he could ask

Jason is different though. He has to be. He can’t stay here. Dick’s entire life is too dangerous for someone without training. Even with his past, Jason still has a chance for a normal life and Dick’s going to do everything he can to make sure he gets it. He promises.

The sound of the cave door creaks open and Dick quickly clicks open a different search tab.

“Hey, Dick?” A voice drifts down. “Is there a light for the stairs? Alfred just showed me how to open the door.”

“There’s a switch between the rocks,” Dick calls back. “Shoulder height.”

Light comes from above, illuminating Jason as he makes his way down the stairs.

“Geeze, how did we even get up here last night without this.”

Dick snorts. “You get used to doing it in the dark.”

Jason’s eyes narrow. “So, do you try to make innuendos or does it just come with the name?”

“Bit of both. Personally, I prefer puns.”

“Ugh, that’s even worse.”

Dick shrugs unrepentant as Jason finally makes his way over.
“Huh,” Jason looks at the screen where Dick’s finished reviewing Barbara’s new notes. “This about Black Mask’s new drug thing?”

Dick turns his chair to him. “You know about that?”

“Not much.” Jason crosses his arms. “Like I said, I try to stay out of gang stuff. But, I still hear things. Plus, some of his guys were doing, um, ‘recruiting’ off my old neighborhood.”

“Any details,” he presses.

Jason thinks for a second. “I don’t know, maybe? I know a few guys talked about a warehouse. Over in the Bowery--here.” He grabs a notepad from the desk and scrawls down an address, and hands it to Dick.

Dick pulls up the site on the computer, scanning quickly over its history. “Jay, this could be his new base we’ve been looking for. With this, we could stop the shipments before he starts distributing.”

He turns to meet Jason’s eyes. “Thank you.”

Jason blushes, putting his hands in his pockets. “Well, you know, glad I could be useful.”

And despite the fact that he still looks much more interested in his shoes than looking back up, Dick can’t help but think he seems pleased.

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Really, Dick should have seen this coming.

“You called in for a personal day twice,” Donna says, hands on her hips. “The entire team was worried. What else were we supposed to think but brainwashing, kidnapping, or horrible grievous injury?”

“Maybe that I took a vacation?”

She snorts. “Oh, please.”

Dick resolves here and now that he’s going to take a vacation one day just to spite them. Working vacations are definitely a thing.

Oblivious to his decision--or more likely aware and amused--Donna smirks, throwing him a wave and heading over to Kory and to save Jason.

The alien princess is currently speaking cheerfully and exuberantly to the thirteen year old, while wearing a tight tank top and a pair of very small shorts. Dick’s fairly certain that Jason hasn’t been able to meet her eyes once, instead focusing on the wall behind her and trying not to spontaneously combust by blushing.

Roy elbows Dick in the ribs, breaking his thoughts.

“Dick, what are you doing,” he asks, too low to be overheard.

“Helping,” he answers because that’s a much better one than, I don’t know.

By the look he gets back, Roy seems to hear the second answer anyway.
“We can’t take him to the foster system,” Dick says. “Not until we’re absolutely sure he won’t tell our secret identities.”

“So, what? You’re just going to keep him here?”

“Got a better idea,” Dick retorts.

“Dick, you’re Nightwing.” Roy reminds him. “You have the Titans to worry about along with the entire corrupted population of Gotham. And you’re seventeen, you can’t take care of a teenager like this. This isn’t—”

Roy cuts off.

“What,” he presses. “This isn’t what?”

Roy sighs. “This isn’t you and Bruce.”

Oh, so that’s what Barbara had been worried about.

“I know. I’m not trying to be Bruce,” Dick says quietly. “He’s...that would never work anyway. You can’t just replace people like that. And I’m definitely not trying to make Jason the next me.”

That’s definitely not what he wants. If anything, he wants the opposite.

He looks down. “I just wanted to help him, okay? Make sure he gets out of this alright.”

Roy stares at him, measuring the words.

“Okay,” he says finally. “But, Dick, be careful. This is a thing that can go bad quick if you handle it wrong. And you’re not the only one that’s going to be caught in the crossfire.”

“Then, I won’t handle it wrong,” Dick mutters, mustering up a smile that Roy rolls his eyes at.

“Guess I better go introduce myself then,” Roy says instead. “Since, he might be here for awhile.”

Roy heads in the direction of the teenager and Dick almost follows before Kory takes the chance to break away and grab his arm, keeping Dick and her out of hearing range.

“I am happy for you,” she whispers, leaning close so her hair tickles his cheek in a way that feels warm.

“You like him, then?”

“I do,” she agrees, “but that is not what I mean. He is good for you, and you him.”

Her tone of voice hints at more than just giving Jason a temporary place to stay.

“I’m just trying to help him, Kory,” Dick tells her, feeling like a refrain. “It’s only for a bit. Then, I’ll take him to the foster programs.”

Kory’s frowns briefly before sighing. “I do not understand your Earth ways sometimes. So closed off, so reserved.”

“How so?”

“He looks up to you,” She gestures to where Jason’s nodding enthusiastically at something Roy’s
telling him. “I only spoke to him briefly and I can tell. He…cares, he turns to you even when speaking to others.”

“Kory, it’s because I’m the only one here he knows,” Dick insists.

She shakes her head. “No, it is because you were the one who first extended a hand. That matters. That gives hope.” Kory turns and smiles at him. “And you, Dick, I have known you for many months. You care about him as well.”

“Of course, I do. He’s a kid.” He sighs. “But, he can’t stay here forever, Kory. It’s dangerous, he deserves something better.”

“Love must always be answered with love,” she replies simply. “You reminded me of that.”

Dick reaches down and squeezes her hand. “This isn’t the same. And Jason doesn’t love me, he doesn’t even know me.”

“Not yet.”

“Not ever.”

She sighs again, a hand coming up to run gently along his cheek. “My dear friend, I hope your decision will not cause you pain. Nor Jason.”

And it’s so similar to what Roy had told him, even though for an entirely different reason, that Dick pauses just for a moment.

“I hope so, too.”

Kory smiles, her hand sliding down and the moment fades around them.

“We will tell the team you are unharmed,” she announces, back at a normal volume.

“Thanks” Dick says, watching as the rest of the group straightens at the cue.

She waves to Jason. “It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance!”

Jason blushes. “Y-yeah, you, too, Starfire.”

Kory beams at him and Roy pats him on the back. “Catch you later, kid.”

Donna winks. “Thanks for dealing with Dick for us!”

“Excuse you,” Dick protests, “I’m a joy to deal with!”

Donna gives Jason a look and the teenager huffs out a laugh.

The Titans depart amazingly without Dick also getting a talk from Donna about his decisions on Jason. Instead, she gives him a grin on her way to the zeta, eyes flickering briefly to Jason, which Dick translates to mean, I don’t know if it’s a good idea or bad but neither do you; so, I’m going to sit back until it works or blows up in your face. Call me if you need help.

Of course, Roy would say that there’s no way he can possibly interpret that from an expression but since neither Dick nor Donna have been wrong yet, Dick’s inclined to disagree.

After they leave, Jason wanders up to him. “Hey, question?”
“Hmm?”

“So, what’s your thing with Starfire,” Jason asks. “Cause I thought you were dating Batgirl, but...”

“There isn’t a thing with me and Kory,” Dick denies with long practice before the rest of the sentence processes and he chokes. “Wait, why did you think I’m dating Babs?”

Jason looks at him like he’s an idiot. “You’re not dating either of them?! Are you crazy? What about Donna?”

Dick shakes his head, still feeling dazed. “I can have female friends without dating them.”

“Yeah,” Jason agrees, sounding skeptical, “but I’ve met Barbara and she’s awesome and Starfire’s um...”

“Starfire’s what,” he teases, moving to a safe topic.

“Like you don’t know,” Jason mutters under his breath.

Dick bumps into his shoulder. “Hmm, what was that, Jay? Don’t know what?”

Jason groans. “Ugh, you’re such a dork. How did you get such cool friends?”

“Oh, so you think my friends are cool?”

“Cooler than you!”

“Rude,” Dick accuses, walking backward to the stairs. “And, here, I was going to ask if you wanted to help pick out new books for the library. Guess you wouldn’t want to be around someone so un cool though?”

“I’ll manage,” Jason’s already heading up beside him. “Uncool isn’t even a word!”

“Anything’s a word!”

Jason shoves him as they walk and Dick watches as the boy races up to the library. 

He’s not going to get hurt, Dick thinks. I can do this right.

-----

“We’ve got movement,” Barbara reports, zooming in with the lenses of her mask.

Dick watches beside her. “Look at the size of those crates, this is has to be the main delivery.”

“Which explains the crowds,” she agrees. “Ship it in through the river, get the technology meta to bury the ship’s existence, and give it straight to the suppliers right out of the warehouse. With what looks like half of Black Mask’s enforcers there as a threat.”

“I’ve already sent an alert to Gordon,” he says, checking his display. “Gotham PD en route.”

“Then, let’s make sure this party doesn’t end early.”

Dick nods, letting out a low whistle as they unload another shipment. “Black Mask must’ve spent a
fortune. With the size of those crates, we’d be clearing that stuff off the street for years.”

She tracks from above as the first police cruisers start circling the warehouse--still far enough away that they’re out of sight. “Lucky the tip was good.”

“Yeah,” Dick says, smiling slightly.

Babs glances over. “Yeah, yeah, you don’t have to say it. He’s growing on me, too.”

“He’ll be glad to hear about the bust,” he says. “He’s been down in the cave reading about Black Mask for the past week. More than even me.”

Barbara hums, standing at the edge. “That’s….odd.”

“They did get kids from his old neighborhood.” Dick shrugs, joining her. “I think it’s a good thing. It’ll show him how important keeping our identities secret is.”

“Maybe…” Their wrists beep. “Gotham PD’s in place. Let’s go!”

Dick and Barbara jump in tandem, swinging through the windows of the warehouse at the same moment the police sirens go off.

Caught in the confusion, Black Mask’s enforcers are almost too easy to disarm and everything goes down quick without any of the cops getting so much as a bruise. After the last crook is arrested and the drugs are tagged for the police high security storage, they survey the damage.

Twenty-five arrests. Over one-hundred and fifty pounds of drugs set to be sold across the county. Five of Black Mask’s top enforcers taken in.

….And no sign of Black Mask. Or the new meta.

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When Dick finally makes it back to the cave, the sun has risen enough to turn the smog of Gotham a warm orange.

He’s not alone. “You haven’t been down here all night, have you?”

Jason jerks up in the chair, rubbing his eyes. “Dick?”

“The one and only,” he replies. “If you really want to sleep down here, the med bay’s a much better choice.”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Jason lies before frowning, looking behind Dick. “Where’s Barbara?”

“Her apartment.” He snorts. “Some crazy person thought signing up for morning classes was a good idea.”

“She has morning classes,” he asks with the same tone most reserve for crimes against nature.

Dick shrugs. “Well, ten a.m. Morning for us. Speaking of which, shouldn’t you be upstairs asleep in the very warm manor instead of down here developing back issues in a cold cave?”
“It’s not that cold,” he mutters. “And I wanted to hear how the mission went.”

“Aww, were you worried about us?”

“What? No! Of course not,” Jason denies vehemently, the tips of his ears turning red. “I just, you know, wanted to see if my tip panned out! It was my civic duty to stay up!”

“Civic duty, huh,” he asks, leaning back against the desk. “Your tip was great, Jason. Some of Black Mask’s top guys are off the streets and the drugs never even left the warehouse.”

Jason looks down, fiddling with the arm rest. “So...I helped?”

“A lot.” Dick squeezes his shoulder. “We couldn’t have done it without you.”

With that, Jason lets Dick lead him to the stairs and up to the manor. Remarkably, Jason goes without any protest. In fact, the only thing he does is offer a slight smile right before heading in and a quiet, “Hey, Dick. Thanks for….well, you know.”

Dick doesn’t think he does but Jason shuts the door on him before he can ask.

He supposes he doesn’t need to know the details, it’s enough that Jason’s happy.

Three weeks pass quicker than Dick realizes.

Jason’s still living in the manor and Dick’s not any closer to figuring out the next step.

It’s not like he thinks Jason’s going to run to the nearest tabloid shouting out Dick and Bab’s identities. No, scratch that, Jason wouldn’t reveal their identities for anything. Dick can feel it. Jason’s stubborn, determined, and more loyal than is probably wise. He won’t tell.

But, it never hurts to be certain, right? There’s no rush, after all. And Dick…

Okay, fine, Dick’s kind of gotten used to having Jason around—hanging about the manor, asking him questions, debating with him about stupid stuff. It’s...it’s nice and familiar in a way that Dick doesn’t allow himself to think about for too long.

The point is he likes having Jason around.

He’s pretty sure it’s not just him. Barbara’s starting to teach him the beginnings of computer coding and, more than once, Dick’s come back from a Titan’s mission to find Jason in the cave, chatting idly over the comms as Batgirl finishes her latest patrol.

Alfred likes him. It shows in the way he’s started incorporating more of Jason’s favorite meals. Or how he lets the younger teen hang around the kitchen. Dick’s not allowed to cook anything more complicated than scrambled eggs after the Thanksgiving Incident of seven years ago. Jason, though, seems to share the old butler’s love of cooking and actually gets to help Alfred prepare the meals.

As for Jason, the teenager seems...content. There’s a slow growing comfort ease around the edges that Dick would’ve thought impossible a few weeks ago.

It’s good. It’s all amazingly actually going good. Which is why the conversation with Alfred hits so
“Master Dick?”

“Yeah?”

Dick’s down in the cave, scanning through another few security files to try to find any hint of Black Mask. It’s been weeks since the drug bust and Black Mask’s gang should be folding like a house of cards without its main source of income. It should make finding the actual man behind it easy. It should be an easy capture and finally a clean close to the biggest drug arrest of the last five years.

All of which make it especially annoying that neither Barbara or Dick can find him. Or the technology meta.

Not even a hint and Dick is almost ready to tear his hair out in frustration.

There’s a pointed cough behind him.

“Sorry, Alfred.” He looks up sheepishly before frowning. “Where’s Jason? I thought he was with you?”

“Master Jason has decided to avail himself of the library’s latest acquisitions,” Alfred answers. “I believe he was quite pleased with them.”

Dick snorts. “He should be, he chose them. He’s been in there more in the last month than I’ve been in a year.”

“Which bring us to the matter I wished to address,” Alfred continues smoothly. “Master Jason it seems has an exceptional thirst for knowledge, especially given his age. I’ve wondered what his school records are?”

“Good with understandably spotty attendance.” He thinks a second longer. “I think his highest was English which I guess makes the library more obvious. Why?”

“I wished to ask your thoughts on enrolling him for next year,” the butler says. “It would require some evaluatory tests but I have every reason to believe he’d still at least place within his age group.”

Dick opens his mouth, closes it, and then tries again. “I thought the foster program handled things like that?”

He was pretty sure he never had to do any of those tests until after he officially became Bruce’s ward, the snooty test administrator looking down her nose at him the entire time.

“Indeed, they would,” Alfred agrees. “However, the proper paperwork must be filed an appropriate amount of time before the new school year--especially for the more prestigious programs like Gotham Academy. Given that young Master Jason would undoubtedly prefer time to prepare, I believe we should address this earlier rather than later.”

“Alfred,” Dick frowns, “the new school year isn’t until next fall. He won’t even be living with us by then.”

A heavy moment of silence falls between Dick and his guardian.

Eventually, Alfred speaks. “Even so, Master Dick, it would still be unwise to allow Master Jason to fall behind.”
Dick nods because, really, Alfred already decided before he came down. The only reason he’s telling Dick now, framing it this way, is because…

Is because it’s something he believes Dick needs to hear.

The question is why.

Alfred’s already heading up the stairs, leaving Dick to his thoughts and he almost wants to call the man back to ask more but Dick thinks he understands.

Alfred’s planning for Jason’s future. Alfred’s thinking about Jason’s best interests, beyond just the days he’s here at the manor. Alfred’s giving Jason…he’s getting him ready for school. Perfectly normal, routine school, just like other kids go to.

What is Dick doing?

---

Standing in front of the cave’s zeta beam, Jason isn’t quite bouncing on his toes but it’s a near thing.

“So, this is like a secret Titans’ meeting?”

Dick hesitates. “….sure, let’s go with that.”

Jason narrows his eyes.

He ignores it, finishing typing in the final key code. “Done! Let’s get going.”

“Wait, Dick!” Jason catches his arm. “No, seriously, tell me. You said we were going to Titans Tower?”

“Which is definitely true!”

“For like superhero stuff, right?”

“Er, not exactly.”

Jason crosses his arms. “Then, why are we going?”

“Weeeellll,” Dick drawls, “sometimes, the team, um, can get really, really fixated on certain ideas and then get really stubborn to argue with, even for me. Especially when they all corner you after meetings and Vic pulls out some really impressive puppy dog eyes for a guy with a laser eye.”

“Dick, what’s this about?”

He bites the bullet. “A few weeks ago, Donna, Roy, and Kory told them about you and they’ve been bugging me to bring you ever since. So, sorry, less superhero stuff and more overzealous teammates.”

Jason’s staring at him with an expression of utter bewilderment. “The Titans want to meet me?”

“Yep,” he answers. “And I really wasn’t kidding about overzealous. Just trust me when I say the weirdness is just their way of showing they care. Okay?”
“Dick, the freaking Titans want to meet me!” Jason nearly shouts, eyes widening to the size of saucers. “I think this might be like the second coolest thing to ever happen to me!”

“Oh.” Dick blinks in surprise before smiling, “Wait, does that mean meeting me was the coolest?”

That at least breaks through Jason’s short venture into a hero-worship coma, turning around to stick his tongue out at Dick. “What, no! Coolest thing’s meeting Alfred. Duh!”

Dick shakes his head, powering up the zeta beam again. “The sad thing is I can’t even argue. You ready then?”

“Born ready.”

And with that they step through.

“Recognized: B-01 Nightwing and guest.”

Dick barely has time to blink the light out of his eyes.

“Finally!” Raquel pops up in front of them. “Is this him? I’m Rocket, you can call me Raquel though since you already know Dick.”

Her hand sticks out, Zatanna and Lilith close behind.

He rolls his eyes. “Geeze, guys, at least let him get out of the zeta entrance.” He shoos the others back slightly while Jason comes forward, earlier bravado wiped away a little bit in the face of the crowd. “Yes, this is him. Guys, meet Jason. Jason, meet your overly excited doom.”

“Nice introduction.” Jade says, standing by the doorway in a more relaxed posture.

“Jason,” Kory flies over. “It is fortunate to see you once again.”

Dick’s somewhat amused to see Jason only blushes slightly this time. “You, too.”

And then, the rest of the introductions begin. Once Dick is reasonably sure that Jason’s not going to be swallowed up in a mound of Titans, he steps back—far enough to give the team an actual chance to meet him but close enough that he’s there if needed.

Besides, there’s someone Dick wants to talk to.

She finds him first.

“He really does look like you,” Donna says, leaning on the wall next to him. “In the kind of adorable way, not like the creepy you-need-help sort. You look like family.”

He takes a breath and tries to laugh it off. “Well, you know, I am starting to suspect black hair and blue eyes means a genetic predisposition for crime fighting. Seems to be a lot of us.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Didn’t know Jason was going into crime fighting?”

“He’s not,” Dick says immediately. “No, sorry, that’s not what I meant.”

“You okay,” she asks. “Not that I’m not thrilled you finally gave in to bringing Jason to meet the team.”

He rolls his eyes. “I don’t even know why they were so interested.”
“Our fearless leader takes in a kid.” She grins. “And let’s him in on the famed secret identity. Are you kidding? That’s the most interesting gossip we’ve had in months.”

“He’s a good kid,” Dick says. “I’m glad they got to meet him,”

Donna pauses. “See, now when you say it like that, it sounds like they won’t get another chance.”

“They might not,” he admits quietly. “…Do you think it’s time I let him go? Let him get away from all of this.”

“Why now,” she asks instead of answering.

He shrugs. “Something Alfred said made me wonder if I’m being selfish.”

Donna smiles, shaking her head almost wistfully. “You don’t have a selfish bone in your body.”

She’s wrong but Dick doesn’t particularly want to start that argument when there’s more important things to be asked.

“Don’, you ever think about a normal life?”

She frowns. “I’m not even sure what that would be?”

“Something not this.” He waves a hand, gesturing at their costumes. “Not superhero stuff. Just whatever most people do. I don’t know. Normal.”


“I’m not talking about me.” Dick would never have a normal life. He knows that. He accepts it. This is more important than him.

“Is this about the JSA,” she asks. “What Jay Garrick said about the Titans?”

“Kind of.” He shakes his head. “I’m not sure. Is he right, Donna?”

She sighs. “Dick, I’m an Amazonian. I learned battle formations with the alphabet. That’s normal for me. Vic’s half-robot. Zatanna grew up levitating her building blocks. Jade’s an ex-assassin. There’s no such thing as a standard normal. There’s just life.”

Dick slumps on the wall. “But, is there a better life for Jason?”

Donna gestures to where Jason’s talking to Lilith. “He’s happy. Isn’t that better than where he was?”

Maybe, but is it enough, he thinks but refuses to say.

Donna lets him think for a minute more before she apparently decides he’s getting too close to brooding.

“Though, if you really wanted to try for more normal,” she teases, “you could stop getting kidnapped by Deathstroke every few months.”

Dick rolls his eyes. “It’s not kidnapping. Last time, he just dropped me off alone in the arctic. You guys picked me up the next day.”

“If that’s not kidnapping, what would you call it?”
“No clue.” He shrugs. “Nonvoluntary training via deadly mercenary, maybe?”

He’s given up understanding it. It didn’t look like Deathstroke had a contract, so whatever he’s doing it’s by choice. And if he wanted Dick dead, he’d have killed him.

Donna snorts. “Why do you always have to collect the crazy villains?”

“Gotham tradition,” Dick says innocently.

And then, because it’s Dick’s life, the tower alarms go on and the power goes off.

“Oh, look, our normalcy Yay.” Donna says, impressively deadpanned as the emergency power kicks in.

Dick sighs, already pulling up the wrist computer. “And I really wanted Jason to have a good visit.”

“At least it’s accurate,” she says.

“Nightwing, what’s going on,” Roy’s the first one to make it to him, already swapping to codenames with a wide-eyed Jason at his side.

“Everyone get ready!” Dick calls out. “Looks like Tartarus teamed up with the H.I.V.E. leftovers.”

Vic groans. “I hate Tartarus.”

“Better than Mad Mod.” Zatanna shrugs, snapping as her clothes change to her uniform.

“Ick, no,” Donna holds up a warning finger, “we don’t talk about Mad Mod. Ever.”

Jade turns to Dick. “Plan?”

Dick swaps the footage to the monitors. “First hit, put us on auxiliary power. They’re trying to break through the tower barrier now but not having much luck. Four metas--Siren, Gorilla Grodd, Lady Vic, and Red Panzer--with around fifty armed soldiers split up to attack from four direction. Good, that means they’re split up.”

“Teams,” Roy suggests.

“Yep, divide and conquer,” Dick answers, gesturing to the the team “Rocket, Tempest, you’ve got Siren--Rocket’s force fields should block out the songs. Cyborg, Omen, Zatanna you three are on Gorilla Grodd. Omen handles the mental attacks, Cyborg and Zatanna on the physical. Cheshire and Red Arrow, you’ve got Lady Vic. Donna and I will handle Red Panzer. Everyone, use the underground exits and try to use the tower shield to block against the soldiers. Good?”

Nods all around and the teams already on the move.

Dick turns to Jason. “Stay here. The zeta’s down but the power on the shield should still hold.” The teenager’s eyes are still wide and Dick grabs something out of his utility belt. “Here, take this. It’s one of my old spare ones. They always make me feel better.”

Jason looks down at the small domino mask like he’s been given something incredibly fragile. “Dick...I don’t...I don’t know what to do.”

Dick smiles, trying to put all the comfort he possibly can behind it. “Hey, that’s okay. You don’t have to do anything here. We got this! Trust me. Tartarus is far from the worst we’ve handled. Just watch from the monitors. It’s going to be fine.”
Jason looks at him with dark eyes. “Come back, okay?”

Dick can’t imagine how terrifying this would be for an untrained thirteen year old. Even one as brave as Jason.

“I will,” he promises.

With a sigh, Jason puts the mask on and offers him a small shaky smile. “Okay.”

Dick smiles back, giving him a small wave before running to meet Donna.

“Ready,” he asks.

She grins. “Just waiting for you. This is going to be fun!”

“Strange reaction to a home break in by super villains,” he responds, punching in the code for the west underground tunnel.

“Pft, like you weren’t thinking it.”

And then, the tunnel’s opening on the other side and two batarangs are flying through the sky, slashing through the wiring of three highly advanced soldier suits.

“Ha, three for two,” Dick says, ducking behind Donna’s shield as she blocks the gunshots from the rest.

“Show off,” she says as the two move forward in step.

An exploding batarang takes out two more—leaving eight soldiers remaining. “That’s the thing about super advanced technological armor. They don’t work that well once you turn off the power.”

“Incoming!”

A concussive blast shoots through the air, causing Dick and Donna to dive to either sides.

Donna swears, already up with her lasso ready. “I think it’s safe to say he got the new and improved version.”

Red Panzer scowls under his mask, shooting another blasts from his arm cannon.

Dick jumps to avoid, flipping through and kicking down another suited soldier as he went.

“Meh.” He slams an electrified escrima into the downed soldier. “Improved or not, Cyborg does it better.”

Donna’s lasso swings one soldier hard into another. “That’s because Cyborg’s got style.”

Dick would respond but one of the soldiers fancy blasters fires a little too close to comfort. He spins, kicking the gun out of the way and follows with a batarang.

Nine down. Four left.

Red Panzer’s next blast singes the ground a second behind him.

Okay, four left and one pissed off meta.

Dick’s comm beeps as Donna takes out another soldier.
He clicks it. “Yeah?”

“Lady Vic and her crew’s down,” Roy reports.

Zatanna’s voice answers, breathing heavy but sounding uninjured. “Still finishing off Grodd here. If you want another workout?”

Another blast means Dick has to move.

“--shire’s on her way,” Roy says. “Anyone else?”

Garth’s comm comes in. “Siren’s down, still working on soldiers but should be fine. Nightwing? Troia?”

Dick’s escrima stick hits into one of the soldiers, electricity frying the circuitry.

“We’re good,” he answers, clicking off the comm and turning to Donna. “Hey, Troia, you hear that? We’re going to be last!”

Donna grins, a blast hitting off her shield. “Yeah, well, they had a head start. Ready?”

“Just waiting for you,” Dick says, landing behind one of the remaining two soldiers and grabbing their arm before they can move. On the other side, Donna’s got the last soldier. “Now!”

From opposite sides, Dick and Donna aim and fire the soldiers’ blasters with Red Panzer right in the middle.

He goes down, smoking, latest armor firing one last blast aimlessly at the tower’s shield. The two soldiers are on the ground seconds after.

Dick taps the comm. “Red Panzer team’s handled. Everyone else?”

“Grod and the soldiers are down,” Zatanna says, sounding much more relaxed.

“Same for Siren’s,” Raquel answers.

“Good.” Dick turns back to Donna and gives her a thumbs up.

She grins, finishes securing the last soldier, and points to the tower. “Not a completely casualty-less fight. Look, Panzer’s blast destroyed our camera.”

“The tragedy,” he says, “and to think I’d raised it since it was just a microfilm.”

Donna laughs. “Dork. That is not at all how cameras work.”

Dick opens his mouth to retort just as the way too familiar sound of news vans pulls up.

“Wow, an entire ten minutes after an attack. They’re late.” Donna leans down to whisper. “And now, the true battle begins.”

He elbows her. “Oh, please, reporters are so much worse.”

“Nightwing! Troia!” A reporter shouts. “Any comment on the latest Titans headquarters attack?”

Dick slips into the role as calm, in control Titans leader. “The tower was attacked by members of the meta-terrorist group Tartarus and who we believe are former soldiers of the H.I.V.E organization.
The situation was handled quickly and without injuries.” He smiles in a way he knows is camera friendly. “Well, no injuries for us at least.”

Another reporter pushes forward. “Nightwing, any response to yesterday’s JSA protest?”

He sighs, taking an easy step back towards the tower entrance. “It’s unfortunate that the JSA is choosing to minimize all the good the Titans have done and continue to strive towards. No further comments today. We’ve gotta get these guys into custody.”

“Nightwing, one more--”

“--another minute--”

“Sorry, everyone,” he waves, almost to the tower barrier.

“Who’s that?!?”

Dick freezes, turning in what seems like slow motion.

Jason’s standing, almost hidden by the tower entrance.

He’s still wearing the domino mask.

In other words, a black haired thirteen year old boy is wearing a Robin mask and standing in the Titan’s tower.

Behind Dick, he can hear the clicks of cameras going off.

Well, shit.

-----

“--getting younger and younger kids involved.” Jay Garrick frowns, sitting next to the interviewer. “Where will it stop? Bringing in this child--whoever he is--proves that the Titans aren’t taking the risks seriously, even after the invasion. They’re too young, this is still fun to them, a real life cops and robbers game. Only now they’re not just risking their own lives, they’re bringing in younger kids.”

Dick comes up behind Jason and clicks the television off. “As a wise woman once told me, stop watching that crap.”

Jason flinches at the sound of his voice. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is,” Jason insists. “I was stupid. The camera on the monitors went out and I wanted to see if you and Donna were alright. And then those reporters saw me. Ugh, I was so stupid and now you’ve got the JSA, who won’t shut up about it!”

“Hey, Jason,” Dick grabs his shoulders, turning him to face him, “listen, it’s okay. It’s not your fault. You weren’t being stupid. It was all just bad timing, okay?”

He huffs. “Tell that to the freakin’ JSA?”
“I might not use those exact words,” Dick admits. “But, don’t worry about the JSA. I can handle them. They’re loud but they’re still a small group without much support. Yeah, this got them some more air time for now; but, it’ll take second seat the moment something newer comes around. And if not that, it’ll die down on its own. Alright?”

He’s sure it won’t take long. After all, it’s not like they’d see Jason in a mask again.

Jason looks down. “You’re really not mad?”

“I’m not mad,” he repeats. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Jason blushes but Dick’s pretty sure he sees a slight smile in there.

“...so, hey,” Jason begins awkwardly, obviously uncomfortable, “did you see that they’re calling me your protegee?”

Dick obligingly takes the conversational shift and grins. “How presumptuous! For all they know, Omen could love domino masks. You could be her protegee.”

Jason rolls his eyes.

“They already give you a name,” he asks even though he’s already fairly sure of the answer.

Jason nods, mumbling the answer. “Most of them are just going with ‘Robin.’”

Dick ignores the way his heart beats a little bit faster at the word. “Ah, the classic! Again, so presumptuous. You could be a play off Nightwing. Smallwing? No, Tykewing?”

“Ugh, those are awful!” Jason scrunches up his face. “I’ll stick with Robin.”

Dick snaps his fingers. “I got it! Littlewing! You are here by Littlewing from now on.”

Jason moans, face in his hands. “Bleh, please, don’t.”

“Nope, it’s decided! Come forth, Littlewing! To the dining room! Agent A has prepared us a lunch!”

“I hate you.”

-----

Whatever Jason says, there are definitely worse names than Littlewing.

“Nigh’!”

Said names are forgiven when they come from two year olds.

“Hey!” Dick reaches down to meet the grabbing hands, asking to be picked up. “Wow, you’ve gotten bigger!”

Mera smiles. “Well, it has been two months.”

“Nigh’” Artur shouts again, squirming in Dick’s arms and almost hitting him in the face. With his father’s bright blond hair and his mother’s bone structure, the toddler really is way too adorable for
the Heir of the Seven Seas.


“Aren’t they always,” she agrees, raising an eyebrow. “Though I did hear from Tula, yours may have been busier than usual.”

He glances to check the nursery’s security spells. “She told you about Jason?”

“More than that, she brought me a newspaper.” She hums. “I didn’t know you were looking for a protegee.”

“I wasn’t. I’m not,” he corrects. “I’m just giving him a temporary place to stay. Then, of course, the reporters saw him at the tower and everything got messier.”

“The JSA?”

“Handling them,” he answers. “We’ve already released a statement saying the details have been heavily exaggerated and pointing out Jason never took part in any of the fight or any of the Titans’ battles.” Dick frowns. “It’s kind of weird, actually. A lot of the younger supporters actually seem in favor of a new Robin. Batgirl told me there’s already fan pages.”

“Not that surprising,” she says. “Robin’s always been a favorite for children. It’s easier to relate to someone closer to their age, I suppose.”

“I guess…” He smirks. “Wait, are you calling me old?”

Mera laughs and Artur grins, without knowing the context, tapping Dick’s chest in the universal sign of put me down.

He complies, watching him toddle back, giggling all the way, to his mother.,

“I think you have a few more decades before that’s a real worry,” she says, running a hand through Artur’s hair. She pauses. “You said he was only staying temporarily. Why?”

He sighs. “It’s not safe. I think the attack at the Tower made that clear enough.”

“Have you asked him what he wants?”

“I assume he wants to be safe and have a more normal life than superheroing,” he says, tone carefully blank. “It’s my job to make sure he gets that.”

Mera watches him. “Funny. You know I had a very similar thought a few years ago.”

“Then you were probably right.” Dick says with a shrug.

She shakes her head. “Oh, no. I was decidedly wrong. And it took a reckless fourteen year old invading my palace to offer an ultimatum to show me that.”

Dick understands her implication.

“Things were different then,” he argues. “The world was falling. There wasn’t a choice but to fight. Jason has a choice.”

“He does,” Mera says. “Maybe you should ask him what it is.”
Dick is still thinking when he zetas back to the cave.

Jason’s waiting for him. “How was Atlantis?”

“Interesting,” he says. “Still sure you didn’t want to come with? I do have a pretty good relationship with their royalty.”

“Let me think, thousands of feet underwater with only magic holding it back from killing me,” Jason asks. “Yeah, I think I’ll pass.”

He shrugs. “You get used to it.”

“I’ll stick to Gotham Harbor.”

“You know I’ve been told by literally every Atlantean I know that Gotham Harbor is one of the worst—”

The cave intercom beeps.

“Master Dick, Master Jason,” Alfred’s voice rings out, “I believe it’s imperative you come up to the manor. A package has just arrived on the front porch.”

Dick frowns. “Um, Alfred, a package doesn’t sound that imperative.”

“It’s addressed to Master Jason.”

Dick turns to Jason, who shakes his head, looking just as lost as Dick.

The news that Jason Todd was at Wayne Manor had never been made public. No one knows he’s here. Or, at least, they shouldn’t.

They hit the stairs together, heading to the manor. Alfred greets them at the top, gesturing to the dining table.

The brown paper envelope lays there, looking entirely inconspicuous except for the words carefully printed on top. Jason Peter Todd, Wayne Manor.

“Should I open it?” Jason looks to Dick.

Alfred clears his throat. “I took the liberty to run it through the normal Wayne security measures. It should be safe.”

Dick nods, turning back to Jason. “Only one way to tell what’s inside.”

Jason nods back, stepping carefully to the envelope as if it contained a bomb. Slowly, he breaks the seal. “It’s just a piece of paper.”

“What does it say?”

Jason frowns. “It’s a birth certificate. Wait, it’s my birth certificate.”
“Why would someone send us your birth certificate?” Dick steps closer beside him, scanning the paper along with Jason.

It’s water stained, parts obviously smeared, but the name at the top is obviously Jason’s.

Jason notices it first, hands clenching around the paper.

“Dick…” His voice sounding small and confused. “Dick, that’s not my Mom.”

And then, Dick sees it. Down on the bottom line, right next to a water stain, a few lines from the bottom. A name. And not the one Dick found in his earlier search.

Not Catherine Mary Todd. But, Sheila Haywood.

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Hours later, Jason sitting in the back of the cave and abnormally quiet.

Dick’s still reading Barbara’s report when the computer pings.

He turns to Jason. “No traces of forgery. The ink, the paper, even down to the water stains.”

The only sign Jason hears him is a nod.

“Babs finished checking the hospital records. Your birth certificate was lost in the last flood. Water on this one matches the Gotham River.”

Another nod.

“Zatanna didn’t find any traces either so not a magic fake either.”

Silence.

Dick steps in front of him, leaning down to eye level. “Jay, give me something. What are you thinking?”

Jason swallows, finally turning to meet Dick’s eyes. “So…it’s real?”

Dick breathes. “As far as we can tell, yes.”

“Mom…” He pauses, lips pressing together. “Catherine Todd wasn’t my mother.”

“She wasn’t your birth mother,” Dick corrects gently. “I’m sure she loved you like one.”

“She did,” Jason says immediately before stopping and saying the words with more certainty. “She always told me that, even during the bad times, she always said it. Fuck, she tried to quit so many times before--” He takes a ragged breath. “So, who’s this Sheila lady exactly?”

“Ex-Gothamite,” Dick tells him. “According to her travel visa, currently working in a refugee camp in Ethiopia.”

He hands him a file and Jason takes it, brushing a hand over it but not opening it.

“Relief worker, huh,” he huffs out something that could be a laugh. “Is it bad that I expected some
“Kind of petty criminal?”

“Do you want to meet her? We can arrange a plane, even zeta there if you want?”

A full five minutes pass in silence before Jason shakes his head.

“No.” He lays the file down. “So, I’m adopted. So what? Whoever Sheila is she obviously didn’t want to be a mother. She’s got her own life.”

“Just because she gave you up, doesn’t mean she wanted to,” Dick says.

Jason shrugs jerkily. “Or it does. Whatever. The point is...look, I had a mom. I didn’t even know Sheila existed until a few hours ago. I don’t know her. And...and I’ve got a life. Here. In Gotham. I’m not giving that up for someone I don’t even know.”

“Jason, are you sure?”

“Yes,” Jason says firmly before hesitating. “I mean unless...unless you want me to go with her?”

“I’m not trying to say anything. It’s your decision, Jay. Don’t think about what I want, think about you.” He sighs. “Look, if I had a chance to see any of my family again, I’d take it. Heck, sometimes, I still miss the circus so much I can’t breathe.”

Jason looks at him. “Then, what makes you stay?”

Dick shrugs. “Everyone here. My life. The Titans. Because as much as I love the circus, the people here are the ones I can’t give up. This is my home.”

“Yeah,” Jason nods, still meeting his eyes. “Yeah, I get it. Mom, my real mom not Sheila, she always said that the best families were the ones you made for yourself. That’s why I want to stay here.”

Then, Jason hugs him.

Dick’s arms come around fairly automatically. Which is good because his brain’s still processing through that last sentence.

Because it kind of sounded like Jason...

Oh.

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“Babs, I think Jason wants to stay here.”

Barbara shoots him a look like he’s gone crazy. They’re in the office again, Dick left Jason in the cave at the monitors, which is hopefully a decent enough distraction.

“No, really, I’m serious,” Dick says. “I think he wants to stay here. With me and Alfred. Like in the manor.”

“Dick, did you hit your head recently,” Barbara asks. “Of course, he wants to stay. He helps out Alfred in the kitchen, he picked books for the library. What part of that made you think he didn’t
want to stay?"

“But, why?”

“Oh, geeze, let me think. Why would a recently orphaned street kid want to stay in a literal mansion surrounded by people who obviously care about him? Why do you think we kept pushing you to take him the foster program weeks ago before everyone got attached?”

Okay, put like that, Dick kind of feels like an idiot.

“I didn’t think he’d want to stay,” he says softly.

Barbara sighs. “You’ve been in his shoes, Dick. How did you feel when you were taken in?”

He doesn’t meet her eyes. “I wanted to stay for Bruce. Bruce isn’t here.”

“‘You’re here.’

“I’m not Bruce.”

“No,” Barbara’s quiet. “But, being Dick Grayson might be enough for Jason.”

Dick doesn’t respond.

“Dick, whether he wants to stay isn’t really a question anymore. The question is do you want him to and if not, you need to tell him. Now. Before it can hurt him anymore.”

Of course, Dick wants him to stay. Jason’s...Jason’s family. Dick’s not stupid, he can at least understand his own thoughts. But, that doesn’t make anything easier. Dick knows. He’s already lost a family twice. This can’t be about him. What he wants is...

“I want what’s best for him,” he says.

Barbara regards him steadily. “Is it really so hard to believe that’s here?”

Yes.

He doesn’t say it because the sound of the door opening cuts him off before he can.

“There you are!” Jason shouts, breathing heavily. “Black Mask! On the monitors!”

Barbara and Dick move before he’s even finished. There in the cave seconds later, looking at the monitors.

“That’s the surveillance camera off the Robert Kane Bridge,” Barbara says, strapping on her utility belt. “We need to go now.”

“We’re undermanned,” Dick responds, already starting the cycle. “That looks like all of what’s left of the Black Mask gang. We can’t take down thirty armed guys just the two of us.”

“If we wait, he escapes,” she says back.

Dick bites his lip. “Jason, use the computer system to type a message to Gordon directly. Set it to ‘Urgent.’” He looks back at Babs. “We wait until we have word they’re close then move.”

Barbara nods. “Got it.”
“Wait!” Jason catches his arm before he can get on the cycle. “What else can I do?”

“Just contact Gordon,” Dick says, trying to be comforting. “Don’t worry, you can still see us a bit from the monitors.”

Jason bit his lip. “Waiting by the monitors is what I did at the Tower.”

“We’ll try to avoid knocking out a camera this time,” he reassures quickly.

Jason shakes his head. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Jason,” Dick gives another quick look at the monitor. “We need to go.”

Jason nods and his grip falls away.

Dick throws him one last look. “We’ll be alright. Okay?”

And then, Dick’s speeding out of the cave with Barbara right behind him.

Even breaking practically a quarter of the traffic laws on book, it still takes a precious seven minutes to get to the old storefront they saw Black Mask walk in. Seconds longer to get on the roof.

The building’s old, no security system to hack into.

Instead, they go old fashion. Dick uses the glass cutters, making a small hole at the top of the window barely enough Barbara to stick a mirror through.

She checks before reporting with slightly vicious satisfaction. “We got him. Black Mask is still there. Plus his men. Crap, it looks like they’re setting up another deal.”

“It has to be a last shot at recouping funds. They don’t have much left to lose.” Dick doesn’t allow himself to untense. “The meta?”

Another second. “Found him, right behind Black Mask. The intel was right, it’s Clifford DeVoe.” She frowns. “N, they’re packing up the briefcases. They’re getting ready to leave.”

He checks the wrist computer. “Gotham PD’s still five minutes out.”

“They’ll be gone by then. Along with the next deal.”

Dick makes a decision. “Let’s go. Aim for the lights first. Delay and distract until backup. Try not to directly engage.”

They move together. There’s the sound of windows breaking followed by a quick batarang that slices at the wires, slightly short of severing. The power blinks in and out around them.

Gunshots ring out immediately almost drowning out the sound of Black Mask’s orders.

“KILL THEM!”

Dick would quip back if it wouldn’t give away his position. He settles for a laugh, echoing against the metal in a way harder to pin.

Four minutes until Gotham PD arrives.

A ricochet bullet nearly catches Dick in the leg. He throws a batarang, knocking away two guns,
before jumping to use the support beams of the roof as cover. Across the room, he sees Barbara weaving between shadows almost too quick for him to see, much less for the gunmen to catch.

In the flickering lights, Dick sees Black Mask shove Clifford DeVoe closer to the wall, four armed men around them. They’re trying to escape.

Three minutes left. They will escape if Dick doesn’t move.

He swings in their direction, just in time to see Black Mask pry open a back door.

Dick swears, giving up the support beams as a shield, to jump to the windows. A hale of un-aimed bullets hammer around him, waiting to hit him the second he miscalculates.

He slips open the window, unheard in the chaos, to find Black Mask and his group heading to an alley.

Dick narrows his eyes. Not this time.

Two minutes left.

He flips over to kick off a wall, one batarang landing on a gunman’s shoulder and sending him down with an electric pulse.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem Black Mask’s guys are a commiserating lot. The others don’t waste time to see if their fallen member’s alright before turning and firing in Dick’s direction.

It’s a lot harder to disarm without the flickering lights and in the tight space of the alley. He takes down two more, before the fourth one gets a lucky shot.

The bullet grazes his arm, not even enough to break through the protection of the suit, but enough of an impact to throw off his landing. He hits against the fire escape hard, barely able to turn it into a controlled fall before he lands in a crouch against the pavement.

When he looks up, the final gunman has a gun aimed straight at him and Black Mask standing right behind.

Black Mask looks down at him. “Bye bye, you little shit.”

There’s barely anywhere to move.

The gunman gets ready to fire. Dick gets ready to evade.

A blur of red and black slams into the gunman before either can do anything.

The gunman goes down hard, slamming against the wall, as the gun skids down the alley.

That’s not what matters right now.

Robin is standing over the downed gunman.

No, not Robin, Dick thinks numbly.

Jason stands in the alley with a domino mask, a red hoodie, and a familiar old uniform with a bright yellow R.

Everything freezes for the span of one long moment.
And then, there’s the sound of sirens, announcing the Gotham PD, and everything moves very quickly.

Black Mask pulls out a handgun, aims at Jason, and pulls the trigger.

Dick’s faster, knocking Jason to the ground while the bullet embeds in stone an inch above.

By the time Dick turns back, Black Mask and DeVoe have disappeared in the darkness.

And Jason’s staring up at him from behind white lenses.

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There’s a ringing silence in the cave, daring someone to break it.

Their masks are gone. Barbara’s eyes keep flickering between the two of them in the same way she looks at a complicated piece of code.

Jason speaks first. “I’m sorry about Black Mask. I should’ve--”

“I don’t care about Black Mask,” Dick interrupts sharply.

Jason winces. “Is it about the hoodie? I’m sorry I changed it, I just thought it would work better for me than the cape. I can--”

“Jason, it’s not about the hoodie! Why were you even there? I told you to stay in the cave! Why are you wearing that!” Dick points to the costume like a garish stain because that’s about what it feels like, looking at it now. Like this.

“I know.” Jason’s stepping toward him. “Look, I know you told me to stay in the cave. Just like you told me to stay in the Tower. But, I can’t keep doing that. I can’t keep waiting where it’s safe. Not if you want me to be Robin!”

Dick explodes. “Why would I want that?! Jason, why would you ever think I wanted you to be Robin?!”

What Dick wants is Jason to be safe. What Dick wants is for Jason to be happy. What Dick wants is for Jason to have every chance at a normal, good life that Dick will never get to have.

He never wanted this.

“I don’t...I don’t understand.” Jason’s stopped, color draining out of his face.

Dick scrubs a hand over his face. “Why did you think this is what I wanted?”

“B—because you said,” Jason’s breathing heavily and the words are coming quicker. “You said that Batman took you in and trained you to be Robin! And...and you took me to the cave and you told me about Batgirl and Alfred and you let me go to the Tower and the Titans wanted to meet me and...and you said I was being useful!” He rubs roughly at his cheek and there’s tears there now. “You said my tip helped with the Black Mask bust. You said I helped! I thought you wanted me to be Robin.”

“Oh, shit,” Barbara breathes softly.
Dick feels like he’s been hit in the chest.

“Jay,” He moves to Jason but Jason steps back, maintaining the distance. “No, Jay. I’m sorry. It was a misunderstanding. That’s not what I want at all. I want--”

“Then, why did you even bring me here?” Now, Jason’s shouting, too. Glaring up even through tears. “Why did you let me stay?”

“Jason,” Barbara tries but Jason shakes his head at her

“No, Dick, tell me! Why did you let me stay?”

“I wanted to help you, Jason,” Dick insists. “I still do. I just...look, I just didn’t know what to do. Especially after you found out our identities. I didn’t--”

“So, what,” Jason yells, “you were going to just what? Make sure I didn’t blab and drop me off at a foster program?”

Dick hesitates a second too long.

“Fuck,” Jason curses but he looks too hurt for it to still be anger. “That’s...that’s really what you were going to do, isn’t it? Just drop me there like you take out the trash.”


Jason laughs like it hurts him “Yeah, well, fool me once, am I right?”

Jason stops, looking at Dick with the same defiant expression he had when they first met. “Don’t worry about your secrets, Dick. I’m not a snitch. You guys don’t have to pretend to worry about me anymore.”

And then, he’s turning, faster than Dick can catch him, and running up the stairs and disappearing up to the manor.

Barbara lays a hand on Dick’s shoulder. “Well, that could have gone better.”

And isn’t that the understatement of a century.

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Jason doesn’t come down to breakfast the next day. By lunchtime, Dick goes up to check his room.

There’s nothing. Bed perfectly made. Floor completely clean. Books neatly stacked. Empty. The only thing marking Jason’s stay in the place is a folded Robin costume laying on the dresser.

Jason’s gone.

“We’ll find him,” Barbara says. “It’s Jason. Even mad, he’s got a good head on his shoulders and he can’t have gone far. He’ll be okay.”

Dick sighs. “I’m an idiot.”
Barbara shakes his head. “You’re not. And you care. I’ll keep an eye on the monitors. Just give him a chance to calm down and we’ll go find him tonight.”

“And then what? He probably hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you. If he did, he wouldn’t be this mad,” she says. “Look, just go to the Tower or something so you’re not moping all day in his room when we go find him. You need to clear your head too.”

Dick doesn’t want to leave which probably means Babs has a point. “And if you find him on the monitors?”

“I’ll comm you immediately.”

“And Black Mask?”

“I’ll monitor for him, too,” Barbara says but the doubt is evident in her tone.

There hasn’t been any sign of him since last night. Or DeVoe. If Dick had a guess, he’d say they’ve finally gone to ground. As far away from Gotham as they can possibly manage and as fast as they could.

He should; but, Dick can’t say he particularly gives a shit about the Black Mask bust right now. Not with Jason missing.

“Okay...okay,” He breathes and gives her a lopsided smile. “Thanks, Babs.”

“Anytime.” She shoves him to the zeta. “Now, go.”

Of course, because apparently it’s that kind of day, this is one of the few times the Tower’s not filled with people to distract him. There’s still a couple, though. And luckily, one’s incredibly distracting.

“Hey,” Dick drops heavily into the couch next to Kory. “Where is everyone?”

She smiles. “The Watchtower. Roy thought today would be a good a day as any to do a quick maintenance check. They just left.”

For half a second, Dick considers leaving and following them. But, it already feels uncomfortable enough waiting for news as far away as the Tower, he’s not willing to test his nerves on not even being on the planet.

“I’m surprised,” Dick teases, trying to sound normal. “An alien princess turning down a space mission. Even if it’s just a satellite.”

She laughs, swatting at his arm. “I believe I have spent time enough in space that I can choose now to enjoy a day on Earth. Besides, I wanted to keep company with Lilith today.”

“I’m still feeling a little astraphobic.” Lilith says, looking up from her book and shifting uncomfortably. “Space is....a little bit weird on telepaths. Lack of noise, I think.”

“And why are you here?” Kory turns to Dick. “As much as I adore the company, I thought you were staying with Jason today?”

Dick freezes.

Lilith and Kory are both still looking at him.
Slowly, Liltih’s eyes widen, sensing…whatever emotions Dick is giving off, he doesn’t even know.

She sits her book on the table, speaking quietly. “I think I’m going to get some water from the kitchen. Would you like any?”

Kory shakes her head for both of them, mouth turning down in a small frown as Dick still doesn’t move to speak.

She waits until they’re alone. “Dick, what is wrong?”

“I...I messed up. Bad.”

Just like everyone warned him about.

Kory lays a hand on his. “What happened?”

“He left. He ran away. We’re still trying to find him. He thought I wanted him to be Robin, Kory,” Dick says in a rush. “He thought I was training him to be Robin. As if...as if I would ever force someone into that. Let alone Jason. Why would... Why?”

She sighs. “He probably did not see it as force. Not if he already made the choice on his own.”

“Why did he decide that though?” His hand clenches on the couch. “Did he think he had to? Did he think that was the only reason I let him stay? How could he think I would do that to him? Make him be Robin? What kind of person makes someone think that the only way they’ll be accepted in a house is to be forced into vigilantism?”

How did I mess up this bad?

“Oh, my friend,” Kory shakes her head. “You overthink it. You are seeing darkness when there was only love. I told you. He looks to you. He cares. Robin is not a burden to him, not something forced upon him. It is an honor.” She squeezes his hand. “It is always an honor to fight for the ones we love. It is what makes a hero.”

“I just wanted him to be safe, Kory,” Dick says. “I just wanted him to get to have a normal life.”

Kory tilts her head. “And if you only allow him to have this ‘normal life’ instead of doing what he wishes isn’t that not forcing him in the same way you wish to avoid?”

Dick doesn’t answer and Kory doesn’t seem to expect him to, just patting his arm gently and standing to put one of the movies from Dick’s collection that he leaves at the Tower. It’s an old black and white Sherlock Holmes movie, the same kind found late at night on classic movie channels.

It’s one that he used to watch with Bruce after patrol.

Dick looks down at his hands, smiling wryly. “I’m an idiot, aren’t I?”

“Never.” Kory laces her fingers through his. “Just sometimes blind to your own heart.”

He needs to talk to Jason.

As if an answer to his thoughts, his comm buzzes.

He clicks it. “Babs, did you--”

“Dick, he hacked the zeta beam!”

Across the line, Barbara’s voice sounds harried. “I’ve been teaching him coding. The zeta records show it was accessed this early this morning. No immediate alert, Jason tried to hide it in between the maintenance codes.” And despite the situation, Dick hears a touch of pride in her voice. “Not quite hidden enough, though, when you know what you’re looking for. I’m trying to access the location now.”

The sound of typing echoes in his ear. Beside him, Kory’s still sitting at the couch, looking worried.

“Got him!” A pause and then more urgent. “Dick, the zeta was to Ethiopia!”

He swears. “He’s going to see Sheila Haywood.”

“His mother,” Barbara breathes before she’s back to business. “What’s the plan?”

“I’m going after him,” Dick says, already heading to the zeta. “He...he doesn’t even know Ethiopia. I’ve gotta make sure he’s okay.”

*Even if he doesn’t want to see me. Even if would rather be with his mother.*

Dick can’t let it end without talking to him first.

Barbara understands. “Alright. I’m coming with you, okay, Dick?”

It’s not a question.

“I’ll meet you at the zeta point in Mekelle,” Dick promises.

He’s almost to the Tower zeta when Kory grabs his arm, Lilith behind her.

“May we help you,” Kory asks.

And Dick nods because, frankly...he can’t help but feel he’ll need all the help he can get.

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According to her file, Sheila Haywood--former Gotham city doctor--is stationed right outside the village of Koraro in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The closest zeta is in Mekelle.

Jason should have beaten them there by hours.

When they get there, Jason’s not there.

Dr. Haywood is standing alone in the tent, a clipboard held so tightly in her hands that her knuckles have gone white.

She looks up when they walk in, surprise flashing briefly before it’s tucked away.

“Can I help you?” She smiles and it’s fake, fake, *fake*.

Alarm bells start to go off in Dick’s mind.

He smiles back. They’re all in civilian clothes. Kory’s waiting for them just outside of camp.
“We’re looking for a boy,” he tells her. “Thirteen years old. Black hair. Blue eyes. Named Jason. We think he came here earlier today.”

There’s a well concealed panic behind her eyes as she laughs pleasantly. “I’m sorry, I haven’t seen anyone today but my patients.”

Lilith steps forward. “She’s lying.”

“Where is he,” Dick says and this time, it’s a lot less friendly.

Dr. Haywood’s breathing quickens. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know about a boy.”

“Look, we’re trying to see if he’s okay,” Barbara says. “Just tell us what happened.”

“You need to leave. Now.” She shouts, eyes flickering around the room. “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

She steps back and Dick can see a flash of red, barely sticking out of a medical box.

He leans down to pull it out. Jason’s hoodie. Dirt scraped against it as if it had been thrown to the floor.

He straightens and turns to Sheila, teeth clenched tightly. “Where. Is. He?”

Sheila backs to the very edge of the tent with wide panicked eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t have a choice.”


Lilith nods, hand going to her head and eyes falling closed.

There’s a quick intake of breath from Sheila. “What are you doing?”

“Jason was here,” Lilith reports, eyes still shut. “She saw him. Earlier today. She….she knew he was coming. Someone…a letter told her he might be coming weeks ago. It said…it said if he did, she needed to….?” Lilith’s eyes pop open. “She sold him out to Black Mask.”

Dick goes entirely cold.

“What,” Barbara hisses.

“I didn’t have a choice!” Sheila shouts, tears streaming down her face. “They were going to ruin me! Everything I worked so hard to build back here after the malpractice suit!”

Lilith shakes her head, hands balled up into fists. “Lying. They blackmailed her because she’s embezzling from the relief care.”

“You heartless bitch!” Barbara curses, inches away from Shelia’s face. “Where did they take him?”

“I don’t know!” She launches forward, hands closing around Dick’s collar where he’s still frozen solid. “Please, please, you have to believe me! They didn’t tell me! I thought he was just some rich kid Black Mask wanted to ransom. I didn’t know they would hurt him!”

That breaks through.
He shoves her off of him. “He’s your son!”

“My s-son? I don’t…I don’t have a….” Her eyes widen, the first hint of true horror behind them. “Oh. Oh. You said his name was Jason?” She shakes her head. “I never….I never found out his name.”

She sinks to the ground of the tent, tears still falling down her shocked face.

“We don’t have time for this,” Barbara snaps. “Do you know where he is or not?”

Sheila shakes her head. “They didn’t tell me….but….” She looks up. “They were in a black car, heading west. The only...the only thing over there is an old military outpost.”

They don’t wait around for more, turning immediately and leaving one sad woman with dirt stained tear tracks sitting alone on the floor.

She grabs Dick hand before he can leave. “Tell him….tell my son I’m sorry.”

“You don’t deserve him.” Dick pulls his hand away for more important things.

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The ten minute drive feels like it takes hours and every second is terrible.

It feels like….it feels like waking up after the invasion. The handful of seconds before he remembered when he just knew everything was wrong.

Kory and Barbara are with him, Barbara at the wheel while Kory flies above scanning for any signs. Lilith’s back in Mekelle, trying to get in contact with the rest of the team.

Babs glances over at him. “We’ll find him, Dick.”

Dick nods, wanting so bad to say something reassuring back to her like a good partner would but the words keep drying out in his throat.

It’s not finding him that he’s worried about. It’s what they’ll find.

Kory lands behind them in the jeep. “I found the outpost. Right over this hill.”


She frowns. “I did not see Jason. But, the man with the odd face got in a car.”

“Where was it heading?” Barbara’s hands are tight on the wheel.

“Further west. I can follow it?”

Dick tries to breathe. “Jason wasn’t with him?”

“Not that I saw.”

Okay, Dick just needs to think. Think and make the right decision. If Kory doesn’t follow now, there’s a good chance they lose Black Mask. But…
“If Jason wasn’t with him, then he left him at the outpost,” he says. “Jason’s the priority. Not catching Black Mask. Kory, stay with us for now.”

Black Mask isn’t they type who just leaves people he’s kidnapped. If…no, Dick’s not going to think it. If Jason needs medical help, Kory’s the one that can get him there fastest.

Barbara tops the hill and the outpost comes into sight. Dick prays.

The car barely stops before he’s running, Kory and Barbara behind him.

The door’s locked for all of a second before Kory’s melting the lock.

“Jason!” Dick shouts.

There’s no answer and for a second, Dick thinks he was wrong. That he made the wrong decision and Jason’s still stuck in a car with Black Mask, getting further away.

And then he sees the figure laying in the corner, next to a crowbar.

Jason.

Dick’s there, beside him and leaning in to check for a pulse, to see if there’s breath, to find if…

It’s there. Jason’s alive and Dick can breathe.

There’s a groan and he carefully pulls Jason’s over, careful about the arm that he’s fairly sure is broken. Jason’s face isn’t much better, heavily bruised with a split lip and a definitely broken nose

“….D-Dick?” a voice rasps out unsteadily.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry, It’s me” Dick runs a hand through his hair. “Shit, shit...Hey, I’m sorry but everything’s going to be alright, okay? We’re going to get you out of here.”

The fog from Jason’s eyes clears slightly. “Leave….Dick, you need to get out….Now. ”

Dick’s chest tightens. “Jay, we’re not going anywhere. I promise.”

Jason tries to shake his head. “No. Bomb! ”

“DICK!” Barbara yells and Dick turns.

Strapped to the crumbling support structure is enough explosives to level the entire building, counting down with a simple little timer.

Seven seconds.

Dick almost wants to laugh.

Time is kind of a funny thing. Because seven seconds? There’s not much that can be done in seven seconds. Not much at all. It’s not enough time to escape an exploding building, certainly not while carrying an injured teenager.

And that means that they need another solution. Because Dick might be able to die here. But, he’s not letting Babs, Kory, or Jason die, too.

Five seconds.
He turns to Kory. “Can you absorb the explosion?”

“I,” Her eyes widen. “I don’t know.”

He smiles like it’s the last thing he’s ever going to do. “Just try, okay?”

Two seconds.

Barbara is crouched down beside him. Kory is standing, looking at the bomb. Jason is in his arms, looking at him like he’s crazy.

Dick meets his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

The bomb explodes.

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The beep of the medical equipment and the soft even pace of breathing are the only sounds in the Tower medical bay.

Dick waits in the visitor chair while Barbara’s folded up on the other, just given in to the exhaustion to fall into a light sleep.

Jason lays between them, unmoving and hooked up to wires.

*And alive,* Dick reminds himself. *We’re all still alive.*

The med bay door slides open and Dick spares the newcomer a brief glance.

“How is he,” Roy asks.

“Better,” Dick says, careful to keep his voice quiet. “Jade’s finished her medical check and Garth did what he could for the bruises. Still has a broken arm, sore ribs, and a concussion.”

“Has he woken up yet?”

Dick shakes his head, not looking away. “Not since the outpost. Jade says it’s good, it means he’s healing.”

“She would know best.” Roy takes the third chair. “I’ve got news. We got DeVoe...and Black Mask. He’s in a holding cell downstairs.”

“Keep him away from me,” Dick orders, tone going sharp and dangerous.

Roy nods, not even trying to argue. He’s always been one of the more in-tune with just how fine the line was between vigilantism and the much darker shade of revenge.

“We barely stopped Donna from giving him some broken bones to match,” he admits and Dick tries not to feel pleased because that leads down a bad road he can’t afford.

Looking at Jason, he’s not sure he succeeds completely.

“Lilith handled the interrogation,” Roy says and then he shifts, tensing in a way that says he’s
holding something back.

“Tell me.”

Roy sighs. “He didn’t even know Jason’s name. Just got a briefcase of money and a note that the kid who tipped off his drug bust would be in Ethiopia with the address of Sheila Haywood. He headed there straight from Gotham with DeVoe keeping the flight off scanners.”

“Anything else from Sheila?”

“Not that you didn’t already tell us. She’s being brought up on embezzlement charges, by the way.”

Dick feels tired. “It was all planned. Everything. Sending Jason the birth certificate. Blackmailing Sheila. Making sure Black Mask was there with a motive. Somebody wanted Jason to die.”

“And who do we know with deep pockets and a track record of using other guys to do their dirty work,” Roy asks.

“It’s the Light again.” He grinds his teeth. “And we’re still no closer to finding them.”

And this time, they were using Jason to hurt Dick. It all started after Jason appeared on the newscast. They targeted Jason specifically almost immediately after, even while he was wearing a mask. Which also means...

Someone knew their identities.

He doesn’t say it aloud as if giving it voice will make it true. He needs to tell Barbara. Alfred. He needs to figure out how far this goes before he’s ready to lay it out to the team.

Luckily, Roy doesn’t comment. Instead, he looks to Jason. “So, what’s your plan here?”

“I don’t know.” Dick’s so tired. “It depends on what he chooses when he wakes up. Every time I try to make a choice for him it ends up being the wrong one.”

Roy huffs “Maybe not every time. He did seem happy.”

Dick doesn’t answer and luckily he doesn’t have to before Jason shifts slightly in the bed, letting out a small groan.

“Guess that’s now.” Roy stands up. “Seems like a private discussion.”

Dick barely pauses to give him a nod, eyes focused on Jason as the sound of the med bay door sliding shut echoes in the room.

Jason’s waking up.

It’s not all at once. It’s slow like something fragile unfolding as Dick watches. First, there’s movement beneath the lids. Then lashes begin to move, getting faster, getting closer. Until, finally…

Jason open his eyes.

“Hey,” Dick says softly and the eyes turn to him. “Welcome back.”

Jason open his mouth to speak and coughs. Dick hands him some water to hold in his good arm.

“Where am I,” Jason manages after the first sip.
“Tower med bay,” he answers. “Do you remember why?”

Jason nods and then his eyes go wide, almost shooting up in the bed before Dick’s hand is there holding him back.


Dick hand goes to his shoulder, trying to calm him. “They’re fine. We’re all fine. Barbara’s right there.”

He points to the chair, where Barbara’s still asleep though he has a growing suspicion she’s feigning it to give him a chance to talk to Jason alone.

Jason doesn’t calm but he stops shooting out of the bed. “Starfire?”

“She’s fine, too. She’s still trying to work through the energy of absorbing the bomb blast. I’m sure she’ll be around to see you soon.”

Jason takes a shuddering breath. “I...I thought you were going to die. I thought all of you were going to die. All because I…” He curls into himself. “I didn’t think you’d come. I didn’t think you’d even look for me.”

“Jay…we were looking for you the second we realized you were gone.” He tries to meet Jason’s eyes but the teenager looks down. “We...I was always going to come to find you. Jason, I’m so sorry. This is my fault, this should never have—”

“So, what happens to me now,” Jason cuts him off, still looking down. “I guess I can’t just go to the Gotham foster program, not with Black Mask knowing my face.”

Dick sighs and supposes this is a good a time as any. “You can, actually. If you want. Lilith suppressed your identity while she was interrogating him, he shouldn’t remember you exactly even if he did think you survived. You can go to the Gotham foster programs. Or Central City if you wanted. Metropolis. Or…” Dick breathes and tries to remember that this won’t fix anything. That it might even make it worse. But, he can’t quite stop himself from wishing.

“Or you can just stay at the manor with us.”

Jason jerks his head, something hopeful there for a second there before it’s smothered beneath suspicion.

He folds into himself even further like protecting against a blow. “This is about what happened in Ethiopia, isn’t it?”

Dick shakes his head immediately. “No.”

“Yeah, right,” Jason scoffs.

“Well, okay,” he admits. “Yeah, maybe a little, but it’s not what you think.”

Jason rolls his eyes. “If you’re letting me stay just because of some warped kind of guilt, don’t bother. I’m not five. I’m not going to run into traffic the second you turn your back”

“No, just Ethiopia,” Dick mutters before he can stop himself.

Jason glares. “The point is I’m not anyone’s fucked up responsibility, Dick.”
“Remember, how I told you it’s not what you think?”

“Well, what else am I supposed to think,” Jason yells. “You told me you didn’t want me! My own mother sold me out to be murdered! Sorry if I don’t believe anyone’s lining up at the door to take me in!”

“I am,” Dick insists.

“I don’t believe you!”

“You almost died, Jason,” Dick finally snaps. “Fuck, when I heard that Black Mask was leaving, I thought you were dead! I thought I was never going to see you again!”

Jason flinches.

“Thought that’s what you wanted,” he says, but the tone’s not combative anymore. It’s gone sullen, warry.

Dick tries to meet his eyes but Jason looks down again. “Jason,” he says gently, “The reason I didn’t want you to be Robin, the reason I didn’t think you should stay in the manor, isn’t because I didn’t want you there. It was never about you not being good enough, it’s because I’m not. This life’s not. You deserve better.”

Jason finally looks up, even if it’s through narrowed eyes “What are you talking about, Dick? You’re Nightwing. You stopped the invasion. You’re leader of the Titans. You’re everyone’s freaking golden boy. You’re practically perfect.”

Dick laughs, short and slightly bitter. “I’m not. Trust me, I’m really, really not.” He holds up a hand when Jason tries to interrupt again. “Jay, I’m seventeen years old and I’ve already lost pretty much every family I’ve had twice. I became Robin when I had practically nothing left. I became Nightwing when it happened again. And, don’t get me wrong, I never regret those choices. I love what I do, I love Barbara, I love the team. But, that doesn’t mean there’s not things I’ve had to give up for this.” He shakes his head. “I didn’t want that life for you, too. I didn’t want you to have to give up anything. I wanted you to have a choice.”

When Dick finally stops, Jason’s finally looking at him and there’s something there as fragile as spun glass.

“What if...what if my choice was to stay with you?”

Dick smiles. “Then, I’d say I’m pretty lucky, huh.”

Jason hitch's on a breath like he’s trying very, very hard to swallow down an emotion. Dick understands the feeling.

“You really want me there,” Jason asks.

Dick nods. “As long as you want to be there.”

And then, Jason’s hugging him and Dick just barely has warning enough to protect the broken arm.

Dick holds him and something in his chest finally settles.

“Hey, Dick,” Jason mutters into his shoulder. “What if I chose to be a hero, too? Like you do?”
Dick sighs, pulling Jason a bit closer. “You know you don't have to, right? It’s not like a requirement to stay in the manor or anything. Believe me, Alfred would be thrilled to have at least one of us not go into vigilantism.”

Jason leans back, regarding him seriously. “I can’t just stay at the monitors forever. I want to help.”

Dick really wishes he didn’t understand.

“It’s your choice, Jason.” He pauses and laugh suddenly. “Plus, if you’re anything like literally every single person I know, it’s not something people can really stop you from. Even Batman couldn’t. And, trust me, he tried.”

“Really?”

“I’ll tell you about it one day,” Dick promises.

And he will. They have time.

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A week and one heavily edited version of a first meeting later, Jason Todd is officially declared second ward of Alfred Pennyworth and adopted brother of Dick Grayson. They celebrate with Alfred’s prized cake recipe and cheerfully ignoring the increasingly insistent calls for interviews.

That night, as a usual night in Wayne Manor, is spent in the cave.

“This is terrible and I hate it,” Jason mutters.

Dick grins. “Tell that to Alfred.”

Unfortunately for Jason, the elder butler also has taken said adoption as the final push to insist Jason begin studying for the school placement exams.

Dick leans over Jason’s shoulder to check the book. “I thought you liked English?”

“Not with the shitty books they choose,” he argues, somehow using a batarang to scratch under his arm cast. “Ugh, there’s a reason people thought this was crap when it came out.”

“You tell them.” Dick plucks the batarang out of his hands. “And, no, there's no way we’re explaining that to a doctor if that gets stuck under there.”

Jason grumbles but doesn’t try to reach for it again so Dick’s counting that as a win.

“With Garth’s healing, it should only be a couple more weeks anyway,” he adds in consolation.

Jason looks up, book momentarily forgotten. “And then...and then, you’ll start training me? Like for real this time?”

Dick smiles. “Oh, don’t worry, I’m going to give you sooooo much training. And first aid. Like the most training possible, Jason, before we even consider going for a grappling gun.”

By the way Jason’s grin goes wide, he assumes this didn’t have quite the grueling implication Dick intended. Ah, well.
Bring it!

Dick grins back. “Ha, just wait until Babs tells you about endurance training.”

Jason rolls his eyes and turns back to his book.

A few moments pass before, “Hey, Dick?”

“Yeah?”

Jason scratches the back of his neck. “About Robin. I don’t have to be Robin...I mean if that was your thing, that’s fine. I can find a different name.”

Dick squeezes his shoulder. “Is that your way of saying you’ve finally come around to Littlewing?”

Jason’s face scrunches. “Bleh, no, that’s still terrible!”

“Whatever you say, Littlewing.” He laughs lightly before swapping his tone to something more genuine. “But, no, actually, I think Robin would be a great name for you. If you want it. Fits kind of perfect, actually.”

“Why?”

“Robin was my mother’s name for me,” Dick shrugs, trying to aim for casual. “It’s why I chose the colors. They’re what my family’s used to perform in.”

Jason winces. “Shit, I didn’t know. I’m sorry about changing out the cape, I can--”

“No,” He shakes his head. “No, that’s fine. It’s your costume now. You don’t have to do what I did. You shouldn’t, it’s yours. Do what you want with it. What I’m saying is,” Dick takes a breath, “Robin’s a family name. That’s why I think you should have it.”

Jason’s staring at him with big open eyes. “Really?”

“No one better,” Dick says.

And then, Jason smiles. Bright and beautiful and alive.

Robin returns to Gotham.

Chapter End Notes

Whew, guys, I hope you enjoyed this one. I decided to post this one all as one instead of breaking it up into two parts so please let me know you’re thoughts on which method you preferred. Also, I’m admittedly a bit nervous about this chapter so any comments are definitely appreciated.

As always, thank you for reading and hope you enjoyed.

Next Chapter: Year 5: A Not So Lonely Place
Looking back, Dick hadn’t expected a fairly innocuous Friday to signal the utter and devastating defeat of the Titans

“Dang it, Dick!” Donna shouts. “Stop saying that! I refuse to be defeated by--ARGH, WHICH OF THESE FRICKIN’ PIECES IS SUPPOSED TO BE AN ‘E’ SCREW!”

Dick sighs. “Well, guys, it’s been a good run.”

Raquel laughs weakly from where she’s laid out by a pile of wood and bolts.

“Furniture,” she enunciates like a swear. “No one ever expects furniture.”

Vic actually does swear, trying to screw on a post. “Lilith, Zatanna, you two do magic. Can’t you just snap and make this stupid thing come together?”

Lilith smiles apologetically. “I’m a telepath.”

“And I’m a magician, not a miracle worker,” Zatanna deadpans. “What about you? Your arm’s got like a zillion tools in there?”

Vic looks at the metal and wood pieces with a manic sort of energy. “I could melt it together!”

“Recognized: B-06 Red Arrow.”

“Roy!” Donna smiles pleasantly. “How are you? How’s Jade? How’s the baby? How are you and Jade and the baby?”

Dick thinks it’s a testament to Roy’s state of mind that even that questionable bit of conversation only warrants a mild pause in his pacing.
“Good,” Roy says. “She’s good. I’m good. Doctors said the baby could come any minute so that’s…that’s good? Yeah, that’s definitely good because it’s been almost 37 weeks so that’s good, that’s totally normal, and healthy. Super healthy. Like the baby’s going to be. So, that’s…I mean, so everything’s going to be good.”

“Good,” Dick answers, grabbing Roy’s shoulder. “Now, stop and breathe for a second, okay?”

Roy takes one sucking breath and thankfully doesn’t start pacing again.

“Thanks,” he says.

Dick smiles. “No problem. So, not that it’s not great to see you haven’t given yourself a heart attack yet, but I thought you were staying in Star today?”

Roy rolls his eyes. “Jade told me I was stressing her out and to find a better distraction. Thought I’d come here and see how the crib’s going. Everything good?”

Around the room, the rest of the Titans exchange looks.

“Perfect!” Donna beams.

“Pfft! Please, Roy, we can handle building one crib,” Vic says, carefully stretching to block a few pieces of said crib from view.

Dick gives Roy’s shoulder a comforting squeeze. “We’re handling it. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, good.” Roy nods, looking relieved. “At least that’s one thing I don’t have to think about. The sales guy said that model was a bit tricky.”

“You don’t say,” Zatanna mutters before Lilith elbows her in the ribs.

Kory steps around Dick, taking hold of Roy’s shoulders. “You may leave it to us, my friend. Come accompany me to the monitors while the crib is finished shortly.”

He shrugs. “Sure.”

The second Roy’s out of earshot, the team turns to each other.

“How long do you think Kory can distract him with monitor duty,” Raquel asks.

Dick grimaces. “When he’s in a pacing mood? Maybe thirty minutes.”

“We’re doooooooomed,” Donna moans.

“Recognized: B-10 Tempest.”

“Sorry,” Garth says, blushing slightly. “Kind of lost track of time with Tula. What’s the team bonding thing you messaged me about?” He picks up one of the pieces on the floor. “Oh, hey, we building a puzzle?”

Raquel sighs, face in her hands. “It was supposed to be a crib for Roy and Jade. But, now, it looks like team bonding is going to be death by panicked archer.”

Two of the pieces slot together easily in Garth’s hands. He hums, pleased.

The team stares at him.
“What? I always loved Atlantean puzzles when I was a kid.”

Donna’s shaking her head. “That’s….that’s impossible.”

“Witchcraft,” Zatanna accuses, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

Garth laughs. “This is nothing. Try doing one of these underwater.”

Dick’s wrist computer beeps with a notification.

“Well,” he says, “as enlightening as this has been to the multitudes of Garth’s hidden talents, I’ve got a teenage brother who’s going to kill me if I’m any later for patrol.”

“But, Dick, you’re abandoning us in our hour of need,” Raquel teases.

He winks. “Nope, I’m delegating. Garth, I leave crib assembly in your more than capable hands.”

Not looking up from the pieces, Garth throws up a sloppy salute. “I accept my mission with honor.”

Dick laughs, heading to the zeta.

There’s the bright blue light of the zeta powering up followed by the strange cool sensation of having his entire body atomized before he finds himself, blinking in the cave.

“Littlewing,” he calls, cheerfully. “I’m home!”

“Don’t call me that,” Jason says, still surprisingly not in uniform. “And you’re late.”

“Important Titans business came up!”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Nice try, Donna already sent me a pic to complain.”

“Traitor!” he says fondly. “Also, I’ll have you know crib building’s very important for crime fighting. Bad cribs create supervillains; it’s a proven fact.”

“Yeah, right,” Jason says, pulling his arm to the stairs. “Hurry up, Alfred says we have to eat dinner before patrol and I still want to get out in time to stakeout Burnley.”

Well, mandated dinner at least explains the lack of uniform. Dick lets himself be pulled. “No need, Babs picked up the latest Moehler family dealers last night. We can check for their contacts though. Nice instinct, by the way, they were working out the old subway tunnels.”

“Ugh, why does Gotham even have abandoned subway tunnels?”

Dick grins. “Aesthetic.”

Jason huffs, feeling on the wall for the door latch.

They step out at the same time the doorbell rings.

He looks to Dick, who shrugs. “Probably a reporter, Alfred can handle it.”

Jason screws up his face. “I hate tabloids.”

Dick doesn’t disagree. Personally, he’s never trusted them since his adoption had the headline “Bruce Wayne Gone Crazy or Just a Savvy Publicity Move”.
But, there’s more important things to think about.

“How’s the programming Babs gave you,” he asks.

Jason perks up almost imperceptibly. “She said I’m almost ready to use it in the field.”

“Good,” Dick says, making sure Jason catches his smile.

In the past year or so since Jason came to live at the Wayne Manor permanently and the five months he’s been Robin, he’s taken to soaking in the training like a particularly dedicated sponge.

Dick’s proud of him.

By the time they make it to the dining room, Alfred’s still not there.

“This is why tabloids are the worst,” Jason complains, sitting down. “They’re making Alfred miss dinner and they’re running us late for patrol. That’s basically contributing to crime, Dick! They’re like criminals.”

“Patience, Littlewing,” Dick says in his best zen voice.

“I changed my mind. You’re the worst.”

“Aww, thanks!”

Alfred’s smooth entrance interrupts Jason’s retort.

Dick turns. “Hey, Alf, chase away the reporter?”

“It’s not a reporter,” Alfred says, face serious. “Master Dick, Master Jason, I believe our visitor is someone you should meet personally.”

Alright, that sounds definitely not good. Dick and Jason don’t waste time asking questions as Alfred motions them to the sitting room.

The sight that greats them isn’t exactly what Dick was expecting.

Sitting in a large armchair, a small dark haired boy, who can’t be older than twelve, fidgets slightly.

He stands as they enter, smiling nervously and pushing out a hand. “Um, hello, Mr. Grayson, Mr. Todd.”

Shooting a confused glance at Alfred, Dick shakes the hand, “Call me Dick.”

Jason crosses his arms. “And definitely don’t call me ‘Mr. Todd’. Like ever again.”

“Oh, sorry! I mean, thank you?” The kid kind of looks like he’s going to explode in a cluster of nerves so Dick takes pity on him.

“And what can we call you?”

The kid’s eyes widen. “Right! Sorry, I’m Tim Drake.”

“Nice to meet you, Tim,” Dick tries to give him a smile. “Now, what can we do for you?”

“I want…” Tim seems to steal himself. “I’d like you to train me as Robin.”
The room goes so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Jason breaks it by snorting. “Look, kid. First, there already is a Robin so tough luck. Second, I don’t know where you think you are; but, we can’t help you. If you wanna pretend to be Robin, go buy a cheap costume from the store like everyone else.”

Dick sighs. “I think what Jason’s trying to say is we’re not sure why you’d ask us about becoming Robin?”

Tim blinks, looking between the two. “Because I know you’re Nightwing and Robin.”

“-----

“Well, this seems familiar,” Barbara drawls, leaning against the desk in the manor office.

Jason stalks from one side of the room to the other. “How the fuck does a fricking twelve year old figuring out who we are?!”

Babs taps her chin. “Great question. Dick, why do we have a weird number of preteens discovering our secret identity?”

Dick holds up his hands in surrender. “Hey, it’s actually not my fault this time. Tim said he remembered my Haly’s routine from back when he was three and matched it to videos of me fighting as Robin. You know, the two that still exist and are super grainy? There is legitimately no way I could have ever planned for that.”

Barbara shrugs but gives it to him.

“Yeah,” Jason says, “and can we talk about how creepy that is? Kid’s like a little stalker. Probably waiting to tie us up in a basement and go all Hannibal Lecter on us.”

Dick rolls his eyes. “I think we can assume the shy twelve year old is not a serial killer.”

“Cause that’s what he wants you to think!”

“Where is he now,” Babs asks.

“Alfred’s distracting him with dinner,” Dick answers.

“What do we know about him?”

Dick sighs. “Just the basic stuff we found while you were getting here. Timothy Jackson Drake, twelve year old son of Jack and Janet Drake.”

Barbara hums. “Drake sounds familiar.”

“It should. They’re old Gotham money. Used to be part of the big gala scene before they went reclusive a few years ago.” He shrugs. “Truthfully, I thought they moved. Wouldn’t be the only ones after the invasion.”

Jason snaps his fingers. “I got it! We call in Lilith and get her to do whatever mind voodoo stuff she did on Black Mask to forget my face. Problem solved!”
Both Barbara and Dick give him matching looks.

“What?!”

“We’re not hypnotizing an innocent kid,” Dick says flatly. “Plus, according to Tim, he did the research on his own. For years. That’s major parts of his life. Even if Lilith got him to forget temporarily, they’d come back naturally to fill in the gaps.”

“Well, then what are we going to do,” Jason says, throwing his hands up. He stops, eyes widening suddenly. “You’re not...you’re not actually going to train him as Robin, right?”

Dick lays a hand on his shoulder. “There’s only one Robin, Jay. That’s you.”

Jason looks down, some of the tension bleeding out of his shoulders. “Right.”

“He’s a fan, isn’t he,” Barbara asks. “I mean he’d have to be if he studied the old Robin footage long enough to identify you. We could just...explain why we can’t train him and ask him not to tell?”

Dick frowns. “You really think that’ll work?”

She shrugs. “I don’t think we have a lot of options.”

“And if that doesn’t work, we can always threaten him.” Jason grins.

Barbara and Dick give him another look.

“What? I was kidding!”

-----

When they walk into the dinning room, Alfred’s indulgently trying to force another sandwich onto Tim’s plate as the boy thanks him, hesitantly smiling.

Dick nods to Alfred as he takes the seat opposite, Barbara and Jason at his sides before Alfred slips out quietly behind them.

“Hey, Tim.” Dick says, trying for casual. “Sorry for the wait, we had to call in someone else who wanted to hear your story. I take it you know who this is?”


Barbara blinks. “That paper’s not coming out for another month.”

He blushes. “I might’ve programmed a back door function in Gotham University’s research section.”

“So, about our secret identities,” Dick pushes forward before Barbara can start drilling Tim on programming questions. “You know you can’t tell anyone about them, right? If you do, it’s going to make all of our jobs a lot harder and put us in a lot of danger.”

“I understand,” Tim says solemnly. “I haven’t told anyone, I promise.”
“Not even your other nerd friends on the fan boards, got it?” Jason leans forward into Tim’s face. “This shit is important.”


Dick releases a breath, pulling Jason back from interrogating the kid further.

“Okay, we believe you,” Dick says. “Now, why do you want to be Robin?”

“Because I can help you,” Tim says, jumping a little in his seat. “I know I can. I’ve been studying all your cases, both in Gotham and with the Titans. I’m good at figuring stuff out, really. And...And I just thought,” he does a helpless little shrug, “well, I thought maybe I fit the mold.”

“What mold?” Jason glares.

“The black hair and blue eyes,” Tim says like it’s obvious. “I mean you have it and Dick and...well, even Mr. Wayne had it so--”

“We don’t have a mold,” Dick and Jason say together just as Barbara lets out a peal of laughter.

Tim shrinks back in his chair. “...oh. Sorry.”

Dick sighs and manfully resists laying his head on the table.

“We don’t have any set criteria for Robin,” he says in a calmer voice, “because we’re not looking for Robins. Jason is Robin. And as smart as you are--and trust me, I believe you’re smart--we can’t train you as Robin. It doesn’t work like that. I’m sorry.”

Tim looks down at the table, swallowing unevenly in a way that Dick recognizes countless kids he’s saved as an attempt to bury down disappointment.

“Okay,” Tim says quietly.

“It’s not you,” Barbara reassures quickly. “It’s just how this works.”

For a second, Jason looks like he’s going to add something and then clearly decides against it.

Tim’s still looking down. “I understand. I knew...I knew this was going to be a long shot anyway, I just wanted to ask.”

Before any of them can say anything, he stands and swings a bag onto his shoulder. “Please tell Mr. Pennyworth that I really enjoyed the food.”

“We will,” Dick promises. “It was good to meet you, Tim.”

Tim manages a smile. “You, too. And...and thanks for hearing me out.”

He turns and walks to the door.

He pauses. “Oh, wait, I almost forgot. There’s something I needed to give you.”

“Of course, there is,” Jason mutters, crossing his arms, but Tim doesn’t seem to hear him, too busy pulling a file out of his bag.

He hands it to Dick. “Here, it’s all the information I found on the Light. I think I found a money trail.”
Dick freezes and beside him, Barbara’s jaw drops open.

“Wait,” Jason frowns, “what’s the Light?”

Hours later, Barbara and Dick are both frantically typing at the monitors, hunting down the trail Tim gave them. It’s small, so small, a piece of code in a much larger set that’s been rerouted and reconfigured who knows how many times. But, it’s there. It’s a lead—an actual solid lead—that puts them closer than they’ve ever been to tracking down the Light. And all because of the obsessive research of a twelve year old.

Said twelve year old is currently standing in the cave, starring in silent amazement at everything he comes across while Jason glares behind him.

Suddenly, Barbara lets out a slightly crazed laugh. “I found it! Dick, I actually found it! It’s an old bank account linked to a transfer to Gotham last fall.”

“The money they sent to Black Mask.” Dick looks over her shoulder.

She nods, eyes sharp. “We finally have solid proof they’re linked to the stuff with Jason.”

He lets out a breath. “Old account? Can you trace where the money came from originally?”

She purses her lips. “Yes, but not quickly. Tracking the account and confirming the numbers will be like finding a needle in a haystack.”

“I can help,” Tim pipes up, hunching in when they all turn to him. “I’m, um, good at finding patterns.”

Barbara smile softens. “Sure, it can’t hurt. Come on over and tell me what you see.”

Tim grins brightly, hurrying over to join Babs by the monitors.

“Wait a second,” Dick says before he can sit down. “Tim, it’s almost nine. Won’t your parents be looking for you?”

Tim stops, looking down at his shoes. “Oh. No, it’s fine. My parents are….they’re not around a lot. They like to travel.”

And the last part is said in such a quiet tone that Dick decides to momentarily drop it. It at least explains why the Drakes are less bothered about Gotham galas. Though, really, how absent can parents be not to notice your kid tracking down vigilantes?

“Just don’t stay up too late,” Dick tells him gently, before looking around for Jason. He sees him over by the stairs, arms crossed and clearly one step away from pouting.

Dick walks over, leaning next to him. “Thanks for keeping an eye on Tim.”

“Whatever,” Jason says shortly. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about the secret villain organization trying to kill us.”
“We didn’t know anything about them,” he protests. “Roy and I almost thought we were imagining it sometimes. There was nothing backing it up, Jason, just suspicions and two words on a H.I.V.E. account. I promise, the second we got something solid, I’d have told you.”

Jason nods, rubbing the back of his neck and looking slightly appeased.

“Tim’s tip is huge,” Dick continues. “The first tangible path we have to actually figuring out who the Light is.”

“Yeah, well, good thing Tim is such a genius then, isn’t it?”

Dick sighs. “You’re being too hard on him, Jay.”

Jason flinches, shoulders drawing up around him. “Fine. Sorry. I’m going to look at old cases so I can get some work done myself then.”

Dick catches his arm before he can leave.

“What, Dick?”

“Thought you wanted to check out the Bowery,” he says. “Want to patrol?”

Jason frowns, gaze flickering to Babs and Tim. “I thought you wanted to stay with them?”

Dick grins. “Somehow, I think they’ll be fine on computer stuff without me. Come on, you want to patrol or not?”

Jason looks down before reaching for his Robin mask and red hoodie.

“Yeah, okay.”

-----

In the five days since his tip, Tim’s been down in the cave, helping Barbara, for all of them. Jason, meanwhile, has said maybe a total of five words to him.

Dick had really hoped still having their regular patrol would be enough to convince Jason no one was replacing him as Robin. Unfortunately, judging by the scowl he gives Tim whenever they’re in the same room, it’s not going to be that easy.

From a practical standpoint, it’s mostly fine. Jason seems to be avoiding Tim for now. If it gets to be a problem, Dick will talk to him again.

Dick’s got his own problem. Mainly, not making the same mistake twice.

“Hey, Tim,” Dick greets when he sees the boy, surprisingly in the manor and not the cave for once. “You get lost?”

Tim turns, lighting up in the way he always does when he sees one of them. Okay, Dick will admit it, the kid’s kind of adorable.
“Not lost,” Tim answers. “Barbara told me to come up and eat some breakfast but Alfred’s in the garden and I don’t want to bother him.”

“Come on,” Dick gestures for him to follow, “I’m not as good a cook as Alfred or Jason; but, I should at least be able to pull off a bowl of cereal. You didn’t eat breakfast before you came?”

Tim shakes his head, following him to the kitchen. “Too excited.”

“And your parents are fine with you being here all day?”

Tim hesitates. “They don’t really care how I spend my summer.”

“They do know where you are though, right,” Dick checks, grabbing a bowl and cereal from the cabinet.

“Of course,” Tim insists quickly. “They just...they tend to let me do things on my own.” He catches Dick’s frown. “It’s alright! I promise. It’s what I’m used to.”

He sighs but relents, giving Tim a smile. “Things like following superheroes and hacking evil organizations?”

He looks up from pouring the milk to see Tim blush. “Well...yeah, sometimes.”

Dick leans over and ruffles his hair before pushing the bowl of cereal to him.

“Thanks,” Tim reaches for the spoon.

“Thanks back, the tip’s the best lead we’ve had on the Light in...well ever,” he waits until Tim’s taken a few bites. “Tim, you know that just because you’re helping Babs finding the trail, doesn’t mean we’re training you as Robin, right?”

Tim’s gaze is focused on the bowl. “I know.”

“It’s not anything about you, alright,” Dick says, increasingly insistent. “And it’s definitely not because we don’t care. We just want you to be safe, we want what’s best for you. It’s not--”

“I understand,” Tim interrupts, finally looking up. “Really, I do. Jason’s already Robin and you don’t need another one. I’m not trying...I’m not trying to intrude or anything, I just...I just wanted to meet all of you. To see if I could help.”

“You have,” Dick promises.

Tim smiles, looking pleased as he turns back down to the cereal.

Dick pours himself some coffee and sits down across from Tim, letting him eat in comfortable silence.

Tim’s the one that breaks it.

“You know I...I met Mr. Wayne. Once. At a gala. When I was five.”

For most kids, Dick would doubt they could have that solid of a memory for someone they met briefly seven years ago. With Tim, somehow he doesn’t doubt it for a second.

“Yeah?” Dick fiddles with the handle of the mug. Galas with famed playboy Bruce Wayne could be...interesting first meetings.
Tim nods, looking at him with intense eyes.

“Mr. Wayne was a great detective.”

Dick slowly smiles. “That he was. Among other things.”

Tim looks like he wants to say more but then, Barbara rushes in and tosses Dick his phone. “You got a text. It’s important.”

He unlocks it immediately. If it was Titans’ business, it would come through the communicator.

It’s Roy. Three words.

Dick grins. “Jade’s in labor.”

“Go!” Barbara winks, stealing his coffee. “Jason and I will hold down the cave and take the monitors.”

Dick doesn’t need to be told twice. “Babs, you’re the best!”

-----

By the time he gets to Star General Hospital, at least half of the team is already crammed into the waiting room. He slides into a seat between Donna and Kory.

“How is she?”

“Still in labor,” Donna taps anxiously on her knee. “Doctors said it’ll probably be a few hours.”

“How’s Roy?”

Donna laughs. “Well, he hasn’t passed out yet.”

“He is in the delivery room now.” Kory beams excitedly, fake contact lenses and carefully applied make up on so she can pass for human. A few chairs down, Vic’s sitting beside Raquel with a creative use of a hoodie to hide the more robotic parts.

The team’s here. All of them as Garth rushes in thirty minutes later followed shortly by Zatanna, dragging an excited Lilith behind her.

The next few hours are defined mostly by quick excited burst of conversation, a surprisingly intense game of I Spy, and Roy coming to pace the room with short updates every twenty minutes or so.

It’s the last one that ends up being the tip off.

Kory glances at the clock. “Roy has not returned for forty-five minutes.”

Everyone stops.

“Do you think…,” Garth says, “it’s happening?”

Barely minutes later, Roy pushes open the door, holding a small little bundle in his arm and gazing
down adoringly.

“Guys,” he says, not looking up, “I’d like you to meet Lian Artemis Nguyen-Harper.”

He shift the blanket slightly and a tiny red face peers out with dark eyes.

“She’s beautiful,” Lilith says and Roy smiles like he’s holding the most precious thing in the world.

“May we hold her,” Kory asks softly.

“Huh?” Roy blinks, looking up. “Oh, yeah, of course. It’s why I brought her out. Gotta hurry, though, before Jade hunts me down.”

Garth rolls his eyes. “There’s no way she’s out of bed rest yet.”

Roy gives him a look. “You really want to test that?”

Garth wisely doesn’t say anything and Roy carefully passes Lian to Kory.

“Hello, little one,” Kory says, “welcome to the world.”

She holds her gently for another minute before passing her in Dick’s direction, who takes her still moving on instinct than conscious decision.

He looks down at her, watching as she blinks up at him and her eyes slowly focus on his face. He finds himself smiling down as the warm weight settles in his arms.

The thing is he’s held babies before. Even newborns. It’s kind of par for the course when you go around saving people for years. Some of them are going to be infants. But, he’s never held one the he knew. Never felt the full weight of how much it matters quite as much as he does right now..

He thinks he understands Roy’s pacing a bit more.

Roy and Jade are going to make great parents. Dick knows it like he knows the trapeze.

Donna taps his shoulder and Dick remembers again that there’s the rest of the team still waiting and steadily passes her into Donna’s waiting arms.

Roy waits, never taking his eyes fully off the newborn, while all of the Titans take turns holding her before finally returning her to her father’s arms.

“Doctors are only letting a few people in the room at a time so you’re going to have to take turns.”

Roy briefly looks up. “Dick, come on, you’re first. Jade and I need to talk to you.”

Dick is nowhere near stupid enough to argue with new parents so he follows behind without protest.

“If it’s about the Titans, you know we’re fine covering for you as long as you need.”

Roy snorts. “As if you haven’t told us a dozen times this month alone. Don’t worry, Rob, we know.”

Okay, then there’s goes Dick’s best guess.

Roy leads him down the hall before pausing suddenly right outside a closed door. He looks down at Lian and for the first time, there’s a slight frown.

“What is it?”
Roy shakes his head. “Nothing, just sucks Ollie and Dinah aren’t here...and Artemis, of course.”

Dick steps forward, close enough to lay a hand his shoulder. “They’d have loved her. All of them.”

Roy lets out a hoarse laugh. “Ollie would have spoiled her.”

“Definitely.” Dick grins and whatever it is must be enough because then Roy’s pushing open the door.

Jade looks remarkably put together for someone who just gave birth. “Give me my daughter, Harper.”

“Yes, yeah,” Roy moves to sit next to her on the bed, transferring Lian over to her arms. “Good thing we’re in a civilian hospital or Jade would have thrown a knife at me during labor.”

“Only a small knife,” Jade reassures, looking down at their daughter fondly. “Barely lethal.”

“Well, that’s practically affectionate then,” Roy says with a soft look.

Even invited, Dick feels strangely like he’s intruding.

Then, Jade looks up, eyes flickering between Roy and Dick. “Have you asked yet?”

“Thought I’d wait so we could ask him together,” Roy says, still looking at Lian.

“Ask me what,” Dick interjects.

Jade shoves Roy’s arm until he finally turns back to Dick.

“We want you to be her godfather,” Roy says bluntly.

Dick’s brains stops then reboots for all of a second just to manage, “What?! ”

“You’re eighteen. It’s legal,” Roy says as if that’s the only concern.

“I’m eighteen,” Dick repeats with much more incredulity. “Don’t you want someone….I don’t know, older? More responsible?”

Jade snorts in a way she must have picked up from Roy. “You’ve been leading a superhero team for the past five years and half raising Jason for the last one. You are our responsible friend.”

Dick can’t help but feel there’s a world of difference between being an older brother to a teenager and being partially responsible for a newborn baby.

“Look,” Roy says with a sigh, “Jade’s mom going to be her godmother so she’ll get primary custody in case we…just in case. But, if something happens to all three of us...I know this is a lot, Dick. But, well, we don’t know many people who aren’t younger than us anymore and definitely not anyone we’d trust with this as much as you. I know you’ll do right by Lian. So, just, tell us what you think.”

Dick looks down, stopping when his eyes find Lian’s face, still fast asleep in her mother’s arms. He remembers the weight of her in his arms, heavier than seven pounds had any right to be.

Dick doesn’t know how to raise a baby. He doesn’t even have the first clue.

But, he does know he’d do anything to make this one has a good life. Jade and Roy’s daughter. Lian.
Maybe that's enough.

“I’ll think about it,” Dick promises.

Roy smiles because he knows as well as Dick that, in all the years he’s said that, it’s never meant anything but ‘yes’.

-----

Dick’s next few days are spent either on patrol with Jason, checking in on Tim and Babs in the cave, or helping Roy and Jade settle Lian into their apartment’s new nursery.

If Dick wasn’t already used to a fairly constant state of vigilante induced insomnia, he’d be exhausted. As it is, he’s just really, really tired and currently half-dozing in the cave infirmary.

He shoots up at the sound of Barbara’s near shriek.

“I FOUND IT!” Barbara shouts, eyes focused manically on the computer. “I FOUND IT! OH, YOU BEAUTIFUL MADDENING STRING OF NUMBERS, I FOUND YOU!”

Dick’s beside her in an instant, just dodging getting his eye poked out by a pencil still tangled in her hair. If possible, Babs has gotten even less sleep than him.

“What is it,” he asks, poking his head around to see the screen.

“An address. One sec, I’ve got to text Tim,” she says, typing on her phone. “I followed the numbers to a bank account and it was all fairly useless until I found an ongoing utility bill to this address .”

“A headquarters?”

Barbara turns back to the computer, pulling up a satellite. “Doubtful. Looks like a storage facility.”

“Not with those energy readings.” He points back to the utility bill. “No way, that’s simple storage. It has to be…”

They both turn to look at each other.

“It’s a lab,” Babs whispers.

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Dick doesn’t really believe in ghosts in a traditional sense but there’s something inherently unsettling about the abandoned factory fifty miles outside of Opal City.

Around him, tense quiet replaces the usual Titan’s mission chatter.

There’s nothing here. Just old farming equipment and enough dust to seem like years since anyone touched the place.
The scans tell a different story.

“BG, you getting this,” he asks though the comms.

There’s a quick burst of typing before Babs’ voice responds. “Yep, layers and layers of heavily fortified lead for an entire floor right under your feet. Definitely hiding something.”

“Any clue on finding out what?” Dick cast a glance at the warehouse. “I’m not seeing any trapdoors.”

“The room’s too small!” Tim’s voice comes through, high and obviously excited.

Donna smirks at Dick. “And who’s this?”

“Oh, um, Tim Drake, mam, I mean Ms. Troia!”

“Tim, the room,” Dick reminds. “What do you mean it’s too small?”

“Right,” more typing, “based on the aerial scan, the east wall should be four feet wider than the measurements the internal scans show.”

The Titans all look to the left wall, partially hidden behind an old crop duster.

“Secret entrance,” Garth asks.

“Only one way to find out,” Dick says. “Cyborg, you want to do the honors?”

“No problem,” Vic says, pushing the machine with one easy motion before using his other arm to wrench apart an almost invisible crease in the metal. The metal tears back like tinfoil, revealing a narrow set of stairs leading down into total darkness.

“Well, that’s definitely not something out of a horror movie,” Zatanna mutters under her breath. “Who wants to go down the creepy stairs into the basement first?”

With the ease of long familiarity, the team moves into order with Garth and his unarguably better Atlantean night vision at the head, followed by Raquel and Zatanna, Kory in the middle and glowing slightly to produce some light for Lilith and Vic, and finally Donna and Dick guarding the back.

Which, of course, gives Donna the chance to interrogate him, eerie staircase into unknown danger or not.

“So, the new kid,” she whispers after silencing her mic, “He seems sweet. When you signing the adoption paperwork?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m not adopting him.”

“Now, that sounds familiar.”

“He already has parents,” Dick finishes, still keeping his voice low.

Granted possibly absent parents that don’t notice when their kid comes home after midnight, which Dick’s definitely plans to check into when whatever they have on the Light calms down.

“Uh-huh,” Donna says, sounding thoroughly unconvinced, “you’ve already got that look in your eyes. The protective big brother look. You get it all the time with Robin. Speaking of, what’s he thinking?”
Dick bites back a groan. “Who knows? Based on the glares, probably that Tim’s half a second away from stealing his domino mask or something crazy like that.” He pauses. “And, before you ask, yes, I have already made sure Tim doesn’t think we’re training him, thank you. I’m only making that mistake once.”

“No, not training him at all,” Donna reassures. “Just letting him work comms on Titans’ missions and hack down criminal organizations with Batgirl. Not mission training in the slightest.”

“It was his tip!” Dick whispers back.

Suddenly, light floods the stairs and both Donna and Dick quiet instantly, moving into defensive stances.

“Relax, guys,” Garth calls from somewhere below. “I found a light switch at the bottom of the stairs. Also, doesn’t look like anyone’s home.”

The rest of the team joins him at the bottom where, true to Garth’s observations, there’s nothing but dust covered lab equipment and storage boxes all lit by industrial fluorescent.

Dick’s sends his cleared bio scan to the cave, clicking his mic back on. “This doesn’t add up. Why keep this much power running when it’s not even in use.”

“N, look at the back,” Barbara says suddenly, shooting the image back to his wrist computer. “Thermal scans show concentrated low temperatures to your right. Oh... Oh! it is a storage facility, there just using it to store something big!”

Dick looks at the scans again and something...itches, right at the corners of his memory, something familiar in the readings that he can’t quite placed.

“Stay alert,” he tells the team, more for his peace of mind than anything. “Approach from both sides, we don’t know if whatever’s stored is safe.”

The team nods, fanning out to either side of the warehouse as they approach the back corner. Dick turns past the last row of boxes, escrimas at ready, and then...he can see it and it’s…

“It’s people,” Tim gasps over the line.

Three cryo-containers line the back wall, buzzing faintly and lit up light blue as tubes run out to hook up with individual vital panels. Faint outlines of what is definitely human shaped silhouettes show from within.

A chill runs across Dick’s spine.

“That’s...that’s terrible,” Tim’s voice continues over the line, quiet and almost to himself, “How could someone do that? The biological effects alone would be--”

There’s the faint sound of Barbara moving him away from the monitors, probably to comfort him, but Dick’s still slightly frozen. The familiar feeling falls into place.

_Cadmus_. Young Justice’s first mission that led to…

With a sense of foreboding, Dick approaches the first panel and looks down on the vital display.

“Kryptonian,” he reports flatly, ignoring the ripple of shock that runs through the team. It’s too familiar. With numb fingers, he hits a few buttons, defogging the window without waking the
occupant.

He looks up, expecting to see black hair and strong features and the painfully familiar features of a long dead friend transposed on a complete stranger.

And instead, he’s greeted with blonde hair and a face that is decidedly not Supeman’s or Superboy’s. Not male at all, actually.

Raquel comes up behind him. “Wait, I thought clones were supposed to...you know look like the people they were cloned from? She doesn’t look like Superman at all.”

“I don’t...” Dick doesn’t have any idea. Sure, theoretically, he supposes it’s possible but based on appearance, she looks more like...

Not a clone at all.

He moves to the next panel, reading the notes on the vitals. Recovered Martian DNA injected into adolescent human male. He clicks another button and the window defogs to show a boy that can’t be much older than Tim, with bright green fur and what looks like a tail.

“Human experiments,” Dick realizes. “Shit, the Light’s experimenting on regular humans.”

And, by the looks of it, abandoning them to cryogenic storage the moment they get bored. That’s...it’s...

Around him, the team has gone silent, staring at the final container that’s already been defogged by one of the others.

Dick looks up.

The young frozen face of what’s undeniably Roy Harper greets him.

Chapter End Notes

Decided to split this chapter up mainly because real life's been hectic and I didn't want to make ya'll wait until I could post it all at once. Next part will come out fairly soon (probably two weeks). Thank you everyone for all your support. I seriously couldn't do this without all of you!
“Have you told Roy?”

Donna leans next to him as he stares at the monitors displaying the Tower’s medical bay.

Two screens. One with the Kryptonian girl and the green boy, still unconscious but shifting in a way that indicates they might not be for long. The other with a heavily sedated Roy Harper look alike that can’t be older than fifteen.

“No,” Dick answers. “He’s busy. They’ve barely had Lian home for a week. I’m not bothering him or Jade until we at least know what we’re dealing with.”

She frowns but doesn’t argue. “And what are we dealing with?”

He pulls up the medical reports on a separate screen. “Not clones. At least, not with those two,” he gestures to the younger boy and the girl, “Queen Mera’s still running blood samples of…well, the one that looks like Roy; but, it’s not like we can’t guess those results.”

“Why did the Light make a clone that’s missing an arm,” she asks. “Especially an archer?”

He shrugs. “How did they find another Kryptonian? And, better question, who is she? How did they get their hands on Martian DNA and why inject it in a kid? Some answers we’re not going to get until our guests wake up.”

“I don’t like this, Dick.” She shivers. “It’s just….that’s Roy. Our Roy. Who knows what the Light did to him.”

He reaches down and squeezes her hand. “Not our Roy. Our Roy’s safe and home with Jade and Lian. This Roy…,” he pauses, stuck on a memory, “he’s just a poor kid the Light’s not even let live a life.”

She meets his eyes, mouth set in the hard, fierce expression that’s partly her sister but mostly just Donna. “We’re helping him, Dick.”

He nods. “We will. All three of them.”

On the monitors, the girl lets out a small groan followed by the younger boy, tensing in response. Dick turns to Donna and tries to muster a smile. “Time to go figure out some of those answers.”
By the time he gets to the medbay, both occupants are mostly awake and staring at the room with large, wary eyes.

Both eyes flicker immediately to Dick, who raises his hands in as non-threatening a manner as possible.

“You’re safe,” he reassures firmly, “You’re in the Titans Tower, we rescued you.”

The boy cocks his head, eyes going impossibly wider. “Oh crap, you’re Nightwing!”

Dick grins. “The one and only.”

Judging by the look of relief that follows, that’s at least one he doesn’t have to worry about being a secret evil Light agent.

The girl blinks, long blonde hair so much different than the short black Dick still vaguely expects. She has to be about sixteen. “Are we...am I on Earth?”

He regards her steadily. “Yes. Are you from Krypton?”

“I am,” she frowns. “I was. My name is Kara of the House Zor-El.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Kara.” He smiles before shifting to a more serious tone. “Do you remember how you ended up with the Light?”

The frown deepens. “My ship...I remember waking up when it crashed and...it wasn’t supposed to crash, something must have gone wrong.” She hesitates, hand clenching on the metal railing of the bed until it crumples underneath. She glances up in surprise.

He winces. “There’s, um, a few more things we need to tell you after your story.”

Kara unhands the metal bed railing and moves her hands back to her lap almost cautiously. “The only thing I remember after is trying to get out of the wreckage before people in suits came, holding a bright green rock. Then...I think I passed out.” She bites her lip in a gesture that’s incredibly human. “How...how long have I been asleep?”

“We’re not sure,” he answers honestly. “We think the people who took you are part of a criminal organization called the Light that we’ve been trying to take down for years. We found both of you in cryo-containers stored in one of their old labs. I don’t know how long they had you; but, I can promise you’re safe here.”

Kara goes quiet, processing, and the boy shifts in his bed.

“What’s the date,” he asks.

Dick tells him and the boy shrugs in a way both casual and fragile. “Okay, not too bad then. I only lost a few months.”

“You know when you were put in the cryo-container?”

“Yeah. Vaguely, I mean. It wasn’t the first time.” The boy folds himself up in the bed until he’s clutching one of his knees to his chest. “Garfield Logan, but everyone calls me Gar. I don’t know anything about the Light but I know how they got me.”
He continues before Dick can say anything, antsy in a way that suggests wanting to get it out as quickly as possible. “I lived on an animal sanctuary in Qurac with Mom...She...she died. In a car crash. But it was...weird. I saw her before she got in, it was...She didn’t know what she was doing. She didn’t have control. I know it. I tried to tell the police, the doctors, reporters, anyone and then this woman with a crown showed up and told me she’d help.” He scratches the back of his ear. “It was stupid. I shouldn’t have listened, it just felt like I couldn’t say no.”

Dick almost interrupts but Gar continues.

“Anyway, so there was this lab and then this green stuff and now,” he gestures to himself, “I’ve got a tail and can do a lot of weird things I’m pretty sure aren’t just puberty.”

He takes a breath, closes his eyes, and then his entire body shivers and shifts until a distinctly green monkey sits on the bed, still wearing Gar’s clothes.

Another second and Gar shifts back to human, lips twisting into a slight grin at the wide eyes Dick and Kara are giving him.

“Yeah,” he says, “it’s a lot cooler when the guys in lab coats aren’t forcing me to test it.” He shrugs. “But, hey, if you’re telling me I no longer have to deal with them, then I am a-okay chilling here and figuring out what I missed in the last three years while I was captured by crazy.”

Kara breaths in suddenly. “My cousin! I need to find my cousin. My parents sent me here to watch out for him!”

She looks about half a second away from getting out of the bed herself when Dick holds up his hands to forestall her.

“Wait, we can help you,” he says. “Who’s your cousin? What does he look like? Was he with you when you landed?”

Dick really doesn’t want the Light to have another Kryptonian in a cryo-container, not just because of the ethics.

Kara shakes her head. “No, he was on a separate ship.”

She pauses, breathing getting heavier “He’s just a baby! I was supposed to look out for him. What if they found him, too?”

“What can you tell me about him,” Dick asks quickly, trying to calm her down.

She tries to take a breath. “He should have landed in a ship like mine. He’s five months old, black hair, bright blue eyes. His name’s Kal-El.”

Dick’s entire chest stutter and his heart come to a near stop.

“Oh,” he says for lack of something better. “Oh.”

Kara looks up at him, bright blue eyes that now look so familiar.

Oh.

He speaks because if he thinks about it too long he won’t. “I’m sorry. I think...I think something went wrong with your ship. Kal-El...he’s not a baby. His ship landed almost forty years ago.”

“He’s...,” she blinks, “Kal-El’s an adult?”
“He was,” Dick corrects softly. “I’m sorry. He...he died five years ago during the Invasion. He was...a hero, one of the best heroes the world’s ever had. I’m so...I’m so sorry.”

Kara’s still looking at him, mouth open like she doesn’t know what to say and Dick doesn’t blame her. He pulls out one of the tablets they keep in the medbay and types in a quick search.

“Here,” he hands it to her, “you can read about him if you’d like. He went by Superman.”

Kara takes it, staring down at the picture of a man in red and blue like it’s the only thing left in the world.

Dick leaves her to it, pulling out another tablet from beside Gar’s bed and handing it over to him. “Might help you find the things you missed and you can just ask any of us, of course.”

“Um, thanks,” Gar answers, still shooting glances at Kara across the room. He clears his throat, trying to stretch his face into a smile that’s still a bit too forced. “So, ah, Titans Tower? Never thought I’d end up here.”

“When you’re up for it, we’ll give you the full tour,” he tells him. “Let you meet the rest of the team?”

Gar perks up a little bit more at that. “Cool. Hey, lab guys once mentioned you’ve got a guy who’s part robot with you now? That true? They were super jealous.”

Dick huffs out a laugh. “That’s Cyborg, I’ll make sure to have him stop in next.”

“You know,” he muses quietly, glancing down at the tablet, “meeting Nightwing, going to Titan’s Tower, seeing an actual cyborg, this is really a lot better accommodations than I expected to wake up with.”

“Get used to them,” Dick promises and for the first time, Gar’s smile actually looks genuine.

“Nightwing?” Kara’s voice interrupts them.

“Yeah?”

“Like the Kryptonian myth,” she asks. “Flamebird the Destroyer and Nightwing the Rebuilder? The Great Rebirth?”

“Oh.” He nods, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, like from the myth. Superman--Kal-El told me about it once. When I was choosing a new name...let’s just say, rebuilding and rebirth seemed kind of fitting.”

“You knew him?”

“I did,” Dick pauses briefly to find the words about the man who was almost like an uncle. “He was...well, brave and kind and probably one of the greatest people I’ve ever met.”

Kara glances down at the tablet. “And he was a hero of Earth? He protected it?”

Dick nods. “More times than I can count.”

Her lips press together firmly again like she trying not to cry but she doesn’t ask anything else.

Dick’s wrist computer beeps with an update from Donna.
“I’m sorry, I’ve got to handle something.” He types out a quick message. “Cyborg’s coming to check on you. If you need anything, just ask.”

Both Kara and Gar give him nods of acknowledgement and Dick holds back a sigh.

He can only hope the next conversation will be easier. Somehow, he doubts it.

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“He’s not a clone.”

Dick stares at her. “....what?”

“He’s not a clone,” Mera repeats, gesturing to the still sedated boy. “I’ve run every test I know of, both magical and medical, and there’s absolutely nothing to suggest this boy’s a clone.”

On his other side, Donna frowns. “Then, what is he?”

Mera sighs, sitting on the medbay chair as proper as if it was her throne. “I think you should both sit down.”

...That’s never a good sign.

Dick and Donna sit.

“By all measures, this boy is Roy William Harper, approximately fifteen years old.”

“That’s impossible.” Donna shakes her head. “We already have a Roy and he’s definitely not fifteen.”

Mera holds up a small vial of blood, handing it over to Dick. “I also took the liberty of running the adult Roy Harper’s blood from storage. The boy we have here doesn’t show any evidence of being a clone, the blood from storage does.”

Dick frowns. “Mera, are you saying…”

Mera nods. “Based on the magical signature and the extremely large number of stem cells in the blood, the Roy Harper that’s been serving on the Titans for the passed five years is a clone. Most likely of the boy we have here, based on the missing arm.”

“That’s…that’s insane,” Donna says. “Roy can’t be a clone. He’s….he’s Roy! He just had a kid! He’s been a hero for seven freaking years since he was--”

“Fifteen,” Dick cuts her off, thoughts coming together faster than he really wants to process. “The same age as the Roy here. If…if the Light kidnapped this Roy and used him to make a clone, then that means…the Roy that’s been here this entire time is…”

Dick’s breath sticks in his chest as the last piece falls into place.

“Oh…oh fuck, Roy’s the mole.”

Donna whips her head to him, already shaking her head. “Dick, no. Roy would never-- never betray
“He wouldn’t have to know,” Dick realizes softly. “Conner...when we first found Conner, they were able to control him with just a few words. He fought it. He freed us. But, that was only after he knew it was happening. If Roy doesn’t even know he’s a clone…” He forces himself to take a ragged breath, “he could be a sleeper agent without ever realizing it.”

There’s a moment of deep silence and Dick can feel he’s right about this down to his very bones. He doesn’t want to be, though.

Finally, Donna speaks. “Dick, what are we going to do now? It’s Roy.”

“We need to tell him.” He pauses. “Shit, and Jade, too. They’re still with Lian. And....and we need Lilith. She needs to...if there’s still sleeper codes, she’s the only one that can get rid of them. We need to find out what the Light knows.”

Donna’s hands are clenched tightly in her lap. “The team needs to know.”

Dick scrubs a hand across his face. “...yeah, they do.”

“Allow me and Lilith to tell Roy,” Mera offers, breaking her silence.

Dick shakes his head. “No, I should be the one to tell. I’m his friend. I’ve known him since practically we both started.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t be the one,” Mera corrects calmly. “You can’t be the approaching storm and the safe harbor. I’m the healer who discovered this, let me bare the bad news so you can still be the friend he can come to for comfort after. Wait for him to process and reach out.”

Dick hesitates.

“Stay here and tell your team,” Mera orders. “With news like this, they should hear it from their leader first.”

Dick looks to Donna, who nods.

He sighs. “Fine, I’ll contact Lilith so you two can tell Roy and I’ll tell the team....first thing in the morning. Roy deserves to hear it first.”

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Mornings always come far too early when you don’t want to face them.

At least, down in the ever present dark of the cave, Dick can pretend he has more time than he does.

He glances at his phone again. Less than an hour until the team meeting.

Mera and Lilith told Roy and Jade hours ago. No word yet from either.

Above, there was the creak of the cave door opening. Dick doesn’t move his head from the desk. “Hey, Jay, didn’t think you’d be up yet.”
“It’s not Jason,” a smaller voice says and Dick looks up to see Tim making his way down the cave stairs, laptop in hand.

“Tim? I thought you went home?”

Tim shrugs. “My parents are on vacation and, well, it was late so Alfred told me I could stay in one of the guest rooms. But, I couldn’t really sleep so….” He shifts the laptop in his hands, “I think I found something.”

“Again,” Dick jokes but it falls flat.

Tim gives him a small smile anyway. “It’s about Mr. Harper or...well, the Red Arrow one.”

“What did you find?” Dick feels way too tired for this but gestures for Tim to sit anyway, giving him his full attention.

Tim opens the laptop. “After you told us, I started looking at the numbers again for bank locations. The money that was transferred to Black Mask last year came from a local Star City bank, a few blocks away from Mr. Harper--”

“Just call him Roy, Tim.”

“Oh, um, okay. Anyway, so I started looking at last year’s zeta beam record and on April 29th, Roy was logged as taking a zeta from Star City to Gotham and back less than an hour later.”

Dick looks at the record. “The same day we got the letter with Jason’s birth certificate.”

“Exactly,” Tim says, excitedly, “I think Roy was the only one that the Light had involved with what happened to Jason!”

Well, great...that’s just...something else that Dick has to process. Roy--one of his best friends and teammates--almost killed Jason without even being aware of it.

Another connection and Dick groans. “Shit, Tara. Roy was the one who brought Tara onto the team and his appartment’s the one they blew up. They didn’t even need to find out his identity, they already knew.”

Fantastic. That’ll definitely be a fun addition whenever he finally gets the chance to talk to Roy.

Tim’s looking at him like he’s starting to worry so he tries to pull himself together.

“Thanks for telling me, Tim,” he musters out. “This was...a really great piece of detective work.”

“...Thanks,” Tim says slowly, frowning like Dick’s missing the point.

Dick shakes his head. “Sorry, you did great. Really. I just...I just have to figure out a way to tell the team now.”

Tim blinks. “But, this is a good thing. It means the Light doesn’t know your secret identity.”

Dick’s head comes up. “What?”

“Roy’s a Titan. If he’s a sleeper agent for the Light, then he has to be really, really valuable. They wouldn’t want to risk him getting found out unless they had to. Having him be the one to set up everything that happened to Jason--especially being the only one--is super risky. If anyone was even a bit suspicious of him, he could have been found out easily. The Light wouldn’t risk him if they had
another choice which means….they didn’t have a choice.” Tim smiles. “The only reason they wouldn’t have a choice is if Roy was the only one who had access, the only one who knew your identities. I think that whatever programming Roy’s under only lets them control his actions, not get information.”

Dick doesn’t say anything, still running through all the possibilities in his head.

“And it would explain why the Light doesn’t seem to know more about the Titans’ missions,” Tim continues in the silence, eyes lighting up. “Oh! And why they wanted Tara! A real double agent that could give them the information they wanted, too. If Roy could already do it, then they wouldn’t need her. That’s—”

Dick’s hand lands on Tim’s shoulder, interrupting him.

“Tim,” he says seriously, “you’re a genius. Thank you.”

Tim ducks his head down, blushing. “Glad I could help.”

Dick’s wrist pings, reminding him of the time like a weight around his neck.

“Tim, I’ve got to go meet with the Titans. Tell Babs and Jason what you found, okay?”

Tim nods, throwing a sideways glance at the zeta before his mouth turns to a sympathetic grimace. “Good luck.”

Dick huffs out an almost laugh before matching the expression.

“Thanks. I think I’ll need it.”

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Dick supposes it could have gone worse. There hasn’t been any tears or angry denials yet so it could definitely be worse.

That said, as the silence drags onto the five minute mark, it’s still pretty terrible.

“But….it’s Roy. Roy wouldn’t…” Zatanna stops, trailing off.

“If he was under sleeper commands, he wouldn’t have a choice,” Donna reminds quietly. “He wouldn’t even know.”

Raquel looks up. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Lilith went with Queen Mera,” Dick says. “If there’s any more triggers, she can get rid of them.”

No one mentions how that doesn’t really answer the question.

“He’s still Roy,” Garth says suddenly. “I mean everything he did around us wasn’t mind control, right? So, he’s still our Roy….he’s just going through some stuff right now.”

Dick nods. “We know from Superboy, clones aren’t just the people they share their DNA with. Roy’s still himself and that might be completely different from the original Roy they cloned him
from.”

Vic winces. “What are we going to do about the kid version? Not to mention Gar and Kara. They’ve been stuck in cryo-containers for years, we can’t just keep them in the Tower forever. They need a life.”

“I’ve got a few ideas but I’m going to need to make some calls first,” Dick admits. “Not that there’s any rush. The other--the fifteen year old Roy isn’t even awake yet. Queen Mera just took him off the sedative this morning.”

Kory frowns, sighing softly. “That poor boy. If he has slept for the past seven years, his entire world has changed.”

Silence falls once again and Dick lets it rest for a moment before clearing his throat. “Vic, can you talk to your dad about making a mechanic arm. I think...well, I think it might help even a little.”

“Sure.” Vic shrugs. “He’ll need measurements.”

“Get them while he’s still asleep,” Dick tells him before turning to address the entire team, “Look, I know this is...well, not what any of us were expecting. But, it’s going to be even harder on Roy and Jade. We’re a team. A family. Whatever happens hasn’t changed that. When they reach out, we’ve got to be there for them...and Lian.”

Donna quirks up a lip. “Titans together, Titans forever.”

Dick smiles back and around the table, the mood seems at least a bit lighter.

Now, he just has to hope that Roy will reach out.

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When Dick finally gets back to the cave hours later with the hopes of getting at least some sleep, he’s surprised by not one but two faces waiting for him.

“Hey.” He grins at Jason and Tim--both looking stiff and uncomfortable as they stand together by the monitors. “What’s up with the welcome party?”

Tim shifts, offering a small smile. “You just...you seemed worried when you left so I wanted to wait here and see how it went.”

Dick’s grin melts into a soft smile. “Thanks, Tim. It went...well, better than expected at least.”

“That’s good!” His eyes dart quickly to Jason. “Jason came down about an hour ago.”

“Of course, I did.” Jason huffs at Tim. “Dick’s my brother.”

Aww, and this conversation has officially become entirely worthy of losing a few minutes of precious sleep over. Sure, he knows it; but, Dick almost never gets to hear Jason actually admit to caring.

“That’s sweet, Littlewing!” Dick ruffles his hair, earning a scowl from Jason all for himself.
Beside Jay, Tim’s looking down awkwardly at the keyboard so Dick squeezes his shoulder just so the younger boy doesn’t feel left out.

“So,” Jason interjects, sounding annoyed, “what’s going to happen to the ones the Light was holding?”

Dick sighs. “Kara and Gar are basically orphans, they don’t have anywhere go. We need somewhere safe where Kara can learn to use her powers and a place that won’t mind the fact that Gar is green and has a tail.”

Jason grimaces. “What ab--”

“Martians are shape shifters, right,” Tim interrupts excitedly. “If it’s Martian DNA, wouldn’t he be able to just...get rid of that?”

“Based on what Miss Martian and Martian Manhunter could do, yeah, he should be able to.” Dick scrubs a hand through his hair. “But, Gar’s human. Who knows what it did to his DNA or what the tests the Light made him run did to his control? Maybe we’ll get lucky and some of it’s a mental block. Lilith’s going to talk to both of them later.” He shrugs. “Either way, I know some people who will definitely love to meet Kara.”

Tim’s eyes widen. “Who--”

“What about the original Roy?” Jason cuts in quickly, crossing his arms.

“I don’t know yet,” Dick admits. “It’s...it’s complicated. We don’t even know exactly when he was abducted. If he’s around fifteen...that’s right around when Oliver adopted him, after he left the Navajo reservation. With Oliver dead, that’s...that’s both homes he’s ever known gone.” He lets out a slow breath. “I don’t know what to do yet. We have to wait until he wakes up and...and I need to ask Roy--our Roy--what he thinks.”

“Has Roy--,” Jason starts.

“Have you heard anything from Roy or Ms. Jade,” Tim finishes triumphantly. Jason glares.

Dick looks between the two and refrains from rolling his eyes. “Not yet, but I’m hoping soon.”

Quiet settles around them and this time, neither Tim nor Jason are jumping to break it.

“So...what do we do now,” Tim asks, hesitantly. “We just...we just wait?”

Dick smiles. “Sometimes waiting’s just what you need to solve a case. And I, for one, need some sleep.” He stretches, heading towards the stairs. “Tim, if your parents are still gone on vacation, you know you’re always welcome here.” He glances at his brother, hopefully. “If you haven’t seen the library yet, maybe Jason can show you around. He knows it far better than me or Alfred.”

Jason snorts. “Hard pass. I’ve got actual work to do that doesn’t involve babysitting. Tim’s a genius, right? He can figure out a library.”

“Jay,” Dick warns but Jason’s already knocking passed him, up to the manor and leaving Tim and Dick alone in the cave.

Tim looks down at his shoes. “I don’t think Jason likes me much.”

Dick sighs, laying a hand on Tim’s shoulder. “It’s not you, Tim. Jason...takes his time letting people
in. Give him more time to get to know you.”

Tim doesn’t say anything for a second, before looking up with clear hesitance. “You’ll still be here though...right?”

Dick leans down until he can meet Tim’s eyes.

“Yeah, Tim. I’ll still be here. Always.”

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Because it’s Dick’s life, he gets barely thirty minutes of sleep before his phone rings.

Also, because it’s Dick’s life, he answers.

“‘Ello?”

“Get here,” Jade’s voice says. “Now.”

And then, she hangs up.

Dick blinks, forcing himself into consciousness.

Well, he guesses that’s all he really needs.

A few minutes later, he’s re-materializing in a zeta tube in Star City. Two minutes after that, he knocks at Roy and Jade’s apartment.

Jade opens the door, giving a tiny nod of approval, before moving back to let him into the apartment.

He surveys it as he enters. Baby toys still scattered around the room with assorted boxes. Knife twirling quickly in Jade’s hands with five matching ones, embedded in the target board they keep in the living room. No Roy.

She catches his look and the knife stills in her hands. “He’s in the nursery with Lian.” The knife starts twirling again, even quicker. “He hasn’t left the nursery with Lian since Lilith and Queen Mera were here last night.”

“How is he,” Dick asks.

Jade’s lips press together firmly. “I don’t know. He hasn’t said anything since they left either.”

She throws the knife. It flies through the air with a lethal kind of elegance before embedding with the others.

She’s worried, Dick thinks. Another knife twists in her hands. Really worried.

“Lilith searched his mind to remove all the triggers,” she continues, perching on the couch to examine the knife rather than meeting Dick’s eyes. “The ones that were still active, that is. Your tip was right, by the way, only still active triggers had to do with following commands, not giving away information. The other ones, the dormant ones, they...Lilith said they became non-functional when whoever originally put them in was gone.” She takes a breath, finally looking up. “His original
Dick swears. “Fuck, I’m sorry, Jade. Sorry it had to be him.”

Jade shrugs. “You know my feelings towards my dear dead Dad, Dick. His death didn’t get me to join the team. Artemis did, the sister that he treated like dirt even longer than me. I don’t think I even shed a tear when I heard the Invasion got him.” She taps the knife against the table. “The problem...is that I should have known.”

“Roy being a clone is it a bit of a jump for anyone, Jade,” he says. “Don’t blame yourself.”

She flicks her free hand through the air in annoyance. “I’m not talking about that. Who cares if he’s a clone? I mean the mind control. I should have known. I saw Sportsmaster use it.”

“What?”

Jade grimaces. “Back when...let’s say, back when I was in a more avaricious profession, the League of Shadows hired both me and Sportsmaster to fake an assassination attempt in Tapei. Roy intercepted us. Sportsmaster,” she pauses, voice going cold, “my father said something, a code phrase, that made Roy freeze and listen to commands.” She shakes her head. “I thought it was a one time thing. Some hypnotism trick from Bialya or even Luthor. He lost time, it should have been obvious once he woke up. I didn’t think it went further.”

The knife starts spinning in her hands again.

“You couldn’t have known, Jade,” Dick says.

“But, I should have found out,” she corrects. “Even as an assassin, I should’ve found out what I was working with. Instead, I left as soon as possible to avoid working with Sportsmaster longer than I had to.” She sighs. “I suppose the bright side is that the handler was him. I know Sportsmaster. He probably made half of the triggers only accessible to him to ensure his value to the Light. If not for his stupid egotism, the Titans would have been compromised more than we were.” She lowers her voice so that even Dick has to strain to hear it. “And that really would have destroyed Roy. More than this clone stuff already is.”

She looks up. “Talk to him. He’s barely listening to me so maybe you’ll have better luck. Either way, get him to stop hiding away in the fucking nursery.”

She throws the knife. Another bulls-eye and a fairly obvious end to the conversation as she points him down the hall.

Dick follows the command, hesitating only briefly before turning the handle and slipping inside.

The nursery’s dark. Dark enough that it takes Dick a second to focus his eyes enough to see the crib in the corner with Lian sleeping peacefully inside under her Titans mobile—a gift from Kory.

Roy’s on the other side of the room, back against the wall where he sits on the floor and head propped on his knees but obviously awake.

He doesn’t even spare Dick a glance as he comes and drops on the floor beside him.

“So, I talked to Jade,” he says after it’s clear Roy’s not going to do anything. He makes sure to keep his voice low so not to wake up Lian. “She didn’t throw a knife at me so there’s at least that….She might throw at knife at you though if you don’t leave the nursery soon.”
Roy doesn’t say anything.

Dick sighs. “The Light...Based off what the other boy they had captured told us, Queen Bee’s probably a member. And if the Sportsmaster used to be working for the League of Shadows, it’s likely Ra’s Al Guhl’s another one. We need proof; but, probably Luthor, too, if there’s a Kryptonian involved...” He trails off as Roy continues staring at the crib. “That’s good, you know? At least we have a lead on some of their members now. We can prepare.”

Nothing.

“Come on, you can’t sit here forever.” He tries to smile. “You’ll start to smell. More than you usually do.”

Silence.

“....Roy?”

“I’m not,” Roy says abruptly. “I’m not Roy Harper. I’m just a clone. Worse. I’m a traitor.”

“You’re not a traitor,” Dick denies immediately. “No one on the team thinks your traitor. It was mind control. You didn't even have a choice, Roy.”

“Stop calling me that,” Roy snaps. “It’s your name!”

“It’s not my name!” Roy grits his teeth, words coming faster like he can’t stop now that he’s started. “It’s some poor fucking kid’s name who’s life I stole! Mera said he was what? Fifteen? Fifteen when he got captured and replaced with me. That’s everything. I took everything from him!”

“You didn’t take--”

“I did.” He cuts him off. “Everything that’s important to me I stole from him. He wouldn’t have even met Dinah yet! Fuck, he probably only got Ollie for a few months! I got it. Got years with him, got the Titans, Jade, Lian.” His voice breaks on the last word.

His eyes return to the crib, breathing heavily. “And what about her, Dick? You and Jade want me to talk so much? Fine. What about my daughter? How’s she going to grow up knowing that her dad is...is whatever I am--too fucked up by the Light to even be a good replacement of the original.”

“Roy--”

“Guess that’s what I do, isn’t it,” he says flatly. “I just...I make people think I’m something I’m not just so I can screw them over.”

“Roy.” Dick grabs his shoulder, finally stopping him. “That’s not what you do. You help people. You always have, that’s not the mind control or being a clone or anything. That’s just you. You haven’t screwed anyone over.”

Roy shakes him off. “I screw everyone over. I know I do. It’s what I’m good at.” He laughs darkly. “Fuck, Rob, always the team leader, aren’t you? Always have the perfect little thing to say. Who cares if it’s a lie? As long as you make people believe it.”

There’s something bitter and broken in Roy’s voice and it catches in Dick’s throat like a poisonous gas.
“Roy, that’s not…,” He stops. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

At his words, Roy deflates, whatever power he found going out of him like a fire to ash.

“See, I’m doing it again,” he mutters. There’s a long pause before he speaks again. “Never told you I’m sorry, did I? About five years ago. All the Titan’s stuff. Shouldn’t have forced you into it. I’m sorry I don’t regret it like I should. You were fourteen and grieving and I asked you to do it again. Shit, we’re lucky it didn’t break you.” He looks down at his hands. “I could’ve led the team. I should’ve. I was nineteen. I’d been working solo even before the invasion. I could’ve learned the teamwork stuff, it’s not like I’d didn’t have experience with Ollie.

Dick sighs. “It’s fine, Roy. I get it. You and Donna told me I had the most experience, I worked with a team before, I was the logical choice. Even...you know I made my choice about the team years ago, an actual choice. I don’t regret anything. You shouldn’t either.”

Roy gives him a tired smile. “Told you that’s what you do, Rob. Pretty words even when they don’t deserve it.” He shakes his head and the new words sound like a confession. “I couldn’t though. Lead the team. Not then. I couldn’t. I was too weak, too...too busy pretending I was as strong as the person I was supposed to be.”

“You are strong,” Dick says adamantly. “Roy, you’re one of the strongest people I know.”

“I’m not.” He lets out a bitter laugh. “I don’t think I ever told you how me and Jade got together, yeah?” He doesn’t wait for an answer before continuing. “It was after the Taiwan thing, the plant monster, you remember? I...I wasn’t in the best shape.” He scrubs a hand over his face. “Actually, when she found me I was drunk enough to forget my name and passed out in Ollie’s room with a needle in my arm.”

Dick stares at him.

Roy shakes his head. “It was just that once. Back then, I preferred booze normally.” He catches Dick’s look. “I just...I just couldn’t for awhile. Not until Chesh found me and threatened to slit my throat if I didn’t put myself together.” He sighs, pushing to his feet and walking to the crib.

Dick follows, not saying anything just listening in silence.

Roy looks down, almost smiling at Lian still sleeping peacefully in the crib. He reaches down, lightly tracing a finger over her cheek.

“You were right,” Roy whispers. “Dinah and Oliver would have loved her.”

He leans back, moving back to the wall until he’s almost back to his original spot.

“I know what you all want me to do,” he says. “You want me to say it’s fine, that the mind control wasn’t my fault, and that I know just because I’m a clone doesn’t mean I’m not still me. Problem is...I’m not sure who the real me’s supposed to be.” He shakes his head. “Not sure if I’ve known for awhile. Not since Ollie.”

“Roy--”

“Just leave, Dick,” Roy says tiredly. “There’s nothing else you can say right now and frankly, I’m done listening.”

Dick stands in the middle of the room, watching as Roy’s eyes slide from his face and back to the crib, exactly like he was when Dick came in.
Dick sighs, reaching in his pocket and slipping something in Roy’s hands, folding the hands around it when it looks like Roy isn’t going to take it.

“Your communicator,” he says. “Saw it on the counter when Jade let me in. You’re still a Titan, Roy. Whenever you’re ready, we’ll still be here.”

Roy doesn’t look up when Dick leaves.

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When everything’s going to absolute shit, there’s always something freeing about being in the air.

Maybe it’s the illusion of getting above it. Could be the sense of control he finds most easily when he’s seven stories in the air without a clear plan on where he’ll land next. Probably it’s just that it feels like home, instinctively familiar in a way that even the manor or the Tower will never reach.

Dick flips over Gotham’s skyline, letting the gravity pull but not conquer him.

Technically, he’s supposed to be on patrol--alone, for once, since Barbara’s tracking down a lead in Old Gotham and Jason was strangely absent when Dick got to the manor.

Crime in Gotham’s still on a brief lull since the Moehler family bust and the latest Arkham breakout was contained. Of course, it’s Gotham, so a lull just meant Dick only has had to deal with five purse snatchers, two break in’s, and one attempted arson tonight rather than...well, that and Two-Face.

All in all, it's an easy night in Gotham as if running in defiance of the rest of his life.

He needs to check in on Gar and Kara and find a safe place for them to go. He needs to figure out what to do with Tim now that he’s involved enough that Dick doubts he’ll quit--if he ever really would have quit. He needs to talk to Jason to get him to stop glaring at the kid. He needs to find a way to help Roy. He needs the other Roy to wake up so it stops feeling less like an ax waiting to fall. He needs to find more proof on the Light so they can finally trace them to something.

He needs a lot of things if he’s being honest. Most of all he needs somewhere to start.

That’s all it takes really. Just a start.

A flash of orange catches in the shadows of a roof and Dick wishes he could say he was surprised. He jinxed himself by calling it “an easy night”; he just knew it.

But, then again, maybe it isn’t such a jinx. Maybe...it’s an opportunity.

He lands on the edge of the rooftop, staring at the shadows.

“Did you know?”

Deathstroke steps out of the shadows, pulling off his mask until it’s just Slade, smirking across from him. “Not even a hello. Rude, kid, we haven’t seen each other in two months. Or at least you haven’t seen me.”

Dick doesn’t rise to the bait. “Did you know, Slade?”
Slade prowls closer until he’s his usual step too far into Dick’s personal space. A threat, a taunt, as if that’s really enough to bother Dick these days.

“Know what? That they were keeping that arrow kid as a popsicle or that your friend was a sleeper agent?” He shrugs. “Guess it doesn’t matter, knew both.”

Dick doesn’t grit his teeth, doesn’t even allow himself to tense. “Thought you didn’t like hurting kids.”

Slade snorts, pointedly eyeing the spot on Dick’s shoulder where he’d left a scar barely four months ago. “I said I preferred not killing them. Last I checked, frozen wasn’t dead.”

“Doubt it’ll make much difference to him,” he says flatly. “He lost seven years of his life Not like you even care.”

Slade tilts his head. “Aww, kid, you didn’t start mistaking me for one of your heroes, did you? You know who I work for.”

He does but that’s not the same as proof.

“The Light.”

Slade raises an eyebrow. “Ah, so you did figure it out. I suppose I should give them a heads up; but, then again, they really don’t pay me enough to be a messenger boy.”

“What do they pay you for,” Dick asks. “Because I don’t think it’s standing here talking to me? Doubt they appreciate you showing up every few months, either. Training me.”

Because that’s what it is. Like clockwork, every two or three months for the past two years, Slade finds Dick alone in Gotham either to fight him or, on the rarer times, to knock him unconscious and drag him to increasingly inhospitable places to see if he can survive. Training, not asked for and actually actively refused, but training anyway.

And if the training actually seems to be help Dick…well, he isn’t going to think about that. And he’s definitely not going to consider that as a reason he never calls for backup when Deathstroke shows up in Gotham uninvited.

Slade smirks. “No, kid, that I just do for fun. Told you I hate wasted potential.”

“Why are you here, Slade? Why now?”

“Because I want to be,” he answers easily. “Real question: why’d you stop to talk to me? Thought you had things to do?”

“I’m not just going to let you run around Gotham.” Dick glares.

“Well, that’s a lie.” Slade tsked. “You’ve definitely tried to ignore me before. The Arkham breakout last Fall for one. Why stop and talk this time?”

“As if you ever actually let me ignore you for long anyway.”

Slade leans closer and Dick lets him. “Yes, but if you really wanted to stop me, you’d have called in the rest of the bat brats. We both know you can’t stop me alone, kid. So, how about the truth?”

There’s a pause and Dick turns up his head defiantly until he can meet Slade’s eye, focusing entirely on what comes next.
“You’re not a bad person, Slade. I know you aren’t. You have a code. The Light...The Light doesn’t have a code. They’ll kill children, they’ll kill anyone the second they get in the way. And the Titans will stop them. We will. They’ve been hurting our own.” He sighs. “Two years ago, you gave me an out—a chance to save my team. I’m giving you a chance at the same for yourself. We’re going to bring down the Light, Slade. Which side do you want to be on when we do?”

Slade stares at him, frozen for the space of a single second in what can only be surprise. They’re still too close for either to have much room to move.

“You really trying to turn me to the side of the angels, kid?”

Dick shrugs. “Would it be so bad?”

There’s a flicker, something too fast to catch, before the single pale blue eye hardens.

“You know,” Slade says casually, at odds to the air that’s suddenly gone tense, “I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t have a reason for coming here tonight. Just felt like it really. But now, kid, I’m glad I came. Looks like you need a lesson, Dick.”

Dick tenses.

It’s an unspoken truth that Slade knows Dick’s identity. Has known it for who knows how long. Dick’s not stupid. Slade’s a pragmatist. There’s been too many opportunities, too many fights that have begun or ended in Dick unconscious for him to truly believe Slade doesn’t know.

It doesn’t scare him as much as it really should for one reason.

Slade’s not going to do anything with it. He won’t tell, won’t use it against his family, even for money. Dick knows it and it all boils down to the fact that if Slade decides he wants Dick dead, he’ll do it himself.

It’s probably the only thing Dick can rely on when it comes to the other man.

But, the thing is they both know all of that. Which means the only reason Slade’s using it now...is as a warning. And what comes after is going to be bad.

Dick doesn’t look away. “What lesson’s that?”

“Something I thought you already knew,” Slade says. “Naivete isn’t something you can afford, kid. You gotta be smarter than that.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“No, kid. You really don’t.”

The sword swipes through the air barely a millisecond after Dick ducks.

He can’t dodge the kick to the ribs.

Pain launches up his side and he stumbles backward to his knees as he tries to get air back in his lungs.

He moves on instinct to get an escrima up to block the next blow aimed at his neck. The block holds, the force bending his wrist backwards.

He aims a quick jab at Slade’s throat that the older man blocks and Slade’s knee cracks against his
shoulder with enough force to break the clavicle if Dick takes the hit wrong.

“You’re strong, kid.” Another blow to the side and Dick rolls with it to get a few more precious inches of space. “You’re fast.” Slade catches his next dodge and the next move slices the sword across his leg. “But, that’s not enough.”

He knocks Dick’s batarang out of the air.

“What’s your strength against a Kryptonian?”

Another swing that knocks an escrima out of Dick’s hands.

“What would your speed have been against a speedster?”

A cut too fast for Dick to dodge.

“Against Bane’s venom formula?”

A kick that just barely misses his injured ribs.

“An Amazonian?”

Another cut to his arm with too much force to block.

“An Atlantean?”

Slade’s foot hits hard against Dick’s knee, sending him to the ground. By the time he looks up, the sword’s against his throat.

“Or even against me,” Slade says, “barely even a meta at all.”

The weight of the sword leaves Dick’s throat and Slade stares down at him.

“You have to be better than all of them, kid. You don’t have a choice. One wrong move, one super powered hit and boom, that’s it. You’re dead.” Slade leans in until he’s pulling Dick in by the collar of his uniform. “You can’t be stronger than them, you can’t be faster, but you have to be better. Better trained. Smarter. More ruthless. Only way you’re going to survive this world.”

Slade’s voice lowers until it’s more of a growl. “And that means, shit like you did tonight can’t ever be allowed to happen again. You understand, kid?”

His muscle aches. His ribs throb. A trail of blood runs down his neck.

Dick meets Slade’s eye. “I understand.”

“Good.”

Slade lets go of his collar. He backs away, pulling his mask back on, and a second later, Dick’s alone on the roof.

Dick still waits another five minutes before pulling up his wrist computer, typing in a quick command.

Five new trackers blink red in reply, all carefully hidden on a single target.

He activates one of them.
“Luthor,” the muffled voice of Slade echoes over the speaker, “I’m clocking back in. Metropolis base in an hour. Have my next payment ready.”

Dick grins.

All it takes is a start.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, thank you everyone for the response last chapter! Here is part 2 of 3, the third one will be posted as soon as I can. After the next chapter, I'm planning to go back for a bit to the previous way of posting the entire year at once (either in one chapter or chapters posted over a few days). Thanks again and hope you enjoy!

Happy Free Comic Book Day!
“What the fuck happened to you?!?”

Dick looks up from the computer. “Hmm?”

Jason makes a wild, frantic gesture at Dick’s entire person. “You look like you fell off a frickin’ building!”

“Oh.” He shrugs. “Calculated risk. I’ll get Garth to heal what he can later. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it!?”

Dick nods. “Jay, we got a bug into LexCorp. Five of them, actually.”

That at least cuts Jason off from what’s sure to be an annoyed tirade.

“Seriously?” He comes to lean over Dick’s shoulder, just as Dick hooks up the recordings to copy onto the Tower’s server. “How?”

“I ran into Deathstroke when I was out on--.” Dick stops. “Hey, wait, where were you tonight?”

Jason’s expression closes off. “Nowhere.”

Dick gives him a look.

“Just working on a case.”

“Which case?”

“A new one.”

Dick raises an eyebrow.

“I can follow some leads on my own, Dick.” Jason rolls his eyes. “I’m not useless.”

“I know you aren’t,” he says. “Just never seen you want to work a case alone.”

“Yeah, well, I’m trying something new.” Jason crosses his arms, looking down.

“Is this about Tim?”

“Isn’t everything these days,” he mutters.

“Jay...Jason.” Dick grabs his shoulders. “I told you. I promise. Tim’s not replacing you as Robin. That’s yours.”
“Thought it was ours,” Jason says too quickly before pulling away. “That’s not even—ugh—that’s not—I can’t—Shit! Why do you always have to be like this? Why’d you have to do all this if you were just going to—”

Jason’s mouth snaps closed with a sharp click.

“If I was just going to what,” Dick presses. Jason shakes his head mulishly. “Come on, Jay, I can’t even try to help if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”

Jason runs an exasperated hand through his hair. “That’s the problem, Dick! You’re always trying to help! Always for everyone! I thought...I thought we were...I just thought I was—”

The cave alert system goes off, causing both of them to jump.

Dick reads the alert before turning to Jason. “Roy Harper’s awake.”

“You gotta go, don’t you,” Jason says, any emotion in that statement carefully tucked away.

Dick grimaces. “Yeah…I’d prefer it if you came with me, though.”

Surprise flickers briefly before Jason scowls. “Don’t pander to me, Dick.”

“I’m not,” he defends. “I think it’ll help having someone his own age there. Another hero. Someone he can relate with. Robin.”

Jason hesitates, scowl fading.

“Come on, Jay, I need you. You can’t be that mad at me, right?”

Jason huffs but moves to grab his mask and distinctive red jacket. “Fine, let’s go.”

“Thanks, Littlewing.” Dick starts up the zeta beam. He catches Jason’s arm before they go through. “We’ll talk later, okay? I promise.”

Jason’s jaw firms—that same stubborn tilt that reminds him of Bruce—and he nods. “Whatever, let’s go meet the new kid.”

“Old kid, technically,” he muses.

Jason rolls his eyes. “That’s an oxymoron.”

“Not in our lives.”

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Dick’s seen a lot of weird things over the past eighteen years; but, nothing’s really the same as the strange not quite deja vu feeling that comes from being glared at by the face of a close friend, seven years younger than they should be.

“Where am I,” the young Roy Harper demands. “All the girl who looks like Wonder Woman told me is that I’m safe, so what is this place? The Hall of Justice? A hospital? And what happened to my arm?”
Dick sighs, sitting down. “You’re at Titan’s Tower, kind of like the Hall. We’ve got a lot to tell you.”

“And all of it sucks. Warning you now.” Jason leans against the wall.

Dick throws him a look.

“What?” Jason shrugs. “He needs to know what to expect.”

On the bed, Roy narrows his eyes at Jason. “Who are you?” He turns and gives a significant look to Dick’s beat up state. “Who are either of you?”

Dick hesitates. “That’s...a bit of a complicated question.”

“I’m Robin,” Jason says, pointedly gesturing to the insignia.

“No, you’re not.” Roy glares. “I know Robin. I’ve met him. Kid’s like ten or something and has a creepy laugh. You’re not him. Who are you?”

“That’s one of the things we need to tell you,” Dick takes over before biting the bullet. “Roy, you were captured by a super villain organization called the Light. They took your arm and kept you unconscious in a cryo-container. It’s been seven years.”

Roy stops, mouth turning down in an expression of complete bewilderment that reminds Dick strikingly of the time his own Roy had an old bow snap apart in his hands.

“Seven years?”

“Yeah,” he confirms. “There’s other things you need to know. A lot...a lot’s changed.”

Roy blinks, wide eyes searching around the room. “Where’s Ollie?”

Dick can’t help it. He winces. Roy sees it.

“Where’s Oliver?” Roy’s hand grips down on the sheets. “He should be here. I know he’s flaky sometimes, but this....this is important. He should be here. Where is he?”

Dick can’t find the words, can’t speak quick enough over the lump in his throat as he watches the panicked denial slowly spread over a face he knows almost as well as his own. It’s too...it’s too familiar.

“Dick, tell him,” Jason commands from beside him.

“Oliver died,” Dick says bluntly. “There was an Invasion. Five years ago. Oliver fought in it with the rest of the League. They didn’t...None of them survived. I’m sorry.”

Silence falls and Dick hates it. Hates how it scratches too close to a time where everyone was silent.

“The League died,” Dick continues in the silence. “Millions of people died. Hardly any heroes were left. The few that were formed the Titans and set up this tower. That was almost four years ago.”

Roy takes a breath, heavy enough that it sounds painful. “Ollie’s really dead?”

Dick nods.

“Did Oliver...,” he hesitates, “did he even know I was alive?”
Dick and Jason exchange a look.

“That’s...that’s also a difficult question,” Dick finally says. “Oliver knew you were alive because...we didn’t know you were missing.”

Roy frowns. “You didn’t--”

“When the Light took you, they used your arm to make a clone,” Dick continues. “Someone with your face and your memories. From our view, you were only missing for a few months before Oliver found you. Your clone, he...lived your life.” He sighs. “It wasn’t his fault. Roy--the other Roy didn’t even know he wasn’t you until a few days ago. Don’t take it out on him. He’s already beating himself up enough already.”

“A clone,” Roy says slowly. “A clone lived my...and Ollie didn’t....how did he...,” He takes a breath and closes his eyes. “Where is he? The clone, I mean, not...not Oliver.”

Dick shifts. “Like, I said he’s been having a rough time with it. He’s at his apartment with his daughter.”

Roy’s head jerks up. “His daughter? He has a kid? Wait, he’s married? To who?”

“Jade Nguyen, she’s one of the Titans.”

“She’s terrifying,” Jason jumps in. “But in an awesome ex-assassin kind of way.”

“Their daughter’s name is Lian, she’s barely a week old,” Dick finishes, watching carefully as Roy’s expression moves closer to shellshocked.

“So,” he takes a harsh sounding breath, “my clone...he got married, had a kid, is part of whatever new Justice League stuff--Titans or whatever--and Oliver is...Ollie’s dead?”

Dick nods. “I’m sorry.”

Roy shakes his head, before scrubbing his hand over his face and leaving it covering his eyes. “I’m not going to hold this shit against the clone...the, ah, other Roy if that’s what you’re worried about. He was just...living his life, I guess.” A weird expression halfway between a smile and a grimace. “Probably better than I would have if I’m being honest. You can...you can tell him that if you want. That I forgive him or something.”

“Thank you,” Dick says quietly, hoping that will help.

“I just,” Roy lets out a bitter sounding laugh, an echo to the one that’s still ringing in Dick’s head, “so, what happens next? Ollie’s gone. The world’s fucking moved on. I don’t even have an arm!”

“We’re getting you a new prototype for your arm. It should be ready later today. As for the rest,” Dick looks at the kid and wishes that Roy’s eyes weren’t covered so he could meet them, “look, you’re still one of us, Roy. You’re still a hero. Even...even if you weren’t, even if you decided not to be, the Titans are still going to be here for you. We’ll find a way to help you. I promise.”

In the corner of his eyes, Dick sees Jason look down to the floor, shoulders turning in slightly in a halfway defensive move like someone expecting a hit.

Dick almost turns to him but then Roy’s moving the arm covering his eyes, turning his head to scrutinize Dick with a complicated expression.
“Who are you?”

“I’m Nightwing,” he answers steadily. “But, I used to be Robin.”

Roy’s eyebrows go up briefly before he tilts his head. “You got bigger.”

“Comes from not being eleven.”

Roy snorts. “The world really has changed, hasn’t it?” He turns to Jason. “You’re the new Robin, then?”

Jason just shrugs but Roy nods like that’s an answer enough.

A tense silence falls between the three where Dick struggles to think of something else to say and Roy looks to the black space where his arm used to be, before suddenly tensing.

“Luthor,” he growls out.

Dick’s head jerks up. “What?”

“He’s the one behind this!” Roy yells, hand clenching at his side. “I was at a LexCorp outbranch in Rhalesia when these guys with guns showed up and surrounded me! They knocked me out and that’s...that’s the last thing I remember.” He looks up at Dick with burning eyes. “Lex Luthor did this to me, didn’t he? He’s the one who responsible for all of this!”

Dick lays his hand over Roy’s clenched one. “We think so. We’re still trying to tie him to the Light, we need concrete proof—”

“What more do you need?!” Roy explodes. “It was him! It has to be, I was taken from a LexCorp facility! That’s all the proof I need!”

“But, it’s not all the proof a court needs,” Dick cut in bluntly. “Look, we’re trying. We already have bugs planted on one of the Light’s mercenaries. We’re getting the proof and then, we’re bringing this all down on him hard, okay? With enough evidence that he can’t buy his way out of it.”

Roy’s mouth firms. “Oliver told me that the world needs guys like us for when the law and justice don’t really see eye to eye.”

He sighs. “Things aren’t ever that simple, Roy.”

“Maybe they should be.”

“Give it time,” Dick tells him. “Wait until we get proof and watch what we can do with it. We do this the right way and everyone sees Luthor for the monster he really is. That has to be enough.”

Roy lets the silence sink in before he answers. “Fine.”

And then Roy looks down, obviously signalling the end of the current conversation.

Dick lets him, standing and waiting as Jason follows suit. “The new arm prototype should be by later. Just call any of us if you need anything. I’ll be back later.”

Roy nods, not saying anything else, and Dick fights back another sigh, heading to the door.

Jason pauses behind him, turning back to Roy. “Hey, Green Arrow really say that? The stuff about justice and the law?”
Roy lifts his head, eyes narrowing. “Yeah, a few days after I moved in. Followed by like an hour long rant about totalitarian regimes. Why?”

“No reason.” Jason shrugs. “Just sounds like a cool guy.”

Roy blinks before a barely there smile flits across his face. “He was.”

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Dick turns to Jason the moment they get far enough away from the medbay. “Alright, Jason, what’s up with you?”

“Shouldn’t you be worrying about Roy instead?” Jason pauses. “Both of them, actually.”

“I’m a multitasker.”

Jason sighs.

“Just drop it, Dick.”

“No. Last time I did that you almost got blown up.”

He bristles. “I told you I don’t need a babysitter. I’m not stupid, I--”

“That’s not--ugh, you have to know that’s not what I meant. I trust you.” Dick runs an aggravated hand through his hair. “But, I’m not an idiot either, Jason. Look, I’ve been busy lately. I get it! I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much. But, I still want to help I can’t do that if you don’t tell me what’s wrong! You’ve been upset since Tim got here, if it’s about Robin--”

“It’s not about Robin!” Jason finally yells. “Stop saying that. It’s not about Robin, it’s not about the Titans. Do you really think I’m mad at you for being busy bringing down the Light?! How selfish do you think I am?!”

“Then, what is it, Jay,” he demands. “If it’s not that, then what? Just tell me why you’re mad at me?”

“I’m not mad at you!” Jason shouts before deflating. “Not...not really.”

Dick takes a moment to steady his breathing. “Then, what’s wrong?”

Jason goes quiet, pausing in a way that indicates he’s thinking rather than just avoiding the question.

“I just...look, don’t you think we’re trusting Tim too much?”

Dick sighs. “Jason...”

“No, listen,” Jason interrupts, “we don’t even know anything about him. He’s what? Some genius little twerp that finds out our identities and then doesn’t do anything with them except tell us he knows?”

“He told us to give us information on the Light.”

Jason shakes his head. “No, he told us so we’d train him as Robin and then we said no. He knows
our identities and the one thing he asked for we turned him down. Now what? He’s just fine with that? Everything’s all hunky dory just because we asked him not to tell? No, kid’s gotta have some kind of ulterior motive! No one’s that fine with being turned down, he’s gotta want something else...something else he still thinks he’s got a chance of getting.”

“Like what, Jay?”

“Like y-,” Jason looks down, “I don’t know, okay? But, I don’t trust him! He wants something”

Dick lays a hand on his shoulder. “Or he’s a lonely, way too smart kid that just wanted a chance to meet his heroes.”

“Ugh, see, this is why I didn’t want to tell you!” Jason shakes off his hand and glares. “You’re not even listening!”

“I am ,” he promises. “Look, Jay, we’ll do a more intense background check on him once this whole mess with the Roys settles. I was planning to look more into his parents anyway for a possible neglect case. But, until then, just give him a chance. He’s a sweet kid, Jason. I think you’d actually like him if you stopped glaring at him every chance you get. Just try, okay? At least until we get a break in the current Light stuff and can actually handle it.”

“What if it’s too late by then,” Jason demands, stepping back in the way of the zeta. “Shit, by then he might already be sleeping in my room and going on stupid family camping trips!”

Dick frowns. “What?”

Jason’s already striding off to the zeta, shoulders tense. “Nevermind! Just forget it, like I told you. I’m going back to Gotham where at least I can handle things on my own.”

“Jason, wait!” Dick runs to catch up. “Don’t go on patrol when you’re upset, it’s dangerous!”

Jason angrily punches in the code to the batcave. “I won’t go on fricking patrol, Dick. Just leave me alone and go find Garth to fix your stupid cuts!”

The zeta beam powers up and Jason turns back, giving Dick a warning glare not to follow.

Dick steps back. “We’ll handle this later, Jay, okay?”

Jason meets his eyes. “You keep saying that, Dick, but only one of us is even asking the right questions.”

And then the zeta turns blue and Jason’s gone.

Dick manfully resists banging his head against the wall or punching it like he would’ve five years ago. Instead, he just lets out a breath so slow it sounds like a hiss through clenched teeth and pulls out his phone.

Are u w/ Tim?

Barbara’s reply comes a second later. Yeah, he just got here. We’re having breakfast with A. Why?

Dick hesitates. Make sure J doesn’t harass him, pls.

What happened?

I don’t even know.
...U coming over?

Later, I'm at Tower. Giving him space.

Ok.

Dick pockets the phone and then, does give into impulse, and punches the wall just once before sliding down onto the floor with a sigh. The cut on his leg aches in protest.

He’s pretty sure he’s not supposed to be this frustrated with teenagers until after he stops actually being one.

“Dick?”

His head shoots up. “Kory? What are you doing up?”

Unlike Gotham, it's barely six in the morning.

“Watching the sunrise, it is beautiful here.” Kory sits down beside him, tucking her hair behind her ear. “What is wrong? Is it Roy?”

“No.” Dick winces. “Well, I mean, yeah, partially. It’s more kind of...everything, you know?” He groans. “Didn’t things used to be easier?”

Kory squeezes his hand. “No. I am fairly certain they never were.”

“You’re probably right.” His shoulders slump. “I don’t know what to do, Kory. I don’t even know which problem I should work on first. We’ve got one Roy that just found out about the Invasion and is still laid up in the medbay, another Roy going through a well earned identity crisis, one Kryptonian and one partially Martian teenager that the Light’s been treating as science experiments, and Jason’s pissed at me for not looking into Tim.” He rolls his eyes. “Plus that’s not even counting the field day the Justice Society’s going to have when they find out a ‘kid hero’ was captured for seven years and we had no idea.”

He looks down. “Sorry, Kory, I shouldn’t be dumping all of this on you, too.”

“My friend, never apologize for sharing your burdens,” Kory says, smiling in that fond way that always lodges in Dick’s chest. She pauses. “Do not worry about the Justice Society. That is a foe we can face when it arrives. Let us not let it be a problem now.”

He tries to smile. “That’ll just leave it at a hundred problems rather than a hundred and one.”

“Still one less for us to manage,” Kory points out.

He tilts his head in acknowledgement, turning his palm up until he can lace it with her hand.

She smiles briefly before it turns back down. “What is wrong with Jason?”

Dick closes his eyes and lets his head fall back until it hits the wall. “I don’t know, Kory. I really honestly don’t know. He doesn’t like Tim. That’s pretty clear, at least. He doesn’t trust him. He’s mad at me for not looking into Tim further and...look, I’m trying to get it, alright? I know Jason’s got problems trusting people. How could he not with all the shit that happened last year? I just don’t get why he’s so focused on Tim. Tim’s like the opposite of suspicious. And nothing in his files has come up to show anything different. He’s a good kid, Kory. I know it. Babs likes him, Alfred likes him. This isn’t some Trojan Horse situation like Tara, I can feel it. And....it’s not like I don’t trust
Jason. I do. I’ll look into Tim more. I just...I think Jay’s focusing on this for the wrong reasons and I can’t figure out what those reasons are.”

Dick trails off and finally opens his eyes to see Kory looking at him with a thoughtful expression.

“My friend, have you considered that Jason is afraid?”

Dick frowns. “Of Tim?”

“Of what he fears Tim to represent,” Kory explains. “Love is...such a strange emotion. Both on Tamaran and here. Wonderful, but so easy to lose sight of and be driven to terrible things if you lose it or fear losing it.”

Inexplicably, Dick’s mind goes to Roy and he’s not sure if he’s thinking of the one in the medbay or the one in a nursery.

He shakes it away. “Jason’s not losing Robin. I told him he’s not. I keep telling him. He said it’s not about that.”

“I am not speaking of him losing Robin, Dick, I speak of him losing you,” Kory corrects.

His frown deepens, brows knitting together. “Me? Why would he lose me?”

With her free hand, Kory reaches out until her hand rests on his cheek and for a split second, she looks far too sad. “For someone who cares so deeply, you miss so easily how that care may be returned.” Her hand withdraws and she shakes her head, bright red curls falling over her shoulder. “It is as you say, Jason has faced far too much far too early, especially when it comes to family. Is it that hard to imagine that he would want to cling tighter to the new family he has found?”

“Tim’s not replacing Jason in our family either,” Dick says as if it’s obvious because to him, it is.

She nods. “I know; but, does he?”

“Jason’s my brother. How could he think helping Tim would change that,” he asks.

She shrugs. “How could he?”

Dick thinks back and slowly the puzzle starts to align itself in a way he’d never think to assemble. It’s a strange conclusion, almost incomprehensible just because Dick could never imagine family ever working like that. But did Jason?

It would at least he explain why he seems to have it out for Tim.

He sighs. He feels like he’s been doing that a lot lately.

“Thanks, Kory.” He pushes up, leaning down slightly to press a brief kiss into Kory’s hair and see the breathtaking smile it gets in return.

Kory’s always been beautiful, inside and out. It’s a fact of life just as true as the sun gives light and the grass is green. But, that doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be acknowledged.

Dick’s chest goes a little bit tight as Kory grasps onto his hand as he helps her to her feet and Dick can’t help think, *Maybe. Maybe one day.*

But, for now, he pushes it away.
“I’ll talk to Jason tonight,” he promises.

“Good.” Her smile fades a bit as Dick’s face hits the light and she runs a finger across his chin where he can feel a large bruise forming. “But, maybe go find Garth first.”

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With things being as tense as they are, almost all of the Titans are spending their free time in the Tower even if it’s just to be closer to the team. Even Jade comes by later in the afternoon, striding quickly to the training room with a sharp look on her face and a terse explanation that she’d dropped Lian off with her mother for the night. No one quite dares to ask what happened between her and Roy to precede that.

On the bright side, with all the Titans gravitating to the Tower, Dick does manage to find Garth fairly early so now he only has the constant aches that come with a near decade of vigilantism rather than being what Donna described as “a walking medical emergency”.

Now, if only that means Dick can stop restlessly flitting around the Tower trying to distract himself long enough to give Jason space.

Dick is...not a very patient person. He never has been. He can wait quietly through a stakeout. He can think through a mission long enough to make plans and contingencies for those plans. But, when it gets down to it, those are doing things. They’re moving forward, even if steadily. Waiting when he know what he needs to do, knows what he wants to say to Jason? That’s not action, it’s inaction.

Dick’s never been good at staying still.

He tries to concentrate on other things. He checks in on Kara to find her still deeply entrenched in news articles on her cousin and tries to add a few memories of his own. He finally gives Gar a full tour of the Tower and watches him work with Lilith on getting his powers under control. It seems like Gar can manage to get rid of the tail and fur; but, he still can’t quite change his green hue, even when in human form. Vic brings Roy’s new arm later in the day so Dick helps with that, not that the younger archer say much other than a quick thanks and a muttered request for the Tower’s nearest archery range.

Dick waits and distracts himself until finally, finally, the sky goes dark and his phone buzzes with a text from Jason.

*Meet me in the cave. I found something.*

-----

Jason’s not there by the time Dick makes it to the cave; but, Babs is. And Tim, sitting quietly at the monitor.

He looks toward Babs first. “Text from Jason?”
Barbara nods, arms crossed, her eyes flickering briefly to Tim.

Dick shrugs.

A second later, there’s the sound of a motorcycle—not the R-cycle, thankfully, so at least Jason listened about not going on patrol—and Jason pulls into the cave, ripping his helmet off in a quick movement.

He barely spares a glance to Barbara and Dick before his eyes land on Tim and his expression locks into something tight and dangerous.

“Jason.” Dick steps in to intervene. “Wait, I need to talk to you.”

“Not now.” Jason, radiating the kind of burning fierceness of a wildfire, never looks away from Tim.

He pulls out a beaten up paper file, throwing it at the cave floor in front of Tim’s feet. “So, are you going to tell them or am I?”

Tim blinks, looking down at the file with as much confusion as anyone. “Tell them what?”

“The truth,” Jason enunciates, advancing slowly. “Figure it’s the least you could do after lying to us for weeks.”

Barbara tries to get in between them. “Jay, step back and calm down.”

“Calm down?! He’s been lying to us!” Jason shouts, pointing at Tim. “This entire time he’s been lying! From the first night he showed up here.”

“I...I haven’t,” Tim stutters.

Jason’s mouth turns down in disgust. “Ugh, just stop already! Stop pretending you’re something you’re not! I found proof! It’s over! You’re done!”

“Jason.” Dick steps in and grabs Jason’s shoulders. “What are you talking about?”

“I told you,” Jason says, face crumpling slightly in something finally other than anger. “I told you that we shouldn’t trust him! That he wanted something! That he was hiding something from us. You wouldn’t look into it, so I did.”

Jason takes a breath, wrenching himself out of Dick’s grip and when he looks at Tim again it’s all anger. “You’re a genius, right, Tim? If you wanted to bury something, you must be pretty freaking good at it.”

Tim frowns and then, quite suddenly, his eyes widen and the blood drains from his face until he’s almost a ghost.

Jason nods, looking satisfied. “Only problem is you’re not the only detective here. And, unlike you, I’m not afraid to get closer than a monitor and a bifocal lens.” He picks up the file, turning to Dick and Barbara. “Kid’s the best hacker we’ve ever seen, maybe even better than Babs. If you want the truth about him, don’t trust any computers. You gotta go old school, find the actual paper trail.”

Dick takes the file, Barbara looking in over his shoulder as he opens it to find...two death certificates.

“Jack and Janet Drake.” Jason says, eyes still focused on Tim, “who, according to the files kept at the County Clerk’s office, died in the Invasion nearly five years ago. Weird that it’s the only file that says that. Based on all the digital systems, they’re still totally alive. Even filed for a tax extension last
year."

He steps forward and Tim’s eyes follow him like prey follows predator.

“So,” Jason says, “let’s try this again. What’s the truth, Tim?”

Tim doesn’t say anything.

“Still nothing?” He rolls his eyes. “Fine. I’ll guess, then. I think that Janet and Jack Drake really did die in the Invasion. Then, I think that someone covered it up—every single digital trace—so that perfect genius Tim Drake would have the perfect matching cover story. Then, I think that whoever covered it up, the person who taught you, the one you’re really working for, told you to—”

“No!” Tim shakes his head, eyes wide. “I’m not working for anyone! I promise!”

Jason snorts. “Finally talks and it’s another lie. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Then, who covered up the deaths, huh, Tim? Suppose it was just another good Samaritan, the kind of person who would bring us information on the Light for nothing in return.”

“You’re wrong,” Tim shouts, shooting to his feet. “I’m telling the truth! It’s just me!”

“The truth?” Jason shouts right back. “You really expects us to believe a seven year old hacked into the county clerk’s office! And then has been doing what? Just nothing for the past five years? You’re just another mole! Admit it! The Light was the one that tried to kill me last year, the one that tried to get a mole into the Titans. When those both failed, they combined methods and tried to get a mole in through here!”

Jason’s close enough that with every phrase he jams his finger into Tim’s chest, pushing the smaller boy back. “And, you know what? Maybe it would have worked. Better plan than the Light’s ever come up with before. Because Dick? He’s too nice for his own good. He likes to trust people. Likes to help them even when they don’t deserve it. Fuck, you even got Babs and Alfred to like you!”

Jason draws in a heavy breath. “But, you didn’t count on me, did you? Because this is my family, too, and I’m not going to let you destroy it.”

Jason stops, finally drawing back. “So, one more time, what’s the truth? What do you want? Why did you come here?”

“BECAUSE I DIDN’T WANT TO BE ALONE ANYMORE,” Tim yells with enough force that even Jason backs up.

His breath hitches, tears starting to roll down. “You’re wrong! I don’t want to hurt anyone! I just...I just wanted to help.” Tim wipes at his eyes, looking miserable, but he keeps going before Jason can interrupt. “You’re right about my parents, okay? They died in the Invasion and I...I didn’t want to go into CPS and everything was crazy already with the files so I...I snuck onto one of the precinct’s computers when they brought me in and then...I just left. No one cared after that and I learned enough about computers that I could keep up with the rest. It wasn’t hurting anyone. I still go to school. I know how to take care of myself.” He shakes his head, looking down. “There’s no one, okay? I promise. There’s no one else. It’s just me. I didn’t think I was lying to you.”

Jason scoffs, though it sounds a lot more unsure now, the same kind of not quite confidence he tries for when a mission goes too wrong too fast. “As if you really didn’t have any help—”

“I can prove it!” Tim shouts, eyes landing on Jason before they go back to the floor. “The files I changed should all be traceable to my computer. I didn’t hide that. I didn’t think anyone would care to look.” He turns, looking to Babs, Dick, before returning to Jason. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lie.
I didn’t...I didn’t want to intrude.”

Tim’s voice falls until the next words are barely a whisper. “I just wanted to meet you. You’re...you’re my heroes. I found everything I could find about all of you. Every time you helped Gotham...I wanted to see if I could help you, too.”

He’s shaking by the time he’s finished and the moment is held suspended, even Jason too hesitant to break it.

“I’m sorry,” Tim says again. “I should’ve told you. I shouldn’t have come back after I told you about the Light. I just...I just was tired of being alone.”

Tim doesn’t look up, wiping his eyes one more time. “I’ll go now.”

And then he’s running, bolting up the stairs to the manor.

The heavy door shuts with a bang behind him and just like that the moment breaks.

As if in sync, both Barbara and Dick turn to look at Jason, who’s still staring at the place that Tim stood almost in shock.

“Jason,” Barbara says softly.

“I didn’t...,” Jason starts, voice blank and frowning. “...That’s not what I meant to happen.”

Before either of them can say anything else, Jason’s running, too--the opposite way than Tim went, disappearing deeper into the darkness of the caves.

The last ones left, Barbara and Dick turn to each other.

“Well,” Babs says, wincing, “...ouch. I don’t think I have anything else to say, just ouch. Think we could have stopped that?”

“Probably.” Dick sighs, pressing a hand to cover his face.

“You take Jason, I’ll catch Tim?”

“Deal,” he agrees, looking in the direction Jason went.

He barely makes it five steps before his communicator beeps.

“Oh, come on, now,” he mutters under his breath before clicking it on. “Nightwing.”

“Dick,” Donna answers, tone focused the way it only gets with missions, “emergency station in the Baltic just sent out an alert. They’re reporting Level Four emergency. You coming?”

Level Four of Seven: Moderate situation with possibility of escalation, all Titans on call

Dick sighs, the sound echoing through the comm.

“Dick, you okay?”

“Having a bit of a family emergency here, Don’,” he admits. “Mind taking point on this one?”

“Sure thing,” comes Donna’s immediate reply.

“I can come after if—”
“Dick,” she says, sounding amused. “It’s just a Level Four. We got this. Everyone else is already here in the Tower except you and Roy. Go be with your family.”

She clicks off her comm before he can say anything else.

Right, family. Somehow, Dick thinks the Level Four emergency would be easier.

It takes a little over five minutes to find Jason in the training room, high up on one of the small stone ledges that line the cave. In all honesty, Dick probably would have missed him if not for the tablet lighting up his face.

Dick swings up, scaling a section before flipping up to land.

“Hey, Littlewing.”

Jason flinches, punching in something on the tablet. “I traced back the digital files, all the same IP address. He wasn’t lying...not about that at least.”

Dick sits next to him, not saying anything.

Jason’s hands shake. “He could still be lying about other stuff! It could still mean--”

“Jay,” He maneuvers the tablet out of his brother’s hands. “Come on, you saw him in there. Do you really think he was lying?”

Jason’s shoulders sag, kicking at a small rock until it falls down, down, down and hits the cave floor below. “I really fucked this up, didn’t I?”

“Kind of,” Dick admits. “No one’s run off to Ethiopia, though, so you’re still doing better than I did.”

Jason folds his arm around himself. “Stop trying to make me feel better, Dick.”

“No can do.” Dick bumps his shoulder. “It’s my older brother prerogative.”

“Why do you care? You’ve got a new little brother now, right,” he asks, some of the bitterness creeping back into his voice, “A better one.”

“Jason. Tim’s not replacing you.”

“As Robin. Yeah, I know.” He rolls his eyes. “You keep saying that.”

“He’s not replacing you in anything,” Dick corrects. “Jason, you’re my brother. Nothing’s going to change that. Ever. Whether Tim’s here or not, you’re always going to be my brother.”

Jason doesn’t say anything for a very long time, long enough that Dick starts to wonder if he’s hoping Dick will just give up and leave.

Finally, Jason looks down. “…You know, I actually did try to be fine with it. I tried to tell myself that Tim could help you and Babs more so it was better, would help more. And, you know, he’s all big eyed and like a fanboy puppy, not like me. Alfred likes him. He can keep up with Babs even when she gets on the high level computer stuff. He practically cries whenever you compliment him. So, that’s good. He’s good, better for you guys than I’d be...So, I told myself it would be fine. I’d still have Robin so it’s not like I wouldn’t see you guys even if you’d be focused on Tim instead... It would still be fine.” He curls into himself more, eyes red but still stubbornly dry. “I can’t compete with a genius, Dick.”
“No one’s asking you to.” He reaches out only for Jason to scoot back. “Fuck, Jay, so what you though that just because Tim was here, we were going to kick you out?”

Jason looks up, surprise causing his shoulders to drop a little. “I mean not literally. I figured you’d still let me stay at the manor.”

“Just ignore you then,” Dick asks incredulously.

Something must finally be breaking through because Jason gives his exasperated glare. “You’d have Tim.”

“That doesn’t mean we wouldn’t want you,” Dick argues, waiting until Jason meets his eyes. “Jay, it’s not a competition. There’s no one one spot to fight for. Yeah, Tim’s a genius and probably knows more about programming than the entire Wayne Tech IT department. And that’s great. That’s awesome just like it is when Bab’s hacks into a security mainframe or when you figured out where Mr. Freeze was hiding out. It’s all great, that’s how a team--that’s how a family works. You’re family.” Dick snorts. “We could have fifty kids stuffed in the cave and you still couldn’t get rid of me, even if you tried.

Jason stares at him, eyes wide but something fragile and hopeful starting to show through. Dick ruffles his hair while he’s still too shocked to stop him.

Finally, Jason speaks. “Please don’t bring fifty kids here.”


Jason huffs out a rough sounding laugh, cautiously coming closer until he’s almost leaning against Dick. Dick mentally fist pumps, thanking whatever saint watches over emotionally stunted vigilante families.

“I’m sorry,” Jason says.

“I know.” Dick smiles. “But, I don’t think I’m the one you should be apologizing, too.”

Jason closes his eyes, not moving in further but not leaning any more in either “You want to take him in, don’t you?”

Dick hesitates. “...Yeah, I do. He’s a good kid that deserves a lot more in his life than an empty house and a computer. What do you want, though?”

Jason looks up, frowning in confusion.

Dick winks. “That’s the other thing about families. It doesn’t just matter what one person wants, not for something this big, it takes everybody.”

Jason stiffens, eyes drifting down this time in heavy thought rather than avoidance. Dick sneaks an arm around him and pulls him in for a quick, tight hug. Jason’s hand comes up to sluggishly bat him away on habit. “Just think about it, Jason. We’re not doing anything without you.”

Dick stands, looking down at Jason as the younger continues to stare down at the floor.

“I’m going to go check on them,” Dick tells, waiting for Jason to give a half-shrug of acknowledgement, still caught up in his thoughts. “...for what it’s worth, I think you’d be a great big brother, Jay...if you want to be that is.”
He finds Tim on the couch in the sitting room where they’d met him what seems a lot longer than a few weeks ago.

He’s stopped crying, which would be great if he was doing something other than looking down with raw red eyes and a bleak expression as Barbara sits next to him with an arm wrapped around him.

Dick pauses in the doorway and just watches for a moment. Times like this he really wishes Bruce was here. Not that Bruce was ever particularly great at emotional conversations but, well…Dick just wants him here. He’s not, though. Which means Dick’s just going to have to do the best he can.

Tim tenses when he notices Dick. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” he reassures, sitting on the floor in front of him so Tim will see him. “I’m sorry. I should’ve looked further into your parents when I suspected something was wrong.”

“Nothing….nothing’s wrong ,” Tim denies before wincing. “I mean…other than the lying. I’m fine.”

“Tim,” Barbara says gently. “You’ve been living alone for what? Five years now? That’s not fine.”

“I’m used to it,” Tim argues plaintively, wide eyes looking between the two. “I promise. I know how to take care of myself! I go to school, I pay bills, I even do the taxes! I’m okay, really! I mean, yeah, I’m not that great at cleaning but--”

Dick grips Tim’s hand, cutting him off. “Tim, just because you’re smart enough to take care of yourself doesn’t mean you have to. Everybody needs people.”

“I do! I have…,” Tim looks to the side. “I mean…I did. I had…I had you guys. I followed everything, ever since I saw you in Haly’s circus. I read every news article they had and then everything I could find. I know…I know that’s not the same as actually knowing you but…I wasn’t… I wasn’t alone .”

Tim’s flushing bright red by the time he finishes, shoulders turned in as he refuses to meet their eyes. “This was stupid. I just wanted to meet all of you. To really, actually meet you. It was selfish and now, I made everything worse.”

“Tim,” Dick says seriously. “I think you’re a long, long way from making things worse. Because of you, we found out Roy was being controlled against his will. We saved Kara and Gar…we found the other Roy when we didn’t even know he was missing. You have helped, Tim. And even if you hadn’t given us all that, we’d still be glad you’re here.”

Tim looks up, blinking in confusion before glancing at Barbara, who nods while her lips quirk up in a smile. “What Dick means is we like you even if you weren’t my little hacking genius.”

Tim blinks again before his face falls back into a frown. “But, Jason hates me.”

Dick lets out a slow breath. “Jason…”

“Was being an asshole,” a new voice announces as the group looks up to see Jason standing in the doorway, arms crossed. He looks at Tim. “I was a dick and I don’t even have the name to excuse it.”
Tim jolts up. “W-what?”

Jason rubs his hand through his hair. “You didn’t do anything, okay?...Well, you hacked into government databases which is definitely illegal but we do that all the time anyway so that’s kind of whatever...” Jason trails off, eyes flickering to Dick and Dick nods in encouragement. He sighs. “What I’m trying to say is it wasn’t your fault. It was all me. I didn’t trust you because I wanted to hate you. Then, I found evidence so I could. So, I’m--”

“But, I lied to you,” Tim breaks in, hesitantly.

“Meh.” Jason shrugs, distracted. “About a year ago, I tried to steal Dick’s tires. My point is I’m sor-”

Tim frowns. “But, what about--”

“Look,” Jason cuts him off, glaring, “I’m apologizing here. Quit interrupting me!”

“You’re apologizing,” Tim asks, looking lost.

Jason huffs. “I’m trying to. I’m sorry about...you know, being a jerk and digging up the shit about your parents and accusing you of being a mole and, well, kind of despising you. I’ll try to, uh, not do that anymore.”

Jason finishes, eyes flickering to Dick and Babs cautiously. Dick grins and Jason finally loses some of the stiffness. He looks back to Tim. “So, what do you say? Truce?”

Tim stares at him, eyes wide. “I--”

And then, Dick’s comm goes off with an emergency alert and everyone freezes.

Dick goes still, clicking it on

“Nightwing,” Donna says, not even waiting for him to speak. “We’ve got a problem. The emergency alert was fake. The village says they never even sent anything to the emergency station.”

Dick frowns, already pulling up his wrist computer. “How long until you can get back?”

“At least thirty minutes. The village wasn’t close.”

Dick has the zeta records up. “Oh, fuck.”

“What is it,” Barbara asks first, followed by Donna echoing it a second later.


“Roy finally left the apartment,” Donna asks. “Um, good?”

He grimaces. “Wrong Roy. The first entry is from the Tower to Star City.”

“Roy...the original Roy, I mean. He went home,” Tim asks, frowning.

“Not for long,” Barbara reports, pulling up the report on her phone. “Second zeta barely twenty minutes later to Metropolis.”

“What’s in Metropolis,” Donna asks.
Jason looks at Dick, eyes wide, and Dick swears.

“Luthor,” Dick answers. “He’s going after Lex Luthor.”

“Is he insane?!” Donna shouts over the comm. “LexCorp basically has its own private army. He’ll never get in.”


Dick looks and then, he stares because that can’t possibly be…

“Is that a rocket launcher,” Jason hisses. “How did he find a freaking rocket launcher in twenty minutes?!”

“He probably got it from Green Arrow’s old stash,” Dick answers absently, already working on pulling up the trackers he’d placed yesterday.

Jason’s head whips around between Dick and Barbara. “Green Arrow had a weapons stash with a rocket launcher?! That’s awesome!” Barbara shoots him a look. “I mean terrible. Who even needs that? Wait, do we have a rocket launcher?”

Barbara ignores him, looking at Dick. “So, Roy hacked the alert system to make sure the Titans were out of the country, got a military grade weapon, and is now heading straight for LexCorp. Dick, that’s not planning for an arrest, that’s an execution.”

“I know,” Dick mutters as the last of the tackers comes up. “Shit. And Deathstroke’s there, too, not to mention whatever security Luthor has in place. Even if he doesn’t kill Luthor, he’s going to get himself killed.”

Silence settles around them before Tim breaks it. “Then, we’ve got to stop him, right?”

“Right,” Jason agrees immediately, looking up at Babs and Dick for the plan.

Barbara bites her lip. “It’s LexCorp. That’s three of us and one thousand feet of some of the toughest security protocols known to man.”

“I can help!” Tim chimes in. “I can get into the security cameras!”

Dick and Barbara turn to each other, silently debating.

“If the kid says he can do it, let him try,” Jason interrupts. “We have to save Roy!”

“We know,” Dick says. “But, we can’t go into LexCorp blind. That’s a suicide mission.”

Barbara sighs, standing up. “Tim, are you sure? LexCorp’s security is top of the line, even I haven’t been able to get fully inside.”

Tim hesitates only slightly before nodding. “I know LexCorp’s security, I’ve tried to hack it before! I could never get into the internal mainframe; but, I can get in to the security cameras. I know it!”

Jason, Tim, and Barbara all look to Dick.

“Suit up,” he tells them. His hand goes to the comm as Barbara and Jason run to the cave, Tim right behind them. “Don’t, get the Titans back as fast as you can for back up. We’re heading in alone.”

“Got it,” she says. “Don’t get killed.”
He grimaces and hears her comm clicking off

He waits half a second before typing into another channel, another comm.

“I don’t know if you’re listening,” he says to the quiet. “But, if you are, we really need some help. Roy needs your help. He’s going after Luthor.”

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By the time they arrive at LexCorp, everything’s already on fire.

Which, come to think of it, is a pretty good description for most things in Dick’s life.

The upper half of the building—thankfully, largely unstaffed except for Luthor’s office—has a large, still smoking hole in it that means the rocket launcher’s already come into play.

“Batcave, what’s the inside look like,” Dick asks from where they’re positioned a rooftop away.

“Firefighters are already evacuating all the civilians,” Tim reports over the comm. “The cameras are only showing security guards that look like they’re in a hurry. No sign of Roy or Luthor”

“Where are the security guards heading,” Barbara asks.

“They’re splitting up. Sub-basement, mostly.”

Jason frowns. “What’s down there?”

The sound of clicking. “No cameras down there. Building plans just show a carport.”

“So, a subterranean floor, off the camera feed and free from civilians,” Dick surmises. “Whatever’s going down, it’s going down there.”

“Guess they’re not going to let us walk in the front door,” Barbara says.

“Doors, pfft.” Dick shoots a line. “Takes all the fun out of heroics if you don’t bust through a window, BG.”

“Dork,” Jason huffs as Barbara rolls her eyes. Oh well, Tim probably enjoyed it.

They hit the windows seven stories up.

Five seconds after, they’re greeted by a hail of bullets as two men, that look far more equipped than your average security guard, start firing at them.

Dick takes cover behind a solid steel desk, Jason right beside him and Barbara on the desk to the right. Two batarangs embed in the wall behind the guards, flashing red before they explode in a spray of yellow gas, knocking the guards unconscious.

Dick clicks on the comm. “What’s our quickest route?”

“The stairwell,” Tim answers. “Out of the office and to your right.”
“Got it,” Dick says, already running to the hall with Jason and Barbara behind him.

Another guard’s already in the hallway and Jason goes low, sweeping his legs while Dick knocks him unconscious with an escrima stick.

“Wait, what’s on the floors below us,” Barbara asks over the comms as they make it to the stairwell. The sound of more typing.

“The lobby and the business section,” Tim answers. “Upper floors are the servers and Luthor’s office.”

“The servers.” Barbara turns to Dick. “N, We’re in LexCorp. We’re inside one of the most secure places on the planet that just got torn through by a missile launcher. Even if we get Speedy out of this, we’re gonna need a really good explanation unless he wants to get arrested by the cops.”

Dick looks at her. “We don’t have much time. You think we can do it?”

She grins. “I think I can. You and Robin go save Speedy. I’ll catch up.”

Dick pauses, clicking through on his comm to Tim. “What’s security look like on the fourth floor?”

“Um, bad,” Tim says, nervously. “There’s like twenty guys, all with really heavy duty guns.”

Babs winks. “Not for long.”

Dick smiles. “Be careful.”

“You, too.” She fires a grappling hook, letting it hook in the upper guard rails and carry her up.

Dick looks to Jason, following as they secure lines around their own rails. “Ready?”

Jason nods.

“Stairway should be clear until you get to the bottom floor,” Tim reports. “Sublevel’s only accessible through an elevator. You’ll need a keycard.”

“No problem.” Jason holds up a card he must have grabbed when taking down the hallway guard.

Dick loves his brother, he really does.

Their feet hit down at the bottom of the stairwell where, sure enough, thick steel doors mark a high security elevator. Dick grimaces. Steel enforcing, underground, no cameras, and only accessible to security. Trust Luthor to double up a carport with an above military grade bunker.

Jason moves to scan the stolen card and Dick grabs his wrist.

“Wait, we’re missing someone.” Dick pulls up the trackers. “Deathstroke’s on the floor below, probably blocking the rest of the floor with Luthor and Speedy.”

“How do we handle him,” Jason asks.

Dick touches the comm. “Batcave, I need you to track Robin’s comms and Deathstroke’s trackers to find him a way around to Luthor.”

Jason frowns. “He’ll be working partially blind without the security cameras.”
“One second, I think I can get a complete floor plan,” Tim says, followed by typing.

“Nightwing, no way is Deathstroke not going to notice us sneaking passed him,” Jason says.

“He definitely would,” Dick agrees. “That’s why I’m going to be the distraction.”

“Got the floor plans,” Tim says, triumphantly.

Jason’s still looking at Dick.

“Relax,” Dick reassures. “If Deathstroke really wanted to kill me, he would’ve by now.”

For some reason, neither his team nor his family ever finds that as reassuring as he does.

“Robin,” Dick tacks on seriously when it looks like Jason’s going to object, “we don’t know how much time we have to get to Speedy. Someone needs to get down there and we can’t do that with Deathstroke in the way.”

Jason sighs and scans the keycard for the elevator. “I hate when you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” Dick jokes as the elevator doors open.

The elevator reaches the bottom floor just a few seconds after Jason’s made it through the elevator ceiling. They both just have to rely on Tim to find him a way through there to Roy.

The door opens, dinging happily as Dick ducks, bullets embedding in the wall behind him.

“Kid,” Slade greets, gun down and two swords at the ready. “Can’t say I’m surprised to see you.”

Dick steps out of the elevator, holding up his escrimas. “We’ve gotta stop meeting like this.”

Then, he rushes Slade, blocking against the swords and almost getting in a hit to the chin before Slade dodges, aiming a kick at Dick’s leg. Dick retreats back.

Slade grins. “And yet you don’t look surprised to see me.”

A cut with the sword that Dick sidesteps, counters with a partial hit to the ribs, before ducking as the other sword swings down.

_Gotta be faster...or smarter._

“Plus, you’re two short of a full nest. You sent them ahead, didn’t you?”

“Don’t need them to handle you.” Dick barely brings up an escrima to block the next blow

Slade laughs, holstering the second sword so he can put more weight behind the one. “We’ll see about that.”

He bats away Dick’s next hit, countering with a swipe almost too quick for Dick to flip over, landing behind Slade and aiming a kick at his knees.

Slade moves, the sword coming down where Dick was a millisecond before. “More relevant is that means you knew I was here even though we both know there’s no cameras on this level.”

“Just lucky, I guess.” Dick flips again, landing in a crouch further away to give himself a precious bit of space. “Or unlucky given the company.”
Slade rushes him and he’s not fast enough to avoid the next hit, barely bringing up his escrima in time to avoid a broken bone. His arm shakes under the weight, holding steady as Slade bears down with his sword. “I keep telling you, kid. You’re not that lucky.”

Suddenly, Slade’s eye widens and he steps back, freeing the pressure on Dick’s arm.

The mercenary’s free hand goes to his uniform, searching, until...he holds up a small black tracker, gripped in the fabric along his shoulder. Exactly where Dick blocked a hit a night ago.

Dick smiles innocently, bringing his escrimas up. “I guess you could say a little birdie told me.”

Slade crushes the tracker, watching him with a contemplative frown. “You placed this during the fight, didn’t you?”

Dick doesn’t answer. Doesn’t need to.

“You goaded me into a fight to get close enough to plant a bug,” Slade accuses, sounding actually pleased. “Ah, kid, maybe you really are learning?”

“Maybe,” he replies evenly.

There’s a ringing sound of metal against metal as Dick’s escrima instinctively blocks a sword swipe so fast the motions blur.

Dick doesn’t wait before swinging around with a kick to Slade’s side.

Slade grunts as it hits, swinging back with a hit that would decapitate Dick if he was a second slower but instead just gives Slade more room.

“So, was the offer even real,” Slade asks conversationally, paradoxical to the force the next hit uses to cut through the armor on Dick’s shoulder and almost his arm.

Dick doesn’t pause to check, spinning out of the way of the following swipe. “Sure, if you accepted it.”

“But, the supposed purity of my heart wasn’t the main reason.” Slade grins. “I’m hurt, kid.”

Dick flips backwards, landing a few meters away and shrugs. “I’m a multitasker.”

Then, he drops the escrima, throwing out two blinking batarangs that swing sharply through the air before landing on cars at opposite sides of Slade.

Dick meets Slade’s eye.

The cars explode.

Dick doesn’t give Slade time to recover before diving into the smoke, knocking the sword away and sweeping Slade’s legs, still unsteady from the explosion.

From the ground, Slade pulls Dick’s leg, trying to knock him to the ground beside him and Dick goes with it, letting himself land in a controlled fall and grabbing Slade’s wrist before he can move away.

Clink.

The sound of a handcuff snapping around a wrist comes right before Dick snaps the other cuff to one
of the reinforced steel bars that line the carport.

Slade looks at the cuff then raises an eyebrow.

“Meta-proof cuffs, virtually indestructible.” Dick smiles. “You told me I had to be better.”

Slade laughs. “Still got a lot to work on before you’re better trained than me, kid.”

“Yeah,” Dick agrees. “But, that’s the thing, isn’t it? I am working. Until then, I just need to win when it matters.” He stands. “I’m not going to pretend that’ll hold you for long but, unfortunately, I don’t have time to stay here until someone comes to arrest you. Got a brother to catch up with.”

“See you soon, kid.” Slade smirks. “Real soon.”

Dick doesn’t bother to respond, running down the carport and tapping his comm.

“Deathstroke’s handled,” he reports. “Where’s Robin and Speedy?”

“600 meters to your right,” Tim reports, almost tripping over his words in the rush. “Hurry!”

Dick swears and doesn’t even waste time on foot, firing a line at the ceiling and swinging over the cars in the direction Tim indicated.

He doesn’t need a notification when he finds it, the flipped and still smoking cars would have been a clear enough sign already if the people gathered weren’t enough.

Twenty armed guards stand in a loose circle, guns all trained to the middle where two figures are standing back to back. Jason’s facing the guards, glaring even under his mask, and holding up two batarangs. At his back, the younger Roy almost doesn’t even seem to notice the guards, too busy with an arrow pointed at the other side of the circle, right at Lex Luthor’s heart.

Dick lands on a car right outside the circle. “Order your men to stand down, Luthor.”

“Certainly,” Luthor says smoothly. “Just as soon as our young friend puts down his bow.”

“Not going to happen,” Roy says.

“Luthor,” Dick grounds out through clenched teeth, “that’s two teen heroes your men have their weapons pointed at. One of them, my family. Stand. Down.”

Luthor hums. “Robin is, of course, able to remove himself whenever he so chooses. My men will let him.”

Jason scoffs. “Just move out of the way and let you shoot Speedy here? Yeah, right!”

“Robin,” Roy says, lowly, “save yourself. This is between me and Luthor.”

“I know you’ve been out of the business for awhile; but, we don’t abandon teammates.” Jason eyes the guns. “No matter how stupid they are.”

Dick restrains a sigh. It’s definitely hypocritical but sometimes he wishes his family would be a little less self-sacrificing. Just for once.

Barbara lands nearly silently on a car across the circle, looking at Jason then Dick. He shakes his head, signaling to wait.
Luthor clears his throat. “You know, Mr. Harp--ah, I mean Speedy, I admire you.”

“Shut up,” Roy growls, never lowering his bow.

“It’s true,” Luthor continues. “Though your weapons have caused quite a bit of damage to my building, I’ve always believed that the greatest arsenal anyone can bring to the table is his own mind, his intelligence, his stratagem, his force of will. You, my young friend, have all of those in spades.”

Roy narrows his eyes. “Are you really trying to appeal to me, Luthor? Flatter me with some empty words as if that’s enough to save you?”

Luthor smiles. “I agree words are often empty. It’s a good thing that I offer more.”

He holds up a case. “Vengeance is a sucker’s game, son, and yours can only be achieved at the cost of your own life. You see ever since you vacated that cozy little freezer unit we provided for you, I’ve expected this confrontation. So, I came prepared.” Luthor gestures to the case. “I don’t suppose I can convince you to drop your bow and open it.”

“Open it yourself, Luthor,” Roy orders.

Luthor smirks and with a small click, the case comes open. He holds it up to the group, revealing a gleaming metal arm.

“What is it your really want, son,” Luthor asks, “Revenge or satisfaction? This arm is the latest LexCorp has to offer, decades ahead of anything else, including the arm you’re currently equipped with. I’ll admit the years you’ve sacrificed for LexCorp came at a heavy cost, so let us make it up to you. Drop your bow and take the arm and you can be leagues above anything you’d have ever achieved on your own. A living arsenal.”

The moment hangs in frozen stillness, stretched out and cutting like shards of broken glass.

Finally, Roy breaks it.

“You think I care...about my arm?”

Luthor pauses, frowning. “Obviously, not solely, I imagine waking from the cryostasis was a bit disjointing--”

“Disjointing?!” Roy’s entire body is shaking even as the arrow holds firm. “I lost seven years of my life! You took them from me! You took everything!”

“Not everything,” Luthor insists and for the first time, he sounds nervous. “You didn’t age in cryogenics. You can still live your life, just better, take the arm and--”

“The arm?! The arm?!” Roy yells. “This isn’t about the fucking arm! I lost Oliver! He died and I wasn’t there to save him, all because of you!”

Luthor pales, holding up his hands. “Wait--”

“No,” Roy’s voice goes flat. “I’m done waiting. Seven years past done. Now, you’re going to pay. Not just for me, for him. Him and everyone else you’ve hurt because you don’t care who your actions affect.”

“Speedy, wait,” Dick shouts.

Roy doesn’t look away. “Sorry. I know what you’re going to say. Wait and do this the right way.
Let the courts decide. But, guys like him? That’s not how this works. He’ll just buy his way out like he always does, like he does for everything. Not this time. Ollie always said we’re there for when the law isn’t. Can’t think of a better time than this.”

Roy draws the bow back.

Jason meets Dick’s eyes and Dick nods like the fall of a guillotine. If it comes down to it, the gunmen aren’t aiming at Jason. Robin knows how to avoid. Speedy can’t.

The guards’ fingers tense on their guns.

Roy and Luthor lock eyes.

“Goodbye, Lex.”

He lets loose the arrow.

SNAP!

The arrow falls to the ground, halfway between Roy and Luthor, cut in half by the slice of another arrow.

“Hey,” a voice says and every eye in the carport turns to find a uniformed Roy Harper, age twenty-two, stepping out of the darkness. He’s holding a bow. “I think we need to talk.”

The younger Roy’s eyes widen. “You’re…”

“You,” he answers before grimacing. “Well, kind of. Supposed to be, anyway.”

Roy blinks, looking down at the broken arrow before back to his clone. “Then, why did you stop me?! I have this. Him. He killed Oliver!”

The older Roy sighs. “No, Luthor’s done a lot of things. But, he didn’t kill Oliver. The Invasion did.”

“And I could have stopped that,” Roy yells. “I could have saved him! He was my partner! I was supposed to save him!”

Before anyone can react, the younger Roy spins, another arrow already pointed at Luthor. “Luthor took that from me!”

The older Roy grabs the arm before it can fire, stepping forward until he’s inches away. “No one could have saved him. No one. I know. I was there. I’m the closest thing to you that genetics could make and I couldn’t save him. You wouldn’t have, either.”

The younger Roy’s hand shakes. “But, I could have been there. I should have been there.”

He looks to his clone. “You can’t tell me Luthor doesn’t deserve to die. Not after everything he’s done. You can’t.”

“No, I can’t.” Roy agrees solemnly. “But, I can tell you that Ollie would have hated if you were the one to do it. Especially like this. Oliver would have hated this. Oliver would have wanted you to live, he’d want both of us to live, not throw your life away on human garbage like him.”
The younger Roy lets out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, well, Ollie can’t won’t much of anything anymore, can he? He’s dead.”

The older pauses, almost long enough that it doesn’t look like he’ll say anything. When he finally does, it’s low enough to be a whisper except for how it echoes around the parking lot.

“But, we’re not,” Roy says, “We’re not dead and he is and I’m not going to stand here to lie to you and say that’s okay. But, listen, I might not have tried to kill Luthor but I’ve done the whole self destructive thing. I know what it’s like to want to break everything apart because the world’s already breaking. And maybe that’s what you want now? Fine, I get it. But, you know what? It doesn’t end well. Nothing’s fixed. Oliver’s still dead. You still hurt. There’s just a lot more broken shit around you without anyone else to blame.” He sighs, glancing at Luthor before looking back at the younger teen. “This is revenge, Roy, not justice.”

The Roys meet eyes, an arrow strung between them, still pointed at Luthor’s heart.

“Sometimes…,” the younger Roy takes a breath, “sometimes revenge and justice are the same thing.”

“Yeah,” the older Roy steps back, hands raised in surrender, “and if you think this is one of them, then take the shot. If not, put it down and I’ll show you something better.”

The weight of the entire carport is held on the taut line of the bow for one...two...three...four...

The string loosens. An arrow clenched tightly in a metal hand.

“Something better, huh,” the fifteen year old mutters. “Don’t know if I believe you.”

Roy gives a small smile. “You’d be surprised.”

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Red and blue lights flash across the LexCorp Tower as the police interview over one hundred of Luthor’s personal security guards, who all insist that the explosion was just an unfortunate mechanical error.

A rooftop away, Nightwing and Red Arrow watch.

“A mechanical error?” Dick shakes his head. “How many people you think will believe that?”

“Approximately zero,” Roy answers. “But, unless it’s the Daily Planet, no one will ask questions either. How’d you convince Luthor not to press charges against Speedy?”

“Someone at the Batcave was smart enough to forward me the recordings from our masks.” Dick hums. “I reminded Luthor that openly admitting to kidnapping a hero and human experimentation wouldn’t be in his favor.”

“Confession under duress. Not admissible in courts.”

“Doesn’t matter. I told him I’d leak it to the papers.”

Roy smiles and the two fall into a momentary silence.
Eventually, Dick speaks. “I didn’t think you’d come.”

Roy scratches the back of his neck. “For about a minute, I didn’t think I would either. Then, I thought about how much Oliver would have killed me if I didn’t get off my ass. Not to mention, Dinah.”

“So….” Dick says cautiously, “does this mean you’re back?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Roy?”

“Will,” he corrects, “Will Harper. Figure it’s confusing enough without both of us going by Roy and, well, the kid did have it first. William’s my…his… our middle name so it’ll work. Might just go by Harper for awhile until people get used to it.” Roy—Will Harper sighs. “As for coming back… I can’t. Not yet. Not fully.”

He looks down and kicks at the gravel on the roof. “I need to figure some things out first. Who I am without Ollie. What kind of hero I am.” He shakes his head. “I need to take a break from the Titans, Dick. I’ll still be an auxiliary member, I’ll still work out of Star, I’m not going to avoid the Tower or anything, but I need… time.”

Dick swallows, trying not to view this as an end because it’s not. “We’re here for you. You know that, right?”

Will Harper, the oldest friend that Dick has, looks up at him and smiles

“I know, Rob. I know.” Will’s eyes fall back to LexCorp. “I just think it’s time I be there for some other people, too.”

He turns back to Dick. “I want to take in Roy.”

Dick blinks. “Won’t that be a bit… weird?”

Surprisingly, Will laughs. “Honestly, what isn’t in our lives? It’s fine. It’s what Ollie would have wanted. It’s what I want. No one’s got a better chance of understanding that kid than me.”

Dick sits down on the ledge, dangling his feet over. “You know taking in a teenager isn’t as easy as you think it’d be. But… it’s worth it.”

“Yeah?” Will sits down beside him. “Maybe you could give me some pointers. Don’t think me not being a Titan gets you out of helping us with Lian, you’re still her godfather”

Dick bumps his shoulder. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

And, for just a bit, in the lights of cop cars and firetrucks and the smoke of a blown up building, Dick thinks that it’s almost enough to be alright.

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“Everything is not alright,” Kara takes a deep, panicked breath. “I can’t do this! Dick, I can’t do this!”
Around them, the wind blows lazily over a haystack as Gar makes faces at the chickens.

“It’s going to be fine, Kara,” Dick reassures. “Trust me.”

“What if they hate me?!” she shouts. “What if they hate me because I’m not…” She shakes her head.

“No, I can’t do this. Let’s just go back to the Tower and we can live there forever.”

“Which you definitely can,” he says. “But, maybe first, just give them a chance. They really want to meet you. *Both* of you,” he adds to Gar.

Gar grins, looking at Kara. “You can go back to the Tower if you want. I’m going to meet them! Are you kidding? This is like the second most awesome day of my life!”

Kara’s shoulders slump. “Are you sure they won’t hate me? I don’t…I don’t think I can handle it if they hate me.”

“I promise,” Dick says.

He leads them to the front door and knocks before she can change her mind.

An older woman answers it, faded auburn hair shining in the sunlight as she blinks before her eyes fall on Kara.

The woman’s mouth falls open. “Is this...are you…”

Dick clears his throat. “Mrs. Kent, I’d like to introduce you to Kara Zor-El and Garfield Logan.”

Kara smiles hesitantly. “He...he was my cousin.”

That’s all she gets out before Martha Kent’s pulling her into a hug, holding tightly as tears trace down the older woman’s face.

“You have his smile,” she whispers.

Kara’s eyes widen before suddenly she breaks, burying her face into the woman’s shoulder as she lets out a soft sob. Martha holds her close, making comforting shushing noises. “It’s okay, honey, we understand.”

An older man comes up behind them, focusing on Gar.

He pats his wife’s back, where she still holds Kara, before walking around and holding out a hand.

“Nice to meet you, son. I’m Johnathan Kent.”

Gar takes the hand. “I’m Gar. I’m...not Kryptonian. I’m, ah, just green. Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry,” Johnathan winks. “To tell the truth, we’re not Kryptonian either. Glad to have you on the farm, though. Don’t suppose you like animals?”

Gar’s shoulders relax, offering a small smile. “Love them.”

“Let me show you the barn.” Johnathan grins.

“Awesome!”

“Wait, a sec,” Dick pulls out a small gold ring, handing it to Gar.
Gar raises an eyebrow. “Ah, geeze, Nightwing, a ring? But, this is so sudden!”

Dick rolls his eyes. “It has a spell Zatanna’s been working on for ages for Kory and Vic. This one’s set to you.”

Gar blinks, taking it. “What’s it do?”

“It’s a glamour charm,” he explains. “Specifically as long as you have it you’ll look a lot less green to everyone except the team.”

Gar grips it in his hand. “I can...I can go out in public? Like to the mall or a concert or--”

“Or anywhere,” Dick smiles. “Like say, a school. I’ve got a minor one for Kara, too.”

He hands it to Johnathan.

“Really? You put it in glasses?” Gar eyes the case, scrunching up his nose.

“A classic,” Johnathan says, smiling softly.

Dick nods. “Zee’s working on combining the more subtle ones into a lot of the team’s uniforms, just enough to change a few facial features. Chins. Noses. Good enough to help us from being recognized.”

A few feet away, Kara and Martha finally let go, Kara wiping at her eyes, but smiling, as she goes to meet Johnathan. Gar, meanwhile, finds himself pulled into a hug of his own by Martha before her husband steals both teens away to show them the rest of the farm.

Martha stays behind.

“Thank you,” she says, watching them go. “After what happened with Clark, I never thought we’d see kids run around this farm again.”

Dick smiles. “Well, no better place to find a Kryptonian than the Kent Farm. Besides, Clark would have wanted you to meet her.”

She pulls him into a one armed hug. “You’re a good boy, Dick Grayson. You staying for dinner?”

“I can’t,” he says apologetically. “Got some people waiting for me back in the cave.”

“Bring them all sometime,” she orders. “I still need that butlers of yours shortcake recipe.”

Dick snorts. “Good luck, Jason’s been trying to figure that one out for a year. Alfred won’t budge.”

She throws him a wink. “But, I haven’t tried yet.”

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“How’d it go,” Barbara asks when he steps out of the zeta. Jason’s standing by the batarang display, flipping one idly in his hands. Tim sits beside him, watching the movements with the usual intensity he gives to everything but far more relaxed in Jason’s presence than he’s ever seemed before.
For the first time in a month, Dick feels everything fall into place.

He grins. “Good. Looks like Kara and Gar have a new place to stay.”

“That’s everything, then, right,” Tim asks, looking excited. “Mission accomplished?”

“Not quite,” Dick answers, exchanging a look with Babs before finally they both look at Jason. Jason meets his gaze before nodding. “Alright, go ahead.”

“You sure, Jay,” Dick asks.

“I’m sure” Jason pauses, looking briefly to Tim before nodding again, this time with a small smile. “Like I said, he fits.”

Tim frowns. “What are you talking about?”

Dick turns to Tim. “I talked to Alfred. And Barbara. And Jason. And, well, we kind of wondered if you’d like to stay here? With us?”

“What?” Tim tilts his head. “For how long?”

“Forever,” Jason huffs mostly for show. “We’re asking if you want to move in. Have Alfred adopt you. The whole shebang.”

Tim’s eyes widen, mouth falling open. “You’d…you’d really want me?”

He’s asking the group but his eyes fall on Jason.

“Yeah…yeah, we do.” Jason clears his throat. “I do….if you want, I mean.”

“I…..really?”

Tim’s eyes are flying to all of them, looking for doubt so Dick steps forward, pulling Tim into a hug. “Welcome to the family, Tim.”

Barbara steps around to the other side and ruffles his hair. “Now, all you need is a name.”

Dick bats her away. “No, stop, Alfred’s going to kill us if we get him into vigilantism before he’s even adopted.”

“Yeah, cause breaking into LexCorp isn’t already vigilantism.” Jason snorts.

“Wait!” Impossibly, Tim’s eyes go even wider. “Are you saying that you’ll actually train me?”

Dick sighs. “Only if you want. You don’t have to—”

“But, Jason’s Robin,” Tim interrupts, casting a worried glance to Jason.

“It’s not like there’s not other names.” Jason rolls his eyes.

“Listen, Tim,” Dick says seriously, “this is your choice. If you don’t want anything to do with this stuff, that’s fine. That’s fine. That’s great. Heck, even if you just want to stay here or at the Tower and help monitor missions, that would be wonderful. But, if you’d like…,” He shrugs, “we’ll help you with whatever you want to do.”

“Well, I kind of…,” Tim smiles sheepishly. “I…kind of already thought of a name.”
Jason laughs. “Of course, you did. Face it, Dick, the ‘do something other than vigilantism’ speech never actually works, does it?”

“One day,” Dick argues without much hope.

Barbara ignores both of them with the ease of practice, squeezing Tim’s shoulder. “What’s the name?”

“Um” Tim looks down, a bit of his former shyness coming through, ”it’s, ah, it’s...Red Robin.”

There’s a long moment of silence.

“You know,” Jason drawls, “for a kid genius, I kind of expected something more creative.”

Dick elbows him. “That’s a great name, Tim...if Jason’s okay with you using part of his name, that is.”

Tim looks at Jason with large pleading eyes.

Jason scratches the back of his neck, awkwardly. “Yeah, whatever. Makes sense, I guess.” His eyes turn to Dick and slowly he smiles. “Fits kind of perfect, actually.”

“Why,” Tim asks.

Jason shrugs. “Robin’s a family name.”

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After Jason and Tim are already upstairs, one helping with supper while the other is given the rundown of Alfred’s finer points of adoption, Dick looks to Barbara.

“You got it, then?”

Barbara holds up the flash drive. “Straight from Luthor’s servers. I broke the encryption this morning; he won’t even know we have it.”

She plugs in the drive and five names flash on the monitor.


“The Light.” Dick grins sharply. “We got them.”
This is definitely the last chapter for year 5. Year 6 is next and, based on the current plan, it might be a long one that's split up again in order to not make you guys wait too long.

For the Light, I know there's a few members missing. This was not a mistake. The Brain and Sportmaster died during the Invasion and Ra's Al Guhl quit after the Invasion for reasons later to be discussed. The Invasion also delayed Ocean Master's plans so his role as a traitor was not revealed and thus, he wasn't replaced with Black Manta later.

Also, while I use a number of lines from either comic book or show cannon in the story, the conversation with Luthor did contain a number of direct quotes from the show so just to give credit where credit is obviously due: those lines are from the show and I own nothing associated with the rights of Young Justice.

As always, thanks for reading, thank you so much for all of your support, and I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Next Chapter: Year 6: Lightning in a Bottle
A split of lightning crackles across the sky chased by a roll of thunder, rumbling against the windows to mix with the music.

Wide eyes turn up, pressing closer to the window. “That one was close, right?”

“Nah.” Dick smiles, leaning down. “Still a few miles away. Don’t worry, the Tower’s survived worse than a storm.”

Artur’s face scrunches up in a frown. “I wasn’t scared!”

“Of course not,” he reassures. “Good thing, too. Because if the Tower gets attacked, I’m expecting the brave Prince of the Seven Seas to protect us all!”

The four year old puffs out his chest. “I can do it!”

Then, he blinks, turning up to look at Dick. “You’ll help, too, though. Right, Nigh?”

“It would be my honor,” Dick agrees, suppressing his grin under an air of solemnity.

Artur yawns before frowning, looking annoyed at himself.

“Though maybe after some sleep,” Dick says, leading him away from the window. “Come on, let’s
go find your mom.”

“I’m not *that* tired,” Artur grumbles but obediently lets Dick pick him up and carry him out into the crowded party.

The gold “Happy Five Year Anniversary, Titans!” banner sticks out among the balloons, suspended over the noise of a brightly packed common room.

Laughter rings briefly across the music and Dick glances over to see Zatanna, hiding out with Raquel and Lilith by Vic’s sound system, subtly jinxing Garth’s hair increasingly hideous neon colors, where he gestures wildly to a smiling Tula. Beside Zatanna, Lilith halfheartedly tries to mutter the counter-jinx, distracted when Zatanna leans over to kiss her cheek.

Over on the couches, Jade and Will Harper look to be having at least a semi-normal conversation with Karen, the Titan’s newest member, and her civilian fiancé Mal while Donna whispers something to Kory. Kory smiles back and Dick’s heart skips a beat in a way that should really be embarrassing after three years.

Donna catches his gaze and winks. Dick rolls his eyes, turning quickly to survey the rest of the room.

Kara and Vic are still in the kitchen, talking with their heads close together. Across the counter, Gar makes kissy faces at them until Kara finally snaps and throws a piece of cake at him, catching him across the face. Beside Gar, Tim lets out a small laugh, looking halfway to passed out on the counter. Dick mentally adds reminding Tim about proper sleep habits. Again.

And that only leaves…

Jason—sitting against the wall and talking to Roy, the latter of which still has a princess tiara tangled in his red hair from babysitting Lian that Dick’s willing to bet no one’s told him about.

Dick smiles, soft and warm, as Artur shifts slightly in his arms.

Just for once, everything is kind of...well, kind of perfect.

He finds Mera on the balcony, hair drenched as the rain continues to pour down outside.

“Have something for you.” He holds out Artur in his arms.

She laughs, taking him. “Thank you. I apologize. I meant to take him back by now. It’s *far* passed his bedtime.”

“Mom,” Artur protests sleepily. “I want to stay at the party more!”

He looks pleadingly up at Dick. “Nigh?”

“Don’t look at me. She’s the queen.”

“That’s what everyone says,” Artur mutters, turning his head in Mera’s arms. A few moments later, his breathing evens out to light sleep.

Mera runs a hand through his hair, glancing up again to look at the rain.

“With anyone else, I’d offer an umbrella,” Dick says from under the ledge of the roof.

“Rain’s always been my favorite part of the surface world. It’s beautiful.” She smiles, gesturing back to the window. “Congratulations, by the way. The party’s wonderful. Artur will be talking about it
for weeks.”

“I’m just happy to finally be done talking to reporters for the day.” He steps out in the rain to sit next to her. “I’m glad you could make it, though. I know things in Atlantis have been...busy since Orm.”

“Yes, well, it’s not every day you’re informed your loyal brother-in-law’s conspiring to overthrow you,” the Queen says, voice going hard. She sighs, hand returning to Artur’s hair. “That said, Atlantis thanks the Titans for their assistance.”

He waves the thanks away. “We’re allies. Besides, shared enemy. We’re still sorting through all the files we got on the Light.”

His fingers twitch lightly on his knee, searching unconsciously for a keyboard, before he steadies them.

Mera catches the gesture and laughs. “The work can wait, Dick. Enjoy your party. Moments like these never last forever.” She shakes her head. “I don’t think I’ve seen Tula smile this much since Orm’s arrest. Not to mention, Garth.”

“Good.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I can’t believe it’s been five years.”

Mera pauses, looking back out into the rain or, possibly, somewhere further.

“Being here, on the surface, it reminds me of Arthur in all the best possible ways. Such a strange, wonderful world.” She smiles. “Do you know where he took me for our honeymoon?”

Dick shakes his head, vaguely picturing warm beaches and islands

“Switzerland. We went skiing.” Mera smirks at his expression. “I know, no one ever guesses. He wanted to show me a place as far away from the ocean as possible. It was amazing, so...so alien, like nothing I could have imagined.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was.”

She nods, still looking out into the rain.

“...I have a question for you, Dick. A personal one, even for allies. Blame it on the late night if you’d rather not answer.”

“I like to think we’re friends, too, Mera,” he says easily. “Ask me anything.”

“A question for a friend, then,” she agrees. “Have you ever been in love?”

“In love,” Dick repeats, unconsciously leaning back to the warmth of the party before he catches himself. “No. Not yet.”

And, then, he hesitates.

Mera raises an eyebrow.

Dick shakes his head. “It’s nothing. I haven’t been in love, didn’t have the time.”

“If you did have time?”
He shakes his head again, more firmly. “It doesn’t matter. They’re dead now. It was just a maybe.” He gives a self-deprecating laugh, forcing a smile that almost feels natural. “To tell you the truth, I’ve been kind of trying to move past the maybes. I think...I think it’s about time.”

Mera smiles softly. “You’ve always been a brave boy, Dick. It’s good to see you’re becoming a wise man.”

“Good friends help a lot.” He winks.

“I suppose they do.”

Another flash of lightning cuts through the dark, the thunder rattling the balcony railing. Artur shifts in Mera’s arms.

She shushes him before standing. “That sounds like our cue to leave...before the party gets too wild for a four year old.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Your Majesty,” he says innocently. “We’re heroes, perfect role models!”

Mera gives him a look.

Behind them, there’s the distinctive sound of something breaking followed by a loud rush of laughter.

“I can walk you to the zeta,” Dick offers.

Mera smirks, shaking her head. “I believe I can find it myself. It’s a celebration, Dick, go *celebrate.* Ancient Xebel wisdom: it isn’t really a party unless something’s broken.”

“I guess I can’t argue with ancient wisdom.” Dick stands.

“Granted. In Xebel, a good party probably means a duel to the death,” Mera adds, sliding open the door.

“Well, the night’s still young.”

Mera laughs, casting a glance back at him and waving her hand. The water still drenching him flies to her hand only to be casually flung back outside in a light blue glow.

“Have fun, Dick,” the Queen of Atlantis *orders* him before disappearing off in the direction of the zeta room.

Seconds later, arms fling around his neck from behind and a face lands right beside his ear.

“So, you gonna do it,” Donna asks.

Dick grins. “I’m gonna do it.”

“Call the presses, I think he’s actually gonna do it this time.”

He elbows her. “It has *not* been that many times.”

“It’s been five times. Five *almost* times,” she counters. “Me and Will actually have a bet going.”

“You and Will have a *problem,*” he says but he’s grinning. “Have I told you you’re the worst best
friend lately?"

Donna clicks her tongue. “Au contraire, I am the best best friend and you should tell me daily. By the way, Kory just got finished talking to Kara and is, in other words, completely free if by chance there was something you wanted to ask her.”

“Don’t rush me. I’ve got a plan.”

“A plan?” She moans, drooping on his shoulders. “No, don’t say you have a plan! ‘Having a plan’ is how you talked yourself out of it the last time. You’re Nightwing, go, be spontaneous, adapt, do something!”

“It’s a good plan this time,” he reassures. “Trust me. Also, cover for us at the party, alright?”

She sighs heavily. “Fine, fine. You’re lucky I love you.”

“The luckiest.” Dick kisses her cheek.

“Yeah, yeah, just go!” She shoves him over in the direction of Kory. “And, Dick?”

“Mhm?” His throat’s gone dry in a way that never happens when he’s fighting Gotham’s rogues.

“She’s not going to say no,” Donna whispers. “You’ve got this, Rob.”

He turns, managing a fond smile. “Love ya, Don’.”

“Go!” She says, shooing him away.

Dick goes.

Kory’s standing in the kitchen, smiling at the crowd in the next room. She sees Dick and then, the full light of that smile gets directed at him.

He swallows. “Hey, Kory.”

“Dick,” she greets warmly, “the party is excellent, is it not?”

“Yeah, it’s...it’s great.”

Ask her, demands a voice that sounds like an unholy mix of Donna and Will.

“Actually,” he clears his throat, “I was wondering if you wanted to get out of here for a bit? There’s something I wanted to show you.”

Her smile never wavers, if anything, it brightens. “Of course.”

Dick grins. “Follow me.”

He leads her out of the kitchen—miraculously, with only Zatanna giving him a ridiculous wink—and into the zeta room. He enters the coordinates he still knows by heart and the zeta beam fires up a bright blue.

He holds out his hand to her. “Ready?”

She nods, fingers threading through his.

They step into the light.
And step out into the dark.

“Computer, turn on the power,” Dick calls. “Sorry, it’s still on back up.”

Kory glances up, blinking in the sudden light, as her smile turns down in mild confusion.

Thunder echoes off rock walls.

“Guess it’s storming here, too,” he says.

Kory squeezes his hand, still frowning. “Dick, this is Young Justice’s old cave, yes?”

“Yeah, um...yeah, it is.” He rubs the back of his neck.

The frown clears into comprehension and then, Kory’s face softens. “Oh. Is this about the Titan’s anniversary? Are you...are you, alright, my friend?”

“I’m fine,” he reassures and then takes a breath, steadying himself. “Actually...actually, I’m more than fine. And...and a lot of that’s because of you.”

No looking back. Time to jump.

He looks up, meeting her eyes. “I need to tell you something. To ask you something. And I...I wanted to take you here because.....” he swallows again, “because a few years ago, I hated this place. I hated it. The few months we used it after Tara, I thought I was going to go crazy. I didn’t even want to look at it because all of it was just memories I didn’t want to think about. And...and it wasn’t just here, there was just everything, every step forward, it was just...”

Kory lays a hand on his cheek. “Dick...”

“Sorry,” His hand lands on hers, holding it there. “Donna was right, I shouldn’t have made a plan for this. I’m not saying it right.”

Kory smiles, impossibly gentle. “Then, keep trying.”

He breathes. “What I’m trying to say, Kory, is that you make it better. You make everything better.”

He finally manages to smile back. “When I met you, I was still trying to look at something other than the past and now...now, I’m not. Now, I’m...I’m trying to move forward and...and it’s more than just time. You make me want to move forward. Because...I want to be in the present. With you.”

He pauses, glancing around the cave. “And I wanted to bring you here not because it’s just the past but because...because it’s the first place I really, really wanted to kiss you and I wasn’t ready. And, now,” he meets her eyes and doesn’t look away, “Kory, would you like to go on a date with me?”

She kisses him.

For the second time

And this time, he doesn’t freeze.

His hand threads through her hair, angling her face to kiss her back. For a stretch of perfect moments, everything is warm and there’s sparks flying up his spine that feel like fireworks.
She sighs into his mouth, pulling back only far enough to show her grin.

She winks. “Salut! Tu es très mignon, oui?”

Dick laughs and says what he wanted to say three years ago. The very first time he heard those words from a beautiful alien girl in a crashed spaceship.

“Et tu es belle.”

Then, he kisses her again just to feel her smile.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

She kisses him, short and achingly sweet. “You were always worth it.”

He moves her closer and the hand that was on his cheek goes back to his neck, pulling him down.

The next kiss is more fire than gentleness. A hand still in her hair. Her hand sliding down his back to pull closer and closer. His heart’s beating quickly in his chest and he can almost hear the echo of hers beside it.

He can feel the curve of her lips under his and it feels like everything.

Like jumping off a skyscraper the second before he flies. Like the warmth of the sun and the thrill of fireworks. Like...like finally kissing Kory and having her kiss him back.

Everything’s dark around them and Dick feels the hair on his arms stand on end and that’s...

That’s not supposed to happen, is it?

He pulls back, trying to focus his eyes and...and he can’t. Everything’s black.

Thunder crackles around the cave, loud and close.

Dick blinks. “Computer, swap to emergency power!”

There’s a click and a whirring humm before white light once again fills the cave.

“Dick?”

Dick glances over to see Kory, her hair drifting in the static of the air.

“Is it the storm?”

“I...it can’t be.” He frowns. “The rock around the cave’s at least ten feet deep.”

The lights flicker.

Energy runs up his arms.

“Warning: Unknown Energy Impulse Detected.”

“Dick!” Kory knocks him to the ground.

**CRACK!**

Lightning strikes in front of him.
On the floor, Dick blinks, trying to clear the spots out of his eyes as Kory grips his arm.

In the center of the cave is….

...is…

“Is that...is that a ship,” Kory asks.

In the center of the cave sits a grey metal machine with sparks still flying off of it.


“Unknown energy impulse. Zeta and Krona radiation detected.”

Dick frowns. “Krona?”

Lightning bursts from the machine in red and white flashes.

“Ta-Da,” a voice shouts as lightning zigzags around the space. “Impulse? That’s so crash! Catchy, dramatic, one word.” A voice by his ear. “Like Nightwing or Robin or….you?” The light flashes around Kory. “Sorry, don’t know you. But, hey, new friends! Like Blue Beetle. Hey, is he here? Never mind, Impulse can find that out for himself.”

The lightning blurs just enough for Dick to make out a vaguely human shape before it’s gone, white sparks shooting around the cave.

“Computer, lock down cave,” Dick shouts, heart beating hard in his chest.

It can’t be...

“Nightwing, what’s happening?” Kory moves to protect his back. “Is he...made of energy?”

“No,” he hears himself say, “I think...I think he’s…”

The red and white blur returns. “Wow, so retro! Hey, where is everybody, I’m--”

Kory drops low, swinging out her leg in a strike.

“Ha, can’t catch me that easy--”

Dick moves on an old almost forgotten instinct, slamming his arm out.

“Oof!” Something--someone--hits into it hard, dropping on the floor.

A teenager in a white and red suit winces up at him.

“A speedster,” Dick finishes.

“And a time traveler!” The kid grins. “Weeeellll, okay, more of a time tourist, whatever!”


“I don’t know.” He shakes his head.

“Hey,” the kid continues, smiling brightly. “What’s the surprise? Half the meat at Comic Con are from my era. Look, look, look, guys, we should all be friends. I’m really one of you. Part of the Heroic Legacy, right? My name’s Bart Allen, you know grandson of Barry Allen. The Flash.”
Dick’s heart shudders painfully.

“That’s not...that’s not possible.”

“What’s not to believe?” The kid--Bart laughs, clear and happy. “I’ve clearly got Flash’s speed, his amazing good looks! Frankly, I can’t wait to meet him. Ahh, you know, back when he was in his prime--”

“You can’t,” he says, already shaking his head. “This is...you can’t be here. It’s impossible.”

Bart pouts. “Oh, come on. Is it the space time continuum thing? Cause, frankly, take it from a Flash, that’s a lot more stretchy than you’d think. Just let me see him or, hey, even Wally--”

“He’s dead,” Dick interrupts, harsh words grating over the blood pumping in his ears. “Barry and...and Wally both died. In the Invasion. The only speedster alive is Jay Garrick.”

Dick’s watching Bart’s face. That’s the only reason he sees it. He’s watching his face and, once, Dick knew how to read a speedster’s expressions better than almost anyone on the planet.

The smile drops off the kid’s face. Not falls, not gradual. Drops, wiped away as if it was never there at all. Like taking off a mask.

“Oh,” Bart says, voice blank. “I’m...I’m too late.”

Dick frowns. “Late? Barry and Wally died six years ago. Barry never had any kids.”

“He never had…” Something flashes behind Bart’s eyes and all of the sudden, he rocks back on his heels, mumbling under his breath, “then...the calculations were wrong...this isn’t... not a fixed point, a constant....”

He trails off before looking up, going to attention like he’s been attached to an electric current.

“I need to see your news articles.”

-----

The kid sits in the interrogation room, five tablets and over a dozen books sitting on the table in front as his fingers blur from one to the next so fast his arms are just indistinct flashes of color.

Dick watches from the other side of the one way mirror.

“How long has he been doing this?”

Dick glances up. “Five hours. Only things he’s said since is asking for more books.”

“Who is he?” Will’s hands tense on tightly crossed arms. “Another clone?”

Dick shakes his head. “We checked. According to everything Mera, Jade, Tula, and Zatanna could find, there’s nothing. No magic. No clone. His DNA matches with Barry’s, Iris’...even trace familiarity with Wally’s. Whatever else is happening, he is Barry’s grandson.”

Will shakes his head. “That’s impossible, Dick. They never had any kids. We would have known. Wally would’ve known. Fuck, Batman would have had files on it.”
“I know that.”

“Have you told... him ?”

Dick drums his fingers. “Donna and Lilith are going now.”

Will nods, returning to staring at the interrogation room and the sole occupant inside.

Dick gives him a small smile. “You know we’ve got this. If you want to go home and be with Lian?”

Will shakes his head. “It’s fine; Roy’s watching her. Kid’s almost more overprotective than me. Besides, this is about….,” he shrugs, “you know. I’ve gotta be here. For him.”

Wally.

“Yeah,” Dick leans his weight on the rail in front of the mirror. “I know.”

For a few moments, the two stand and watch in silence. The only sound the slight whirring of pages turning at rapid speed.

Eventually, Will shifts. “He kinds of looks like him, doesn’t he? I mean it’s mostly Iris and a bit of Barry but...”

“Bone structure’s more narrow,” Dick says, “but, the nose is the same.”

Will smiles back. “Not to mention--”

“The hair .” Dick grins. “Bit darker, but, yeah. Hey, remember when Wally--”

“--showered at the Batcave, grabbed the wrong bottle, and dyed his hair black.” Will finishes “Exactly!”

Will rolls his eyes. “He pouted about it so much, we had to convince Zatarra to jinx it back.”

Dick snickers. “And then, he spent the rest of the day trying to find a scientific reason on how it wasn’t really magic!”

“Nerd.” Will snorts out a laugh.

“Yeah,” he agrees, voice fading out into a soft smile.

Will turns back to the mirror. “He’s quieter than Wally.”

“He’s focused,” Dick counters.

“He looks...I don’t know. I can’t read his reactions.” Will rubs the back of his neck. “What do you think he’s thinking?”

Dick hesitates, only briefly, before typing in a command and pulling up a recording in the corner of the mirror. “That’s the thing. I noticed something a while ago. He’s not reacting in real time, watch.”

He slows down a recording of Bart from an hour ago. On the screen, the face glitches, moving too fast for the cameras to entirely catch but enough to show that it’s changing. Dick plays the recording at normal speed and the expressions smooth out, creating a single look of basic concentration.
“They’re micro-expressions,” Dick explains. “He’s processing everything at hyper-speed.”

Will frowns. “But, that would mean…”

“I don’t think he’s slowed down since he got here.”

“Wally didn’t do that,” Will says.

*Red light. The heat of a ship core stinging across his face. The tick of a countdown.*

“I’ve got an idea, okay?”

Dick shakes the memory away. “No, he didn’t.”

A rapid knock at the mirror interrupts them.

“Hey,” Bart says from the other side. “I think I’m ready to talk now.”

-----

Bart fidgets at the other side of the table, foot tapping rapidly enough that the sound’s just a hum.

Dick starts first. “We have your blood results.”

Bart grins. “And, let me guess, nothing weird or magicy or cloney except rapidly repairing cells. Told you.”

“You’re the grandson of people who, as far as we know, never had kids,” Dick states. “You can see how that leaves us with more questions than answers, right?”

He shrugs. “Time travel’s weird.”

“Yeah, we’re going to need a bit more than that.” Dick leans back, trying to appear as open as possible. “You mentioned that the calculations were wrong. What calculations? How did you know who I was but not Starfire? What did you mean you’re late?”

Instead of answering, Bart stares at him for a second, taking in details in a way too fast for the normal human brain to process.

Finally, the grin softens into a hesitant, barely there smile that, for the first time, looks honest.


Dick stills. “How do you know that name?”

“Wally told me.”

“That’s not possible.”

“No,” Bart agrees quietly. “Not in this timeline.” He flickers and, a second later, there’s a piece of paper and a pen in front of him and Dick’s not sure where he got them. “I wasn’t lying. Time travel is weird. Even for speedsters and we barely exist in normal time frames as it is.”

“What does that mean?”
“It’s frequencies. That’s all anything really is, right? Reality, time, it’s just being in line with the right frequency. And then, the speedforce is basically just the energy generated by those vibrations.” Bart gives a sheepish smile. “I don’t suppose you know any quantum physics?”

Dick raises an eyebrow. “I’m assuming you do?”

“I...um, yeah,” the kid who can’t be older than thirteen shrugs a little bit stiffly. “I read fast and...and I really, really needed to know.”

Dick takes the logical leap. “For the time machine? You built it?”

“...yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because I needed it,” Bart says with a shrug. “It’s like this. Speedsters don’t really need a time machine to travel through time. We’re part of the speedforce, we already have trouble staying on the right reality frequency as it is. We practically time travel by accidentally every time we move a bit too fast to lose the correct vibration.”

Dick blinks. “I think we would have noticed if Barry and Wally time traveled every time they broke the sound barrier.”

Bart shakes his head, a flash of light running excitedly behind his eyes as he starts talking faster. “You don’t, though! That’s all the speed is! Swapping frequencies to vibrate at a speed faster than your reality! I mean, yeah, go too fast and you can get lost or--”

“Get lost?”

“It doesn’t happen much.” Bart waves a hand, distracted. “Molecules always have a pull to their own original frequency, even for speedsters. That’s part of what the machine does.” He pauses, lost on a tangent. “Then, of course, if you do it by accident, there’s Lightning Rods...”

“Lightning Rods?”

Bart looks up, eyes focusing on Dick again, as he abruptly settles.

“Yeah, Lightning Rods.” He shrugs. “They’re…a home frequency, a grounding force. Someone a speedster can find the frequency of even when they’re lost in between. Like Grandma Iris or Great Grandma Joan.” Bart shakes his head again. “It doesn’t matter. Not every speedster has one, they’re just a fail safe.”

He turns back down to the paper and draws two horizontal lines a few inches apart. “The point is moving through time’s not really a problem for speedsters. It’s changing time. Messing with your own timeline without causing a paradox.” Bart taps his pen at the end of the first line. “That’s why I needed the machine...it’s not really about travel, it’s more….like a tuning fork. I needed to separate myself from my own timeline, become a fixed point, so any changes I made wouldn’t affect me.”

Dick looks down at the paper before turning to Bart. “What did you want to change?”

Bart hesitates. “It’s not really important anymore.”

He make an arch, connecting the end of the first line to a point in the middle. “I just wanted to go back, to become a fixed point. But, instead,” He extends his point through the middle until it runs through both lines. “I didn’t just affect my past, I made myself a constant. Every timeline, every
frequency. I’m...it’s like an inevitability. So, now, here...I’m in the wrong timeline.”

“So, you’re saying…,” Dick leans back, trying to process. “You’re from a different world, a different….a different reality.”

Bart nods. “That’s what I wanted the news articles for. The best I can tell things here started diverging six years ago.”

“When the invasion happened,” Dick’s breath catches. “The invasion didn’t happen in your universe?”

Bart’s expression flickers again, running through expressions too fast for Dick to catch.

“Not exactly,” Bart says slowly. “It just happened six years later. Different events, different heroes, different ...different deaths.” He clears his throat. “I...I came back to save my grandfather, the first casualty. I thought maybe if I saved him, then the invasion….wouldn’t have gone the same way.”

Dick blinks, taking in the stiffness in Bart’s voice, the fidgeting, the hidden expressions, everything since the kid got here.

And then, very carefully, he asks, “Did we lose? In your timeline, did we lose the invasion?”

Bart tenses and then, too fast, he grins, bright enough that it’s blinding.

“Lose?” He laughs. “Of course not, we’re heroes! Heroes never lose, right? Nah, they definitely kicked some alien butt just took a bit longer than it did here.”

Dick doesn’t answer.

“I just came back because…,” Bart’s smile dims just a bit, wearing down and the next line comes out more as if he’s quoting rather than speaking, “because that’s what heroes do. Save everyone we can, no matter what we have to do.”

Dick doesn’t pretend to understand quantum physics; but, he thinks he has a pretty good understanding of people. Of lies and hopes and truth and pretending and how there’s a lot less difference between all of them than what people want to believe.

So, he lets it go.

And, instead, he clears his throat and asks the question he has to know. “Can you rebuild the machine? Would it work again? Fix the equation?”

Can you stop the invasion that happened here?

Dick asks because he needs the answer. Needs to know even….even if he has no clue what to do if it’s--

“No,” Bart cuts off his thoughts. He looks at Dick and smiles the same small smile only this time, Dick sees the sharpness around the eyes, darker and desperate almost like--Bart blinks and it’s gone. “I can’t. It was a one chance shot. The machine did what it was supposed to do, it realigned my molecular frequency with here. Trying to do it again? It would destroy the molecules. I’m sorry”

Dick nods, not knowing if he feels relief or despair so he tucks both away to analyze later.

A notification blinks on Dick’s wrist and he scans it before dismissing it.

“So,” he says to Bart, “you’re here to stay?”

Bart nods, letting out a small laugh. “Guess I’m a pretty crappy time traveler, huh? Everything I came back to stop, already happened. Not...not really sure what to do next.”

Dick smiles. “I’ve got an idea on where you can start.”

-----

Jay Garrick’s sitting in the Tower’s meeting room. He stands when he sees Dick.

“Dick, it’s five in the morning. You kids got me out of bed.” He frowns. “If this is about the JSA, I think we both know where we stand on the matter. Power plays like calling me to the Tower before the sun’s even up won’t change my mind. So unless you’ve decided to stop--”

“I haven’t,” Dick interrupts. “It’s not a power play. It’s related to Barry...and Iris and Wally.”

Jay stills, motionless in a way speedsters almost never are.

“What’s new to say,” he asks. “They’re dead. Just like Joan.”

Dick sits down across from him. “Barry and Iris’ grandson time traveled into the old Young Justice cave last night.”

Jay looks up. “Barry and Iris never had kids, Dick.”

“No, it’s...it’s complicated.” He sighs. “We ran blood tests, checked for magic, checked for cloning. He is who he says he is. His name’s Bart, short for Bartholomew Wallace Allen.”

Jay swallowed. “How? Where is he?”

“Like I said, it’s complicated. He’s stuck in this timeline. Right now, he’s in the Tower common room; but--”

That’s all he gets before Jay disappears in a blur of light.

Dick restrains another sigh. Speedsters.

He hurries into the common room, only to find both Bart and Jay standing completely frozen on either side of the room, staring at each other.

Jay speaks first. “You’re...you’re really here?”

“Um, yeah...,” Bart presses his lips together, eyes wide. “I’m Bart. Are you...are you Jay Garrick?”

Another flash of movement and then, Jay has Bart in his arms, holding him tightly as Bart carefully reaches back to return the hug.

“Yeah, kiddo, I’m Jay. I’m family.”
Dick steps out of the zeta and into the batcave with an odd feeling of peace, the feeling of something settling back into place.

And, then, he ducks as a batarang nearly hits him in the face because both of his brothers are beings of utter chaos and destruction.

“I can’t believe you lost my tablet,” Tim yells. “It has all my homework files on it, Jason! All of it!”

“I told you I don’t have your stupid tablet, Tim!” Jason glares. “And, so what? It’s homework, just do it again! You’re the genius. I thought you worked ahead!”

“I did, asshole! It’s my homework for the entire semester” Tim jams a finger into Jason’s chest. “I lent it to you Friday for the Two Face thing!”

“And I gave it back!”

“Then, where is it?”

“How should I know?”

“Because you lost it!”

“I gave it back! Maybe if you checked the toxic waste plant you call a room, you’d find it!”

“Well, maybe if you --”

“Hey, guys, I’m home,” Dick says dryly. “Miss me?”

Both look over at him in unison before immediately, going back to glaring at each other in what’s obviously a heated internal debate of whether to continue the argument or question Dick about the sudden existence of literal time travel.

It’s kind of cute in a way. Like beta fish that’ll kill each other if he leaves them alone for too long.

“So, is the kid actually from the future,” Jason asks.

Ah, so it looks like time travel won out. Dick gets the feeling it was a small margin.

“Yeah,” he answers. “But, not our future. Different timelines. It was kind of confusing and dealt with a lot more quantum physics than I know what to do with.”

Tim’s eyes light up and Dick hides a smile.

“Wait a bit before you start interrogating him, Timmy. He’s still with Jay Garrick.”

Both Tim and Jason give him looks like he just told them the Riddler should run for mayor.


“It’s really not that common of a name,” Dick deadpans.

“But, he hates you.”
“He doesn’t hate me,” Dick corrects. “It’s more of...a profound and long running disagreement about basic tenets of my life.”

Jason crosses his arms. “Dick, five months ago, he used the shitstorm from the whole Speedy thing to argue teen superheroes violate the Geneva Convention.”

“Which he lost. By a lot.”

“Because you were forced to give a speech to the entire UN that the Titans are the only reason we found Roy,” Tim argues.

Dick momentarily wonders if it makes him a terrible brother that his life is so much easier when Tim and Jason are at each others’ throats rather than teaming up against him.

“Don’t you guys have school,” he tries a bit desperately. Bless Gotham Academy for starting their semester weeks before Dick and Babs’ at Gotham University.

Tim shakes his head.. “Not for another hour.”

“Punctuality’s important.”

“Dick!”

“Okay, okay, maybe Jay hasn’t had the best history with the Titans. But….,” he sighs, “look, it wasn’t always like that. Not back when he had Wally, Barry, all of them.”

Dick quirks his lips up in a hopeful smile, like the kind he remembers Superman making. “Who knows? Maybe Bart’s the push Jay needs to remember what the Titans stand for. Would be nice if the JSA could be an ally again, wouldn’t it?”

Jason gives him a look. “You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

The smile drops and Dick shrugs easily. “Nah, but it doesn’t hurt to be optimistic. Besides, Jay’s literally the only family Bart has left. What else was I going to do?”

Neither Jason or Tim come up with an argument so Dick’s counting that as a win.

Jason falls back in the rolling computer chair, the momentum spinning him in tight circles.

“Nope, something’s still weird. Gut instinct.”

Dick rolls his eyes. “We dress up in costumes, fight criminals with incredibly dedicated motifs, and I just met a kid from another universe. Something’s always weird, Littlewing.”

Jason slows briefly in his spinning to glare at the nickname.

“No, Jason’s right,” Tim pipes in before making a face like the previous words literally pained him. He pushes through to focus on Dick. “You’re being really positive about this.”

“I’m always positive,” Dick argues. “I’m an optimist!”

Jason snorts loudly.

“Fine,” Dick corrects. “I’m a pragmatist that’s abnormally optimistic considering I live in Gotham.”

Jason gives it to him.
“More positive than usual,” Tim says suspiciously.

Jason stops spinning. “Oh, fuck, you finally asked out Kory, didn’t you?”

Dick smiles widely. “Maybe.

Tim’s eyes widen. “Wait, really?”

“Finally,” Jason moans. “Also, thanks, you just won me twenty buck. Roy bet you’d chicken out again.”

“I told you I was going to ask her at the party.” Dick groans. “Did everyone make bets?”

“I didn’t.” Tim grins.

“Tim’s my new favorite.”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Suckup.”

“She said yes, by the way,” he adds. “You know, just in case anyone was curious.”

Jason waves him off. “Yeah, yeah, no one had a bet riding on that.”

“We’re going out to dinner Friday,” Dick says and if his smile gets a little bit dopey, well...whatever, he deserves this one. He just needs to check with Alfred about his plan and make sure Barbara can cover patrol for--

He blinks, looking around the cave. “Hey, wait, where’s Babs?”

Tim and Jason exchange a loaded look that Dick can’t translate.

“Er, she left earlier,” Tim says. “She was, ah, tired.”

Dick frowns. “I wanted to tell her how it went.”

“I think she guessed,” Jason mutters. He looks up, pointing a stern finger up at Dick. “Just leave her alone right now, okay?”

Feeling oddly confused, Dick obligingly holds up his hands in surrender. “Alright, got it! Wasn’t planning on bothering her, I’m glad she’s getting some sleep.” He narrows his eyes. “Speaking of which, Tim, what did Alfred say about staying up late on--”

“Oh, yeah, school,” Tim says, grabbing Jason’s arm and almost dragging him to the stairs. “I love school! So full of...of knowledge! We should get going so we don’t miss all that learning!”

Jason lets himself me pulled to better judge Tim. “Timbo, I’m say this for the good of the family. We’ve gotta work on your deflecting.”

“Shut up, Jason.”

Dick hides a smirk, watching the two disappear up the stairs and up to the manor.

It’s cute that Tim thinks he can escape.
Two days later and Dick’s still in a fairly spectacular mood.

The Titans made another breakthrough tracking down files on the Light. Gotham hasn’t been any crazier than usual. The JSA’s been fairly quiet. And he’s only forty points behind Jason in the family’s ongoing and intensely heated online Scrabble game--no one can actually beat Jason in Scrabble, it’s impossible, he’s like a human thesaurus.

And--okay, fine, he can admit what the main reason is--he has a date with Kory in a few days.

He whistles under his breath while washing the dishes, one of the few things in the kitchen that Alfred actually trusts him with.

Around him, the manor is empty in the increasingly rare phenomenon of actually having time to himself. Jason and Tim are still at school, Alfred’s gone to pick them up.

If he’s honest, Dick kind of hates when the manor’s quiet. He always has, ever since he was a nine year old trading the colorful business of the circus for dark steady walls. It’s too hollow. Like an itch beneath the surface.

Usually, Barbara’s here. But, this week he practically hasn’t seen her at all except for patrols.

Almost...almost like she’s avoiding him.

Which is weird and worrisome and something he very badly wants to investigate, except for the fact that Tim, Jason, and Alfred keep insisting he leave it alone even though it’s Babs!

Behind him, the sound of something rattling drifts from the dining room before it abruptly stills.

Dick’s hand tightens on the knife he’s washing as he stops his shoulders from tensing.

No footsteps.

There’s a creak on the loose floorboard behind him.

Dick spins, knife flying at the sound

...and caught, a few inches in front of a face.

“Bart?!”

“Yeah?” Bart says, looking wide-eyed at the knife in his hands. “Geeze, who were you expecting?!”

Randomly showing up in complete silence? Slade, usually. But there’s not really a way he can say that and it sound normal. So, instead...

“Bart, why did you break into the manor?”

Bart shrugs, sitting the knife down. “Technically, it’s not breaking in if you vibrate through the door.”

“I’ve got a whole stack of meta B&E laws that would beg to differ,” Dick rolls his eyes, “and that still doesn’t answer the question.”

Between blinks, a stack of files appears on the kitchen counter.
“I finished comparing the timelines,” Bart says, hopping up on the counter and swinging his legs. “Hey, have you ever thought of a zeta-shield?”

“A what?”

“A zeta-shield, it’s kind of like an energy field that blocks out interplanetary zetas to Earth?”

Dick pauses, looking over the files. “Your universe had one?”

“Yep, there was a thing with the Light and the Justice League and Rimbor and then, the Kroloteans, and then—anyway, not important, I think I can set up the basics if you want?”

“Do it. See if Tim can help with the programming.”

Bart grins. “Working with Robin? Awesome, that’s so crash!”


“Jason?” Bart blinks. “Right, Jason Todd who’s ali—ah, Robin! And definitely, not Red anything.”

Dick’s quirks an eyebrow.

“Just timeline differences.” Bart shrugs. “Kinda still adjusting, ya know?”

Dick watches him. “Sure there’s not something you want to talk about?”

“Yeah...yeah, I’m sure,” Bart says with an easy grin. He’s stopped swinging his legs. His hands are tense on the counter.

Dick lets the conversation move on.

“So, how’s living with Jay,” he asks, turning back to the dishes.

“Um, great?”

Dick snorts. “Next time, try to say it less like a question.”

Bart huffs, running a hand through dark auburn hair, not noticing how it makes it stick up on ends, and the gesture is so shockingly familiar that Dick’s next breath catches in his lungs.

“It’s great, really. He’s...he’s Jay Garrick! The Jay Garrick, original Flash! I mean how awesome is that? Wally used to talk about him all the time but...” Bart trails off. “Jay’s awesome; but, I get the feeling he doesn’t want me to be a hero. And by ‘get the feeling’ I’m kinda saying that as a massive understatement.”

Dick bets. “What do you want to do?”

“Be a Flash,” Bart says immediately. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Then do that. Jay….Trust me, for all he disagrees with teen heroes, Jay’s always loved his family.”

Bart makes a halfway affirmative hum, sounding more contemplative than anything.

Dick finishes washing the last dish and starts drying. “Jay’s JSA wasn’t a thing in your world?”

Bart shakes his head. “Ah, nope, wasn’t exactly a thing people were worried about.”
Dick snorts. “Good. Makes me want to ask my alternative self for tips on how they avoided that.”

“You can’t, you were dea--,” Bart freezes.

Dick’s hands stop halfway through drying a plate.

Bart’s stares at him, wide-eyed.

“Oh,” Dick says quietly. Then, he shrugs, going back to drying the dish.

Bart winces. “I’m sorry. I--

“It’s fine, Bart.”

“I don’t even know any details. Wally never wanted to--”

“Bart,” Dick interrupts, putting down the dish to lay a hand on Bart’s shoulder, “listen to me, it's fine. I should’ve expected that.”

Bart stops, skittish eyes glancing up.

Dick smiles, as reassuring as he can possibly can make it. “It’s alright. I wasn’t supposed to survive in this timeline either.”

“….what?”

“Someone needed to stay behind to blow up the ship core,” he says. “There wasn’t enough time to get out. I was the team leader; it was my responsibility. I knew that going in. It was fine.”

“Then, how…?”

Dick turns back to the dishes, picking one up so he can stare at that instead.

“I’ve got an idea, okay?”

“Wally saved me,” Dick says, voice carefully blank. “He vibrated us through the walls. We didn’t...we didn’t know he could do that. He’d never managed it before.”

Bart swallows. “How did Wally die?”

Dick smiles in a way that’s nowhere close to humor. “He tripped. Right outside of the ship. I got knocked out of the debris radius. He didn’t. Just chance, really.”

There’s a small shift of sound and Dick looks up to see Bart, face smooth but arms wrapped around his legs tight enough that Dick wouldn’t be surprised if it left bruises.

“Hey,” Dick says in a much calmer voice, “tell me more about your Wally, though.” He grins. “Hard to imagine the dork I knew as an actual adult. What was he like?”

Bart blinks, tension slowly draining to be replaced with surprise and then, contemplation.

Finally, Bart smiles.

“Kind,” he says succinctly. “The kindest person in the universe.”

Dick smile softens. “Yeah...that sounds like Wally.”
The bang of the front door opening cuts across the kitchen.

“Dick?” Tim’s voice calls out.

“In the kitchen,” he answers.

A second later, Tim pops into the kitchen only to be near tackled as Bart all but flings himself at him.

“Ack!”

“Tim,” Bart nearly shouts in his ear, “Red Robin, the very reddest of all the Robins, my science bro, the spicy cheese to my nachos. Ooh, did I tell you Jay got me nachos? So crash! Aww, now I’m hungry again!”

“By the way, Bart’s here,” Dick says innocently.

“Thanks for the warning,” Tim responds dryly, trying and mostly failing to pry Bart off of him.

“Also, Jason zeta’d to Roy’s, he said he’ll be back by patrol.”

“Got it.” Dick hands him the file on the table. “Hey, how do you feel about programming a zeta shield with Bart?”

Tim’s eyes light up, giving up on his fight to page through the schematics. “Bart, these are yours?”

“Hmmm, yeah, mostly, my timeline had something similar,” Bart says lazily from where he’s hanging off Tim’s shoulders.

“These are great.”

Bart holds up his hand to fist bump Tim’s. “What did I tell you? Science Bros!”

“And does Mr. Allen wish to stay for dinner,” Alfred asks from the dining room.

“Huh?” Bart blinks. “Oh, yeah, dinner. Sorry, forgot...I can’t, I told Jay I’d be back in like an hour.” He glances at the clock before wincing. “Or maybe three hours. Sorry, I gotta--”

“Run,” Dick suggests.

Bart grins. “Exactly.”

And, then, in a blur of color, he’s gone and the files in Tim’s hands are flying around the room.

Tim sighs, leaning down to pick them up. He shakes his head, smiling slightly. “Bart’s kind of weird, isn’t he?”

Dick helps him. “Timmy, I think that’s an understatement.”

“Yeah, but...like, I don’t know,” Tim shrugs. “Almost like he doesn’t view the world quite the same.”

Dick’s pretty sure he knows the reason for that. But, if there’s one thing he’s learned in a decade of masks and secret identities, it’s that some secrets aren’t his to tell.

So, he shrugs. “Or maybe he sees it better than any of us.”

Tim frowns, probably at the implication that he doesn’t understand something. He hates things like
“Think it’s the time travel,” he asks, “Well, I mean, duh, of course, it’s the time travel. What else could it be? Really, if you think about it the psychological implications a time traveler entails are fascinating, not to mention the physical, biological, oh, even the chemical…”

Dick cuts him off with a grin. “Tim, get some sleep first, running theoretical experiments on our friends can wait until later. By the way, I found your tablet.”

Tim’s head shoots up. “You did! Where?”

“A cereal box.”

“....sorry, what?”

“I know. Best prize I ever got was a decoder ring.”

“Um…”

“Tim,” Dick says, handing him the last of the papers.

“Ah, yeah?” Tim smiles sheepishly.

“Go get some sleep.”

“....I guess I could use a nap before patrol,” Tim admits as reluctantly as possible.

Dick rolls his eyes.

-----

Dick’s staring in the mirror and nothing feels right.

A red shirt and a blue shirt are hanging in either of his hands. He still hasn’t picked a jacket. Plus, a piece of his hair’s sticking up in a way that probably defies gravity and not, for once, in a good way.

He’s...he’s nervous.

He’s really, really nervous that everything is about to go horribly wrong.

“The blue one.”

Dick looks up and Barbara’s leaning on his door frame.

“Always go with the blue, it’s your color,” she says.

Dick manages a smile. “You sure?”

“Definitely.” She walks forward, looking at the jacket choices he has laying on the bed. “Listen to me, Dick, you’re an absolute disaster when it comes to fashion. Remember your first design for the Nightwing suit?”

“It wasn’t that bad,” he argues halfheartedly, putting on the shirt.
She hands him the black jacket. “It had neon yellow and a collar up to your ears. It deserved to be burned.”

“Pfft, you and Jason said that when I wanted to grow a mullet, too.”

Barbara gives him a probably mock look of horror. “I forgot about the mullet! That would have been terrible. What is this? The 80s?”

“I could’ve made it work.”

“Maybe, Boy Wonder, maybe.” She winks, stepping forward to smooth the collar. “But, even for you, that’s a big maybe.”

Dick smiles softly. “I missed you, Babs.”

Her smile fades. “I had something I needed to deal with.”

“I would’ve helped,” he tells her. “With anything, Babs, just say the word. I promise.”

“I know, Dick.” She shakes her head. “But not everything’s yours to fix. You trust me?”

“Always.”

“Then, let it go,” she tells him firmly. And then, she smiles. “Besides, I’m back now and you need to get ready for your date.”

Dick sighs then grimaces, looking back in the mirror. “Why am I so nervous, Babs? I’ve known Kory for years. This should be easy. So, why am I like this?”

“Because it’s important,” Barbara says. “Important things are worth being nervous over.”

She reaches up, fixing the last wild strand in his hair “But, for what it’s worth, I think you’ve got this.”

“Why’s that?”

She steps back and smiles. “Because you’re you and Kory’s smart enough to know that’s pretty special.”

Dick swallows, reaching out to squeeze her hand. “Thanks, Babs.”

“Anytime.” She looks down. “Hey, just promise me one thing, okay?”

“What?”

She meets his eyes.

“Don’t you break her heart, Dick Grayson.”

-----

Kory’s laugh catches in the wind as she wraps her arms tighter around his waist. “Dick, where are we going?”
“It’s a surprise!” Dick grins back, gunning the motorcycle on the long, mostly empty roads outside of Coast City.

Kory laughs again, pressing her face into his back and Dick swears he can feel the smile even through his jacket and shirt.

“Just five more minutes,” he says, more to remind himself than her.

Kory hums, unhurried, arms still tucked around his waist as she leans on him to watch the road fly by.

The next five minutes seem both unfairly long and unreasonably short. Dick wouldn’t trade them for the world.

“We’re here,” he says, pulling up to park at the dark, deserted building.

Kory looks up. “Oh... oh, I remember this! Is not this the place…”

“The Cult of Kobra destroyed a few months ago? Yeah,” Dick nods, looking up at the observatory. “They rebuilt it, should be open to the public next week. I asked and, well, they said they wouldn’t mind us using it for the night. I, um,” he blushes, “I thought maybe you’d like to see the stars?”

Kory looks at him and smiles, eyes shining as she leans forward to kiss his cheek.

“That sounds wonderful,” she whispers.

Dick smiles back, his entire face feeling warm as they go through the back door the staff promised to leave open and into the main observation deck, big curved windows shaping to form a dome, only broken by the telescope splitting through the middle.

This far away from the buzz of the city, there’s nothing but stars, thousands upon thousands of lights stretching and spilling across the dark of the room like there’s nothing else around except the observatory.

Kory spins around the room, mouth open but with no words as she just watches, glowing ever so faintly almost like she’s one of the stars herself.

“It’s beautiful,” she says.

Dick’s throat gone dry. “Yeah.”

He holds up a small basket he’d stashed earlier. “I brought food.”

If possible, Kory’s smile brightens even further. “You made dinner?”

“Alfred helped with the menu,” Dick admits with a grin, sitting by the telescope and passing her the basket. “Ah, and possibly a lot considering that it’s actually edible.”

Kory sits next to him, moving to lean on his shoulder. Tentatively, he reaches his arm around her.

“This is perfect,” she says.

Dick leans into her. “Well, Alfred’s a really good cook.”

Kory laughs. “Not just the food. Everything. It is wonderful, Dick. Thank you”
“I’m glad you like it.” He threads his hand with hers. “Thanks for coming.”

She hums. “It would have been perfect wherever you took me.”

“Why’s that?”

She smiles, stretching up at the same time he looks down until her lips land softly on his.

Like fireworks. Like the sun on his face. Like the thrill before he jumps.

“I believe you know,” she says when they finally break apart. She takes a sandwich from the basket. “Or, at least, I hope you know now. There is nothing to fear, Dick. There is no place I would rather be than here with you.”

Dick watches as she tilts her head back, eating her sandwich, as she smiles up at the stars. She’s warm against his side, her smile is still bright, and her red hair’s always that vivid red and, for a second, Dick thinks wildly that being around Kory is like having something as otherworldly beautiful as a constellation close enough to touch.

“I really like you, Kory,” Dick whispers back and finally relaxes enough to just watch the stars.

They finish their dinner just like that, together and watching the sky and talking about both nothing and everything until the moon’s high in the sky.

Hours later, Kory yawns. They’re both tucked under the telescope, Dick listening as Kory idly points out different solar systems using the most insignificant star alignments as navigation points.

She points to a slightly bigger star, one that Dick can recognize. “Over there is the Regulus system, a few light years away from Bolovax Vik, one of the research planets.”

He smiles. “On Earth, that star’s part of Hercules.”

She tilts her head, bemused. “Hercules?”

“It’s a story.” He catches her hand and traces it against the rest of the stars in the constellation. “Apparently, it’s supposed to be shaped like a man. The Greeks had a myth that he was such a great hero that the gods commemorated him by placing his image in the stars.” He grins. “My mom used to tell me about the stars when we were traveling. Hercules was always one of my favorites.”

“Did he really exist,” she asks, laying her head on his shoulder.

“Nobody knows. I just like the story, everyone needs their heroes.” He pauses briefly. “Like the League used to be.”

Kory glances up at him. “And like the Titans?”

“I hope so.” He laces his hand with hers.

She smiles back. “The new speedster--Bart--his grandfather was part of the League, right? The Flash after Jay Garrick?”

“Yeah, Barry Allen was one of the League’s founding members. Just like Jay was for the old JSA...and like Wally was for Young Justice.”

He pauses again. “The Flashes were...I don’t know, it’s hard to explain, especially after all the stuff with Jay...they just...they made everything seem better. They helped people believe. Gave them
optimism. Hope.”

“Like Superman?”

“Kind of.” He shakes his head with a small smile as he tries to find the words to explain it to Kory. “It was more like... when Superman showed up somewhere, everyone knew it was going to be alright, that they were going to be safe because Superman could handle it. With the Flash...,” Dick’s lips go up in a grin, “the Flash gave you the kind of hope that you could get through it yourself, no matter how dark it got. They all did that, even Jay during his time.”

Kory hums thoughtfully. “That seems like a lot to live up to.”

“It is.” Dick nods.

The topic falls down to a comfortable quiet. Kory, still leaning against him, lets out a small yawn, eyes flickering closed briefly before they come back open by force of will.

It’s getting late. They should probably head back to the Tower soon.

But, until then, he leans down to press a kiss into her hair and she moves in just a little bit closer, neither of them making any move to leave.

Above them, the sky is clear except for the stars.

-----

“You’re smiling!”

Dick turns and pulls his mouth down in an exaggerated scowl just because.

Donna snorts and Dick’s lips quirk back up.

“Indeed, I am. You sure you aren’t the detective, Don’?”

Dick moves over so she can sit beside him on the back of the sofa. In the Tower kitchen, Bart and Tim are still bent down over a tablet, running the final tests to bring the new zeta shield online.

Donna sits. “Maybe I am. Want to trade? Warning, you’d have to do the lasso, too. It’s a must.”

“Pft, shows what you know. I’ve always wanted a lasso!”

She taps her chin in faux consideration. “Nah, still no dice. Please understand, it’s not you, it’s Gotham. I’m not touching that shitshow with a ten foot pole.”

“I’d throw in a Robin or two? Think of it as a Buy One, Get One Free Special.”

Donna smile gets sharper. “I’d counter for Babs?”

“Ouch, no way. She’s like the entirety of my impulse control.”

“Looks like the deal’s off then, Former Boy Wonder.”

Dick nods. “Fair...Hey, you think Zatanna would be up for it? It’s the fishnets. I could totally work
Donna breaks off into a loud laugh, elbowing him. Dick just grins back.

She raises an eyebrow. “So, I take it the date went well? Come on, give me the details. I’ve earned them!”

Dick maintains his poker face because ever so occasionally he feels the urge to live up to his name. “Hmm, I don’t know about that. I’ll have you know there’s a gazillion other reasons I could be in a good mood.”

“Is that so?” She narrows her eyes.

“Who knows? Maybe a gazillion and one.”

Donna sighs. “Darn, well, that’s just too bad.”

And then, she drops it.

Dick frowns suspiciously. “And why’s that, Don’?”

“Oh, nothing.” She shrugs. “It’s just I’m the only one that was still up at the Tower at the frankly absurd time that Kory got back. I’d tell you what she said but since you’re busy with your gazillion and one things, I guess it can wait.”

Dick tries to stare her down. Donna smiles back.

The fiercest of Gotham criminals have nothing on one Donna Troy.

He rolls his eyes. “Okay, you got me. Tell me!”

“Details, first.”

Dick smiles, dropping his voice to a whisper. “You know the observatory from the Kobra thing? I took her there.”

“To see the stars?”

“Yeah. I brought dinner.”

She whistles, impressed. “Oooooh, that’s a good one.”

“Thanks. Now, your turn?”

Donna smiles. “She loved it. I think she’s the only one with a smile today that rivals yours.”

“Really?” Dick ridiculously feels his cheeks heat up like he’s still thirteen years old.

“Yep.” Donna bumps her shoulder against his. “I’m happy for you, Rob. Both of you.”

Dick can’t think of anything to say back so he just lets the silence settle between them.

Unsurprisingly, Bart breaks it. “And….. there! WE GOT IT!!”

Tim looks up from the tablet, high fiving Bart. “WE GOT IT!”

Donna and Dick both look over to them.
“The zeta shield’s ready to come online,” Donna asks.

“Definitely!” Tim grins brightly. “Well, I mean technically we already got it online days ago, but--”

“Yeah, but test pulses don’t really count,” Bart continues, waving his hands wildly, “basically just a searching signal for the other stations on the network--which is a freaking lot, by the way! Dude, so crash!--rather than--”

“A fully functioning operating system,” Tim nods enthusiastically, “which is why we had to calculate a program that would run outside of--”

“But not interfere with,” Bart adds. “That’s the tricky part!”

“The zetas already within Earth’s gravitational field,” Tim concludes. “Plus, there was the Watchtower to account for. So, basically--”

“Guys,” Dick interrupts, holding up his hands to stop them. “Real question, you’re saying the shield’s are ready?”

Tim exchanges a look with Bart, already nearly hopping on the toes of his feet, before Tim gives a thumbs up. “We got it, Dick! Ready to activate the shields?”

“Do it! Do it!” Bart chants. “Ugh, why does everything take so loooonnnng!”

Dick rolls his eyes. “Go ahead.”

Tim grins, typing in a code on the tablet.

On the screen, what looks like hundreds of tiny dots, signifying the satellite system, suddenly turn a light blue with a maze of lines reaching to connect them.

“We’re online,” Tim reports. “No zeta access outside of the Earth’s perimeter.”

Tim and Bart high five again.

“Great work, guys!” Dick reaches out to ruffle Tim’s hair, just because his youngest brother will still sometimes allow it. “I mean it. Earth just got a whole lot safer.”

Bart’s smile flickers for just a second before it’s back, looking softer and a bit more genuine.

Donna claps her hands together. “Well, protecting Earth from an attack through zeta I say definitely calls for pizza tonight to celebrate!”

Dick snorts. “You said that about last week’s thing with Parasite, too.”

“And I was right then like I’m right now,” she answers breezily. “I’ll text everyone else to swing by later.”

“Yeah, yeah, just make sure you order one with--,” Dick’s wrist beeps with an alert. He frowns. “Jay Garrick’s in the Tower lobby.”

“Oh, ah, for me?” Bart’s brow knits together in confusion, checking his new already slightly beat up phone. “Aw, but I’m not even late this time.”

“No,” Dick holds up his own phone with a new message. “He says he wants to talk to me.”
“Jay,” Dick greets the older man in the usual meeting room.

Jay smiles warmly and if Dick tries hard enough he can almost believe it’s not even forced.

“Dick.” He chuckles. “I hope you don’t mind I chose the afternoon rather than barely sunrise this time?”

Dick forces his shoulders to relax. “Sorry about that, I assumed you’d want to know about Bart as soon as possible.”

“And you were right.” Jay nods firmly before sighing. “It’s still hard to believe, honestly. Having Bart. It’s like...like having a piece of Barry back again. Of...well, of all of them really.”

“I know the feeling.”

Jay meets his eyes. “You gave me my family back, Dick. Something I never thought I would have again. No matter what all the two of us have been through recently, there aren’t words to express how grateful I am that you trusted me with Bart.”

Dick shifts, feeling uncomfortable. “It’s not about trust, Jay. It’s like you said, Bart’s your family. That’s not something I can take away. Not something I’d want to.”

Jay smiles again. “You’re a good kid, Dick, always have been even back when you were running around playing pranks with Wally.” He settles. “It’s why I hope you’ll hear me out.”

And here it is, Dick thinks wryly.

“I don’t want you to let Bart join the Titans.”

Dick sighs. “Jay...”

“Hear me out,” Jay insists, “Bart’s a kid, Dick. He’s the only family I have left. I don’t want to–I can’t lose him, too. I can’t.” He stops, obviously taking a moment to get whatever he’s feeling back under control before starting again. He looks up at Dick. “We can work together, Dick. You and me. I know...I know that the history between the Titans and the JSA have been strained to put it mildly, but if we can come to an agreement on this, then maybe we can work together on the rest. I’m willing to lead the JSA back on some of our more strict positions.”

“Really,” Dick raises an eyebrow. “You’d tell the JSA to back off?”

Surprisingly, Jay nods. “Please understand that it’s not that I’m changing my mind, Dick, but...I would do anything to protect Bart. And I know Wally used to be your best friend, you have to feel the same way. Maybe this is what we both need to come together again. To work with each other for better solutions rather than fighting against each other.”


Jay’s face softens and for a single second, it’s seven years ago and Jay’s just the old hero, sitting in the West-Allen’s kitchen and laughing along to one of his and Wally’s stories.
Dick blinks it away.

Jay regards him seriously. “Then if Bart asks to join the Titans, you need to tell him ‘no’.”

“I can’t.”

Jay’s face falls. “I hoped maybe this time you’d understand.”

“I’ve always understood, Jay. It’s just not my choice to make.”

“Don’t do that.” Jay’s lips tightening into a thin line. “Don’t try to push off responsibility--”

“Push off responsibility?!” he interrupts incredulously. “Jay, are you kidding me? I’m not forcing people, it’s their choice! You were a hero once! How can you not remember what that felt like? The feeling that if you have the power, if you can help people, you have the responsibility to--

“Oh, don’t talk to me about responsibility, Dick!” Jay snaps. “You’re a nineteen year old kid with a bunch of other kids that have convinced yourselves it’s somehow noble to die in a blaze of glory before you’ve even learned how to live! It’s not noble, Dick, it’s suicide masquerading under bravado. Bart’s thirteen! How can you want him to die that way?”

Dick takes a breath, tries to stay calm. “Jay...I never let anyone do anything. They do it on their own. I just try to help, to have a structure where they can have help. That’s all I do.”

Jay’s fists clench down under the table. His jaw firms.

“If that’s all you think you do, Dick, then this was a pointless conversation.”

“Isn’t it always?” Dick bites back because he’s so very done with this. “What do you mean?”

Jay shakes his head. “There’s no point in telling you. You still think everything’s the same, don’t you? That the world’s still going to work like it did back then! That if you just train enough, fight enough, believe enough that everything’s going to be okay. It’s not that world anymore, Dick! Maybe it used to be. But, in this one, people die! Not matter how hard they fight. You don’t understand--”

“STOP TELLING ME I DON’T UNDERSTAND!” Dick erupts. “How can you say that? How can you even think that? That out of everyone, I don’t understand the risks? I led the team during the Invasion! I saw them die! I saw Batman die! You think you’re the only one that understands losing a family? That understands this is dangerous? I DO, JAY! The only difference is that I’m trying to make sure no one else goes through the same while you’d rather hide out with a protest sign--”

Jay’s already on his feet. “You’re enabling them, Dick! You think the Titans is about heroes? They’re glorified child soldiers and you’re their leader! How many of them do you think would be out there without you? How many do you think would still be doing this if they didn’t have the Titans behind them telling them they should?!”

“All of them!” Dick shouts. “I think all of them would still be doing this! Just like you were before the first JSA! Just like they used to do before the League! Just like me and Roy and Zatanna and Donna and Raquel were all doing before we even started the Titans! Because that’s what heroes do, Jay! They help people! And not for some glorified martyrdom or whatever the fuck you think we want but because it’s something we can do!”

Jay’s face is a dark, angry red. “You can’t--
Dick shakes his head, disgusted. “You really think if I tell Bart ‘no’ that he won’t still be out there?! The kid runs faster than the speed of sound, is the grandson of Barry Allen, and what?! You think he’s just going to quit because I tell him he can’t join the Titans. You’re not asking me to stop him from being a hero, Jay, all you’re doing is asking me to take away the support system! And I won’t do it! You want something that’ll kill him, because that’s what you’re asking for, Jay!”

“YOU ALREADY KILLED ONE OF MY GRANDSONS, DICK! I’M NOT LETTING YOU KILL ANOTHER ONE!”

Dick stops so suddenly it’s as if Jay just slapped him.

...He wishes Jay just slapped him.

Red light. The heat of a ship core stinging across his face. The tick of a countdown.

Jay sighs, the anger draining out of him. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Dick. That was ...uncalled for. I shouldn’t have said that.”

He doesn’t say he didn’t mean it.

“Just please,” Jay says. “Please, Dick, not Bart. Not again. I’ll work with you on the JSA, just please don’t let him join the Titans.”

“Leave.”

Jay looks at him, frowning.


Jay watches him. Dick doesn’t look away.

Jay slowly moves to the door and then outside the meeting room and down the hall, out of the Tower. Dick falls heavily back into the chair.

“I’ve got an idea, okay?”

-----

Smack!

The punching bag swings away with the force of the hit.

Dick doesn’t let it swing back before he hits it again, alternating hands.


“The pizza’s here.”

He doesn’t look behind him. “I’m not really hungry, Donna.”

“Everyone’s in the kitchen.”

“I’m not really good company right now either,” he says, landing another left cross.
“You want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“You want to spar?”

Dick hesitates.

Donna smirks, grabbing his arm and dragging him over to the mats.

She gets ready, sliding back her leg into a fighting stance. “Come on, Rob. Show me what you got. The usual, no holds barred. You’re not going to hurt an Amazonian.”

Dick gives her a barely there smile, obligingly holding up his arms.

Donna strikes first, swinging her leg down and out in a smooth sweep.

He jumps, landing behind her. She turns quickly and he swings his elbow into her sternum.

Donna blocks, smiling sharply as she uses her strength to push him back. Dick moves with it, flipping back in a crouch and swinging his own leg to catch the back of her knees.

She laughs, stepping back to avoid falling and going for a knee strike that Dick barely dodges.

Her next punch catches his shoulder.

“Good one,” he grunts, knocking her arm out of the way and swinging up his leg to aim at her side.

Donna moves back before it does more than glance off of her. “You, too.”

She strikes forward and Dick twists around the blow, turning to try to catch her ribs.

She drops the strike, reaching around with her other arm to try to pin him in against her but Dick drops down, rolling back out of range.

“You know whatever Jay said to you has a statistically high chance of being complete bullshit,” she says.

“I told you I didn’t want to talk about it, Don’.”

A jab to his chest, he catches it, flipping over again and trying to pull her with him.

She aims a knee to his ribs and he lets go to dodge it.

“You’re not talking about it; I’m talking about it. See the difference?”

Dick sighs. “Donna.”

“I know, I know, but you’ve been in here for hours which tells me that you need to talk about it.” Donna meets his eyes steadily. “Let me help.”

Dick twists out of the way of Donna’s next punch. “It wasn’t even anything that new. Jay doesn’t want Bart to join the Titans.”

His next kick is a feint, waiting until she blocks before he jabs at the side she left unprotected. He does a simple jump back before she can retaliate.
“Ouch, must’ve been something bad, then. You didn’t even add an unnecessary flip to that.”

Dick pauses. “What do you mean?”

Donna rolls her eyes. “You usually put on more of a show, even when you fight. It’s the performer in you.”

He blocks her elbow to his neck. “No chance you’re going to let this go, is there?”

“See I would,” She blocks his punch and swings out her leg in a roundhouse, forcing him to flip over it. “But, Will even showed up with Lian and I know she’s going to want to see her Uncle Dick. I can’t let a baby down just cause you’re sulking! I’m her favorite aunt!”

Dick narrows his eyes. “Using Lian’s cheating.”

“Thought it was no holds barred?”

He slips around her next punch and she blocks his knee. He ducks, her kick goes through the air over her head and she moves back to avoid his cross hit.

He takes a breath. “Jay blames me for Wally’s death.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Dick.”

“It wasn’t not my fault.”

“Dick,” She catches his next punch and instead of going into another move, she just holds it. Dick stops.

“What happened during the invasion wasn’t your fault,” she says firmly. “Jay’s wrong. Just like he is about the Titans.” She smiles slowly. “Now, in my infinite and beloved wisdom as your best friend, I’m going to offer you a choice. Option One: you can stay down her for another however many hours and keep thinking about shit that you can’t change and isn’t going to make you feel any better. Or Option Two: you come with me, have pizza with people who care about you, and have the strong possibility of watching Lian spit up food on Will’s face. What do you say?”

Dick sighs. “Is one of the pizzas Hawaiian?”

“Yes, you savage.”

He smiles back hesitantly. “I guess I’ve been down here long enough.”

“Excellent choice!” Donna swings an arm around him before wrinkling her nose. “But, shower before pizza. You stink!”

“I’m getting a new best friend.”

Donna laughs. “Jokes on you, I have a no refund policy.”

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“Dih! Dih!” Grabby baby hands reach up to pull at his hair and Dick grins like an idiot.
It’s possible that he may be slightly biased but his goddaughter is the cutest baby in the entire world.

“Look, Lian,” he says, maneuvering her with one arm before she punches him in the eye again, “this pizza has meat and pineapple on it. Isn’t that amazing?”

Lian grins up at him with her adorable chubby smile.

“Stop corrupting my daughter with your pizza blasphemy,” Jade says, coming up to sit beside him.

Dick makes faces at Lian. “It’s not corruption, it’s education. You’re the one who teaches her different types of knives.”

Jade hums. “I don’t see your point.”

“Knibe! Knibe!” Lian claps.

Will comes to stand beside Jade. “For the record, I entirely blame you for that being her first word.”

Jade leans down to kiss her daughter’s head. “It runs in the family.”

“DaDa!” Lian squirms in Dick’s arms, reaching for Will.

“Hey, Princess,” Will acquiesces, taking her in his arms while winking at both Jade and Dick. “She knows who her favorite is.”

Jade rolls her eyes, looking to Dick. “Bribery?”

“Has to be,” Dick agrees. “It’s the only way.”

Lian giggles before her mouth turns down in a distinctly unhappy face that Dick unfortunately recognizes.

“And that’s our cue to get away from the food,” Will says, hefting her up in his arms. “Roy grabbed the diaper bag, right?”

“In the zeta room.” Jade nods, pulling him through the crowd surrounding the pizza.

In their absence, Dick scans the room until he finds Bart, who seems at first glance to be busy laughing with Gar and Tim—a fact that would be more convincing if his eyes didn’t flicker nervously back over to Dick every approximately 1.2 minutes.

Dick gives it five seconds.

Sure enough, roughly four seconds later, Jade’s vacated seat is filled by five feet of vibrating speedster.

“So, um,” Bart starts, “you talked to Jay and, ah, then you kind of, sort of, totally disappeared off in the training room so I’m guessing it didn’t really go well. Which, um, I guess is understandable and everything I just maybe, possibly wondered what—”

“Jay asked me not to let you join the Titans,” Dick interrupts.

“Oh.” Bart’s shoulders drop. “So, I guess—”

“I refused.”
Bart looks up, blinks. “Oh. Ah, I mean why? I mean not that that’s not totally crash and, um, so yeah, and--”

“I’m not really in the business of stopping people from being heroes.” Dick looks down at his pizza. “Which I guess might be the problem. The point is, Bart, it’s your choice. If you chose to be a hero, all I can really do is help.”

Bart doesn’t say anything. When Dick glances up, Bar’s gone back to that silent, intense state that he only seems to do when no one else is watching.

Dick waits.

“I don’t…I don’t think I really know how to be--,” Bart cuts himself off and he looks up at Dick a bit desperately. “Can I…can I tell you something? About…about the place I came from?”

Dick meets his eyes. “You can tell me anything you want.”

Bart watches him, looking for something, before cautiously starting, “It wasn’t--”

“Intruder Alert! Main Entrance!”

The tower’s lights flash bright red and Dick immediately grabs his mask.

“Titans, spread out, groups of two, guard the points of entry!” He glances around. “Where’s Red Arrow and Baby Arrow?”

“Already through the zeta,” Jade answers smoothly, mask already on and knives out.

Dick pulls up his wrist computer, projecting the video to the front of the room.

Beside Dick, Bart tenses.

“Wait, is that…,” Raquel starts.

Zatanna shakes her head. “It can’t be. Ted Kord died in the invasion, we saw it.”

On the screen, a figure in distinctly familiar blue plated armor flies down the hallways. Dick tracks his path.

“He’s coming straight for the common room,” Dick says. “Everybody get ready!”

He barely finishes speaking when the blue figure burst in, flying over Karen and Gar’s heads, to land in the center of the room.

“Wait, wait! I’m not attacking!” The figure holds up his hands in surrender. “I didn’t mean to break in, I promise! I just have no idea how this stupid armor works and I really, really badly need to find all of you! Please! My friend Tye was kidnapped!”

“Who are you,” Dick asks, not dropping out of his stance.

The armor’s mask comes up with a slight hiss, revealing a panicked Hispanic teenager.

“My name is Jaime Reyes,” he says. “And I really need your help.”
Dick frowns, thinking. “Alright, so again, you and your friend Tye were heading to the bus stop in El Paso so he could get a bus to Houston—”

“He wasn’t actually going to do it,” Jaime interrupts quickly. “He never does! He just talks about running away but he’d never actually do it, not without telling me, I swear!”

“I believe you,” he reassures. “But, right now, I think we have bigger things to focus on. You said you were attacked from behind before you got there. Any distinguishing features?”

Jaime shakes his head, looking down at the torn piece of fabric with a dull yellow hexagon on it—a H.I.V.E badge. “Just this. They were wearing masks and...like hazmat suits?...I don’t know. They hit Tye with some kind of injection, knocked him out. He hit the guy holding me before he went down. He...he saved me.” Jaime sighs. “And all I could do is grab the stupid badge and run away.”

Dick lays a hand on his shoulder. “You did the right thing. You went to get help. That’s what you’re supposed to do. Now, tell me again, how the armor came into play?”

“I don’t even know,” Jaime says, words stumbling out even faster. “I have no idea. One second, I’m running, trying to find help and then...this...this scarab thing hits me in the back so hard I thought they shot me. Then, the armor came up and...it flew me here.” He looks down at his shoes. “That’s all I know, I promise. I just...I really need your help. I have to find Tye before they do anything to him.”

There’s a flash of color and then another set of arms are slung around Jaime’s shoulders, careful to avoid his back.

“Hey, don’t worry about it, BB--Beetle?--you know what, I’m just going to stick with Blue,” Bart says, grinning wide and lopsided. “We’ve got this! Everything’s going to be totally crash, just trust me!”

Jaime blinks. “Wait, sorry, who are you?”

“Impulse! Oh, or Bart! Whichever, you want, I don’t care. Just don’t call me Bartholomew cause, ugh, talk about lame family names, am I right? Even Gramps hated it! Not something cool sounding like Jaime or Blue Beetle, I guess. Or BB or Blue...or, wait, we’ve covered this already, didn’t we? I didn’t just imagine that, right?”

“What’s a Blue Beetle,” Jaime asks, still staring at the sudden onslaught of words.

“Duh, it’s you, Blue!” Bart grins. “Or will be? Sorry, spoilers!”

Dick gives Bart a questioning look before focusing back on Jaime. “I think what Bart means is that the armor you had on looks a lot like Ted Kord’s old Blue Beetle suit.”

“Ted Kord?”

“He died in the invasion,” Dick answers shortly, pulling up two images on his wrist computer and showing them to Jaime.
Jaime looks down at the pictures, frowning at the second one.

“Dan Garrett,” Dick says before he can asks, “the first Blue Beetle and Dr. Kord’s old teacher. Kord based a lot of his suit’s technology off the artifact Garrett used.”

Jaime swallows. “So, this...this thing on my back’s an old artifact? Or...is it some kind of technology?”

“We don’t know. Maybe both.” Dick looks over Jaime’s shoulder. “Zee, how are the tests coming?”

Zatanna huffs, blowing a piece of hair out of her eyes. “Well, there’s *something* magical about it. Or at least there was, judging by the residue. What it was originally? No idea! And the stupid thing keeps fighting me whenever I try to get it off his back!”

She mutters another spell under her breath and the scarab shaped device lights up a dull yellow before the spell abruptly fizzes out.

Jaime winces. “Yeah, it, uh, it *really* doesn’t like that.”

Both Zatanna and Dick stop. Still hanging off Jaime, Bart stills for half a second before backing up.

“You can communicate with it,” Dick says, surprised.

“Um, I don’t know if I’d say ‘communicate’ but I can hear it, ah, in my head,” Jaime winces again. “Mainly it just argues with me like...like a Jiminy Cricket with a bad attitude.”

Dick exchanges a look with Zatanna.

“Get Omen to see what she can find psychically,” Dick says. “Tell her to go deep, I want to find out what this scarab is.”

“Got it,” Zatanna replies, already leaving the room.

Dick’s communicator beeps.

“Nightwing,” Donna reports, “we’re at the bus stop. Story checks out. Chesh found gouges in the dirt from what looks like a fight plus Cyborg picked up partial tire tracks. Scanning them into the main computer now. We’re seeing how far we can track them; but, they’re fading already.”

“Do what you can,” Dick says, clicking off the comm. Jaime’s shoulders are hunched. “You heard that?”

“The...the scarab did,” Jaime confirms, “Man, how am I going to tell Tye’s mom?”

“We’ll handle that,” Dick tells him. “Right now, we just need you to stay here at the Tower...at least until we find out more about the scarab. That alright?”

“Yeah,” Jaime’s shoulders slumping even further, “my parents already think I’m spending the weekend with Tye anyway. I just can’t believe...”

He trails off while Dick watches, trying to think of something comforting to say. Someone else beats him to it.

“Hey, Blue...um, I mean Jaime,” Bart says, zipping until he’s leaning down in front of him, “I told you, don’t worry. You’re with the Titans now, they’re heroes. We’ll find your friend for sure, okay? All you gotta do is trust me. Everything’s going to be okay. You trust me, right?”
Jaime lets out a slow breath, finally giving a small smile. “Yeah...okay. Thanks. You...you really think you can save him?”

Something flickers across Bart’s face--far, far too quick for Dick to place it.

“One of course, saving people’s what heroes do.” Then, Bart smiles, just a hair too wide to be real.

Dick shifts on his feet, tensing slightly without knowing why.

Jaime doesn’t notice, looking between Dick and Bart with an expression slowly getting lighter.

“And, hey, I guess finding superpowered armor’s pretty cool, right?”

“Crash,” Bart agrees, smile held steady on his face.

The door to the medbay slides open.

“Someone call for a psychic check up on a sentient armor,” Lilith asks, shaking her head ruefully. “I swear our lives will never stop being weird, will they?”

Dick grins. “Not in this lifetime.”

She gestures to him and Bart. “Now, you two out. If you want me to go deep, I need room to focus without the extra mindscapes blocking the way. Don’t worry, Supergirl and Tempest are manning the monitors.”

He nods, slipping out of the medbay followed by Bart. He grabs Bart’s arm before he can run off.

“Wait, I need to talk to you.”

Bart frowns, but complies as Dick leads him down the hall into one of the more secure rooms.

“What did you want to talk about, oh so fearless leader,” Bart asks, hopping up on the table and swinging his legs.

Dick narrows his eyes. “There’s something wrong, isn’t there?”

“Er, like specifically or in general? Because in general, I’m pretty sure there’s always something wrong. Like earthquakes or tsunamis or house fires or like someone stealing the last piece of pizza. Which, by the way, Gar totally --”

“Bart,” he interrupts, “I mean something’s wrong here. You’ve been acting weird since Jaime got here. You know something, don’t you? Is it the scarab? Something that happened in your universe?”

Bart cuts him off with a laugh.

“Oh! That. It’s nothing. It’s just…,” he smiles sheepishly, “sorry, it’s kind of embarrassing. It’s just, well, Blue Beetle was this huge, huge, h-hero in my universe. Um, one from after the invasion. Like my favorite hero, actually.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I guess I got a bit over excited at actually getting the chance to meet him.”

Dick watches him closely, taking everything Bart’s told him and, more importantly, all the things he hasn’t and trying to find the picture between them.

Finally, he says carefully, “So there were new heroes after your invasion?”

Bart freezes then shrugs casually. “We won. Why wouldn’t there be?”
“You tell me,” Dick counters.

Bart stays silent.

“You know you can tell me anything you want, right?”

“I know,” Bart says too quickly.

Dick sighs, deciding not to push...yet. “So, Blue Beetle--or I guess the third Blue Beetle--is one of your universe’s next great heroes following the invasion?”

“My favorite,” Bart agrees readily.

“Guess that makes sense,” Dick muses, looking back down at his wrist computer as he tries to figure out what needs to be done next, “Jaime seems like a good guy, kind of a requirement for a hero.”

There’s a pause, long enough that Dick glances up again.

“Yeah,” Bart says blankly. “Yeah, he does.”

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Sitting down in the cave before patrol, Dick looks down over the research.

A month since Jaime came to them with Tye’s disappearances and still no definitive leads except the badge Jaime grabbed. Plus, a string of similar disappearances all with runaway teens that made it nearly impossible to tell which were abducted and which just didn’t want to be found.

And the scarab that they still couldn’t figure out how to remove from Jaime’s spine or, really, find out anything about other than Lilith and Zatanna’s hesitant assessment of “relatively safe”.

All in all enough of a pain to give Dick a headache just thinking about it.

The phone buzzes, pulling his thoughts out of the files

His lips turn up in a goofy grin as he types out a quick response to Kory.

The moment after he hits send, a rubber practice batarang whacks him in the head.

“Ow!”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Oh, please, like that actually hurt.”

Dick pouts, rubbing at his head for show. “It hurt my feelings. Honestly, I don’t think I’ll ever get over it.”

“You’ll live,” Jason retorts dryly. “Besides, watching you moon over your phone hurts my will to live so I guess we’re even.”

Dick glares.

“How’d the date go,” Tim asks, distracted, not even bothering to look away from the computer.
Dick perks up instantly. “Great! We went to an old drive in! Kory loved it, she’s never seen one before.”

“That’s because they’re ancient, you nerd,” Jason accuses, crossing his arms and eyeing him skeptically. “So, did you two actually watch the movie?”

“Some of it.” He winks.

“Ugh, barf!”

Dick gives Jason his most patronizing smile. “Aww, it’s okay, Littlewing. Don’t worry, you’ll understand when you’re older. Want me to ask Alfred to give you the talk again?”

“I hate you.”

“You love me.”

“I’d trade you for a half-eaten sandwich.”

Tim lets out a cut off growl of frustration. The keys bang viciously under his hand as he types in another string of code, muttering under his breath. “Stupid, freaking, son of a mother freaking piece of useless…”

Dick and Jason exchange a look.

“See,” Jason says, “I’d say that he was complaining about your dumb date; but, we all know Tim already found his true love years ago in a computer processor.”

Dick bites down on a laugh, leaning down to Tim. “What is it, Timmy?”

Tim moans.

“Lassie fall down a well,” Jason guesses.

Dick whacks Jason’s shoulder without looking up from Tim. “Those the files from Ted Kord’s old lab?”

“No.” Tim glares at the screen. “It’s this string of code we got in the last Light breakthrough and I. Can’t. Freaking. Break. It.”

Jason peers down over his shoulder. “Hey, Junior Detective, have you ever thought about, oh, I don’t know, not obsessing? Change things up, for once.”

Tim looks up mutinously. “When’s the last time you or Dick took a break from a case?”

“Do as I say, not as we do, twerp.” Jason flicks him in the head before turning to Dick with a shit eating grin. “See, look, I’m doing the responsible older brother thing. Be proud.”

Dick rolls his eyes. “Jay’s right. Give it a rest for a bit, Tim, we all hit snags in cases.”

Tim huffs again, glancing back briefly at the code. “There’s just something familiar about it….”

“Ask Babs to look at it,” Dick suggests, looking around the cave. “Where is she? It’s almost time for patrol.”

Tim and Jay both tense and Dick immediately goes onto alert.
“Um, she didn’t tell you,” Tim asks sheepishly.

“Tell me what?”

“Babs asked if we could cover patrol just us tonight,” Jason takes over. “Not like it matters, she’s still got her comm and things have been pretty quiet since the last Penguin bust, right? No big deal.”

“Well, yeah,” Dick says slowly, feeling like he’s gotten off balance without quite knowing how.

“But, where is she?”

Tim looks to Jason before they both practically simultaneously turn to Dick.

“She’s on a date,” Jason says bluntly.

“Oh…. Oh. With who?”

Jason worries at a hangnail, shrugging. “Just some guy from her programming class.”

“Oh,” Dick says again.

Tim finally pipes up. “You’re….you’re okay with that, right, Dick?”

Dick tilts his head, confused. “Yeah, why wouldn’t I be? Be kind of hypocritical not to be after she covered patrols for me and Kory.” He smiles, soft and sincere. “Besides if anyone deserves a night off, it’s Babs!”

Tim and Jason are still watching him carefully and, if anything, they look almost disappointed. The off balance feeling continues.

Dick clears his throat.

“Anyway,” he says pointedly, picking up the file next to his phone, “since Barbara’s off for the night, either of you mind looking over the disappearances for a pattern? I want a second set of eyes on it.”

“I got it,” Jason says, grabbing the file and pointing sternly at Tim, who’s already halfway out of his chair. “No, sit, don’t even think about it.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Tim grumbles, falling back in the chair.

“As if you weren’t.” Jason snorts. “And no, this one’s mine. You already got the Kord stuff and your stupid code, now give me some freaky disappearances to look at before my brain melts out of my ears going through more of the Light’s taxes.” He leafs through the files, raising an eyebrow at Dick. “Still not going for the obvious, then?”

“I don’t think it’s H.I.V.E.,” Dick says simply.

“Despite the fact that we’ve got guys in hazmat suits and a literal H.I.V.E. badge.”

“Exactly,” he says, “it’s too easy, too perfect. H.I.V.E. goes from practically non-existent last year, stays almost completely off the radar, and then, what? Decides to abduct two teenagers, one of which just happens to only grab a H.I.V.E badge before coming straight to the Tower? That’s not even bread crumbs, that’s like a neon sign pointing to H.I.V.E.”

Jason frowns. “If someone’s using H.I.V.E. as their fall guy for the abductions, that’s a lot of work--getting the intel, pulling off the kidnappings, making sure the real H.I.V.E’s either on board or out of
the way. Not a lot of organizations with that kind of pull...or motive. Except the Light.”

Tim shakes his head. “But, it can’t be the Light. We’ve been hitting them all year. They haven’t even recouped from Prince Orm’s arrest yet. They haven’t had the time to work out a large scale abduction scheme, much less pin it on H.I.V.E.”

“No, you think it could still be the Light?”

Dick shrugs.

“The Light,” Jason says, looking through the file again, “…or we’re dealing with someone new.”

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“Hey! Someone stole my Chicken Whizzies?!” Jaime narrows his eyes. “Bart!”

From across the Titan’s kitchen counter, Bart grins back, unrepentant. “Hey, where I come from, it’s not stealing, it’s scavengers’ rights--delicious fried chicken flavored rights. Besides, you’re the one who got me hooked on them, so technically I say we split the blame.”

Jaime rolls his eyes, pulling another bag from his backpack.

“Aww, dude!” Bart pouts. “That’s not even fair! Why blame me if you had an extra?”

Jaime smirks holding them higher out of reach from Bart’s grabby hands. “They’re not extra, they were for a friend of mine. But since someone stole the last bag, I’m not feeling inclined to share.”

Bart stills for half a second before his smile goes softer. “You brought me food?”

Jaime blushes bright red, arm dropping back down as he tosses the bag to Bart. “Yeah, no big deal, they’re only like...like a dollar at the convenience store.”

Bart’s still smiling and Dick coughs into his hand to grab their attention.

Jaime jumps, almost falling out of his chair, while Bart just throws Dick a wink, already stuffing his mouth with Chicken Whizzies.

“Nightwing!” Jaime rubs the back of his neck. “Um, how long have you been there?”

Dick smiles. “Not too long.”

“They’re like ninjas,” Bart accuses cheerfully between bites.

“The scarab didn’t warn you,” Dick asks.

“No.” Jaime shrugs. “I think he’s mad at me.”

“Why?”

“He keeps nagging me to practice with the armor.” Jaime goes quiet. “I probably should be
practicing more, especially if I’m going to help find Tye. Anything new?”

“We’re still trying to find a pattern for the disappearances,” Dick says gently. “Don’t worry, we’re not giving up.”

“I just wish I could do something.” Jaime sighs. “Maybe if I worked more with Khaji Da, I could—”

“Hey!” Bart zips forward, an arm slung around Jaime. “What’s a big old beetle going to do that the Titans can’t? Who cares about training with the scarab? We’ve got this. Just trust me, okay?”

“I guess,” Jaime says, still frowning.

There’s a rush of displaced air and Kara slides into the kitchen, socked feet barely coming to a stop as she grabs the counter. “Hey, Vic’s taking me and Gar bowling, who’s in?”

Bart tilts his head. “Bowling?”

“Yeah, they don’t have bowling in the future?”

“Um, I guess not.” Bart puts on a wide smile. “Probably because it’s all like old and we made something even cooler. Bowling’s crash with me, though. I love retro!”

Kara rolls her eyes. “You don’t even know how it’s played yet.”

“That’s fine. Jaime can teach me. Right, hermano,” Bart asks, butchering the final word while grinning up at the older boy.


Kara turns to Dick. “What about you, Di--Nightwing, you in?”

“Rain check,” he offers. “Kind of already got plans.”

“Have fun with Kory.” Kara bumps his shoulder before grabbing Bart’s and Jaime’s arms and dragging them off down the hall. “She’s in her room, by the way!”

“Thanks.”

Dick watches them go, waiting until he’s at least reasonably sure no one’s watching him, before very furtively checking his hair one last time and slipping off his glasses. His heart still beats a little bit faster as he makes his way to the Tower’s living quarters.

He knocks and barely a second later, the door slides open and arms wrap around his neck, pulling him in, while a warm mouth land on his.

“That was a really good hello” Dick says when Kory finally pulls back.

“Hello.” Kory smiles, the afternoon light shining in her hair as she presses forward again just briefly.

“You ready?”

“Almost,” she says, hand slipping around his wrist and pulling him inside. “I just need to finish watering.”

Dick lets himself be pulled, blinking in the light as he takes in the slight disorientation that always
comes from going to the hall to Kory’s room. Kory’s room is...well, alive is really the only way to describe it. Lines of green vines run up against the trellises on the walls and long planting pots line the shelves. Bright bursts of flowers break through the green, lit by the open windows of the Tower-- all in all, making the room look more like a garden than a bedroom.

Kory stands in the middle of it, glowing faintly as she holds up a watering can. “It will only take a moment.”

“No rush.” Dick grins , leaning against the wall. “I don’t mind at all.”

She smiles back, falling into a happy sort of silence as she focuses on the plants.

Dick gets lost, falling back on his thoughts as he watches her work.

After a few minutes, she glances up at him. “What are you thinking about?”

“Going on a date with the most beautiful girl in the world.”

She laughs. “What are you thinking of besides that?”


Kory raises an eyebrow.

“I think there’s something wrong with Bart,” Dick admits. “Something’s off.”

She hums. “Well, he has always been a little...strange, has he not?”

“Yeah....” Dick chews on his lip, contemplating the words and which of his guesses are his to tell. Finally, he sighs. “I think it’s something to do with Jaime...or maybe the scarab, I’m not sure.”

“How so?” Kory finishes the watering, coming to lean beside him.

“It’s how he acted when Jaime showed up. It was...I don’t know, exaggerated? Like when Bart first showed up in the cave.”

*When he was lying*, he thinks but doesn’t say.

“Did you ask him?”

He nods. “Bart said he was just fanboying because apparently Blue Beetle’s a big hero in his world. But, that...that just raises more questions, honestly.”

Kory pauses before suddenly, she smiles, leaning in closer to thread her hand with his. “I think I may have an explanation.”

“What is it?”

“I think....,” her smile widens, “Bart has a crush.”

“What?” He frowns, thinking back. “Well, I mean yeah, maybe but...you really think that explains everything?”
“I do not know about everything,” Kory says, eyes bright, “but, being a bit… ‘exaggerated’? Maybe.”

“Maybe,” Dick repeats, letting out a breath. “I don’t know. Whenever Wally had a crush, exaggerated was an understatement. I think the whole Tower would know by now.”

Kory brings their hands up, gently laying a kiss on his knuckles as she watches him carefully. “Bart is not Wally, Dick.”

“...I know.”

*Red light. The heat of a ship core stinging across his face. The tick of a countdown.*

“I’ve got an idea, okay?”

Dick pushes the memory aside and smiles at Kory. “So...ready to get out of here?”

Kory smiles back. “Lead the way.”

-----

In the end, *finding* Tye isn’t really the problem.

Stopping him turns out to be a bit harder.

“Supergirl, Rocket, Cheshire, clear the civilians,” Dick orders into the comm as another piece of rubble breaks against Raquel’s barrier. “Zatanna, Tempest, try to hold up as much of the structure as you can!”

In the middle of Central City, a giant yellow human shaped projection rips through the downtown.

Dick exchanges a look with Donna, on the ground, as she makes a rush for the creature’s legs, trying to trip it with her lasso. He coordinates, jumping from the roof and firing off another line as he works to find an opening to land on the thing.

The creature kicks out at Donna, forcing her to avoid, as a giant hand swipes at Dick like a fly. He flips out of the way, adjusting course to land on another roof.

Vic fires his lazer cannon to cover them, the projection absorbing it as if it’s nothing.

In the chest of the projection, I much smaller yellow force is lit up too bright to make out.

“Bumblebee, status,” Dick asks once he’s on the roof.

“Almost close enough,” Karen reports.

“Nightwing, my cannons aren’t doing anything,” Vic says. “I don’t even think it feels them.”

Kory comes in fast from above, hands lit up a bright, hot white, before she has to pull back to avoid the projection’s arm. “Same for my starbolts!”

Dick swears. “Omen?”
“It’s...not magic. Not quite, I don’t think,” Lilith hesitates. “I think it’s human. There’s...pain, confusion.”

“Got it!” Karen shouting over the comms. “I’m in close enough. Definitely human! Sending pics now!”

Dick takes in Karen’s video feed.

“That’s Tye!” Jaime’s frantic voice sounds over the comm from back in the Tower monitoring room. “That’s Tye! In the middle of that--that thing!”

There’s a muffled static sound as Tim takes over on the Tower comm. “Facial analysis confirms match for Tye Longshadow.”

“I have to help him!” Jaime’s voice says, further away from the mic. “I have to.”

Another burst of static movement and then Bart’s “No, Jaime! Wait! They’ve got it! Wait!”

“Um, I think you’ve got help incoming,” Tim says over the comm. “Wait, Bart?! A sigh. “Okay, make that two incoming.”

Dick grimaces. “We’ll handle it. How are the scans?”

The sound of typing.

“Based on the feed from your mask and Cyborg’s gear, I don’t think it’s technology based...Hang on!” Tim pauses. “Nightwing, there’s some kind of weird broadcast signal coming from it. I can’t get a hold on it!”

A giant fist crashes down on the roof and Dick rolls, dodging quickly to another building before he becomes a Nightwing shaped pancake.

“Can you stop the broadcast,” Dick yells over the comm.

“I can’t even figure out what it’s doing,” Tim says, typing frantically. “Wait, I think...I think it’s a monitor!”

Which means someone’s watching, Dick thinks.

The projection kicks out, nearly taking out Lilith before Kory pulls her out of the way.

“Try to track the signal if you can,” Dick says over the comm. “Titans, new plan, surround and contain! Something’s gotta work on this thing!”

“TYE!”

A streak of dark blue flashes across the sky.

“TYE!” The Blue Beetle face plate comes up, revealing Jaime’s face as he hangs in front of the projection’s center. “TYE! IT’S ME! IT’S JAIME! CAN YOU HEAR ME?!”

The creature’s arms swoops down, nearly slamming Jaime into a wall.

Jaime’s eyes widen. “TYE?”

The second arm comes up.
Dick slams into Jaime, the extra weight pulling the armor down just in time to avoid being hit by the next punch. Dick fires a line, pulling them to another building.

“It’s not Tye!” Jaime’s breathing heavily, looking up at Dick. “I mean--I mean it is him; but, it’s not him doing this! Tye would never do this!”

There’s a rush of wind and a pop in Dick’s ears and then arms are helping Jaime off the ground.

Bart shoots Dick a sheepish smile. “Um, surprise!”

Dick rolls his eyes. “You two need to get out of here. It’s not safe.”

“I have to help!” Jaime protests. “He’s my best friend! I’m not leaving him!”

Bart just crosses his arms, mouth setting. “And I’m not leaving Jaime.”

Dick pinches the bridge of his nose. “We don’t have time to argue--”

“NIGHTWING!” Donna shouts. “INCOMING!”

Dick turns, just in time to see giant yellow hands coming in fast from either side.

“Crap,” he mutters, readying another line and reaching back to grab Jaime. “Bart, run!”

“BOOM!”

For a second, Dick’s entire field of view is washed in white.

He blinks the spot out of his eyes, just in time to see the projection stagger back, yellow light blinking in and out.

Dick turns, looking back at Jaime. The younger teen’s mouth is hanging open, blue armor pulled back on his arm to form something like a cannon.

Dick blinks. “What is that?”

Jaime shakes his head. “I don’t know! It’s the scarab!”

Dick watches as the yellow light reforms, the creature charging at the roof.

“Well, whatever you did, keep doing it!”

Jaime shoots him a panicked look, holding up his arm. “Come on….please work…”

The cannon blasts again, white light hitting against the projection and sending it careening back. A second later, Kory’s starbolt strikes against it, the yellow light of the creature flickering in and out.

“It’s weakening it.” Dick grins. “Guys, hit it with everything we got! Aim for limbs, we get Tye out, I think we can stop it. Omen, can you reach him?”

The yellow of the creature stumbles back as it’s hit repeatedly, yellow light getting dimmer and dimmer.

“No.” Lilith’s voice sounds strained. “There’s something keeping me from getting to his mind. It’s like...a fog. I don’t think he’s even aware what’s happening.”

Another flash of white light hits the creature and it moves back, trying to dodge at the last second as
it hits heavily against a museum behind it.

A scream echoes faintly through the air.

“Nightwing!” Garth calls. “We’ve got civilians!”

Hunched between pillars of the museum a man tries to shield a small boy from the debris, the creature’s foot coming down barely ten feet away.

“I got them!”

Kara angles down to intercept, only to get slammed hard into a building by the projection. She sweats over the comms.

“It’s blocking them,” Donna realizes. “We need to knock it away!”

Barely a moment after, Jaime’s blast hits into the creature’s side, followed by an energy pulse from Vic and the creature slams its hands down into the street below, shaking the buildings with the force of an earthquake.

The child screams.

Five things happen, one right after another, in the span of a single breath.

One. Jaime’s next blast hits at the same time as Garth’s hydrokinesis.

Two. The creature stumbles back against the museum before its light finally blinks out.

Three. The museum pillars crumble and fall, family still trapped beneath them.

Four. Tye Longshadow drops from seventy feet in the air.

Five. A flash of light splits down the street.

CRACK!

A cloud of dust and debris fills the air, so thick Dick can barely see five feet in front of him.

“Zatanna,” he coughs over the comm.

“RAELC EHT TSUD MORF EHT RIA!”

The dust clears with a faint purple sheen and Dick blinks, bowing his head faintly at the sight of the wreckage that used to be a museum.

Here’s the worst part about being a hero, the sad truth that makes it hard to sleep...no matter how hard you try, you can’t save everyone.

Dick swallows at what he pretends is dust. “Cyborg, check for signs of life.”

“On it,” Vic says, voice heavy. There’s a pause and then Vic’s voice again, something strange and almost...light in his tone. “…Nightwing, I don’t think there’s any need. Look.”

Dick’s on the ground before Vic’s transmission even finishes.

Standing in the broken fragments of the street, an armored Jaime holds Tye Longshadow in his arms, skin ashy but amazingly still breathing.
There’s a sob and, slowly, almost on instinct, Dick looks up. Passed Jaime and Tye, passed the broken street and rubble, to just in front of what used to be the Flash museum.

The father is bent down, son in one of his arms and the other arm wrapped tightly around a figure in bright red and white.

Bart stands stock still, looking more stunned than either of them.

“Dad,” the little boy shouts, grabbing Bart’s hand. “we were saved by the Flash! It’s the Flash, Dad!”

Bart breaks out of it, just enough to give a small grin.

“Not the Flash. Just..just call me Impulse.”

-----

The heart monitor beeps steadily as Tye Longshadow lies unconscious in the Tower medbay.

Jaime sits next to the bed, arms wrapped tightly around his chest. “How can he just not wake up? There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“Lilith thinks it’s something to do with his powers,” Dick says. “Whatever the people who took him did to him, it activated and expanded his powers far beyond their normal ability. That kind of damage is going to take some recovery.”

“He’ll be okay though, right? He just needs some rest.”

Dick hesitates, pulling up a seat next to Jaime. “We don’t know. We’ve never seen this before. Who knows? He might wake up tomorrow and be fine or...well, we might have to find some different options.”

Jaime looks down. “This isn’t right.”

Dick sighs. “A lot of things aren’t. And not all of them can be fixed.”

Jaime doesn’t say anything immediately, letting a soft kind of quiet fall over the infirmary.

“I don’t think...I don’t think I can be a hero,” Jaime admits quietly. “I mean heroes are....they’re guys like you and Bart. And...and Kara and Gar and Troia...and freaking Superman! I’m not like that. I’m just me, you know? Just some guys who was at the wrong place at the wrong time and got superpowered armor that I’m not sure even likes me. I’m not like a genius or an alien or the the long lost descendant of a superhero....I just...I want to help.” Jaime hold his arms a bit tighter. “I want to really help so there’s not more guys like Tye laying around in hospital beds. And since...since it looks like this stupid scarab isn’t coming off anytime soon do you think I could... I mean do you think maybe....”

Dick lays a hand on his shoulder. “You’re always welcome with the Titans, Jaime.”

Jaime doesn’t look up. “I know I’m not exactly a hero.”

“I don’t know about that.” Dick quirks up a lip. “Wanting to help people? Making the world a better
place? Sounds kind of heroic to me.” He pauses. “You know there’s not exactly one right way to be a hero, right? There’s not a mold you gotta fit or a list you gotta check off. You just kind of….keep going.”

Jaime glances up, letting out a breath. “I guess I should practice with the armor more?”

Dick laughs. “Oh, trust me, that part right there that was the nice end of the speech. Ask Gar and Kara. You want to go out on the field again, you’re going to get so much training you’ll wish it was just practicing with the armor.”

“I guess I should probably break it to Bart that I’m joining the Titans.” Jaime shakes his head. “I swear sometimes I think he hates this armor more than I did.”

Dick keeps his tone mild. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s nothing. Just a joke.” Jaime shrugs. “He probably just hates that when I’m practicing, it means I’m not bringing him more Chicken Wizzies.” His smile goes a little bit softer. “Bart’s just kind of different, you know? In a good way, I mean. Probably like the rest of the Flashes, right?”

Dick’s expression doesn’t shift from mild interest.

“ Probably,” he agrees.

-----

“Hey.” Dick lets himself fall, catching himself to sit on the ledge of one of Gotham’s many ledges, high enough that the wind carries away the words almost as soon as they’re spoken.

Behind her mask, Barbara smiles back. “Hey.”

“How was your date?”

She shrugs. “Nothing to write home about.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay...It was a start.” She squints, looking out at Gotham. “I needed a new start.”

“Nah.” Dick grins. “You deserve more than a start. You deserve someone amazing, Babs, just like you.”

Barbara chokes on a laugh. “I love you, Dick Grayson.”

“I love you, too, Babs.” He knocks his shoulder against hers. “Best partner I could ever ask for. Don’t tell Jason or Tim.”

Babs moans into her hands, shaking her head. “You’re such an idiot sometimes.”

“What does that mean?”

“But, I guess I already knew that,” she says fondly. “Okay, enough about my love life, why’d you track me down?”
“Believe it or not, I didn’t actually need an ulterior motive to check in on you.”

“Ulterior motive? Of course not,” Babs pokes at the blue bird on his chest. “But what would vigilante life be without a little multitasking?”

Dick smiles a little bit helplessly. “Tim needs your help on a code.”

“Hmm, he texted me already.”

“I gave Jason some more files to look over.”

“Which I’m sure he can handle.”

“Blue Beetle’s joining the Titans.” He pauses. “Kory thinks Bart has a crush on him.”

“Does he?”

“Maybe,” Dick taps his fingers against the ledge. “Probably, actually, Kory’s better at telling those things than me and apparently Blue’s a big hero in Bart’s future. But, there’s something Jaime said...it’s bugging me.”

Barbara gestures for him to continue.

“If Bart wants Jaime to be a hero so much, why doesn’t he want him to train?”

Babs tilts her head. “Good question.”

“Yeah.”

But, with Bart, there’s always a lot of good questions. And very few good answers.

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“This is Cat Grant and you’re watching Hot Seat—hot topics, hot takes, live from Metropolis.”

On the screen, Grant stares solemnly into the camera. “Today, we have a special guest following the announcement by Titan’s leader Nightwing that the destruction of five blocks in Central City’s downtown was caused by an un-named civilian teenager, kidnapped and experimented on by an unannounced organization. To make matters worse, The Titans have released a warning that other runaway teenagers may also have been targeted. Here to discuss, we have leader of the Justice Society of America, Jay Garrick.”

“Thank you for having me.” Jay sighs, shifting in the armchair. “I just wish, for once, I could come for better news.”

“Before we get to the real issue, I have to ask. Mr. Garrick, despite your organization’s relatively small size, you and the JSA have become all but legends for other grassroot organizations in regards to member devotion. How can you account for your success?”

Jay gives a weary smile. “Well, Ms. Grant, sadly it’s not true success until our goal is accomplished. But, as for the dedication, all I can say is that when the JSA sees something wrong, we won’t stop
until we can fix it.”

She hums. “And I’m sure having an opposition as influential as the Titans hasn’t hurt your group’s publicity?”

“Opposition?” Jay shakes his head. “That’s a fair term, I suppose. I’ve never liked it, though. The Titans didn’t start out as our opposition, they started and still are simply other victims we’re trying to help. I guess that’s how these things go.”

He looks every inch a kind grandfather imparting hard truths. “Something I learned my own years in the tights, you never set out to make enemies. But, somehow, if you just keep fighting for what’s right, enemies show up to try to stop you.”

“You’ve certainly made no secret of your past superheroics, Mr. Garrick.” Grant tilts her head. “Tell me what makes what the Titans are doing now so different than your actions back then?”

“Nothing,” Jay answers calmly. “Nothing at all. They’re doing exactly what I used to do. It’s how I know it’s wrong. It’s always hard to assess your actions in the moment; but, when you’re like me and are lucky enough to live past the excitement, you see them for the tragedies they really were. That’s the reason I’ve never made a secret of my identity following the Invasion. I want people to know my past, I want people to know that I know exactly where the Titans are coming from, it’s why I know we need to stop them.”

He sighs. “The kind of system we have now, superheroes and sidekicks, it’s broken. It’s terribly broken and we don’t see it because we look up to capes and bright colors as a salvation instead of a sacrifice that should never be made. I’ve lost friends to this. I’ve lost a man I thought of as a son and boy that was like a grandson. They didn’t deserve it. No one deserves this.” His jaw firms. “And now...now we have teenagers, ordinary civilian teenagers just trying to live normal lives, who are being abducted and experimented on by whatever sick organization is the flavor of the day.”

He pauses. “But, if you want to know who’s really to blame, ask yourself this? Would anyone think that teenagers, not even fully grown, are the ideal model for metahuman experimentation if we hadn’t grown used to seeing teenagers fly away on screen? Teenagers, children, they’re supposed to be one of the most protected groups in the world but instead the very idea of the Titans has warped the idea until we barely blink an eye to see a thirteen year old run into a burning building. And who knows? Maybe I’m at fault, too. Even now.” He looks to the camera. “I’ve tried to be subtle, I’ve tried to protect the Titans from this kind of media attention just as I would every other child; but, there comes a point where blame has to be laid and the Titans need to face the consequences of their actions. The Titans are no longer just victims. The Titans continuing puts every child on the planet in danger.”

-----

Dick glances up from the desk at the sound of the door opening.

“You know what the most annoying thing about Jay Garrick is,” he says conversationally. “The amount of fucking public responses and press releases he causes me to write. It’s practically psychological warfare at this point. Lex Luthor’s caused me less headaches.”

Donna sits on the desk, tapping her finger against the page now stained with crossed out lines and
“You’re good at them though. You get people listen to you, make them like you.”

“That your way of saying ‘better you than me,’” he teases.

“Maybe just a bit,” she admits. “You okay, Rob?”

“Yeah...not like we didn’t know Jay was going to do something. Not with every news station from Central to Keystone speculating on the return of the Flash.” Dick chews on the end of his pen. “What’s Bart been doing?”

“Gar dragged him and Tim to the Kent farm, something about a new video game.”

Dick lets himself smile. “Wally always cheated on video games.”

“That your way of saying you lost?”

“That’s my way of saying I cheated better,” he corrects. “Superspeed doesn’t matter if you hack the software.”

Donna laughs. “What a little asshole.”

“I prefer Dick,” he agrees.

She rolls her eyes, looking back down on the page. “It looks good...which version is this?”

“The official statement, the one for the general public’s over there,” He gestures vaguely at a pile of notes. His head lands on the desk. “Don’, do me a favor and tell me some really big monster is attacking right now.”

“There is” Donna says cheerfully. “It’s called the news media. And, don’t worry, we’ll definitely need your help!”

“Hardy har har.”

“What was it you said? Better you than me.”

“Terrible best friend.”

“Best best friend.”

Dick grins, halfway to a retort when both their comms buzz at once, the lights in the room blink bright red as the Tower siren sounds.

“POSSIBLE LEVEL SEVEN EMERGENCY!” Garth’s voice sounds over the speaker. “ALL TITANS REPORT! REPEAT: POSSIBLE LEVEL SEVEN EMERGENCY!”

Donna and Dick are already sprinting to the monitor room.

Level Seven: Invasion.
“Garth, what’s the situation?”

“Take a look,” Garth pulls up the footage from the Watchtower, just outside the new zeta shield.

A giant green ship, round and almost like a massive bug, hangs suspended right in front of the cameras.

Behind Dick, the zeta beam glows bright yellow as the rest of the team crowds into the monitor room.

“Why are they just sitting there,” Donna asks.

Garth shakes his head. “I don’t know, one second they were hardly anything on a scanner and then boom, they’re right in front of our cameras.”

Dick sighs. “So advanced enough to have warp drive technology.”

“Nightwing,” Tim grabs Dick’s arm, mask sitting slightly crooked on his face from the hurry. “There’s nothing on the news yet, not even on the government satellites. I think this is only coming through on our feed. They’re blocking the rest.”

Dick frowns, gesturing to Tim and Vic. “Check it out. Find out everything you can about what they’re using.”

“Can they not get through the zeta-shield,” Raquel asks.

“That’s not how the zeta-shield works,” Karen answers. “It doesn’t have any physical structure. It should only stop transmissions.”

“They’re waiting.”

Dick turns, eyes landing on Bart standing frozen at the back of the room.

“What do you mean they’re waiting,” Gar asks.

Bart doesn’t answer.

Vic swears at the screen. “Incoming video transmission. Accept it?”

All eyes turn to Dick.

Dick presses his lips together before nodding. “Let’s find out who we’re dealing with.”

Vic hits a string of keys and the screen goes to static before a video feed replaces it.

“Greetings,” says a humanoid figure with pale green skin covered in blue markings. The figure smiles at them, holding up a white flag. “We come in peace. I am the Ambassador for the great Reach Empire, a peacekeeping organization dedicated to galactic cooperation.”

Dick clears his throat. “What is your business with Earth?”

“Only an offer of friendship,” the Ambassador answers calmly. “As a gesture of respect and a sign of non-aggression, we keep our ship outside of your borders and request merely a single meeting with the heroes of your world to prove our intentions.”

“And if we deny the request?”
The Ambassador continues to smile. “Then that is your decision. However, we believe we may have something that interests you.”

The Ambassador steps back from the video frame, only to be replaced by two new figures.

Two beings stand, individually encased in black and green armor.

Just like Blue Beetle.

-----

Dick stands in the meeting room, Donna and Will manning either of his sides while Queen Mera, Garth, and Tula take his far right and Queen Hippolyta with two of her warriors take the left.


Sometimes, Dick’s still not quite sure how he got here.

Looking far more out of place, Jaime stands to the side of the crowd, hand twitching ever so lightly to the scarab on his back.

Dick’s comm buzzes in his ear.

“They’re here,” Jade’s voice sounds.

The doors to the meeting room open, Kory and Kara leading in the small group of four. The Ambassador strides confidently in the front, both of the armored Beatles behind him and finally an alien with the same green skin and red markings.

The Ambassador smiles. “Ah, how lovely to see both a Kryptonian and a Tamaran refugee among your ranks. Honestly, it’s that kind of spirit of cooperation that made us decide approaching Earth would be a wise venture.”

Mera smiles with all the gentleness of a shark. “Oh? So, you’ve been monitoring us then?”

“Merely as a safety precaution before our official approach,” the Ambassador reassures. “As I mentioned, we’re merely a peace-keeping organization. We have to be careful about who we approach, not every world is as friendly as Earth.”

“Friendly,” Hippolyta repeats, sharp as a sword with dark eyes set firm. “An interesting choice given that you’ve cloaked your ship’s presence from all but the Titan’s networks. It’s been my experience that those that have chosen to hide, generally have something to fear.”

“An astute observation,” the Ambassador agrees. “Of course, I would expect no less from the fabled warrior queen of the Amazonian’s hidden island.”

Hippolyta narrows her eyes and the temperature of the room all but physically drops. Behind Dick, he feels more than sees Donna tense.

“My Amazonians stay neutral not out of fear for themselves,” she returns evenly, “but as an active decision for peace based on our love of the rest of the world. Great power inspires great enemies.”
The Ambassador holds up his hands in surrender. “Pardon me, I believe I misspoke. My words were meant to be a compliment. Prioritizing the needs of the world at large above the needs of oneself is the Reach’s truest ambition.” He shakes his head sadly. “It is why we decided to approach the Titans specifically rather than the world at large, as is our normal approach. We know you have suffered greatly from another alien presence in the past and believed our ship would panic the general public.” He pauses. “We understand the Earth may not be ready for an open alliance with an alien force so soon after your world’s attempted invasion; however, we are hoping those gathered here may be more open minded.”

Dick smiles, making it trusting and friendly as he slips into his own role to play off the Queens beside him just as he once did for Batman.

“Before there’s any talk of an alliance, I think it’s time for introductions,” he says. “You seem to know us already; but, we’re still a bit lost when it comes to you.”

The Ambassador smiles back. “Our culture does not have names so much as we do roles. As mentioned, I am known as the Ambassador while my companions are known as the Scientist,” he gestures to the alien with the red markings, “and, of course, the Black Beetle and the Green Beetle.”

Jaime’s head shoots up at the names. “They look like my armor?”

The Ambassador laughs. “Actually, I think you’ll find your armor looks like theirs. A happy coincidence on our part.”

The Scientist takes over, smooth almost sibilant voice filling the room. “It’s standard in our initial observations of the planet to scan for any existing Reach technology. Imagine our surprise when we found that one of our scarabs had crash landed here millennia ago and was used by Earth’s heroes. We thought it would make a wonderful peace offering to continue the legacy so we...I believe your word would be reactivated it….to find someone in great need and with a kind heart to serve.”

The Ambassador’s smile widens as he looks to Jaime. “And it appears it chose wisely, young man.”

Jaime swallows. “It...it chose me?”

The Ambassador nods. “The scarab is a gift! From the Reach to the Earth, a symbol of cooperation between our heroes and yours. Have no fear, it is far from the first time someone outside the Reach empire has become one of our greatest scouts.”

“I believe that is my cue,” says a warm voice and the Green Beetle’s face covering slides up, revealing a clearly Martian man. “I am B’arzz O’oomm, I will admit it is nice to be back in my home solar system.”

“A Martian,” Mera says, tilting her head ever so slightly in acknowledgement. “I must admit, I was sorry to see our planets’ partnership come to an end following The Manhunter and Miss Martian’s deaths. It is nice to see one of your people once again on Earth.”

B’arzz bows his head. “I am honored. You know my fellow Martians are unfortunately not too keen on space travel...especially since our solar system’s abandonment.”

“Abandonment,” Hippolyta questions.

The Ambassador lays a comforting hand on B’arzz’s shoulder. “Yes, I will admit the Reach does have further goals than a simple alliance. We’re trying to form a peace keeping organization to serve as an alternative to the Green Lanterns Corp.”
“The Green Lanterns Corp has served as Earth’s ally decades before we even heard the Reach’s name,” Mera counters. “What incentive could we possibly have for joining their alternative?”

The Ambassador’s face crumples almost in confusion before it resolves. “Well, that certainly is...a truly remarkable amount of loyalty to the Corps given the situation.” He shakes his head. “Regardless, the benefits are clear. An alliance with the Reach would be a full alliance where Earth would get a seat at the table just the same as the other members. The Green Lantern Corps only appears to be accepting of other species because of their barbaric recruitment methods; but, as I believe you all are well aware, the Corp’s Guardians hold the power, not their lanterns. No true new voices are ever heard. Tell me, even when the Corps did protect you, how often were any but the Lanterns ever contacted by the Guardians?”

The members of Earth choose to remain silent and the Ambassador breathes out in a smile. “With the Reach, it’s different. We’re interested in a democracy, not an oligarchy. The defensive zeta shield you have set up is a great starting point; but, what about larger scale problems like the Invasion? The Earth needs larger allies and the Reach is able and willing to be that start. And, unlike the Corps, the Reach does not abandon their allies when faced with challenges.”

“Abandon. Your group has used that word twice now,” Hippolyta says, “tell me why are you so certain we can no longer depend on the Green Lantern Corps as allies?”

The Reach contingent all exchange glances.

“Your Majesty,” B’arzz says slowly, “is Earth not aware of our solar system’s situation?”

Dick leans forward. “If there’s something you think we should know, you might want to speak up?”

The Ambassador sighs, face grim.

“The Guardians of the Green Lanterns Corps have declared this system a restricted zone. I’m sorry; but Earth is no longer under the Corps’ protection. When it comes to galactic defenses….you’re on your own.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait, guys! Just moved across the country. The next chapter should be the last of Year 6. Thank you to everyone for your support and I appreciate every comment, bookmark, kudos, and view! You guys rock!
The tension in the room is palpable even with the Reach contingent safely escorted back to their own ship.

Dick sighs, looking away from the monitors to the two other figures in the room. “The Green Lantern Corps are being contacted.”

Mera snorts. “For however much good that will do. The Reach was right on at least one thing. When’s the last time the Guardians have ever responded to a summons from Earth? Even before the Invasion?”

Hippolyta’s mouth firms, eyes sharp as ever even with the lines around them more pronounced. “The Guardian’s...abstinence from typical communication doesn’t necessarily mean the Corps have abandoned their duty to us.”

“It’s certainly not a good sign.” Mera lifts a brow. “The Corp’s Guardians are not your Amazonians, Hippolyta. They’re as far from a neutral party as possible.”

“No, but I like to believe they have a similar concept of responsibility as that of my warriors,” Hippolyta counters. “I find it hard to believe a single battle, even one as devastating as our Invasion, would cause them to abandon our entire solar system as a lost hope.”

“With all respect, Your Majesties, debating the Corp’s mindset isn’t exactly our concern right now,” Dick says. “Until we hear word from the Corps themselves, we have to plan for the worst. We have to assume we’re acting alone.”

Mera hums, surprised. “You think we should trust the Reach?”

“I think we should assume the most vulnerable position,” he corrects.

“And, in the most vulnerable position, what do you suggest we do,” Hippolyta presses.

“We need support,” Dick says bluntly. “Earth’s still a fairly new planet. We don’t even have the intel on the threats we could be facing. Trust me. When dealing with threats you can’t beat in terms of resources, you have to be able to out plan them. Currently, we can’t do either.”

Hippolyta’s expression gives away nothing. “So, you do think we should accept the Reach’s offer.”

He hesitates.

Hippolyta continues to watch him and Dick can’t help but feel like he’s being assessed.

“No,” he finally admits. “I don’t trust them. It’s too nice of a story. They come and tell us we’re in danger and, in the same breath, offer up a solution with no strings attached. Nothing’s that easy.”

A perfect story tied up with a bow. Easy, lucky, almost as lucky as finding a torn H.I.V.E badge at the scene of a kidnapping. The same kidnapping that gave the team Blue Beetle. And isn’t that something that deserves more thought?

Dick shakes out of his thoughts just as Hippolyta nods, slight approval echoing off the older
woman’s face. “The best way to predict your opponent’s next move is to make them believe they have only one option.”

“Then we’re agreed,” Mera says. “The Reach isn’t telling us everything.”

“And what of the Blue Beetle,” Hippolyta asks.

“Jaime’s a good guy,” Dick says quickly. “And one that Omen’s run as thorough a mental check as possible on. Whatever’s going on with the Reach, Jaime’s not involved.”

Hippolyta taps her hand against the hilt of her sword. “So another question, then. If the Reach is our enemy, why gift us with advanced technology that could be used against them?”

“If it can be used against them,” Mera adds. “I’d also like to know more about how they got a Martian working with them.”

“More and more questions without any answers,” Hippolyta surmises. “Not particularly a situation I like to be in.”

“Give the Titans a chance to follow in to a few leads,” Dick says. “We need time before we can do anything.”

The two Queens exchange a glance before nodding.

“Sensible enough,” Hippolyta agrees. She stands, her robes shifting elegantly around her like the old statues of Greek goddesses. “Then, if that is all that can be discussed, I would like a moment with my wandering daughter.”

Dick nods. “Donna’s in the common room with the others. It’s just a floor above.”

He stands to show her and Hippolyta holds up a hand to stop him.

“I believe I’ll manage,” she says before her eyes go sharp once again. “Not one, but two of my daughters have spoken quite highly of you, Dick Grayson of Gotham. I will be interested to see whether that faith was well placed.”

She glides out of the room before Dick can formulate a response.

He turns to Mera.

“Yes, Hippolyta’s always a bit terrifying, isn’t she,” Mera says. “When I first met her at mine and Arthur’s wedding, I was half convinced she’d eviscerate me at a single wrong word. I’ve seen killer whales with less bite.”

Dick falls into the seat next to her. “That’s nothing. The first time I met this one queen, I almost drowned.”

“That was your own fault,” Mera says primly, hiding a small smile before sobering. “You’ve always made a remarkably good ally, Dick, and do you know why? It’s because we’re on equal terms. I can trust you to do what you need to do just the same as you can trust me. The Earth’s terms with the Guardians were barely tenable back when we had two Green Lanterns serving in their upper ranks.”

She shakes her head. “Yet, somehow, the terms that the Reach gave are even less reasonable. To hear them talk, they want practically nothing from us.”

“What are you thinking,” he asks.
“I think that those aren’t terms of alliance, they’re terms of *servitude*.” Mera’s lips go tight. “Dick, I’ve been Xebellian far longer than I’ve been Atlantean. Being pressed under another kingdom’s rule can be even worse than standing alone.”

“You know I don’t disagree with you,” Dick argues tiredly. “But, Mera, what happens when another invasion comes? If we’re alone, we’re powerless. That’s the whole point behind any alliance, behind the Titans even. The more of us there are, the more defense we have.”

Surprisingly, Mera laughs. “Powerless? And tell me, Dick, would the Titans have quit if Atlantis had not given their support? I seem to remember it a bit differently.”

“I remember, too, and was that power or the desperation of being the only choice,” Dick shoots back just as quick before he leans back, rubbing at his eyes, “...and this is a far different scale, Mera.”

“Yes,” she says firmly, standing and squeezing his shoulder. “But, Hippolyta is right about a good many things. Don’t forget the Earth’s strong alone, too.”

Dick doesn’t answer and Mera nods.

“I have a kingdom to reassure and I’m sure you have your own business to take care of,” Mera says, already heading to the zeta room. “I’ll tell Artur you say hello.”

A few seconds more and Dick’s alone.

He taps on his comm.

“Hey,” Barbara’s voice sounds on the line, the slight echo of the Batcave around her. “Still alive, then?”

“For now.” He smiles.

“And are we being invaded?”

“...Undecided. Any word from Jason or Roy yet?”

“No.” She continues before he can speak. “They were tracking down one of the Light leads in Bialya, Dick. You know the rules there, radio silence unless it’s an emergency. They know what they’re doing. Don’t start worrying yet.”

He sighs. "Only Jason could go on a mission right before an *alien invasion*.”

Barbara laughs. “He’s going to be so mad when he gets back.”

“I’ll give him the Cliff Notes,” Dick says dryly. “Maybe this’ll teach him not to complain there aren’t any ‘cool missions’.”

Barbara hums lightly before her tone drops lower. “...how bad is it, Dick?”

“I don’t know,” he answers truthfully. “And it looks like it’s the Titans’ job to find out.”

“I’ll keep you updated here,” Barbara promises and there’s a small click as the connection ends.

Dick grimaces, restraining from the urge to just...to just go wait on the side for someone older to step in and come up with a plan that’ll somehow make everything okay.

There isn’t anyone else coming though. And Dick stopped believing in perfect plans six years ago.
They always cost something. Always.

“I’ve got an idea, okay?”

He pushes himself up and off in the direction of the Titan’s living quarters.

This time, he doesn’t even get the chance to knock before Kory’s pushing her door open and pulling him inside.

Her arms wrap around him and, for one second, Dick lets himself relax, his own arms coming up to hold her closer.

He kisses her hair before pulling back to address the other person in the room. “Thanks for waiting for me.”

“Of course,” Kara says immediately. “Seemed like kind of an all hands on deck thing. I already texted Martha and Johnathan that Gar and I’d be at the Tower tonight. You want to know about the Reach, right?”

“Yeah,” Dick confirms. “...and the Green Lantern Corps. Anything that can help.”

Kara and Kory exchange a glance.

“Sorry,” Kara says quietly, “Krypton didn’t really do the whole Green Lantern thing. I mean I’m sure we were part of some Lantern’s jurisdiction; but, Krypton was a science planet to the extreme. The whole defend the galaxy schtick wasn’t exactly what they pushed us kids into...and Uncle Jor El was pretty big on learning about Earth once he found out Krypton was failing.”

“What about the Reach?”

Kara shakes her head. “Never heard of them until today.”

“I have,” Kory speaks up. “Not much, unfortunately. It was...when I was a child, before the Citadel, before the Psions. Back when I was still being trained to serve Tamaran.”

“What do you remember?”

Kory presses her lips together, thinking. “I believe they were telling the truth about their relationship with the Green Lanterns. I remember learning about...tensions, I suppose...a long time ago, maybe close to two millennia. I think the Reach is under some manner of treaty with the Guardians.”

“What was the treaty about,” Dick asks.

Kory shakes her head. “I do not remember the exact details. Something about specifying terms of engagement to divide areas that were under the Reach’s control from the Lanterns.”

“That might at least explain some of the Reach’s behavior with Earth,” he says, turning the facts over in his head to try to find the Reach’s strategy. He looks up. “Anything else you remember?”

“Sorry,” Kara says, rubbing the back of her head. “I’ll tell you if I think of anything, though.”

Kory just smiles apologetically.

“Alright...,” Dick takes a breath, talking more to himself. “This is still better than we had....We just need to...just need to figure out...”
Kory lays a hand on his shoulder, stopping him before turning to Kara. “Do you mind if we have a moment?”

“Oh... oh, yeah, sure, I’m just going to, ah,” she waves her hands vaguely, “go find Gar and Vic.”

And then she’s gone with only the kind of quickness that Kryptonians and speedsters can manage. The door falls shut behind her.

The hand on Dick’s shoulder moves to his face, tilting it up until he meets Kory’s eyes.

“How are you, my friend,” Kory asks.

Dick gives a small little laugh. “Feeling like I need to run forty directions at once and my legs are bound together….so, you know, pretty normal, actually.”

“Not every storm has another side,” Dick says.

Red light. The heat of a ship core stinging across his face. The tick of a countdown.

“Shh,” Kory pushes up to kiss him gently. “We can make it through this one.”

Dick lets his shoulders fall, leaning forward until his head is resting against hers.

“Stay here,” Kory asks.

“I can’t,” he breathes out. “I need to check in with the rest of the team, run through the databases,...try to come up with a few failsafes just in case….oh, not to mention Jason and Roy are still somewhere in Bialya because of course, they are.”

Kory kisses him again, brief but thorough, until she leans back, dropping her hand to run along his arm until her hand is clasped in his.

“Come back then,” she compromises.

Her hand is smooth and warm and Dick can feel the energy running from it until his hands are just as warm. He doesn’t want to let go.

“...I don’t know if I can tonight,” he says, the words pulled out unwillingly.

Kory only smiles. “I did not say tonight. I only need you to come back.”

Dick’s chest feels tight like it’s suddenly a size too small.

“Always, Kory,” he promises. “Always.”

Kory squeezes his hand one last time before letting go to pull open the door.

“Hurry so you come back then,” she tells him and Dick makes himself move before he can stop and reconsider.

The door shuts behind him and Dick finds himself smiling at it anyway.
Something small and light and terrifying is beating in his ribs and Dick’s working really hard on not looking at it too closely.

Then, there’s a rush of wind so sudden Dick shivers.

“Bart!”

Bart Allen is standing at the end of the hall, more jittery and nervous than Dick’s ever seen him, like one wrong move will send him scurrying.

Something clicks in Dick’s head. Two pieces coming together in a way that leaves more questions than answers.

There’s always more questions than answers when it comes to Bart.

Dick approaches him carefully, like he would a scared kid or a feral alley cat.

“Bart,” he says quietly, “are you looking for me?”

Bart blinks, plastering a smile on his face far too haphazard to be believable. “Well, yeah, I mean aliens--er, um, I mean more aliens--that’s so...so crash, right? Yeah, so, the Reach? It is the Reach, yeah? What are you thinking? I mean--”

“Bart,” Dick cuts him off, “is there something you want to tell me?”

The hum of the Tower lights echoes around them.

“No,” Bart says.

Dick sighs. He was really hoping it would be the easy way.

“Bart, I need you to tell me what you know about the Reach,” he says bluntly.

Bart’s eyes widen--fake, fake, fake. “Why would I know about the Reach? They didn’t exist in my universe.”

“Except that’s a lie,” he says. “I know it has to be a lie because they’re the ones that reactivated the Blue Beetle armor. If the Blue Beetle was a hero in your world, it had to be because of the Reach so I’m asking again: what do you know?”

“I don’t know anything.”

“Bart, we’re facing an alien invasion here,” Dick says, struggling to keep his voice calm. “I’m not your enemy!”

“I know that,” Bart snaps out. He’s practically vibrating now. He stops, clears his throat. “...I know you’re not.”

“If there’s something I need to know, you need to tell me,” Dick tries again. “Look, everyone has their secrets. I get that. I worked under Batman. I know about keeping secrets. The difference is when it’s other people’s lives at stake. Now, Bart, is there something you need to tell me?”

Bart’s lips stay firm as he shakes his head.

Dick steps back, closes his eyes and breathes. “Then I pray to God, that’s the truth, Bart. I really, really do.”
He turns because there’s things to do, plans to make, contingencies to alter.

“...Dick,” Bart whispers, tone fast and scared, “...just because you’re not my enemy doesn’t mean...doesn’t mean I won’t end up being yours. I’m not a hero. I know I’m not.”

Dick turns back. “Bart, what does that--”

Dick’s alone in the hallway.

His comm beeps.

“Nightwing,” he reports.

“Dick,” Babs’ voice sounds rushed, “we’ve got word from Jason. We need an emergency retrieval now!”

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“We’re fine ,” Jason insists over the line.

Dick looks over Vic’s shoulder at the jet’s targeting map. “We’re five minutes out. And, no , you are not fine. You’re surrounded by soldiers and being held down by gunfire in an abandoned cave in Bialya ! That is the very definition of not fine , Robin! Un -fine!”

Jason doesn’t say anything immediately, long enough that Dick is half hopeful and half afraid that the words actually took.

“...well, obviously, the cave’s not that abandoned now is it?”

Dick swears, pinching the bridge of his nose.

He spares a glance to Jade. “I’m going to kill them….Right after we save them, I’m going to just murder them both.”

Jade smiles sharply, a knife twisting in her hand. “I’d help but unfortunately that would put me down two free babysitters.”

“We’ll get you new ones,” he promises.

“In this economy?”

Dick huffs out a laugh, going back to the comm. “Status report?”

“Same as a minute ago,” Jason says, sounding bored. There’s muttering in the background. “Oh, wait, no, Speedy says he’s getting a cramp. What do you know? The mission’s first injury.”

“Robin,” Dick warns.

Jason sighs heavily. “We’re fine, Nightwing. I told you they didn’t see where we went. I hacked the monitors, they’re searching the ground level. All we need now is for you to hurry your asses up so we can get a proper extraction.” A pause and the next words come out slightly mulish. “I did the responsible thing.”
Dick winces, mentally debating commenting before there’s a hiss from the comms.

“Shit,” Jason swears, voice dropping low. “One of the contingents broke off and is headed our way. How far out are you?”

“A minute but we’re coming in from the other side,” Dick says, tensing. “Can you manage until backup?”

There’s another pause, longer this time.

“....yeah,” Jason steadies his voice. “Yeah, we can do it.”

Dick tries to believe him.

Bialyan troops travel in groups of seventy five. Five contingents, each made up of fifteen highly armed and well trained soldiers. Fifteen soldiers against two sixteen year olds. Those are hard odds no matter how good the teens are.

Everything...everything can always change so fast.

He looks to the team. “Remember, this is an extraction mission. Team Alpha distracts the soldiers while Team Beta gets Robin and Speedy. We get out quick. Zatanna and Cyborg are on getaway. Troia’s Team Alpha leader. Cheshire, Omen, and Bumblebee with me. Everyone, stay safe and keep moving.”

Vic turns to Dick, hand going to the console button. “Ready?”

Dick grabs the bar above him and nods. “Ready.”

The jet’s floor drops out from under them.

Zatanna stretches out her arms, hands glowing blue. “Etativel!”

The fall is halted almost as soon as it starts with the team floating down the sheer rock face. Dick stamps down on the not-quite-right feeling of falling through the air when he’s not the one controlling it.

Their feet touch the edge of the cave.

Not a second later, they’re moving—all with the uncanny grace and coordination that only comes with the kind of deep familiarity that normally has Dick smiling to watch.

The guards see Kory first, the quick tap of bullets flying through the space only to be melted in a wave of intense heat before they can land.

And then, it’s chaos. Terrifying, loud, messy chaos, perfect enough to distract form four figures breaking off to the left tunnel.

“Found the soldiers,” Lilith says as they scale quick up one of the metal support structures lining the tunnel walls. “To the right...probably 50 meters away.”

Dick swears, checking his wrist computer for Jason’s locator. “Have they found them?”

“No, not y--”

There’s the sound of gunfire, far, far too close.
They start running.

By the time they arrive, four of the soldiers are already down on the ground, the rest firing at a pile of boxes Dick would bet his life has two teen superheroes hiding out behind them.

A shot ricochets off the stone wall, landing a bit too close for comfort and Dick hears a muffled curse from Roy. Jade takes out the soldier that fired it before the next breath, adding in the one beside him for good measure.

Karen takes her left, the distinct zap! of her stingers taking out two more guards as they aim their guns at Jade’s back.

Dick moves forward, firing off a line at the bars along the ceiling and pulling up in a flip over the crates.

He lands in a crouch, smirking. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Behind the mask, Dick has the distinct impression Jason’s rolling his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, now let’s get out of this stupid cave.”

Another volley of gunshots starts, only to cut off a second later.

“Clear,” Jade’s voice calls out.

Roy stands, stretching. “Hey, Chesh, enjoy the exercise?”

Jade hums. “Not much of an exercise.”

“Rude.”

She kicks at one of the downed guards. “Was this you?”


“Better. I’m still adding a few more... stronger options,” Jade says. “Just in case.”

“There’s stronger?”

Jade pinches his cheek, making an honestly disturbing fake cooing noise. “Adorable. I can teach you the same time as Lian.”

Roy swats her hand away, grumbling under his breath.

Dick turns to Lilith. “Think you can get us out of here without running into any more guards?”

Lilith nods. “Team Alpha’s already made a good dent in the ones upfront.”

“Don’t know why an entire Bialyan squad’s even here in the first place,” Jason grumbles.

“We’ll figure it out when we get home,” Dick says before pausing. “Speaking of, there’s something we need to catch you up on. Something...something big.”

Jason groans, rubbing a hand over his face. “I was only gone twelve hours! What could have happened? A freaking alien invasion?”

“...”
“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

-----

“---so, really,” Tim continues, “if you think about the odds, it’s incredible that the Bialyan troops just happened to choose to patrol the caves the exact day that you and Roy did. I mean really it has to be like ten thousand to one--”

“Uh-huh,” Jason says without looking up from his phone.

“--and that’s not even counting the odds that you also missed the Reach, so when you throw in those probabilities--”

“Tim,” Jason cuts him off, exasperated, “get to the point!”

Tim smirks. “You’re like the unluckiest person alive!”

Jason glares.

Tim’s smirk widens.

“Next patrol, I’m punting you off a freaking building,” Jason says.

“That’s fine. Given your luck, you’ll miss.”

“Hey, Tim,” Dick steps in, cutting off Jason’s next retort. “Mind helping Alfred with lunch? I need to talk to Jason for a second.”

Tim frowns in close to a pout. “If it’s about the Reach, I can help--”

“Tim,” Dick interrupts. “I know you can. Just...later, okay?”

Tim nods, reluctantly heading up the stairs.

The door to the cave clicks shut behind him.

Jason turns to Dick, crossing his arms. “We could’ve handled it if we needed to, you know. Back in Bialya. Roy and I could’ve made it out fine if we had to. Calling the Titans just made it easier.”

“You’re not always going to have backup,” Dick says.

Jason’s frowns. “So, what? You’re saying we shouldn’t have called!”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“You think we should’ve been able to handle it ourselves rather than--”

“That’s not what I meant,” Dick repeats. He falls back in the chair by the monitors and sighs. “Look, Jay, I need to talk to you about what we’re going to do if the Reach thing doesn’t go our way. I’m dividing the team. You’re Team Gamma leader. I need you, Roy, Tim, Gar, Bart, Jaime, and Kara to stay out of this for now. You can use the old Young Justice cave as a secondary base. Understand?”
Jason's fists clench tight at his side. “Is this about Bialya?”

“No.”

“Bullshit,” Jason accuses. “You think I screwed up the mission and now you're banning me from the Reach!”

“No, I--.”

“Yeah, right?!” Jason shouts, nearly quivering in his anger. “You don’t trust me so you’re benching Roy and me at the kiddies table with the newbies! That’s such bullshit, Dick! You know how hard I train! You know I can handle this. I’ve been doing this for two years and not once have I given it anything less than my all. And, now, because one mission goes to shit, you’re putting me on the sidelines! I can handle an alien invasion, Dick!”

Dick’s on his feet, shaking Jason’s shoulders before either can think. “JASON! THE LEAGUE COULDN’T HANDLE AN INVASION!”

Jason stares at him, wide eyed.

Dick lets out a slow breath, willing his voice to a more controlled level.

“Robin,” he says quietly, “I need you to listen to me. The last time we faced an invasion, the only reason we survived was that Young Justice was separate and, therefore, able to act after the Justice League fell. Now, I need you to take Tim and Roy, Gar, Kara, Jaime, and Bart and make sure all of you are away if there’s a fight. Do you understand?”

The cave goes silent. Completely and utterly silent.

Jason swallows, face gone pale. “Dick, you...you don’t really think it’s going to get that bad...right?”

Dick hesitates.

“Jason, I don’t...I don’t make plans where we fail. Not ever.”

Red light. The heat of a ship core--

Dick shakes it off. “But...things can go bad whether it’s in my plans or not.” His lips firm. “Jay, this isn’t my main plan. Not even close. This is just our failsafe. And I’m sorry. This isn’t fair. I shouldn’t be asking you this at all. I shouldn’t ask this of anyone and I’m going to do anything I can to avoid it. But...but, I need you there in case things go wrong, alright?”

“...”

“Jason?”

“...yeah...yeah, okay. I...I understand.”

Dick relaxes. “I trust you. Always. You know that, right? And you did fine in Bialya, stop beating yourself up about it. Tim’s right; it was just bad luck.”

Jason lets out a slightly strained laugh. “Already forgot about it.”

Jason’s still staring straight ahead without particularly looking at anything.

“Hey, Jay?”
“Mhm?”

“T’m proud of you.”

Jason finally blinks, turning to Dick with a disgruntled expression. “Ah, crap, Dick, it’s bad enough already. Don’t start saying all the emotional stuff, too! Because then if you start, you’re gonna want me to start and I hate that stuff, Dick! You know I do!”

Dick laughs, holding up his hands in surrender. “Fine, fine, far be it for me to trick you into emotions. I guess I’ll have to use the actual end of the world for that.”

“You’re the worst!”

“Sticks and stones.” Dick turns to the stairs. “Now, come on, I’m starving and I know you’ll want to tell off Tim for all the things he’s supposedly doing wrong in the kitchen.”

Jason’s slowly shaking himself back to normal. “Kid, doesn’t even know how to slice an onion right, Dick.”

“Is there a wrong way?”

“This shit here is why Alfred banned you!”

Dick rolls his eyes.

He’s almost to the stairs when something hard hits into his side, wrapping around him.

He frowns, looking down at the top of Jason’s head. “Jay?”

“Shut up,” Jason huffs like he’s not hugging him. “And don’t you dare tell anyone about this.”

“No one would believe me.” Dick smiles, wrapping his arms around Jason’s shoulders in return.

It lasts for a second, maybe two, and then Jason’s pushing off, almost running up the stairs and muttering to himself all the way with the door slamming shut behind him.

Dick shakes his head, amused.

There’s a cold rush of wind, almost like a draft running through the cave.

Dick doesn’t look behind him. “Change your mind?”

“I….maybe,” Bart answers.

Dick finally turns.

In many ways—possibly too many—Bart is exactly like Wally West. He’s got the wild hair, the lanky build, he’s energetic to the point of aggravation, and he has that uncanny brightness that all the speedsters have like it’s interlaid in their very skin.

Bart is not Wally. Dick isn’t stupid. He knows Bart isn’t. Bart hides and obfuscates like he doesn’t know how to stop where Wally could barely bluff in a card game. Where Wally had soft, kind edges, Bart has too sharp eyes and sad smiles. Wally was transparent and honest and good just like his uncle, like his adopted grandfather before him. Bart is...harder to define.

“What are you afraid of, Bart,” he asks.”You know--you have to know I’ve realized some of it. I
know the world you came from wasn’t as nice as you want us to believe. I know we lost the Invasion. What else are you trying to hide? Why are you trying to hide it?”

Bart looks down at his shoes, scuffed and beat up. “....you’re right. We lost the Invasion.”

Dick lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Okay. That’s a start. What else?”

“It wasn’t…it wasn’t the Invasion you’re thinking of.”

Dick stops.

“...what?”

Bart fidgets. “That one--the one that happened six years ago--it didn’t happen in my world. It never happened on my world. I don’t know why it’s different.”

Bart takes a breath and closes his eyes.

“....in my world, we lost the Reach Invasion.”

Dick tries to stay calm. “The same Reach we just met with?”

“Yeah,” Bart still isn’t looking up. “They even sent the same people to do it. The Ambassador, the Scientist, the B-Black Beetle and Green Beetle. It’s...it’s all going to be the same, Dick. And I don’t--I don’t think I can stop it. I don’t think I can--”

Bart’s mouth falls shut with a click.

“We can do it together, Bart,” Dick steps forward cautiously. “I just need you to tell me what you know.”

Bart finally looks up. “I didn’t tell you the worst part. The reason Earth lost, the greatest weapon that the Reach had….it’s Blue Beetle, Dick. They’re going to use Jaime. And it’s going to destroy him.”

On the other side of the glass, Jaime sits on the infirmary bed, tense and jumpy like a single wrong move will fracture him.

Bart buzzes around him, barely staying still for more than a second as he lobbies topic after topic at Jaime more akin to someone playing a haphazard game of darts than a conversation.

Jaime gives him a weak smile in return, whenever Bart stops long enough to see him.

“Are you sure,” Dick asks.

Lilith shakes her head. “I’m not sure about anything with this. We’re talking about technology from an entirely different species. The only thing I can say right now is that Jaime’s definitely the one in control for now.”

He sighs. “And there’s no way we can bring the scarab totally offline from the Reach’s control? Make sure they can never access it?”
“Dick, I can’t even tell right now how the Reach could link to it. You said Dan Garret used it for years, right? Maybe in our universe, the scarab’s broken.”

Dick shakes his head. “That’s not a risk we can take. We’re already going through Garret and Kord’s notes to see if we can find anything.” He runs a hand over his face. “Right now, all we can do is make sure Jaime’s as far from the Reach as possible. Make sure they never even get the chance.”

Donna clears her throat behind him. “And that sounds like my cue.”

Dick turns, giving a brief smile. “Hey, sorry I couldn’t go with you.”

“Delegation’s a virtue, Dick. Glad to see you’re finally learning it.” Donna comes to lean next to him. “Besides, it went fine--or at least as fine as it could given the situation.”

“How did the Reyes take it,” Lilith asks.

“That their son secretly got bonded with an alien parasite or that said alien parasite might try to take over the world?” Donna shrugs. “Shock, mostly. But, they agreed to let him stay here and go along with the cover story. As of today, Jaime Reyes was officially diagnosed with rheumatic fever.”

“That’s at least one problem down,” Dick says, pushing off from the window and heading toward the Tower meeting room. Donna and Lilith follow him. “Jason’s taking the Gamma Team to set up base in the Young Justice cave this afternoon. Hopefully, the Reach won’t even know where to look for him.”

Lilith nods. “And everything else?”

“Well, I guess that’s what the meeting’s for,” Dick says, pushing open the door.

Everyone else--with the exception of Bart and Jaime--are already crowded around the table.

Zatanna looks to Lilith. “What’s the verdict?”

“Mentally, Jaime’s clear of Reach influence,” she hesitates, sliding into her chair. “For now, at least.”

“Now, we just have to keep it that way,” Vic says grimly.

The room is tense. And….for the first time in a long time, Dick recognizes it as fear. The few that fought in the last invasion are staring down at the table while the rest who watched the world fall around them look nervously at each other.

Something sharp shifts against Dick’s chest, something jagged and rusty and wrong.

He doesn’t want his team to be afraid.

And maybe...maybe that’s all it is. Maybe Mera’s right and all it takes is a single choice, a single act of defiance even if it can cost everything.

Or maybe it’s something else.

What would Bruce have said?

What would Wally?

Dick’s felt powerless before. It’s not a new feeling, just a greater scale. He’s been fighting against
bigger opponents since he was a nine year old in pixie boots. Since he was thirteen, watching a spaceship explode.

The jagged feeling in his chest doesn’t go away but he fights against it anyway.

He looks up. “We’re going to win.”

Around the table, heads jerk up to stare at him.

“This isn’t six years ago,” he says firmly. “This isn’t an invasion we’re losing before we even get in the fight. This is a fight that we’re going into fully armed and with the advantage.”

“Dick,” Garth says carefully, “even with an advantage, it’s still an invasion without allies.”

“We have allies,” he corrects, “we have the Atlanteans, the Amazonians, and we have us.”

“Is that really enough,” Jade asks darkly.

“Has it ever not been,” Dick counters back. “We have one of the strongest teams that Earth has ever seen and we’re going in with an advantage of foresight.” He shakes his head. “And no, you’re right, it isn’t going to be easy. When are things ever easy for us? But….that doesn’t mean we’re going to lose. That doesn’t take away from any of the other hard things we’ve been fighting against for the past six years.”

He pauses. “Someone very wise told me recently that the best way to predict an opponent is to make them think there’s only one move. We’ve have more than one move. In fact, we have options they haven’t even guessed at.”

“The Reach is just another mission, guys,” he says firmly. “It doesn’t matter if they come from Earth or space, we can beat them.”

The room watches him and slowly, almost gradual, the unease shifts into determination.

“We’re the Titans.” Dick stands, looking at the table one by one. “We built ourselves in the ashes of what we’ve lost and we never stopped fighting. I’m not going to stop fighting now because the Reach was foolish enough to pick Earth as their next target. We’re Titans. And we stand together. Always.”

Donna smiles like she always does. “Titans forever.”

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“Dick.”

Dick stops, hand still stretched out to the zeta keypad.

He turns. “Jade?”

“I need to talk to you,” she says, already dragging his arm and all but shoving him into one of the smaller meeting rooms.

She locks the door behind her.
Dick raises an eyebrow. “Has anyone told you motherhood’s made you even scarier?”

“Thank you.” She turns to face him. “I need to know if we can trust Bart Allen?”

He sighs. “He’s not lying about the Reach Invasion, Jade. Or about Blue Beetle. I know it. I trust it. People don’t time travel to stop a perfect world.”

“I’m not talking about his intel.”

Dick frowns. “Then what do you mean?”

She hesitates. Jade hesitates. That alone is enough to set Dick on edge if he wasn’t already.

“I mean…,” Jade begins slowly, “…he grew up in a very different universe, Dick.”

Dick pauses, thinking through the words.

“I think we can still use the information despite the differences in the timelines. Too much of it already lines up.”

She stares at him. “You’re not listening.”

“I’m trying,” he counters. “Jade, it’s been a very, very long day. Please, I’m begging you here, if you think there’s a legitimate reason to distrust Bart just tell me.”

“No.”

“No, there’s no reason?”

Jade shakes her head. “No, I don’t think I’ll tell you…because I’m not sure I disagree with him yet.”

Just once, Dick would really like things to go the easier way.

“Then, why drag me in here?”

Jade shrugs. “I do try to follow my better nature. Sometimes, at least.”

Dick rolls his eyes. “Jade, no offense, but I reached my daily fill for cryptic answers trying to pry information out of Bart. If you’re not going to tell me, I’m going home and getting sleep before I pass out.”

Jade simply nods, opening the door.

Dick trails out, eyeing her suspiciously.

He hesitates, right before they reach the zeta. “I wasn’t lying in the meeting, Jade. We can beat them,”

“I know,” she says simply. “But not everyone has the same kind of methods.”
"Still no response, then," Dick asks.

A sigh rattles over the communicator. "The Guardians have always dragged their pointy blue feet when it comes to answering anything, Dick. Don’t give up hope yet."

Dick rubs at his eyes.

"Thanks for your help, Alan."

Alan Scott smiles on the screen. "Anytime, kid. All you’ve gotta do is ask."

"Sure, you don’t want to join back in the fight," he asks, half hopeful.

"I’m retired." The old former Lantern laughs, eyes crinkling around the edges. "And, unlike Jay, I know that means to but out. He eyes Dick seriously. "You’re doing a fine job with the Titans, Dick. You don’t need us old timers slowing you down."

Dick smiles. "Thank you."

"I’ll update you when I get word," Alan agrees and with a click, the screen goes black.

"If we get word," Dick can help but mutter, sipping at his coffee and pulling up another file.

Two weeks since Bart’s new intel and the Titans are still working on the long game until they can find an in. Two weeks of slow, meandering conversation between Dick, Mera, Hippolyta and the Ambassador with no real progress to show.

It’s the best way. Dick knows that. It’s the safe option until they can gather more resources to make sure they can put the Reach down hard and without casualties.

It still feels eerily like playing a game of cat and mouse with the team on the wrong side of the equation.

He sets the mug down, glancing around the manor kitchen. "Where’s Barbara?"

Alfred gives him a look, highly implying he should already know.

"Is she on a date," he guesses haphazardly. For some reason, it’s always the option no one ever tells him about.

"No, Master Dick, I believe she’s put a momentary suspension on her romantic life at least until after we’re finished dealing with a secret invasion starting at any moment."

Dick rolls his eyes. "She shouldn’t. With that kind of logic, we’d never get any free time."

"Indeed."

"So, where is she?"

"In class, sir." Alfred raises an eyebrow. "A place, I highly suspect you should be."

Dick winces. "There’s an invasion, Alfred. I can catch up on my classes later."

"What was it again?" Alfred hums. "With that kind of logic, we’d never get any free time."

"I’m never going to win one of these, am I?"
“I do have far more practice, young sir.”

“An unfair fight, then,” Dick mutters, distracted by the files.

Alfred allows him a moment.

“If I may be so bold, sir, to ask what’s on your mind.”

Dick snorts. “As if you’ve ever had to ask.”

He drums his fingers along the counter, thinking.

“We need an in,” Dick says finally. “We have Bart’s information, now, we just need a way to use it. More than just an option the Reach hasn’t considered, an option they’ve entirely thrown off the table.” He rolls his shoulders. “And, then, there’s the H.I.V.E.”

“The H.I.V.E.?”

Dick holds up the badge Jaime found at Tye’s abduction. “Too big of a coincidence to assume the Reach wasn’t behind Tye’s kidnapping. Which means that somewhere they have to be holding the other runaways, too. Which also means they’ve been on Earth far longer than we assumed or….they have another source.”

He pulls up another file, scanning down it to follow a hunch.

Alfred clears his throat. “And what about Mr. Reyes?”

“Hmm?….oh, we’re still working on hacking the scarab. Tim think he’s got…..” Dick trails off, looking at a write-up of the attack on Central City, “….an idea. Until then, I wouldn’t worry much. From what Jason says, Bart’s barely letting Jaime out of his sight.”

“I suppose that’s understandable. For Mr. Allen, especially.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

He scans through Jason’s mission to Bialya. Tim’s right, the odds of troops patrolling there were extraordinary. Unlucky-- just the opposite of finding a H.I.V.E badge or getting a too good offer of alliance.

In his peripheral, Alfred shakes his head somewhat fondly, turning back to the oven.

For Mr. Allen, especially...

Dick stops, pulled out of his thoughts so sharply it feels like a car crash.

“Alfred,” he says slowly. “Why is that ‘understandable’ for Bart especially?”

Alfred frowns. “I thought it was fairly obvious, Master Dick--”

Dick’s heart is beating fast in his chest. Bart’s always been close to Jaime. Since he first showed up. They’re friends, maybe more than that. Everyone who’s been at the Tower knows it. Bart cares. Of course, he’d stick close.

But, Dick doesn’t ever remember telling Alfred that. Alfred’s never seen Bart and Jaime together. How is it obvious?
“--After all, from what you told me, the Blue Beetle was responsible for the destruction of Mr. Allen’s universe,” Alfred continues, unaware. “I’d imagine Mr. Allen would stay quite close.”

Watching with Will from the other side of a window.

“He’s quieter than Wally.”

He’s focused.

“I can’t read his reactions.”

Talking to Tim.

“Almost like he doesn’t view the world quite the same.”

Bart smiling, too bright, too happy when Blue Beetle first showed up. A lie.

“I guess I got a bit over excited at actually getting the chance to meet him.”

Was it all just a lie...

“Bart is not Wally, Dick.”

I know.

No, not just a lie.

“Just because you’re not my enemy doesn’t mean I won’t end up being yours. I’m not a hero. I know I’m not.”

Not a lie. But, that would mean...

“Not everyone has the same kind of methods.”

The mug falls from Dick’s hand and breaks across the floor.

“Oh.”

-----

Bart stands on the other side of the meeting room.

He’s not fidgeting, not running around the room, not babbling off a thousand and one tiny things. He’s still.

He knows.

Dick watches him.

There’s a truth that’s never acknowledged. That’s never had to be acknowledged. You can’t stop a speedster. Not even a Kryptonian can. There’s no way to truly stop someone that moves faster than you can think.
Only a faster speedster can and Bart….Bart Allen is the fastest man alive.

Bart clears his throat. “Jason said you wanted to see me?”

“I do,” Dick says. “I realized something. You never answered why. You told me what. You told me about Jaime, about Blue Beetle, about the Reach. But you never told me why you were afraid to tell me.”

Bart looks down at his shoes.

“You know why,” he mutters.

“I need to hear you say it, Bart.”

Because if not, Dick doesn’t think he’ll ever fully believe it.

Bart shrugs stiffly. “You’re a detective, you can guess. Don’t make me say it, Dick.”

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll guess and you can tell me if I’m wrong. How’s that?”

Bart doesn’t say anything.

“Let’s start with what I know.” Dick pauses. “I know that, in your world, we lost the Reach Invasion. I know that people died, that heroes died. I know that the world you came from wasn’t a good one. I know it was bad enough that the only way you thought you could save it was to build a time machine and make sure that it never happened in the first place.”

Bart’s fidgeting again.

“I know the kind of world you came from was one where you had to make hard choices,” Dick continues quietly. “I know that you had to have a plan to fix it. I don’t think the plan was just to save Barry Allen. Am I wrong?”

Bart takes an unsteady breath. “No.”

“I know you told me Blue Beetle worked with the Reach. I know you said he’s the reason they won.” Dick doesn’t drop his gaze. “I also know you’ve been at Jaime’s side since the moment he showed up at the Tower. I know when I asked, you lied and told me Blue Beetle was a hero.”

Dick pauses one last time. “Bart, I think your real plan was to stop Blue Beetle. Am I wrong?”

Bart stays quiet, lowering his head.

“And I don’t think your real plan was to save Jaime,” Dick says. “....I think your plan was to kill him.”

Bart doesn’t look up.

“Bart, am I wrong?”

A second, then two.

Bart lets out a wet sounding laugh. “You know Wally always told me not to play guessing games with Bats. Guess he was right, huh?”

It’s been over a month. You’ve had hundreds, millions of opportunities to kill him if you truly thought it was the right choice. That has to mean--"

“*No! STOP!*” Bart’s shaking his head almost violently. “Don’t do that, Dick! Don’t think I’m a hero just because I haven’t--because I couldn’t...*I told you I’m not a hero, Dick! I can’t be!*”

“Making the choice to save someone’s life,” Dick says. “To care about them even when you know their potential to hurt. What makes you think that’s not--”

“I SAID DON’T DO THAT!” A blink and Bart’s in his face, hands pulling on Dick’s collar. “I *KNOW* WHAT A HERO IS! I’ve heard it, over and over again. From Wally. From Jay. From *you*. I’m not a hero. The world that built me, the *person* I am...this isn’t one of those things that’s going to be stopped with the power of hope and a pep talk, Dick. *I’m* not one of those things. I’m...I’m broken and I’m not a hero. I’m never going to be.”

Bart sighs, finally letting go of Dick’s collar. “You don’t understand, Dick. Blue Beetle, he was a monster. He didn’t just help the Reach win, he betrayed the League. He *killed* them. Jay, Grandma Iris, Batman.... *you*.”

Dick lays a hand on his shoulder. “That’s not Jaime, Bart.”

“He killed Wally.” Bart’s hands are fist at his side. “It took them years to find us; but...he killed Wally, Dick. And if I wasn’t so weak, I’d be able to...”

“Blue Beetle’s not Jaime,” Dick repeats. “And you know that. Because if you didn’t, Jaime Reyes would already be dead.”

Bart looks up with dead eyes. “I know. But, what if that’s not enough?... I can’t be a Flash, Dick. I can’t be a hero. I know I can’t. *But*, I can make sure others can be. I can at least make sure they get the chance.”

“Why don’t you start with Jaime,” Dick argues. “Don’t lie to me, Bart. I know you care about him. You just need to keep trying.”

Bart’s shoulders slump. “*Do what you have to, we must save the world.*”

Dick stops.

“Wally told me it was something Grandpa Barry used to say.”

Dick shakes his head. “He didn’t mean this, Bart.”

“I--”

Dick’s comm goes off.

“Nightwing,” Donna’s voice rings out. “We’ve got the Ambassador in the lobby. He’s requesting a meeting. He says it’s about Blue Beetle.”

“I’ll be there,” Dick answers. “Call in the rest of the Titans that’s not on Team Gamma. I want back-up in case there’s an issue.”

“Got it,” Donna says before signing off.

He turns to Bart. “You know I can’t let you go back to the Young Justice cave. Not now that I know.”
Bart fidgets and nods. “You know you can’t really stop me, right? Not forever.”

Dick sighs. “I only need to stop you long enough to change your mind. And lucky for me, I think you want me to change it. Bart: stay here.”

Bart swallows.

“....okay.”

Dick watches him. “We only need time, Bart. I promise, we only need time.”

-----

“Ambassador.”

The green skinned alien turns, hands clasped behind his back as his eyes land on Dick. “Ah, Nightwing, a pleasure to see you as always. Don’t tell the queens, but I confess I believe I enjoy our meetings the most.”

Dick grace-ful hides a snort. Probably because Hippolyta never bothers to fully hide the air that she’d rather skewer the man and eat him alive and Mera only holds back enough to seem like she’d at least wait for silverware first.

Sometimes, Dick still feels remarkably like he’s wearing a bright leotard and listening to criminals cry their hearts out as long as they don’t have to face the big bad Bat.

“That’s an honor to hear.” Dick smiles. “You wanted to discuss Blue Beetle?”

“A quick meeting,” the Ambassador assures. “We were only curious why we had not spotted him out on patrols the last few weeks.”

“Oh, Jaimie just came down with a simple Earth bacteria. We took him off patrol until he’s feeling better.”

The Ambassador’s eyes widen. “It must be serious if the scarab hasn’t already healed it. If he needs medical assistance, I’m sure our Scientist can see him.”

Dick shakes his head. “It’s not serious. He should be better in a few weeks all by himself. Maybe the scarab just didn’t have the bacteria in its database yet.”

“Aha, knowledge--another reason that the Reach and the Earth with benefit greatly from our alliance.” The Ambassador sighs. “Though, I must admit it is...troubling that negotiations have yet to start. I don’t suppose you have any advice on swaying Queen Mera and Queen Hippolyta to our side?”

Dick smiles thinly. “It’s not the Reach, Ambassador. We’re still waiting for word back from the Green Lantern Corps.”

The Ambassador tilts his head, frowning. “You do not believe us about your system’s abandonment by the Corps?”

“It’s just a courtesy,” he says. “Trust me, the Earth---including Queen Mera and Queen Hippolyta---are not unaware of the generosity of the Reach’s offer. I’m sure we can reach an arrangement soon.”
“That’s good to hear.” The Ambassador sticks out his hand. “A pleasure as always.”

Dick takes the hand, the conversation with Bart still running in his mind.

He lets the hand go before he can’t.

“Let me show you out, Ambassador,” he says with a smile.

The man goes without complaint and Dick watches him, all the way until he’s out of the room, out of the Tower, and finally--finally--until he’s out of sight.

Dick lets out a breath, slowly letting his shoulders relax.

He taps his comm. “Don’, we’re good. He’s gone.”

Static greets him.

Frowning, he tries again.

Static.

...The comms are down.

….the comms are….down.

Dick starts running, faster than he’s ever run in his life.

The comms are down.

In a meeting with the Reach.

When all the Titans are in the Tower.

They know.

A trap.

They’re under attack. Dick knows it with a terrifying certainty that settles in his bones.

He runs into Donna the moment he gets to the third floor.

She grabs his shoulders to steady him, eyes wide. “The comms are down!”

“I know!” Dick’s hearts beating hard in his chest. “Where’s the attack? Who’s down? How--”

“Dick!” Donna’s frowning at him. “Calm down. Vic said it was just a computer error. We’re safe. The Tower’s not under attack.”

Dick stops. He blinks.

The Tower’s not under attack. The comms are down and….the Tower’s not under attack.

His blood goes cold.

“Donna, it’s not the Tower! It’s the cave! They’re going after Jaime!”
Lights flicker around the Young Justice cave as the team steps out of the zeta.

Dick taps his comm. “Robin? Red Robin?”

There’s nothing but static.

“Impulse, go,” Dick orders and in a flash of light, Bart’s gone, checking every inch of the cave.

Garth steps forward, laying a hand on Dick’s shoulder. “I can’t hear them.”

Dick takes a deep breath. “Spread out. Zatanna, locator spell?”

“Arena!” A pause. “Nightwing, something’s coming. Left corridor.”

Dick tenses, holding up his escrima sticks. “Everyone, get ready!”

A figure appears, scant light from the hall casting shadows across his face.

He’s limping, desperately holding the wall for strength.

“Nightwing!”

Jaime Reyes throws himself forward off the wall, catching Dick’s shoulders.

“Please,” the teen begs. “Nightwing! You have to help me! The Reach--they attacked! Please! I don’t want them to get the scarab!”

Dick tries to steady him. “What happened?”

“I don’t know!” Jaime shakes his head frantically. “They just attacked and then I ran and--”

There’s a rush of wind.

“I found the others. They’re unconscious. No Reach soldiers--,” Bart stops, staring. “Jaime?”

The panic slowly slides off Jaime’s face, replaced by a smile.

His eyes are flat.

“Shit.

“Guess the jig’s up, huh, hermano?”

There’s a flash of blue armor and the buzz of electricity.

Dick falls to the ground, unconscious.

-----
Dick blinks awake to the familiar feeling of metal cords cutting into his wrists and legs. The soreness of being electrocuted still stings through his muscles.

He focuses his eyes.

The Reach Ambassador smiles back at him.

“Aww,” Dick slurs, voice getting stronger. “Is this your way of saying I’m not your favorite anymore?”

The Ambassador laughs. “Humans. You know I think what I’ll miss the most about your pathetic world is your sense of humor.”

Dick takes stock of his surroundings.

They’re still in the zeta room of the old Young Justice cave. The Titans are around him—bound and certain members with large metal collars around their necks, but alive. That’s the important thing. Team Gamma is propped against the other wall, right next to…

A bomb sits in the middle of the cave.

With Blue Beetle standing next to it.

“How?” Dick turns back to the Ambassador. “How did you find out where Jaime was?”

The Ambassador chuckles again. “Find him? We never lost him.”

“We’re ready,” The Scientist says, walking back from the zeta port.

The Ambassador nods absently, still looking at Dick. “You know you could have caused us a real problem here. One of our greatest weapons with a malfunctioning scarab? Honestly, I shudder to think of the consequences. It’s a good thing we thought to check it beforehand. The Blue Beetle was never yours; he was always ours. Right from the beginning.”

“But, I checked his mind,” Lilith speaks up, the collar around her neck. “I checked! That was Jaime in control, not the scarab.”

“A gambit on our part and luckily, a successful one,” the Ambassador says. “We knew you wouldn’t fully trust it unless it still had the appearance of being controlled by one of yours. Easy enough, really, to activate the scarab remotely once he was put in ‘hiding’. The pinnacle of a millennium old technology versus the mind of one small human teenager. There was no contest.” He looks up. “Isn’t that right, Blue Beetle?”

The Blue Beetle walks to the Ambassador, movements sharp and robotic. “The bomb is ready to be activated, Ambassador.”

“Jaime?”

Both Ambassador and Blue Beetle turn to look at Bart, glaring up even from his position on the floor. With the collar, he looks distinctly small.

“You can beat it, Jaime,” Bart says. “You don’t have to do this.”

The Ambassador cocks his head. “Ah, yes, the boy from the future. Another unexpected hitch in the plan. Congratulations, boy, you see normally we like to take our time hunting down the host planet’s protectors. I’m sure you understand why. It sets the tone: no matter how strong you are, you’re all
prey to the Reach. But, now,” the man gestures to the room at large. “We’re going with a different tactic, one with less loose ends. Besides, I’m sure blowing up the Titans and an entire mountain will still be quite the message.”

Blue Beetle steps forward. “It’s time to go, sir.”

“Right,” the Ambassador turns back to Dick. “I take it you’re aware of the situation by now. You’re trapped, the metas on your team are secured with our inhibitor collars blocking off their powers, our bomb is set to go off in ten minutes, and—as of a few moments ago—our scientist has set up a zeta shield around your cave.” He smiles. “We thought it was fitting, you see. Your new shield is what convinced us it was time to act before you became more advanced. Now, a shield can doom you twice.”

He turns to the rest of the team. “So, any last words?”

Jason spits at him. “Fuck off!”

“Charming.” The Ambassador swings an arm around one of Blue Beetle’s sides, the scientist taking the other. “If it helps, you never had a chance to beat us. Not really.”

And then Blue Beetle’s in the air, flying out of the top of the cave with all three of them disappearing in the darkness.

Dick waits a second before shrugging out of the bonds, Tim, Jason, and Jade doing the same in his peripheral. Roy glares, struggling more obviously against them until he’s doing the same.

“Red Robin, check the bomb,” Dick orders. “Everyone else, check the collars.”

“No need,” Bart huffs, hands going up to pull at his own in a way that looks painful. “I know these. They’re still the old models.”

A click and the collar falls to the ground and Bart blurs into movement. There’s a flash of lighting, static stinging across the room, before the rest of the collars are on the floor.

“Nightwing,” Tim calls, voice panicked. “The bomb! I can’t hack it! It’s Reach technology, I don’t even recognize it!”

Dick swears. “Rocket, can your shields take the explosion?”

“It’s a mountain!” Raquel shakes her head frantically. “My shields can take maybe half of it or direct some of the rubble! But, no way, I can take the entire explosion!”

“Starfire?”

“I---,” Kory bites her lip, “I may be able to absorb the heat, but I cannot melt pure stone.”

“Supergirl, can you run it out?”

“They laced it with Kryptonite,” Kara says quietly, hand reaching out to grip Gar’s beside her. “It’s how Blue Beetle took me down in the first place….Nightwing—Dick, they were prepared for us, they created this bomb specifically to destroy us. I don’t think we can beat it.”

“Yes, we can! We have to!”

Dick turns, bending down next to Tim to look at the bomb.
It’s a heap of dark black metal, inscribed with foreign symbols. The only thing Dick can even begin to recognize is the blinking red numbers.

Six minutes left.

Tim swallows. “Dick, I… I don’t know what to do.”

Donna comes to Dick’s other side, gripping his shoulder tightly. Jason stands behind Tim.

Dick lets out an unsteady breath.

“It’s okay, Tim,” Dick whispers. “It’s okay. We’ll think of something.”

Five minutes.

Dick thinks through the cave, trying to remember something— anything—that they can use. He thinks about...

The kitchen. M’gann, smiling at Conner while she baked cookies.

The training room. Dinah helping Kaldur with a new punch.

The living area. Wally and Artemis bickering over a movie.

The living quarters. Wally’s souvenir room. The showers. The infirmary. Red Tornado’s room. The mission briefing room. The ship dock.

The zeta room. The last place Young Justice was all together before their final mission.

The place where now there’s a bomb he can’t stop.

Behind him, he can feel his team watching him, waiting for the plan. The miracle, really, because there’s always a miracle. A last ditch play to save the day….

….until there isn’t.

Four minutes.

Dick closes his eyes.

The tick of the bomb still rings in ears.

It’s warm beneath his hand.

….Red light….

….The heat of a ship core stinging across his face….

….The tick of a countdown….

Dick’s eyes fly open.

“I’ve got an idea, okay?”

The Titans are staring at him.

“I’ve got an idea,” he repeats. “Everyone, get to the zeta platform! Now!”
The entire team rushes to comply, even if the confusion’s still obvious.

“Dick,” Donna stands beside him as he moves to the zeta keypad. “What are you doing? The Reach said there was a zeta shield around the cave.”

“I know,” Dick says, typing in the code. “That’s why we’re not going anywhere. Tim, how does the zeta system work?”

“Hacking a way around the shield would take hours!”

“Just tell me how it works, Timmy.”

“It separates, transfers, and reassembles molecules,” Tim answers with a frown.

Three minutes.

Dick finishes the code. “Exactly and what happens when the molecules can’t be transferred. What happens before they reassemble here?”

Tim’s frown deepens. “They--”

“They vibrate,” Bart answers suddenly. “They vibrate until they can find the right frequency to reassemble.”

“Absolutely.” Dick gives a small smile. “The exact same system a speedster uses to vibrate through walls.”

Vic’s eyes widen. “We’re not going away from the explosion.”

Dick nods. “The explosions going to go through us. We’ll be going at a different frequency than the rubble.”

Two minutes.

He turns to Raquel. “How long can your projection shield hold without you present?”

“Maybe fifteen seconds,” Raquel answers.

“Great, use it to make sure the explosion doesn’t take out the main zeta processor,” he says, gesturing to the small piece of machinery beside the zeta. He turns to Kory. “Think you can handle the residual heat?”

Kory smiles. “I can do it.”

Dick smiles back before addressing the entire team. “If we time this perfectly, we can do this. We can survive. And then,” his smile flattens, “the Reach won’t know what hit them.”

The team nods, expressions going serious and silent.

One minute.

“Bart,” Dick grabs the younger boys shoulders. “You’re the only one who can start the zeta and make it in before it activates. You’re in charge of starting it, got it?”

Bart nods, standing by the keypad.
Thirty seconds.
Dick lets out a breath. “Raquel, ready?”

“Ready.”

Twenty seconds.
“Kory?”

“Ready.”

Fifteen seconds.
“Bart?”

“Ready.”

Ten seconds.
Dick takes one last look at the Young Justice cave and just...for the span of a few seconds...let’s himself remember.

….There’s always a cost.

“NOW!”

The cave disappears around him to the sound of a bomb going off.

-----

Ash is still falling from the sky an hour later, burning in the small fires not yet extinguished and blanketing everything else in a dull grey. The cave’s gone. The mountain’s gone.

His team’s alive.

That’s what matters.

Bart and Tim are still bent over the intact zeta processor, trying to find a way around the zeta shield.

Tim sees him watching and offers a smile. “Almost got it.”

“Good. Just make sure the Reach doesn’t catch it.” Dick nods, turning to the rest of the team.

The Titans are covered in streaks of ash, still poking around at what’s left of the cave. But, there’s an energy in the air, an anticipation that Dick recognizes like the second after pulling off a jump he didn’t think he’d make.

We survived. What’s next?

Dick grins, wide and just a bit wild.

“The Reach thinks we’re dead,” he says succinctly. “That’s good. That’s our in --the best
opportunity we’re ever going to get.”

The team moves around him, getting ready.

“Here’s the plan,” he says. “Donna and Garth are already informing Queen Hippolyta and Mera. The Amazonians and Atlanteans will attack the Reach ship from the outside, draw their attention.”

He pauses. “Ours is the real mission. We zeta outside the ship, find a way inside, and take out the Beetles. Without them, the Reach doesn’t have an offense.”

Jade nods, crossing her arms. “What’s the strategy?”

“Divide, surprise, and conquer,” Dick answers. “Last time, they took us by surprise. That’s all the Reach strategy ever is, working off surprise and false assumptions. This time, we return the favor. Three teams. Team Alpha--Garth, Donna, Raquel, Jade, Jason, and Roy--are on Black Beetle. He’s the least familiar with Earth tactics so use it to your advantage. Team Beta--Zatanna, Kory, Vic, Kara, and Gar--takes Green Beetle. Remember, under everything he’s still got the same weaknesses as a Martian. Use heat.”

Dick’s mouth go firm. “Lilith, Tim, Karen, and Bart are with me on Gamma. We’ll take Blue Beetle.”

“And what….are we doing with Blue Beetle,” Kara asks cautiously. “It’s still Jaime. Under all of it.”

Dick sighs. “I know. We’ll figure that out once we have him secure.”

He looks to the rest of the team. “Any other questions?”

No one has any. The three teams sort into their groups to further strategize.

A few minutes later, Tim looks up. “We’re ready to zeta.”

Dick nods.

And then, he smiles at his team one last time.

“They think we’re dead. Now, let’s go make them wish that were true.”

-----

With the distraction of the entire Amazonian and Atlantean armies surrounding the Reach ship, finding a way into the Reach ship goes surprisingly easy.

Tracking Blue Beetle is trickier.

Team Gamma turns down the next hall. “Anything?”

Lilith shakes her head, not opening her eyes. “Nothing yet.”

Dick taps his comm out of habit, only to hear the same empty static as a reply.

They can’t re-activate a comm system for a team that’s supposed to be dead. Dick knows that.

It doesn’t make the static any less unsettling.

They’re in an empty hall in the ship, guarding Lilith as she stands in the center and tries to find Blue
Beetle’s mental frequency. Karen’s shrunk down, patrolling their immediate surroundings, while Tim is still muttering at his wrist computer as he tries to find a way to hack into a completely alien system.

Which leaves only two.

Bart’s staring at him, the same questioning gaze that he’s been looking at him with since back in the wreckage of the Young Justice cave.

Dick knows why.

“I’m going to check the left hall,” he announces. “Impulse, come cover me.”

Bart nods.

They barely get out of ear shot before--

“Why did you assign me to Blue Beetle?”

Dick sighs. “Bart, you were going to go after Blue Beetle whatever team I assigned you. At least, this way you won’t distract the others. The others can’t afford distractions right now.”

“Oh.”

Dick would smile if the situation was less serious. “Not every plan’s going to have an easy, safe answer.”

“Does that mean…,” Bart fidgets. “Does that mean you’re not going to try to stop me?”

Dick shakes his head. “It means I think you’ll make the right choice.”

“You’re wrong,” Bart whispers. “I...I can’t. You know why I can’t.”

“You can.”

“If I don’t…,” he fidgets again, “if I don’t, the entire world could be destroyed. Everything I came back for. Everything I tried to fix. Just because I was selfish.”

“It’s not selfish to not want to kill someone, Bart,” Dick says. “If you’re wrong, an innocent person will die. Jaime will die. Give us more time, Bart. That’s all we need more time.”

“That’s not--

“Nightwing,” Tim’s voice calls out and Dick’s stomach drops. “Omen found him! Two hallways to the left--”

Bart meets his eyes. “We’re out of time.”

And then, he’s gone in a flash of lightning running down the hall.

“Shit,” Dick curses, turning back to Tim. “Stay back and wait for Bumblebee!”

Dick starts sprinting.

The sound of scraping metal reaches his ears before he sees the fight.

“How are you alive?!” Blue Beetle’s entire left arm has shifted into a blade, swiping through the air a millisecond before Bart vibrates through it.
Bart doesn’t answer, thrusting a still vibrating hand up before hopping back. Blue’s cannon leaves a dark singe mark in the place where Bart stood.

“I’ll kill you again,” Blue Beetle hisses. “Slowly.”

Bart’s quiet as he dodges before Blue’s other arm hits him hard on the side, knocking him to the floor.

Blue aims his cannon at him. The cannon heats up a bright white.

Dick’s escrima stick hits the armor in the chest, sending a volt of pure electricity to knock him back.

Blue Beetle recovers quickly, narrowing his eyes at Dick. “Another to kill.”

And then...

Bart’s fist hits Blue Beetle’s chest.

No...no, that’s not quite right.

Bart’s fist goes through his chest, the hand vibrating as it clutches where Jaime’s heart should be.

Everything stops.

“BART!” Dick yells, running closer. “DON’T DO IT!”

Bart ignores him, eyes not looking away from the armored face of Blue Beetle.

“Let me see him,” Bart orders quietly.

Nothing happens.

Bart pushes his hand further into the chest, sparks of white lightning running up his arm.

“Let. Me. See. Him.”

The face plate comes up and then, Jaime Reyes is looking back at them, eyes blank.

“I’m sorry,” Bart whispers, small enough that even Dick barely a foot away has trouble hearing. “I have to do it. You understand, right? I have to.”

Jaime’s eyes remain flat, expression unmoving.

The arm cannon twitches.

“BART!” Dick yells.

The arm cannon burns a bright blue, aiming at Bart’s head right before--

It stops.

The arm that holds it up is shaking faintly.

Something, something small moves behind Jaime’s eyes and….

Jaime’s head moves, the smallest most minuscule movement almost like… a nod.
Bart’s eyes widen.

There’s the sound of footsteps behind them. “Impulse! Nightwing!”

Bart’s hand twists and Blue Beetle crumples to the ground, unmoving. Bart falling to his knees beside him.

Dick can’t do anything but stare.

Beside them, Tim skids to a halt, eyes huge as he looks at the body. Karen and Lilith stand beside him.

Tim’s head jerks up to Bart. “Is he...is he dead?”

There’s a long pause as Bart stares down at Jaime’s body.

“No,” he finally says, tone expressionless. “Just stunned. I moved his heart out of rhythm. Will probably take a few minutes to recover.”

Dick gains the breath back in his lungs almost violently.

Tim just blinks, unaware. “Oh. How’d you know you could do that?”

Bart shrugs.

“Lucky guess,” he lies.

Dick finally gets his voice back. “Omen, secure him. Make sure he doesn’t wake up.”

“Got it,” Lilith says, closing her eyes and bringing a hand up to her head.

Tim’s already got his wrist computer back up, continuing to attempt hacking into the system.

Dick looks to Bart. The speedster’s still standing quietly, expression still in the way that means he’s processing thoughts at a million miles an hour and covering up each of them before it shows.

Dick moves beside him, not saying anything, just laying a hand on his shoulder.

Bart doesn’t look up.

“Nightwing,” Tim says, voice picking up in surprise. “You’re....you’re not going to believe this.”

“What is it, Red,” Dick asks, coming over.

“It’s the code,” Tim’s says, nearly tripping over his words. “The code I’ve been trying to figure out from the Light files! It’s not just a code! It’s a key! It’s....it’s the most extensive backdoor code I’ve ever seen.” Tim stops, staring up at Dick. “I can....I can get into the Reach’s system! I CAN SHUT THE ENTIRE SHIP DOWN!”

Something’s beating in the back of Dick’s mind, the final piece of a puzzle that he doesn’t have time to look at right now.

“Do it,” Dick orders before pausing. “....Wait, before you shut it down, let’s do one more thing…”

Karen, Tim, Lilith, and even Bart all look up at him.

Dick smiles. “I want to have a chat with the Ambassador.”
The lights are out in the ship’s control room as the Ambassador frantically types in commands.

“You won’t find them.”

The Ambassador jumps, twisting around to find the voice.

Through the dark, Dick smiles, leaning idly on the desk.

The Ambassador stares. “You’re...you’re supposed to be dead.”

“Am I?” Dick hums. “I’m curious. Do the Reach have the concept of ghosts?”

The Ambassador swallows.

Dick pushes forward. “I guess it doesn’t matter. You’re trying to contact your Beetles, right? You won’t find them. My team’s already taken care of them. And your Scientist.”

“You’ll come to regret that,” the Ambassador threatens.

Dick circles him slowly, feet light almost like a dance. “I won’t.”

“You will,” the Ambassador swears. “You think this is all of the Reach’s forces? We were merely an envoy! An entire army is coming! Straight to your pathetic world!”

Dick laughs.

“Promises, promises. Tell me, do you ever get tired of making claims you can’t keep?”

He stops circling abruptly, leaning in until he’s a few inches from the Ambassador’s face.

“I’m going to explain the situation to you and then, because I’m nice, I’m going to offer you a choice.” Dick grins. “I wasn’t lying. We checked as soon as we brought the comms back up. Your Beetles are all down--taken out by surprise--and our psychics going to make sure they stay down for as long as we need them to be. More than that, we’ve hacked your ship and, without the Beetles, your basic troops won’t stand a chance against the Amazonian and Atlantean armies. You’re done here.”

He leans back, still smiling. “Now, let’s go back to your threat, shall we? I know you were an envoy. In fact, I have no trouble imagining that there’s a larger Reach army out there. What I don’t believe is that said army is going to attack Earth. Do you know why?”

The Ambassador stays silent.

“Because you don’t have more Beetles,” Dick says quietly. “I don’t know why. Maybe it’s because you lost the how-to guide over millennia, maybe it’s because they were never yours in the first place. I don’t know and, frankly, I don’t really care. What I do know is that if you could make more, you would. You called them your greatest weapon, why stop at just three? Why not equip your entire army with scarabs?” He tilts his head, dropping his voice even lower. “And why if you had better options, would you rely on a broken scarab a millennium old and with a problem of malfunctioning?”
Dick shakes his head. “We have your Beetles, you can’t make more, and if we really wanted to, we could make sure those scarabs never see the light of day again.”

The Ambassador lets out a small sigh. “What’s the deal?”

Dick throws an escrima stick, watching it spin through the air before catching it and throwing it again.

“Well, it’s more of a favor really,” he admits.

The Ambassador narrows his eyes. “What is it?”

Dick catches the escrima.

“A quick death.”

When he looks up, the Ambassador’s paled so significantly he’s almost white.

Dick laughs cheerfully.

“A quick fake death,” he adds carelessly, throwing the escrima again. “I imagine your Empire isn’t going to take too kindly to the man who lost them three Beetles to a ‘second rate’ planet. Take the favor and, as far as the larger galaxy knows, you were killed on Earth.”

The Ambassador sniffs. “That’s not much of a deal. Giving up my entire life, my very name, so I can go live destitute on backwater planets hoping the Empire won’t find me.”

The escrima lands hard in Dick’s palm.

“I don’t think you understand,” he says slowly. “You attacked my planet. You kidnapped and experimented on children. You tried to kill my team. As a rule, I don’t believe in killing. Queen Mera and Queen Hippolyta don’t share that philosophy.” He takes another step forward until the Ambassador is pressed against the keyboard. “So, yes, you will live penniless on the most miserable, isolated, unforgiving planet that Starfire and Supergirl can remember to ship you to. And, while you’re living there, you will spend every single second of your life hoping that either mine or Mera’s or Hippolyta’s more charitable nature hasn’t run out.” He smiles sharply. “And if anyone ever asks you how you ended up there, why you’re living like that, I want you to tell them this. It’s because you thought Earth was easy prey and You. Were. Wrong.”

He leans back again. “Do we have an understanding?”

The Ambassador nods, hands gripping tightly against the table. “What do you want in return?”

“Lucky for you, that’s pretty easy.” Dick’s smile flattens. “I want you to tell me everything about the Reach’s deal with the Light.”

-----

The air is humid and heavy with the feel of an approaching storm. The rubble crunches under Dick’s feet as he bends down, knocking away lose stones to get to the dented metal underneath.

Two weeks after the explosion and the entire area of what used to be Mount Justice is still closed off
and faintly smoking. Today’s the first time Dick’s gotten the chance to really look at it.

It’s kind of funny in a way….or no, funny isn’t that right word. Humbling. That even something as massive and steady as a mountain can be lost between the seconds.

*It’s not important*, Dick reminds himself.

He’s still not sure if that makes him feel better or worse

A soft thud lands behind him.

He holds up the dirty, dinged Helmet of Fate. “Figures if one thing was going to survive an explosion, it’d be this.”

“We survived,” Kory corrects softly.

“True.” Dick moves to stand. “Tye’s showing signs of waking up, by the way. We’ll give him a few days to recover and then put him with the rest of the rescued teens for therapy and training their new powers.”

“Do you think any of them will stay with the Titans?”

He shrugs, looking up to the dark clouds. “I think most of them just want to go home.”

“And what of Jaime,” Kory asks, coming to walk next to him. “Do you think he will stay? And Green Beetle?”

Dick pauses. “I think that Jaime–that both of them, really–have been through a violation more than what most people would be able to comprehend. We’re lucky the Bialyans were so interested in guarding that cave and that Zatanna and Lilith were even able to translate the hieroglyphics or we’d never have figured out how the Blue Beetle scarab malfunctioned in the first place.” He sighs. “Jaime and B’arzz are grateful enough to have their minds back, expecting them to carry on using the scarabs is more than anyone could ask.”

Kory smiles. “You did not answer my question.”

Dick thinks of a shaking arm, a bright blue cannon, and the fraction of a nod.

“...Yeah, I think Jaime will stay. Heroes always have a hard time knowing when to quit.”

Dick stops walking near the center of the rubble, turning slowly as he takes it all in.

Kory stands next to him, a silent, warm light among the ash.

“It’s not over,” he says. “This is only the beginning.”

“We won, Dick,” Kory says. “The Reach will never bother the Earth again.”

He shakes his head. “It doesn’t have to be the Reach. Four weeks and still no word from the Green Lantern Corps. That’s more than just a bad sign, Kory, it’s a declaration. The Reach may have been lying about a lot of things; but, they weren’t lying about that. Earth’s been abandoned. How long until someone else makes Earth our next target? How many times can we keep winning? How many without mass casualties?”

“Or…,” he sighs, “or maybe the next threat won’t be from space, it’ll be from Earth. The Light was working with the Reach, Kory. They were the ones who led them to Earth in the first place. Gave
them intel. Told them about H.I.V.E. I’d even bet they’re the ones that originally kidnapped the runaways.”

Thunder starts to rumble around them, the clouds getting darker and heavy.

Kory frowns, expression tight. “Why? What gain could the Light possibly have for seeing Earth enslaved by the Reach?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” he offers a small smile. “I don’t think that was their plan at all. So many lucky coincidences. A line of code from the Light files that just happens to beat the Reach’s system. A suspiciously large patrol in Bialya that just happens to hold the key to resetting the scarabs. An unidentified monitor at Tye’s attack on Central City. They were watching us, Kory.” He looks down at the helmet in his hands. “The Light wanted the Reach to attack Earth, it wasn’t so they could win….It was so we could beat them. I just don’t know why.”

He looks up. “It’s the beginning, Kory. It’s still just the beginning.”

He turns back to the destroyed mountain.

“….then why does it also feel like the end,” he adds quietly.

“It is not the end, Dick,” Kory wraps her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder. “None of this is an end.”

Dick stays quiet.

“Please tell me what you’re thinking,” she asks.

He shakes his head. “It was just a cave, Kory.”

“No, it was not,” she disagrees.

“…Maybe.” The rubble crunches under his feet. “But, either way it’s gone now.”

A hand slips into his, squeezing tightly.

“Things that are no longer present are not forgotten, Dick,” Kory says. “Because something is gone now, does not mean it did not happen once. It does not mean it was not important. It does not mean it does not matter….it does not mean they do not matter.”

Above them, the sky rumbles once more and finally, finally, it starts to rain.

They both look up as fat drops of water paint their faces.

“….ominous weather signs do not dispute my point,” Kory adds quickly.

And Dick...Dick laughs, loud enough to echo over the thunder.

He bends back to kiss her cheek. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re exceptionally wise.”

“You, once or twice,” she mumbles, resting her head back on his shoulder. “Should we go in or would like to stay here a little longer?”

Dick shakes his head. “Actually, I think there’s something else I need to do.”

“Come back?”
“Always, Kory. Always.”

-----

Bart Allen sits, drenched from head to toe and dangling his feet through the railing of the tallest building in Central City.

“I thought I’d find you here.” Dick comes to sit next to him.

“How’d you know,” Bart asks.

“Oh, I installed a tracker chip in you.”

“Seriously?!”

“No,” Dick laughs. “This was Wally and Barry’s favorite spot, too. It gets struck by lightning roughly twenty times a year, the most highly conductive place in Central City. And I’ve never known a Flash who wasn’t trying to chase lightning.”

Bart leans his face against the openings of the rail. “I’m not a Flash.”

“You’re an Allen, Bart. Some things are just nature.”

“You know Wally…,” he swallows, “Wally used to tell me all these stories. About Grandpa Barry and the League, about Jay and the old JSA, about you. I always thought they were incredible, too good to be true, like a fairy tale. Just the old kind of stories that teach you what kind of person to be. Wally was always like that. He liked to teach me things. He taught me the periodic table before I turned one. He taught me about my speed, how to find food. He was everything.” Bart watches the rain. “....I miss him. It’s been years now and I really, really miss him.”

“Yeah,” Dick says quietly. “Me, too.”

“I’m not like them,” Bart repeats. “I know I’m not. I know what people talk about when they see the Flash. Wally, Grandpa Barry….they were hope. They were a light in the dark. I’m…I’m just the dark. I can’t be the hope for people if I’m still trying to find it myself, Dick. That’s just the truth.”

The sound of rain falls across the building.

“You’re not Barry,” Dick agrees. “And you’re definitely not Wally.”

Bart nods, hunching down against the wind.

“But, you know what? I think you’re wrong about the rest of it.” Dick shrugs. “I’m from Gotham, Bart. I’ve seen darkness, you’re not it. And….and I’ve seen hope, too. You’re right sometimes hope’s about being an unfailing light. That’s how Barry and Wally did it for sure. But...that’s not all it is. Sometimes….sometimes it’s not about showing people the light. Sometimes, it’s just showing people they can take another step through the darkness.”

Bart’s quiet for a long moment. “....I told you a pep talk and the power of hope isn’t going to fix this,
Dick.

Dick gives a sudden laugh. “Bart, I don’t how to tell you this, but I think you vastly overestimate the power of my pep talks.” He shrugs. “Yeah, that stuff never fixes anything. Not really. That’s just the stuff that looks good on paper. All the shit that comes after and takes forever’s where the actual work gets done. But, I guess you know something about that already.”

Bart doesn’t answer and Dick reaches in his pocket.

“Hee.” He hands it to Bart. “I think you should have these. They were Wally’s.”

Bart holds the goggles in his hands as if they will break apart at the single wrong move.

Dick smiles. “They’ve survived explosions, Bart, they’re not exactly fragile. You can put them on.”

Slowly, possibly the slowest thing Dick’s ever seen a speedster do, Bart slips the goggles on.

He blinks up at Dick, expression flickering.

“Just another step through the darkness,” Dick says.

Somewhere down below the sound of sirens gets caught in the wind and red and blue lights flash against the night.

Bart looks at Dick.

“No way I’m going to make it in time,” Dick says honestly. “Looks like they need a hero.”

Bart gives him a look, but his eyes keep flickering down to the street.

Dick grins. “Run, Bart, run!”

Bart groans. “Oh my gosh, you’re the worst!”

And then he’s gone. In a jagged bolt that streaks across the street.

Dick sits back and laughs.

A moment later, a second voice speaks.

“You know you’re not immune from lightning, Dick...no matter how much you’d like to think different.”

Dick looks up, not even bothering to get annoyed. “Hey, Jay.”

Jay Garrick comes forward, bending down with a wince to take Bart’s recently vacated spot.

Dick eyes him skeptically. “...that can’t be good for your health.”

“It’s...it’s probably not,” the older man admits ruefully. “I take it you were talking to Bart.”

Dick nods. “Are you going to keep trying to stop him from joining the Titans? You know who that’s going to hurt the most, don’t you, Jay?”

“You can’t stop a speedster, Dick. Not really. We both know that.” Jay sighs a bit wistfully. “Stopping Bart completely would be like trying to catch lightning in a bottle. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to fight it in other ways. The JSA isn’t done. Not by a long shot.”
Dick hums, letting the noise of the rain settle around them.

“...I miss the days when I could count on you,” he admits quietly

“You still can, Dick.”

Dick laughs. “No, I really can’t.”

“I’m not trying to hurt you, Dick.” Jay sighs. “Please, you can believe the worst of me however much you want. But, please believe I never want to hurt you kids. I’m doing this for you and I’m doing it for them, the League. Because they’re not here to do it themselves. You can’t honestly tell me they’d want you kids doing this? That this is good for you.”

“It’s probably not,” Dick says.

Jay stops, cut off from whatever his next retort was going to be to stare at him.

Dick raises an eyebrow. “Did you think I’d disagree? You’re right. I think the League would hate it. I think they hated us being out there then. And you want to know the truth, Jay? I don’t blame them. My brothers are doing this, my friends are doing this. You really think after everything, I want to lose more family?” Dick breathes. “You’re right. We all could die. How could this be good for us? But, that’s the thing. It doesn’t matter what people want, not me, not you, not the League. You want a world without superheroes and I’d love a world that doesn’t need them. And. That’s. Not. This. World. So neither of us are going to get what we want.”

There’s a long pause.

“No, I don’t think we will.” Jay watches him. “Take care of yourself, Dick. Please. If not for me, then for Wally.”

“I’m trying.” He leans against the rails. “Hey, Jay, for once in a blue moon, let’s not end this conversation in an argument. Not tonight. I don’t want to fight you tonight. I just want you to do one thing for me, okay?”

There’s another pause, then a sigh, and finally Jay’s voice softens ever so slightly.

“Okay, Dick, what would you like?”

“For you to enjoy the view.”

Below them, a flash of lightning races across the streets of Central City.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, first off, thank you so much for your patience, everyone! Next, this chapter ends Year 6 which marks the halfway point since this first story will cover 12 years. So, yay! Last, I seriously want to thank everyone for your support—every view, subscription, kudos, and comment. I couldn’t write this story without your kind words.

Next Up: Year 7: The Princess and the Witch
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!