A Place For Us

by Hashtag_DriveBy

Summary

Sasha couldn't believe that she had to ask Jason, of all people, but she did. “Are we going to help her? She's just a kid.”

“Actually she looks like she's your age.”

“No she doesn't. I'm sixteen. She looks like a middle schooler.”

“So do you.” Jason said, also keeping his voice low.

Sasha looked at him sharply, wondering if she could stay ahead of him in case her sandwich somehow made its way into his face while his big dumb mouth was open. She'd lose her lunch but it would be worth it to shut him up.
Hello, All!

I really wanted to write a lovable "recovery" or a "finding home/peace" story for my favorite punk. Because he deserves it. So there's going to be sass, fluff and emotions all over the place.

So a quick breakdown of what you're getting into here- The majority of this fic is based post-Arkham Knight, as mentioned in the tags. There are elements from other comics, movies and otherwise woven in, and I've altered some of the character's ages/appearances to better fit how they appear in the comics (Oracle and Robin, for instance). This takes place four years after Arkham Knight. Bruce and Alfred are out of the picture, leaving Oracle and Robin. Nightwing drops in from Bludhaven frequently to help.

Jason has died and come back (through different means) three times, including the time Joker shot him. After taking up the mantle of Red Hood, A loose version of the events of "Under The Red Hood" take place- mainly his face off with Black Mask and his infamous duffel bag of severed heads. There's also some "Death In The Family" references in here- mainly Joker's claim to have orchestrated his life, from infancy until he became, and died as, Robin. In this fic, Jason was never apart of The Outlaws, and has mostly kept to himself. And due to the Arkham Verse story, he was never resurrected by the Lazarus Pit. Jason is also still estranged from his family.

As for Sasha- I have looked everywhere for the comics online and can't find any complete issues where she appears, but I've done a lot of research and altered her to fit the story. The...the way that their relationship is portrayed, or at least how it begins, really bugged the hell out of me because Jason 'recruits' her by manipulating her to work with him after a traumatic experience. Just...no. No.

Warnings- most of the main characters are dealing with their own trauma. PTSD, depression (including mentions of suicidal ideation), anxiety, panic attacks, nightmares, heavy thoughts. Past attempt at suicide Past torture. Mentions acts/consequences of human experimentation, very brief scene of rape further into the story. “Mild” language.

In this story, Jason has finally started to slow down. He hasn't fully come to terms with things, but there has been some things that have happened that have made him just really want to find some peace.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

There was a kid.

She was old enough to recognize a shit hand when it was given to her, but too young to carry that weight. She stood small and slight in the firelight, standing patiently while she waited for Robin to keep his promise and help her. Still with shock and the very last embers of hope. Waiting. Trusting. Hoping. Too young to know that those were the quickest ways to get yourself killed in this shit-hole of a city.

Robin wasn't coming back.

Jason lingered on a vantage point just outside the burning lab, watching as the building-and her world- went to ash around her. He'd been following the case. Or, following Robin. Since he'd come back from a three year break from Gotham, he'd been careful to stay out of their way. He never stepped in, just spied on them to keep up with their on-goings so he could better avoid them when he needed to (which was always). So he'd known about Professor Pyg's escape. He'd known about Robin's race to find him before he turned innocent people into dollatrons. He'd known just how much the punk had failed. Just like he knew, despite swearing to her that he would be back, that he wasn't going to be. Not in time.

Robin hadn't left her in the fire, though. He had had enough time to pull her out and stash her somewhere out of sight so they could talk later. Once he'd left, the girl had gone back into the chaos by herself. Bare foot and wearing the standard dollatron getup- paper gown, blank theater mask and nothing else. But she had stepped quietly and confidently like it was plush carpet instead of smoldering ashes. She'd approached one of the fallen dollatrons, a man. Struggling to get back up, though he was broken in too many places. She'd knelt down beside him, smoothed a hand over his head in comfort, and strangled him. A mercy killing, to spare him the pain of burning or facing what he'd become. Leaving her to do it alone.

And maybe, just maybe, that was why Jason was dropping down from his perch. Maybe that was why he crushed smoking debris underfoot, subjected himself to the suffocating heat, breathed in the stink of chemicals, fire, death and innocence lost. She was still, the flames lapping at her legs, catching on her gown. Jason removed his jacket when he neared her, sweeping his gaze down her frame once to account for injury before setting it firmly on her masked face. Her head turned in the odd, mechanical way that dollatrons moved. Brown eyes that were unnervingly calm behind the mask.

She didn't flinch when he swept his leather jacket around her shoulders. Didn't fight him when he lifted her into his arms. Jason carried her out of hell and away. Neither of them spoke, but her hands eventually raised to curl into the fabric of his shirt.

Jason found himself focusing on breathing, the weight in his hands somehow becoming the same as the burden that always sat heavy on his back, in his head.

She was just a kid.

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The kid was heavier than she looked, and Jason wasn't exactly in peak form.

He got her a safe distance away from the burning lab before they stopped to rest and gently check
over her injuries. She continued to stare at him quietly, blinking slowly back at him from beneath the mask. She had readjusted his jacket on her shoulders, and was now sliding her arms through the too-long sleeves. Jason paused to ease the hood over her head, which had been shaved bald, before he shifted his attention down to her feet and lower legs.

He expected to see the worst. Charred, thick skin. White or black flesh. Third degree burns where she'd walked through the smoldering embers. Jason was both, relieved and disturbed, to find that the worst of them barely qualified as second degree. Relieved, because he wouldn't have to sneak her into a hospital or the clinic down in Crime Alley. Disturbed, because any naive hopes he'd had of her being unaltered were shattered. Pyg's dollatrons were tough sons-of-bitches, made to take and dish out major damage in equal turns. But that kind of transformation was permanent, and devastating.

Jason sat down across from her and removed his helmet. He was mask-less beneath it, so she could see his face, but he couldn't bring himself to give a shit about compromised identities. She met his eyes, brown to green, and just sat there. Still. Quiet. Like a...like a doll.

Cold fury thrummed through his bones. It wasn't the same, white-hot rage that had driven him to reign war down on Gotham. That fire had snuffed out years ago. But, in a way, this was worse. It made him focused, made him see everything in a clear light. It forced him to look at this kid and see that someone, somewhere, had failed. That yesterday there had been a girl in this city that had been taken and broken and reforged into a tool to be used. The wrongs, the damage, done to her were carved deeper than the changes in her body, than any pure intentions to help people may have.

Being blinded by rage was a hell of a lot easier than seeing all of that any day.

He set the helmet down on the roof, “I'm Jason.”

Silence met him. That was okay. She didn't pull away when he gripped her ankles and gently set them on his knee so there was no pressure on the burns. Jason rested a hand on her bare shins to keep them in place while he scanned the skyline. No sign of Robin. Must be busy dropping Pyg off at the GCPD, then. He caught his breath, then gathered her back up to make the final stretch to one of his better stocked safe houses.

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When he set her down on his wobbly table, she stayed in place and watched while he moved through the room. He filled his biggest tupperware box with cold water and set it down on a chair in front of her. He placed both of her feet into the water, lingered to make sure she didn't move, then pulled his med kit from the cabinet. He set it down on the table. Next was some soapy water to clean the wounds. Then he went hunting for the smallest set of sweats he had.

By the time he had everything and had scrubbed his hands clean at the sink, she was done soaking. Jason put the water up on the table, and flopped down in the chair. Patiently, he cleaned both feet, doctored and wrapped them in loose gauze.

Pushing everything but the clothes aside, Jason said, “I'm sorry I didn't ask to bring you here, and you don't have to stay. As long as you're here, though, I'm going to make sure no one touches you again.”

He rolled up the legs to the sweat pants and guided her feet through. “Doesn't mean shit now, but I'm sorry.” That someone failed you. That no one saved you.

Jason pulled the pants up to her knees before her hands, thankfully, tugged them out from his. He backed off and stepped away with his back turned so she could dress herself. The chair scraped
across the floor and a voice said, quiet and toneless. “Okay.”

He turned to face her again. She was dressed in what he'd brought out—sweats and t-shirt. The charred gown laid on the floor, and his jacket was back on her shoulders, hood over her head. The mask hadn't moved, hiding her face. Jason kicked the gown away—he'd burn it, later—and started to pick things up. “You hungry, kid?”

“No.”

Not surprising. Jason took the tubs to the sink and dumped the dirty water. “That's fine, but tomorrow, I'm cooking breakfast and you're gonna eat. Doesn't have to be much, but something is better than nothing.”

He turned back around and found her standing on her feet in the kitchen, hands curled in her pants to keep them up. Jason huffed. “You shouldn't be on your feet.”

“It doesn't hurt.”

“Just because you can't feel it doesn't mean the damage isn't there.” Jason said. He paused, looking her over carefully, before he switched tracks on her. “You gonna tell me your name, kiddo?”

“Sasha.”

“Sasha.”

“Yeah?” Her voice shook a little this time, the first ripple of distress. Her hands trembled, her shoulders bowed forward. She started to reach up for her face, but she jerked to a stop and hugged herself tightly instead.

Jason forced himself to move slowly and stop just within range of her. His 'gentle' voice sounded like sand paper, “Hey. Hey.”

He waited until her face turned toward him. “What happened was monstrous, and nobody deserves it. It wasn't your fault. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. I won't push you. If you do, I'm here. But for the love of god, Sasha. If you are hurting, let yourself hurt. If you are sad or pissed off or anything in between, you let it out. Do not keep that poison in you. It will kill you.”

“I killed him.” She whispered.

Jason thought back to earlier that night, the way how she had walked back into the fire and comforted, then killed, one of the downed dollatrons. Jason kept his voice low, “Who was he?”

“My dad.”

“Why.”

She flinched, “Because he wasn't my dad anymore. He was...he was one of those things, and he was going to burn.”

“You did it to keep him from suffering.” Jason watched her body language carefully, spotting the defensive arch of her shoulders. “You did it because you loved him.”

“Yeah.” She sounded like she was crying. She fidgeted with the sleeves of his jacket, then took a careful step closer, then another, until she was leaning into his chest. Jason curved one arm around her shoulders. She didn't completely relax, but the rigid edge of her spine eased. Her head tucked
down, hiding against his shirt.

“I'm sorry, Sasha.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for such an awesome response! I'm going to try to update weekly so I can finish the story up in time without having to stop posting.

Hope you enjoy this one! Thanks for stopping by <3

Warnings: Nightmares, heavy thoughts, coping and some language.

EDIT: Sorry for the updates! I was trying to work a few errors out that I caught after posting. Thank you!

It took a lot of time just to convince her to sit down somewhere so she was off her goddamned feet, and even then she absolutely would not lay down. She had to be sitting up, and she moved from the kitchen chair, to the sofa, then to the floor as Jason went about his business.

The kitchen chair for when he pulled off his gear and set everything on the table to disassemble, check and clean. Then he went to the living space and flopped down on the sofa to read for a while, letting her do whatever she wanted. She followed him. He offered his room up to her even though he had a feeling she wouldn't take it - and she didn't - so he stripped the mattress of the comforter, flat sheet and pillows and brought them into the living room to pile on the floor. He chose a corner, pushing whatever was occupying it out of the way, that was facing the only exit. As he arranged things there, dragging one of the ratty throws from the sofa to add to the nest, he remembered all the years he lived on the streets. Starving, alone and terrified. A safe corner to guard your back, with clear sight lines, was a god-send. Sasha seemed to agree, because as soon as he'd dropped everything there she was. She settled slowly into her nest, watching him from behind the mask. She was still wearing his jacket - he was beginning to wonder if he'd ever get it back- and he tugged lightly on the edge of the hood covering her bald little head.

“I'm going to be right there,” He jerked his chin toward the sofa, “you'll be able to see me at all times, but I won't see you.” It was all he knew to do, offering what security and privacy he could in the situation.

A tiny bit of tension slid out of her shoulders. She nodded slowly at him. Jason nodded back and stood up. He felt her eyes on him until he flopped down on the sofa and pulled the blanket there over his shoulders, still decked out in kevlar and body armor. He hadn't changed out of his suit to reinforce that this place was 'safe', and it helped him feel a hair better. It was easier to fight horrors, literal or figurative, when you were armored head to toe. True to his word, he couldn't see her at all from this position, but that was fine. He could see the door, and most of the living space, and that was good enough.

Sasha didn't sleep. Jason knew this, because he didn't sleep, so the sound of their not-asleep breathing filled the quiet. He just laid there on his back in the dark, staring at the ceiling or the door, and doing the absolute last thing he wanted to do. Thinking.

In the following four or five hours until dawn, he thought about almost everything. Mostly bad things, with a few good kernels here and there, trying to dance around the bleakest and harshest
things until they were all that was left untouched. And then he did the next last thing he absolutely wanted to do. He touched those things. The day he found his mother dead. His last day as Robin. Torture. Death. More torture. Pain. Fury. More pain. More death. Cold. Death again. Empty. Ache. Need. Need-Need to...to...

The first beams of sunlight bleed through the blinds and he was so raw and thin that they burned right through him. Jason scraped a hand down his face and forced himself off of the couch. He moved stiffly into the kitchen. Though he already knew the sad state his pantry and fridge were in, he broke into both and wasted a few minutes perusing through his stock. Then he shut the door, lowered his standards, and opened it again to get a second look.

Sasha emerged from her cocoon of coziness and dragged his comforter to the table. She bypassed the chairs and parked it right on the tabletop, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders.

Jason didn't look at her, too busy staring into the depressing bowels of his fridge. He sighed and pulled out the egg carton. “Eggs?”

“Scrambled.” She said, “...do you have cheese?”

He had one flimsy slice of sandwich cheese left. He held it up for her to see, and she made a sound of affirmation. Jason nabbed the last stick of butter before he shut the door, “Toast? Don't have any jam.”

“Okay.”

They were both quiet while he scrambled up some eggs with cheese and buttered toast. He didn't bother asking her to get off the table, just brought her a plate and a glass of water. She took them, then went still.

“What's wrong?” Jason asked, then grimaced. There was a lot wrong. Everything, really. Stupid choice of words.

“I...” She looked at him, eyes wild, “can you...can you turn around?”

Jason stared at her for a minute before it sank in that she didn't want him to see her face. His eyes softened and he went back into the kitchen. He used the counter top as his table and ate. By the time he was done, she had her mask back down and the plate beside her, half of it eaten. She'd almost finished her water. More than he expected. A taste of warm pride opened in his chest. Sasha was trying.

Then it was snuffed out when she leaned forward and hugged herself, taking on a defensive curl.

“Why were you there?”

“Last night?” He cocked his head at her.

“Yeah.” Her tone was quiet now, almost a whisper.

“I like to keep tabs on any Bats in Gotham,” Jason said, “Robin, and Nightwing, whenever he strolls his chatty ass into town.”

“But you don't help them.” It sounded like a guess. She twisted her hands into his jacket, fidgeting even though her eyes stayed firmly on him.

“No, I don't.”
“That mean you're enemies?” Something sharp entered her eyes. Jason studied her for a long minute, trying to suss out what it was. But her face was covered, and her body language was still defensive, not at all matching the edge of her focus. Contradicting signals. He couldn't read her half as well as he could Bruce, or Dick, but he sensed that this was almost like a test.

“Its...Its complicated.” Jason crossed his arms, “we go back and forth. I'm not really supposed to be here, but I keep my head down and my nose dry, and they got bigger things to deal with. So, they let me be.”

“Why did you help me.”

“Because you needed to be helped.”

“And Robin wasn't coming back.” She bit the words out, and Jason could almost taste the first curls of a rage that would eat her alive. “He promised.”

“Had a Bat make a promise to me, once.” Jason looked to the side, eyes narrowed as he thought of Bruce. Bruce, taking in a pissed off boy and making promises that he'd never be hungry again. That he would never want for anything else. Bruce, looking at the man that boy grew into, damaged and lost, and promising to help him. That he still had a home. “They don't always break them, but I'm not surprised when they do. Not anymore.”

Sasha chewed on that for a while. Her gaze drifted away, unfocused while she processed. Jason let her have it, collecting dishes and scraping them clean. He set them in the sink, pausing when he realized that this was the first time he'd cooked for someone, never mind himself, a warm meal in years. Not since long before his second death. It hardly counted as a cooked meal, but it wasn't take-out and it wasn't booze or cigarettes or willpower.

“Why did you help me?”

“You just asked me that.” He turned the faucet on and ran water over the dishes. Cheese was stuck all over the plates. Jason tried to pry it off with a fork.

“I didn't like your answer.”

Sassy little shit. Jason raised an eyebrow at her, “Yeah? What do you want me to say?”

“People don't just help people anymore, and if Robin wasn't going to help me, why would you?”

“Because you are just a kid,” Jason started. Sasha bristled like an angry alley cat, but he pressed on, turning fully to face her. “And some twisted piece of garbage got their hooks in you and made you into their next scheme, and everyone- Robin, me- were too late to save you. I can't fix what happened, but if all I can do is give you a chance to make something out of this shit show, then I'll do it.”

Silence. Sasha was still as stone, though her eyes shifted in minute movements. Searching his face, his body language. Seconds stretched into minutes, then-

“I like that answer a lot more.”

Jason snorted, “Do you? I'm so glad.”

Her eyes eased out of the razor-like focus. Jason shut the water off and dried his hands off on a towel. The air was still heavy, and after a night of going over every horrifying detail of his life with a magnifying glass, he needed a change.
“So,” He started, leaving the kitchen, “do kids these days still watch TV or do you just glue your faces to your phones all day?”

She swung her feet in the air before she slipped down and shuffled after him, “Do old people these days still make fun of kids or do they actually do something useful with their time?”

“I'll have you know that I'm twenty-three years old,” Jason informed as he sank down into the couch.

“Could have fooled me. I saw how long it took you to get off the couch this morning.”

“I'm getting the sneaking suspicion that you're a mouthy little shit.” Jason passed the remote over to her when she settled beside him. It was taken slowly, almost like she thought it was a trap.

Sasha looked over the remote with a critical eye before she turned the old box TV on and started flipping through channels. Jason let the quiet be, leaning back into the cushions.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Ah! Sorry, guys! I meant to post this yesterday morning but got caught up in test reviews for college. Here it is though!
In this chapter we'll see some emotional stuff (A little self-injury), Jason-typical language and some fluffiness. <3 Hope you guys enjoy and you're having a wonderful day/evening!

The next few days passed on, same as the first. Jason didn't have anything going on that was too important to set aside for a while, so he stayed in the safe house with Sasha. Sasha followed him at a distance. He (barely) managed to cobble up three half decent meals a day. They sat down and watched TV, talked when the quiet needed to be broken, and retired for the night in their respective places; corner or sofa. Sasha didn't sleep the second night, or most of the third, but exhaustion won out the morning of the third day, and she was passed out in her nest, dead to the world.

Jason slipped outside and hauled himself to the roof where he sat back for an overdue smoke in the pale sunlight. Real sunshine never touched Gotham. Too much smog and bad intentions for anything pure or good to break through. He let himself stop existing for a while, let the heaviness in his bones anchor him down. A flash of color dipped in and out of sight across the way, moving out. Something big must be going down if Robin was out flapping his cape in daylight. Really, covering this whole city was too much for the kid by himself. He was going to burn out at this rate.

Jason flicked the ashes off the end and took another drag, felt it soothe all of his edges. The Replacement disappeared into the city, off to face the world alone. Jason thought that maybe he should get off his ass and suit up. Maybe Robin wouldn't need the backup, but the saying was 'better safe than sorry', wasn't it? Yet Jason stayed exactly as he was. He finished his smoke, ground out the rest beneath his heel, then lit up a second.

He didn't feel obligated to help, or petty over Robin's latest negligence over Sasha. Jason didn't feel guilty about enjoying a smoke, either. In that moment, Jason, thankfully, didn't feel anything.

He snuffed out his cigarette when a light rain started to drizzle. Jason laid back on the roof gravel and closed his eyes for a bit. He'd slept on harder ground, in the middle of war zones, so it was a simple matter to drift away for a few hours. Then there was the shatter of glass, muffled by distance, the thud of fists pounding on a wall. An angry scream.

Jason pulled himself up and back down into his safe house, already anticipating a mess worthy of, well, himself. Sure enough, there was a trail of broken glass and sheet rock. Holes punched in the bloody walls. His first instinct, honed by training and experience, was attack. He shifted into into stealth mode, picking his way quickly and silently through the mess. Through the living room, into the hall and past the bathroom where he caught a glimpse of glinting pieces of broken mirror.

Sasha was in his room, pounding the living hell out of his mattress with both fists. Blood stained the sheets, her hands, the sleeves of his jacket. Her mask was askew on her face, with red finger prints. Wide brown eyes burned with fury and horror and hurt.

Oh. Jason eased out of his predatory crouch and palmed a hand over his face. She must have finally
gotten the nerve to look at herself in the mirror, without the mask. Must have lost her fucking mind. He watched her beat the mattress until the fabric ripped and the springs pierced through. She struck around them, determined to tear the entire thing apart.

Something deep in his gut twisted. This was familiar. This had been him, over and over and over. As the Arkham Knight, he had spent a long time avoiding mirrors, avoiding showing his face at all. And when he couldn't, when he was faced with the permanent marks Joker had left on his skin, his face, his soul. When he had no choice but to look and see what he had been broken into-

One of her fists missed their mark and snagged in the springs. Her enhanced skin stopped it from completely shredding her hand, but blood still welled up in thin lines on her wrist. It didn't stop her from hitting harder, from roaring her rage until her voice cracked. Jason slid forward and caught her fist in his palm before she could do more damage. Her attention snapped to him, other fist flying at his face. He almost didn't block it. The impact rattled through his arm and into his back. A sharp pain spread through his hand and wrist. Jesus Christ, this kid was a powerhouse.

She tried to pull back, but he squeezed her fists just enough to get her attention. “You gonna break me into pieces, too?”

Her breathing was ragged. Each gasp sounded like it was being ripped out of her chest. “Let me go!” Sasha snarled, jerking harder.

Jason held her in place for a second longer to make sure she wouldn't turn full Tasmanian Devil on him, then slowly opened his hand. Sasha hissed at him, “If you- they- I-” Frustrating herself, she screamed again.

Jason opened his hand toward her, “You're not bad at throwing punches, but you need practice. Try again.”

Sasha's eyes focused on him. She hesitated, her entire body strung tight and shaking with everything she was feeling. She threw her knuckles clumsily into his hand. Less force than before, like she was afraid of hurting him or testing what he'd tolerate.

“Try again.”

She did, and this time she hit him with the same power she had the first time. He didn't so much as grunt. Then, without being prompted, she threw another. And another. And another. After the sixth one, she spat, “Why?! I didn't-I just wanted my dad! I wanted to be a part of his life. I didn't want to come here, I didn't want to- I'm so-there's nothing, nothing! It's gone! He's dead, I should be dead! But I'm not, I'm just this fucking thing- Its not my face. Not my-”

Let it out. Jason kept his mouth shut, taking every bit of punishment she gave him. Anything to keep her from turning it on herself. It took time, and his hands would ache tomorrow, but eventually she burned through it. Her hits weakened, until they were just taps of knuckles on his palm. Until she was shaking and breathing so hard it was all she could do to stand.

Jason took her hands into his, gently uncurling her fingers so he could see the damage. Scrapes, cuts, and reddened skin on her knuckles. Nothing serious though. He pulled her out of the room, “Come on, then.”

Sasha let him drag her back to the kitchen where she sat down and waited for him to clean up her injuries. Jason let her have the silence, settling in the chair in front of her with tweezers to pick shards of glass out of the cuts.
Sasha took a deep breath, “Are you mad?”

“Why would I be mad?”

She stared at him. “Really, Jason?” She made a vague gesture with a hand at the mess surrounding them. “Really?”

“This? This is nothing.” Jason dipped her hands into a container of warm, soapy water. “When I was twenty, I pulled a loft completely apart. Down to the bare studs with my fists. Was a complete wreck afterwards, hands were fucked up for weeks, but things are just things. I have other safe houses. I can buy another mirror or another mattress. Its nothing.”

“You...You really don't care?”

He shrugged, pulling her hands back to set on her knees while he pulled gauze and antibacterial gel out of his kit. Her fingers curled into her pants and she leaned forward, searching his eyes.

“You don't care that I just broke your things?”

“You remember what I said to you the first night you were here? About not keeping things locked up? This is what I meant. If you need to break things, then break them. They can be replaced.”

“But your walls-”

“Sasha.”

He heard her teeth click when her mouth shut. Jason held her eyes for a while, then started to doctor her cuts. “And just so you know, you are not just some 'fucking thing'. You're allowed to hurt and to be so pissed off you can't see straight, but you don't get to put yourself down like that. You are not, in any way, any less than what you were. Understand?”

She bristled, “You don't know-”

Jason looked up sharply at her, head already angled from focusing on her hands. Her gaze caught on the 'J' that had been burned into his face with a hot iron. At the other, less obvious marks of torture scattered across his skin, some too foreign or distinct to be picked up in a brawl. There was more. There was always more. His body was a road-map of ugly marks, everything from nails and teeth to forks and brands and bullets and knives, with the biggest being the 'Y' shaped autopsy scar that spanned down his chest and down to his belly. Of course, she couldn't see it. Just what was on his mug and his neck and arms.

The accusing bite left her voice. “How can you not care at all then care so much? You're giving me whiplash.”

Jason snorted, “Its one of my special talents.” He finished wrapping her hands, then sat back to think through his next words. “If you write down what size clothes you wear, I'll pick some up for you. And some food. And- you know what, just make a list of anything you want. I'll make sure you get it.”

“...Okay.”

“If you want, you can come with me. But only if you want to.”

Sasha tensed, “No. I'll just, uh, I'll just stay here.”
Jason nodded and collected the med kit. He paused to eye her feet when he remembered that there was still a mess of broken glass spread out through the house. He had managed to guide her through safely, but he didn't know how well she'd done by herself while she was bull-dozing her way through his stuff. Some red had soaked into the gauze. He sighed and set everything back down. He needed to check on her burns anyway. They'd done a lot of healing since that first night, and when he unwrapped them, he was pleased to find that there was almost no signs of them left. He went over every cut and scrape on her feet, meticulously picked out any glass or debris he could find, then set them in the water to wash.

Once he was finished taking care of them he made eye contact and said, “You stay on this table. I've got shoes on, I'll clean up. Do not move until I'm done.”

“I'm not five,” She sneered.

“Could have fooled me.”

She gestured like she was turning her nose up at him, “Can't say I'm surprised. Anyone under the age of forty looks like a kid to you, huh?”

“And the sass master is back. Awesome.” Jason dumped the water and dragged the broom and trash can into the living room. Sasha watched him as he went about cleaning her mess. An hour later and he was confident enough that he'd gotten everything to give her the okay to move. Sasha did just that, tromping over to the couch where she sank down with a drawn out sigh. Jason joined her.

Scrapping a sore hand through his hair, Jason reached for the TV remote. Sasha leaned forward and snatched it out of reach like some spiteful, teenage sweat-pants ninja. Jason huffed at her but didn't fight for it. He kicked his boots off instead and propped his feet up on the coffee table, book in hand. He flipped it open and read three chapters before Sasha's breathing slowed beside him.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Almost late again. Whoops. It's been wild.

I'm hoping this chapter will make up for it. It's one of my favorites and I affectionately call it "The Lion's Den".

Warnings include tooth-rotting cuteness, Jason-typical language, the woe of a man crossing hostile territory, and good-hearted people that still make a difference.

I wanted to take a moment and thank everyone that responded to this piece so far, either by dropping a kudos, bookmarking or taking the time to leave a thoughtful comment. You guys/gals/velociraptors have really made a difference for me by doing this. <3

I hope everyone enjoys and I wish you all a wonderful day/night.

He was hopelessly lost.

There was no denying it. Jason had no idea of what the hell he was doing, standing in the junior's clothing section of the local superstore, and wondering why the fuck there was a whole rack of fifteen dollar crop tops tailored for young girls. It wasn't any of his business what anyone else wore, but for fuck's sake. Kids. Kids being pressured into dressing like this in Gotham, of all places.

Jason exhaled slowly and turned away. Thank god, 'crop tops' weren't on the list Sasha had made for him. Neither was 'poop emoji' or 'unicorn cat' or '#flawless' merchandise. It was a modest list, requesting the bare essentials. The specifics were kept to long pants, long sleeves, comfortable and topped off with a tiny note, like an afterthought, in the corner that said 'purple'. Alright. He could work with that. Easy, right?

Five racks of skinny jeans, see-through Disney shirts and skin-tight yoga pants later, Jason was feeling like the poor bastard left crawling through no-man's land in the middle of a civil war. It didn't help that he just didn't know Sasha well enough to be buying her things. He knew that she was a spit-fire with one of the smartest mouths he'd ever heard, and that she was tough and sassy. He knew that she liked to keep her head and hands and feet covered as much as she could. Young insecurities, magnified by being the victim of an attack that had made her body alien to her. So anything tight or even remotely revealing was out of the question. Comfort and security took priority over everything.

He found a dark purple hoody that was soft and smooth to the touch in her size, the last one. It was already altered with thumb-holes in the too-long sleeves, so it was perfect. And that was all he found in the junior's. Jason stopped in the delicates and was left to scratch his head at the options before him. Not for the first time, he wished that she had been ready to be in public again so she could pick her own stuff out. Granny-panties, bikinis, cheekys, boy-shorts, thongs and every thing in between. Where the hell did he even begin- and it didn't stop there. The aisle of bras was its own den of lions.

Jason threw two different kinds of underwear into the basket-bikini and boy-shorts, because they looked more comfortable than anything else-and moved on to the bras with an impending sense of
doom.

For five seconds his fifteen year old self emerged and he picked up something that was padded with heavy straps and looked like it could be used to carry your favorite pair of bowling balls. “Jesus Christ. Is this a bullet-proof vest for Ursula or-”

A woman cleared her throat nearby and he jumped out of his skin. He spun around, lingerie still in hand as he faced a squat woman leaning against her basket with this look. Jason froze, “Uh...Excuse me.”

“Excuse me.” She canted her head to one side, giving him a sideways look that told him she thought he was up to no good. “Watch where you swing that thing. You'll knock someone's head off.”

“No shit,” Jason looked at it again, “they need to commission these out to the Budweiser clydesdales.”

Her mouth twitched, like she was trying very hard not to smile. “You look like you're a little out of your element.”

“What gave me away?” He set it back on the peg and stepped away before he could reach for the monstrosity beside it, which looked like a Madonna prop- cone tits and all.

She rolled her eyes, “Shopping for someone?”

“Yeah,” Jason paused, “niece. Flew in and lost some of her luggage. She needed a few things, but she's sick so I volunteered to get them.”

Her eyes softened, “How old?”

“Fifteen.” Jason looked at the selection again, “she didn't tell me what she wants.”

“Well, what she like?”

“I don't know. I haven't seen her in years.” Jason made a quick decision and added, “the reason why she came is because some asshole attacked her, and she needed a change.”

“Fifteen?” She repeated quietly. “That poor girl.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them again. She nodded toward the end of the aisle where the sports bras were. “Comfortable, secure.”

Jason went for them, but was immediately lost again. “Why is there so many? Its not like trying to pick out a car or something.” There was thin straps, thick straps, multiple straps, clasps in the front, clasps in the back, no clasps, pockets and- was that one with a hood?

His helper was looking more and more amused by the second, watching him as he filed through each peg. By process of elimination, he narrowed it down to clasp-less and a fairly broad strap. He tossed a handful of the better made ones into the basket, then added one of the hooded ones on a whim. She might appreciate the layers. He looked at the woman, “What kind of socks do you think?”

“Probably ankle or no-show.”

“No-show? You mean there's more than gym socks and ankle socks?”

“Oh honey. You really have no clue, do you?”

“I feel like I'm in an alternate dimension right now. Or hell.” Jason picked out a package of bright
colored socks so they were easy to tell apart from his at a glance. Then he went to the pajamas, which were thankfully much easier to navigate. Something long, comfortable and plain. The woman left him as he started browsing the clearance rack with a softly spoken 'good luck, honey'. Three pairs of lounge pants and two soft long sleeved sleep shirts. Jason also nabbed a pack of tank tops because, again, layers. He pressed on to the men's department, where he finally found what he was looking for.

He piled in the sweat and track pants, then the cotton t-shirts. Another hoody, though he made sure this one was looser so she'd have options. There was some sassy graphic tees on sale, so he grabbed a handful. There was even one with a giant Wonder Woman print across it that would fit him, and there was no way he was passing that up. By the time he had some shoes picked out- plush moccasins for the house, and a pair of plain black sneakers- he had a closet's worth of stuff in his basket. Jason pulled aside and took time to fold and arrange everything into the child's seat so there was still space for groceries.

Jason steeled himself and went on his way. Next stop was soaps and shampoo, which was equally challenging since there was only fifty-thousand different scents and textures and specialties. Last was food.

Shopping for this many groceries was...surreal. The last time he'd had to pile so much into a basket were the times he went with Alfred when he was a kid. He had to stop more than once just to breathe and think before he could continue.

On the way to the front, he passed by a clearance rack that was packed with unwanted leftovers from Halloween, seventy-five percent off. He passed it with barely a glance, got an idea, and backtracked. There was some fun animal-shaped Mardi-Gras-like masks. He got a cat, a fox and a butterfly.

The lines were forever long, so he parked his cart in the shortest one and resigned himself to slow torture for the next thirty minutes.

“Hey.”

Jason turned his head to find the woman from earlier in line across from him. She looked him over, then lifted a small stack of items and her wallet and ambled over. She passed over three bars of cookie dough, a box of tea, a box of hot chocolate, a set of pencils and a sketch book. Jason tensed slightly, already winding up to politely decline.

“These are for your niece. Here's some money. You keep the change.”

“You don't have to do this, I have enough.” Jason said, trying to take everything but the twenties she was holding up to him. She deftly lifted all of it out of his reach.

“I want to,” She said, a subtle fierceness in her voice. “Please let me help her.”

“Okay.” Jason relented.

“And please tell her that...that it matters, and that she isn't alone.”

“I will.”

Satisfied, she handed everything to him, “She's lucky to have you.”

“...Thank you.”

She returned to her basket and they silently waited for their turn.
Sasha was stretched out like the Queen of Sheba on his sofa when he ambled through the door, laden with groceries. Somehow, even after three and a half hours spent in that god forsaken store and filling up an entire basket to overflowing, he had managed to get it all home and up the stairs into the safe house. He was exhausted, winded, and his still-bruised hands hurt like hell.

Sasha peeked over the top of the couch and said, “Its about time. Thought you'd fallen down somewhere and were waiting for Life Alert to come rescue you.”

Jason cut her a sharp look over his shoulder as he lumbered into the kitchen and dropped everything on the table. It shook on impact. He unbagged the milk and dairy to put up first. When he closed the door, she was right there with an armful of more cold items.

“Thought I told you to stay off your feet.”

Sasha huffed, “It doesn't hurt!”

“Vegetables in the top drawer, meats and cheeses in the bottom,” Jason instructed, walking around her. Together they put up groceries in record time. Jason joined her at the table and scooted the soaps aside, since she'd bypassed them anyway, and watched as she started pulling clothes out of the bags.

She tensed as she pulled out more and more, “Jason, I thought you were just getting a few things? Did you buy out the whole stupid store??”

She sounded panicked. Jason lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “I wanted you to have enough. And look.” He pulled out the purple hoody, watching as her eyes snapped to it like they were magnetized. “Purple, and not covered in a thousand tiny smiling turds.”

Her eyes brightened and she snatched it out of his hands. “This is still a lot. You don't even know me.”

“So, just because I don't know you, I should let you wear my clothes forever.”

She glared hellfire and brimstone at him and yanked the pants he was unfolding with more hostility than necessary. Jason found one of the graphic tees at the bottom of a bag and held it up so she could see, “So fitting.”

Her eyes scanned across the caption; 'Beware of short people: The shorter they are, the closer they are to Satan.' Particularly fitting, since she was barely pushing five foot, four inches, and full of evil fury. It, too, was ripped from his hands. She reeled back and slapped him with it across the chest.

Jason smirked, the expression strange and tight feeling on his face. He pushed the last bag of clothes toward her in favor of the one with the goods the nice woman at the store had picked out and the Mardi-Gras masks. He pulled everything out and set it on the table so it was all in view, tucking the leftover change from the woman's twenties into the sketch book.

“I had to ask for help on some things. The lady found me in line and told me to give this stuff to you.”

She stilled, head tilted down to look at the pile. Jason added the masks to the pile, “And these were just over a dollar. They're soft inside, so I thought they'd be easier on your skin. You don't have to wear them, but they're yours if you want them.”

Sasha pushed the sleeves of his jackets up so she could touch unhindered. First the cookies, then the tea and hot chocolate. The colored and graphite pencils, and the sketch book. Then the masks, one by one. Each one was embellished in brightly colored sequins, studs and embroidery.
“I don't know what to say,” She spoke so quietly he almost missed the words.

“Had to give her a cover story, so I told her my niece was attacked by someone. She wouldn’t let me go without taking everything. Wanted me to tell her that it mattered, and that she wasn’t alone.”

“Did you get her name?”

“I should have. Sorry, kiddo.”

“It's okay.” She opened the sketch book and smoothed her fingertips over the paper.

“So,” Jason started, “I think you need a shower.”

Sasha laughed. It was quiet and rough sounding for a teenage girl, but nice. “Saying I stink?”

Jason wrinkled his nose at her like that was exactly what he thought.

“A shower would be awesome.”

“There's nothing weird about it. Just two knobs, twist one and the water comes on.” Jason collected the cookies and drink mixes, “I'll start on dinner.”

Sasha was already stripping out of his jacket. The hood came down and Jason saw the soft dusting of little hairs that were just beginning to grow back on her scalp. They were light colored, red. He left her to it, opening his fridge to pull produce out while she sorted through her new clothes.

She stayed in the shower for an hour, and when she came back out she was wearing her new pajama pants, the matching top and the purple hoody. Jason turned his head away so she didn't catch him watching her, or the softness he knew was in his expression.

She was wearing the butterfly mask.
“You haven't left the house in days.” Sasha said as she stared down at her half-empty plate.

Jason kept his eyes on the TV but tilted his head in her direction to show he was listening. He wasn't really paying attention to the screen. Honestly, it was just background noise. Something to 'watch', even though he could scarcely see anything past what lay inside his own mind. The floor lamp burned at the corner of his vision, a white hot brand that was held close to his eye, to instill terror, before it lowered to-

“Jason?”

Jason blinked slowly, forcing his fingers to smooth over the ridges of body armor he'd put on beneath his new Wonder Woman t-shirt. A night full of terrors had roused him long before dawn and left him in a hell of a state. He'd been battling the trauma for years now, but he had yet to learn how to snuff it out on command. If that was even possible.

Jason tipped his head back and shut his eyes. He exhaled slowly, “What, kid.”

“You haven't touched your food.”

“Not hungry.” He said it even as he realized that he wasn't setting a good example for his new charge. Another breath. His ribs were bearing down, too tight around his chest.

Sasha dropped it, shrugging beside him. “I thought you liked to keep tabs on the Bats. But you haven't put on your helmet in weeks.”

Had it been weeks? Jason thought back, trying to remember just when he'd found Sasha, exactly. “They're not missing me.”

She was staring at him. Jason rolled his head to stare back, raising an eyebrow at her. She was wearing gray sweats, her favorite graphic tee ('I don't give a:' with doodles of a rat and a donkey beneath the caption), her bigger hoody and the fox mask.

Three. Today made just over three weeks that he'd been taking care of her. All of her wounds were healed and the tiny little hairs on her scalp were just a tiny bit longer now, thin and fair, like baby's hair. Her hairline was coming in further back than what was the norm, just a few inches from the top of her head.

She'd helped him fix the worst of the holes in the drywall. He hadn't bothered replacing the mirror or the mattress. She’d had three meltdowns since that first one, but they had each been smaller and easier to manage before she really hurt herself. Jason had been entertaining the idea of teaching her self-defense to vent some of that rage, but he had yet to bring it up to her. This safe house really wasn't equipped for sparring.
Sasha's foot collided with his side, forcing a low grunt through his teeth at the impact. “Hey!” She snapped, “stop spacing out like that. Its weird.”

“Ow,” Jason said under his breath. Even with body armor on, that had definitely smarted.

“Are you seriously wearing your suit right now?”

“It's-” Jason rumbled when she pushed her heel into the sore spot, “could you not?!”

“You are! You're wearing your armor under your pajamas!” A bewildered laugh bubbled out of her, “dude, you are cracked in the head.”

Jason definitely did not pout at that. He did not, because he was a grown ass man, dammit. “And what's wrong with that? Is there some stupid law that says I can't?”

“Aww, you're embarrassed.” Another laugh. It sounded nice, and despite having her heel dug in under his ribs and his pride nicked, Jason felt himself calm.

She finally eased up on his side but didn't completely remove her foot. He was almost certain it was a tactical move—a reminder that he'd have a cold foot made of marble in his gut if he didn't respond accordingly.

“But, really. You didn't stop going out because of me, did you?” Her voice went quiet, insecure.

“Honestly?” Jason sank into the couch, “I shouldn't be out there at all. The only reason why I was that night was because it was harder to stay at home than it was to suit up and find trouble.”

That got her attention. Her face turned toward him, head canted to one side in question. “Shouldn't be out there? What? You're Red Hood. Aren't you supposed to, I don't know, shoot everyone? Shoot the bad guys until they die and shoot the good ones until they leave you alone?”

“If only,” Jason dropped his head on the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling while he tried to think of a response that would work for her. And that was way harder than it should be.

“What happened?” She pulled her foot back to fold her legs beneath her. Jason heard the unspoken clarification; To you. What happened to you? Felt the assessment she was making of him. The comparison of the reputation, and what was right in front of her. She was probably seeing all the things that didn't fit. His too-slender build. That, just like her, he could scarcely finish a meal. That he leaned toward long pants and long sleeves to hide in. That he was so lost inside of himself he wore a suit beneath his clothes to hold his loose parts together.

Someone broke me, he almost said. Over and over. Then I broke myself.

Jason jolted when she threw herself down on the sofa closer to him. He hadn't even noticed when she stood up. Sasha had the comforter in her hands and was pulling it over both of them. She hesitated, “It's...okay. You don't have to talk about it.” He felt her fingers touch his arm in silent support. “I'm sorry.”

And for one wild second, Jason wanted to cry.

*_**_*_*

Jason startled awake from a blissfully dreamless sleep when a too-small voice called for him. His eyes opened to a dark room, quickly scanning what he could see as a years of training and hard-won experience demanded he make sure they weren't in danger.
“-ason? Jason?”

He twisted on the sofa and looked at Sasha's nest. She was curled tight into herself, face in her knees. Her hands were vices on her upper arms. She was shaking.

Jason rolled off of the couch and to his feet. She was still calling for him, his name a hoarse plea in the dark.

“I'm here,” Jason said, almost sprinting for the light switch. Warm light flooded the living room, chasing away the shadows. “Right here. It's not real, kid. I am. Listen to my voice.” He swept up the leather jacket that had kept her hidden and safe all this time from where it lay on the kitchen table, hoping it would help ground her.

He crossed the floor and sank down next to her, but was mindful to leave a bit of space just in case too much contact would trigger her. Instead, he smoothed the supple leather against her knuckles. She released her arm with jerking, robotic motions then snagged it from his hand like a life line.

“Jason?”

“Here.” He said softly. She uncurled enough to pull the jacket to her chest, and he watched it vanish into the defensive curl of her body. Sasha breathed in, then forced it all right back out. Too much, too fast. Then her hand was groping across the floor until it found his. Small fingers gripped his with the strength of wrought iron bands.

“Hey,” Jason smoothed a calloused thumb over her knuckles, “how hard am I gonna get punched for telling you to breathe and calm down?”

“Ha-Hard.”

Jason grinned. “It's been a while since I've had a black eye. Think I'm overdue.”

“You'll get two.”

“A matching set,” He nodded his approval, “make sure to get my nose, too.”

“Split lip.”

“A full facial.”

A stunted, broken laugh forced its way in between her gasps for air. A victory, though it probably wasn't helping with her breathing. “Breathe in, hold. Breathe out, slowly.” He repeated the instructions until she was doing it herself, then branched off unto a completely different topic.

“When I was a kid, before things got really bad, my mom would buy a stupid-huge amount of cookie dough. Enough for a batch for everyone to share, a secret batch just for us, and the rest we ate raw while we were baking. When it was just us she would drag her comforter to the couch and we'd sit down and stuff our faces and listen to the radio or read.”

Jason glanced down at Sasha and saw that she was gradually beginning to uncurl. Her breaths were calmer. Her free arm was crossed against her chest, pinning his jacket to her front and face. Her mask was askew, and her hood had fallen down. Jason pulled it back over her head. Her eyes blinked, a hint of life returning to them when they flitted his direction.

Jason tried to smirk, or do something something besides frowning in concern. “We got three bars of cookie dough in the fridge. How 'bout we go stuff our faces with chocolate chip deliciousness?”
He knew he had her when her eyes brightened with interest, the haze of a anxiety attack leaving them. She hugged herself tighter then seemed to mentally steel herself before she relaxed with a sigh. Sasha let go of Jason's hand and devoted her focus to pulling on his jacket and yanking the hood up over what was already on her head.

That was how they ended up eating hot, soft cookies straight off the cookie sheet at four-thirty in the morning, and talking about carefully thought-over pros and cons of different 'as seen on TV' products. Jason had just caved to her reasoning of why 'Snuggies' were human kind's greatest invention when the conversation took a sudden turn.

Sasha's eyes dropped to the table top, body language screaming discomfort. Jason knew that she was gearing up to talk about whatever she saw that scared her so badly, so he sat patient and quiet beside her.

She nibbled on her cookie and sipped on her milk. The Mardi-Gras masks allowed her to do that without having to be removed since all three designs tapered off just a past her nose. Which meant they didn't have to eat out of sight of each other anymore. It hadn't bothered him, but she seemed much more at ease with herself. She actually hadn't touched the original, full mask since he gave them to her.

Sasha straightened herself up and looked at him. Jason mirrored her, folding his arms across the table top.

"I had my real face. The old one." She started, "in my dream. And my body was...fine. It was like nothing had ever happened. My dad was still alive. Then things just changed. It wasn't my face anymore. It fell off and-" She stopped talking, closing her eyes. "I wasn't me anymore. I was...I don't know. But I wasn't me. And the people that I know? My friends? My dad, my mom. They couldn't look at me anymore. No one could. I was alone.”

"Jason,” She curled her shoulders forward and down, “is that- I mean, is that the life I'll have now? Where no one can stand to even look at me? I can't even do it. Can...” Can you? Her fingers raised to her mask, hesitating.

She braced herself before pushing the mask off her face. A face riddled with scarring and disfigurement revealed itself to him, an entire canvas of pain and loss and life. Emotion and a desperate need for acceptance in her eyes. She watched him closely, holding her breath and anticipating the worst.

Jason held her stare without flinching. Somehow, this seemed to put her further on edge and she went rigid. He tilted his head then, “I knew it.”

“"What?” She said too quickly.

“I knew there was a smartass punk under that mask.”

She blinked owlishly at him, then she reeled back and smacked his arm. “Ow!”

“This is serious, Jason!” She snapped, but Jason caught the overwhelming relief on her face. “I don't even look like a person anymore!”

“Two eyes, two ears,” Jason said, raising two fingers, then one. “A nose. A mouth. You look pretty human to me.”

Sasha looked away. “That's not what matters, though.”
“No, its not.”

Pain. She squeezed her eyes shut, clenched her jaw.

Jason took a breath, “People are stupid, so stupid shit matters to them. But you? Sasha, you are alive and wild. And because of that, you are special. Every bit of you. That's what matters. Anyone that says otherwise can fuck off.”

He finished off his milk and took count of how many cookies were left. Sasha sat still beside him then slowly leaned into his shoulder.

“It really doesn't bother you?” She pressed after a moment.

“There are a lot of things that bother me. You are definitely not one of them.” Jason let it sit for a while, silently sliding the cookie sheet closer to her. “You know what? Think its time we checked on my other safe houses.”

“...What?”

“Find another place to stay in. This ones a bit small.”

“It's bigger than my dad's old apartment. How is it small?”

“Well,” Jason leaned back and tapped his fingers across the table top, “I have one that's got two rooms. You could have your own space. That's what teenage girls are always screaming about needing, right? Hashtag space?”

She huffed, “Yes, because we're human beings with human needs, and don't like adults sticking their big stupid noses in our business all the time.”

“See? Works out great. Its also got a nicer fridge and a really big, open living room.”

“The bigger fridge I can get on board with. But whats with the living room?”

“If you want, I can teach you some self-defense. I was going to ask you sooner but this place really isn't big enough.” Jason glanced down at her as her hands tightened around his arm. “Only if you want, though-”

“Yes.” Sasha jumped to her feet, eyes bright, “When can we go?!”

“This weekend. Maybe sooner-” Jason wheezed when she hugged him tight around the ribs. “Jesus Christ, kid!”

She was grinning into his shoulder, “Don't let it go to your head, but you're awesome.”

Jason closed his eyes under the attention(abuse) and huffed out a breathless chuckle.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

On time again! Today's going to be a good day.

Warnings include nightmares/episodes and Tolkien.

Hope everyone enjoys. Love you all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sasha didn't know what to do anymore.

It was a month in. She'd been experimented on and taken in and treated with more respect than she could ever have asked for, and she was losing her mind.

Jason was...nice. Anytime she went to him about things that hurt to think about, he always jumped to reassure her. He was trying to help. He'd given her a safe place to stay. He'd fed her. He'd put up with her panic attacks and flashbacks. He let her break all of his stuff, didn't even care about it. He even gave her her own room.

But it wasn't hers. None of it really was. It didn't feel like hers, or even like she deserved it. Which was...it didn't make sense? Because she hadn't asked to get totally screwed up beyond all reason. She hadn't asked someone to rip her life away, her choices and chances. Her family, her future. God, her mom. Her mom was still alive. Sasha had left her, willingly, angrily, to prove a point and follow her dad who, surprise, screwed everything up and gotten them both tangled up in Pyg's schemes. And now? Even if she wanted to, Sasha couldn't go back. She just couldn't.

Sasha was not that girl anymore. She was different, other. She didn't know what she was, or who. It was like everything had been completely stripped out of her, and this cold marble statue, a villain's pawn, had been shoved in it's place. Taken and remade into a tool that wasn't supposed to think or wonder or feel. Sasha caught herself asking more and more often if maybe that was the real reason Pyg stripped his dollatrons of their free will? Obviously, the most believable reason was that it put them completely and mercilessly under his control. But if they had that option, if they still carried that last, damned thread of humanity?

It was messing her up. She couldn't focus on anything else, but what had happened. On what was still happening.

At first, the monsters in her head stayed hidden. The first few days after waking up on a table as Robin flew overhead to smash into Pyg's chest, had been a blur of moving and Jason's voice and Jason's smell and Jason's home, new and strange but a perfect distraction. Then it was the things he said. Jason was crass, and he was an asshole sometimes, but he said things that were kinder and much more understanding than what she even thought about herself. Those were also a distraction, and she gripped them with both hands and held them like her life depended on it, because dammit, she wanted to believe in those things. She wanted them to be true.
When they moved locations, she was given a room that she didn't sleep in for the first few nights. Instead, she took up a corner in the living room. Jason understood. He slept on the couch. And it was easier. The first day they pushed all of the furniture to the walls to make a clear space, when they spent hours just working on the way she fell down until it was done exactly the way he wanted, and the motions were burnt into muscle memory. The following days after, they were still working on it but also slowly introducing new things. Basics, one by one. It was frustratingly slow but Sasha wasn't stupid. She knew why he was enforcing too-long lessons, and she faced them head on.

But the first night she stayed in her room? It was too big, too quiet, too empty. She couldn't stand to lay back in bed, feeling the panic crawl up into her throat as she saw shadows of masked dollatrons and caught the flash of Pyg's knives as they danced and spun in the air. So she stripped the mattress and pulled everything to a corner on the floor. Screwed her eyes shut, breathed, tried to ground herself in the ways she'd found worked best.

Then she opened them again, and her father lay beside her, her hands around his too-strong neck. Sasha couldn't breathe.

She wanted to run. To fight, to do something, but she was so trapped in her visions that she couldn't move at all. Jason was pushed firmly out of her mind by her own night terrors.

So Sasha didn't sleep. The sun rose. Jason got up and started making noise. Finally, she was able to unlock her limbs and leave. She went into the kitchen and sat on a bar stool while he made breakfast, just to be near him. Close enough to hear, see and even smell him. Jason talked to her. He was good at that, filling the suffocating silence with a bunch of soothing noise. And for the rest of the day, when they wasted it by training and eating and lounging, she was okay. Not good, but okay.

But it happened again and again.

By the end of the week, she was empty. She heard Jason moving in the morning, and rose on autopilot. Instead of the bar stool, she sat on the couch because it was closer, and brought her into the sunlight. Sunlight that burned. She couldn't hear him when he talked to her, and couldn't bring herself to care.

Jason brought her a plate, which she took but didn't eat from. Then he sat beside her.

“Sasha.”

That was her name, wasn't it? She closed her eyes to the world, wishing that it would fall away. Or better yet, that she would fall away. Just...gone.

A hand tugged on her hood, light enough that it didn't jostle her, but firm enough to get her attention. She'd recognized it as his unspoken code for 'I care about you, I'm here'. She exhaled slowly and forced herself to eat.

She couldn't even finish half of it.

That night began the same as the others. The deafening quiet came alive with melancholy opera, Pyg's voice adding to it to create the duet from hell. He came thundering out of the shadows, huge and bloody and brandishing knives of all shapes and sizes. Her father was against her, pushing against her hands as he tried to stand up and continue the assault Pyg had ordered on Robin.

She didn't even notice when her door actually opened, or when a lamp was turned on, or when a real, living, breathing body was sitting next to her on the floor. And a voice, soft and rough in the dark, started to speak. Word after word, sentence after sentence, tumbling into the open air until they
snuffed Pyg's singing and her father's breathing out with their quiet, steady strength.

She closed her eyes. Relief. Jason continued to talk, and she began to catch the words. Weakly at first, and so loose that they slipped right through her mind. But her resolve strengthened, and it began to make sense to her.

“-There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.”

Something didn't fit, between what she was hearing and what she might have expected. So she fought to open her eyes and look. Jason sat beside her in just his pajamas, one leg stretched out and the other bent. An elbow was propped on his raised knee, while the other arm rested against his side and held an open, well-loved paper back book in his hand. Reading. Jason was reading to her.

While she watched, he paused, supposedly at the bottom of the page, and took a drink of water. Her eyes followed the motion. There were two glasses on the floor by his legs, and a bag of cookies. Sasha let her head roll back against the wall. She closed her eyes and didn't say a word.

Jason set the glass down, she could hear it, and picked up where he left off. His voice, and images of a fictional world that was far, far away, filled the aching hollows in her body and mind.

Chapter End Notes

So, I wrote the majority of this story in early 2018 and have been working on it since, and I guess I didn't realize back then that I wrote two of these kinds chapters in a row. Though if we're talking realistically, episodes and nightmares don't happen when we want them to. They happen when they want, which tend to be the most inconvenient times while you're trying to hold your shit together.

And, on that note, I guess I should let you guys know that I have over 40 chapters written for this story. At the rate its going, I think we'll be up in the 80 chapter range before it is finished. Once I finish writing it, I can start posting maybe twice or even three times a week, or I can stretch it out and leave at once a week. I'm not sure if you will have the time or headspace to read more than one chapter a week, so I'll leave that choice up to you via vote in the comments.

Also, there is a prequel thats coming and is over halfway finished, and I'm hoping it'll be ready to start posting by April. Again, I'm going to give you the choice of posting it early or waiting for 'A Place For Us' to finish so you're not juggling two different time frames of the same series at once.

Both of these stories are set up to exist in the same series, but are independent of each other enough to be read as separate stories. The reason why is because they are two completely different genres, with this one being a recovery story and the prequel being closer to a horror/survival, and I know that everyone has their own personal interests in genre and may not want to read both. But, its still going up, so if this is the case and you ever decide to change your mind or want to try it, the prequel will be there.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

I'm on a road trip with a childhood friend and won't have access to good internet for the next few days, so you guys get an early spring break update!

Warnings include sparring, Jason-typical language (Should be expected by now) and quoted one-liners.

Hope everyones having a good week! Love you!

One thing Sasha really, really hated was acrobatics. Which was ironic, because Jason didn't seem to be a big fan, either. Well, maybe not so ironic. She had a hard time picturing him as the type of hero that did flashy flips and spins in the air just for the hell of it. For one, he was too big and bulky. Two, he just wouldn't waste the time or energy being a showgirl when there were things to do.

Back on point, though. Sasha despised this part of her training. Really, she hadn't asked for it. Jason had just walked up to the mats and started drilling her on the basics of tumbling. How to fall -again, dammit- and then got her started on basic tumbling. Tucking into a ball and rolling. That graduated into handstands, which she hated, and cartwheels, which she also hated.

Sasha wondered sometimes if Jason remembered that she wasn't a normal teenage girl. She was built to smash and be smashed, thanks to Pyg, which meant she was a lot heavier by default. Add on to the fact that Jason's training and healthy diet had more or less turned her into a little body builder, and she was pretty sure that if she managed to land any flips her weight would put her right through the floor.

She made sure to share this assessment with Jason. He snorted and told her that yes, she was 'heavy as fuck' (thanks, Jason), but that wasn't what was holding her back. Apparently, she was doing that to herself by not trusting anything. Not herself, not her training, not his guidance. Sasha didn't know how to fix that, though. It was hard to go against a gut instinct that screamed at her to 'stop' while he was telling her to 'go'.

“Let go of it,” Jason said.

“But how? How did you 'let go'?”

Then he just looked at her, this sharp glint of mischief in his eyes that screamed trouble. Sasha bristled at him, “What?!”

“Batman picked me up and tossed me around a couple hundred times.”

“He what- No. No. You are not going to start picking me up and throwing me around like a football.”

“What's wrong, Sasha? Scared I'll drop you?”

“Like you even could lift me.” Sasha huffed, “so besides that terrible idea, how can I do this?”
Jason cocked his head to one side, “You forget that I dragged your butt across fifty roof tops to get you home. Go jump off the couch.”

Sasha gaped at him, “The couch?”

“And I don’t mean just stand up and drop. I want you to climb on top of that thing and throw yourself over like the hounds of hell are on your ass.”

Sasha stayed right where she was, waiting for him to admit that he was jacking with her. But Jason just stood there with his stupid arms crossed across his stupid chest, all stupidly expectant like. So Sasha huffed and turned away from him.

She jumped off the couch. Or, she tried to, but the whole damn thing tipped over on her and sent her slamming to the floor as soon as her weight was on it's back. Jason started cackling. Sasha beat him with one of the couch cushions until he was crying with laughter.

* * * *

Sasha hit the floor and, for the thousandth time, Jason was glad they didn't have any neighbors. The rumors and complaints would have spread like wildfire, and they probably would have gotten evicted months ago when he started training Sasha.

The impact shook through the hardwood and up into his feet and calves. It sounded like a terrible fall, one that was ambulance-worthy. But Sasha was rolling smoothly to her feet before she'd even gone still, and was lunging for him with renewed energy. Jason pushed off and flew across the bar and out of the kitchen. Sasha hopped up and tumbled over to follow. Around the corner, over the table, out to the living area, a dive over the couch and a roll across the mats. Jason was working up a bit of a sweat, but Sasha stayed right. On. His. Ass.

On the next time around, Jason spun around the corner into the kitchen instead of going over the bar first. Fingers touched the back of his shirt and he pivoted on contact. Sasha was already moving away, backwards, over the bar and back to the mats. Jason followed, letting her keep the lead for longer than necessary so he could assess her technique. She was still unsure with her footing, and her jumps were as low as she could possibly make them. Her landings and rolls were almost perfect, and she was fast and focused. Still room for improvement, but impressive.

Jason was closing in to tag her when the TV, which they'd left on for background noise, turned to an emergency broadcast. He immediately called for a break, eyes caught on the live footage flashing across the screen. Robin, getting his ass handed to him by a rabid Killer Croc. The image was grainy and jumped around. From the angle, it was being shot from a helicopter, and zoomed in to catch the ass-handing for the entire world to see. Sasha leaned over the back of the couch, watching with narrowed eyes as the seventeen year old boy was thrashed and thrown into the dock with enough force to splinter the wood.

“He's going to kill him.” Sasha said.

“Nightwing,” Jason reassured, though he wasn't sure if it was for her or for himself, “Nightwing should be there.”

“You see another set of tights anywhere?”

No. Jason was already stalking into his room. He opened his closet and started rummaging through the stacks of cases and lock boxes and gun rack that made up his little armory. He stripped right there
and yanked all the layers of his suit on with one hand while he started separating a load out and weapons. He didn't have time to be specific. He didn't have time to really think about what he was getting into.

Robin was alone. Nightwing was based in Bludhaven, and the chances of him being in Gotham were slim at best. Even if Oracle had called him as soon as the broadcast started, or even before, there was no way he'd get there in time. Which left Jason. And when had Jason ever sat out a good fight when the stakes were this high?

He came back out, swinging on a spare black leather jacket since he had yet to replace the iconic one Sasha had taken over. She watched him as he slid the emergency Bat comm link into his ear- hoping it still worked and the channels were open because it'd been years since he'd gotten it- and put his signature helmet on over it. It sealed down with a low pressurized hiss, the interior visor lighting up with a clear picture of the room around him.

“Be careful.” Sasha watched him as he headed for the window, “you better come back home in one piece, Jason, I swear to god. If you die-”

Jason offered her a careless salute, “Death never did anything but slow me down a little.” Then he was off, grappling to the roof and busting ass to reach the Replacement.
Okay this time I have no excuse. My friend stayed out for an extra week due to the mess with the planes being grounded for technical stuff and yesterday we just got caught up in having fun. I am weak, sorry.

Warnings for this include butt-kicking/violence, Jason-typical language, and stuff that I probably should have researched more before slapping it online.

Enjoy!

Half way to the coast, the comm link in his ear crackled and Oracle's voice filtered through, strained with urgency. She immediately rattled off an exact location.

"Hows it looking?" Jason rushed, grateful for the first time in his life that Oracle had eyes everywhere.

"From what his suit is feeding back to me? Not good. Low heart rate. Multiple breaches and contusions. The suit's tasers have been shorted out- they were activated while he was in the water."

"Jesus Christ," Jason said with feeling. That told him two things. One, Croc had probably surprised Robin and dragged him into the water – which explained how the big scaly bastard got him to begin with - and two, Croc had probably had his arms around the Replacement's ribs and had squeezed hard enough to trigger the suit's defensive tasers. It made him terrified of the condition he might find the poor kid in. Was there water in his lungs? Were his ribs shattered? Organs punctured? Was he fried to a crisp now? And that was all done before Croc picked him up and slapped him around.

"He's still breathing," Oracle rushed, "but his vitals are dropping and he's unresponsive."

Shit, Jason would probably be out cold, too. He ground his teeth, "Where the hell is Nightwing?"

"On his way from Bludhaven, but you're closer. Help Robin, Hood. Please."

Jason heard the the beat-down before he came upon it, wincing behind his helmet at a loud cacophony of cracking and splashing. That definitely didn't sound good. A hollow roar with the underlying hiss that was unique to Killer Croc followed.

Right, so first thing first- get Croc away from Robin. That was the priority until one of them dropped or help arrived to get the kid out of the field. Jason drew a pistol, thumbed the safety off, and hurled himself out of cover and into the fray. He fired half a magazine into the brute's hide to get his attention. The bullets barely pierced his armored skin, penetrating just enough to be a nuisance before they stopped cold.

Killer Croc twisted toward him and fixed predatory glare on him, the slit pupils contracting in focused fury.

"Hey, lizard lips!" Jason shouted cheerily, slipping into his Red Hood persona like it was a fitted glove, "How 'bout us freaks-of-nature leave the baby bird alone and dance? Just you and me,
asshole.”

Jason tucked and rolled just as a chunk of weathered wood was ripped from the dock and chunked at him. While moving, he caught a glimpse of the kid draped limply over the jagged edge of the hole Croc had pounded through the pier. He seemed secure enough there and his head was out of the water, so Jason left him alone and focused on drawing Croc away from the dock before it caved beneath his weight.

That proved easy enough. He fired a few more bullets into Croc's chest and jumped backwards toward solid ground. Killer Croc was either too pissed to care about being led away, or he had finally lost the ability to think rationally and was just acting purely on instinct. Which did both, make his job easier and harder at the same time. Easier because it was a simple thing to get that rage to shift fully to him. Harder, because it made Killer Croc that much more unpredictable.

Holding a safe distance and firing bullets at him was doing nothing but eating through Jason's ammunition and irritating Croc. They were too close to Robin to start chunking grenades. No, if he wanted to do enough damage to take him down, he would have to get in close and target weak points. Wonderful.

Jason utilized their surroundings and kicked off a stack of crates to propel him closer while he holstered his guns. He stopped between Ugly's legs- that huge tail stopped him from going any further- and broke out a knife and sliced it upward into a thigh that was thicker than Jason's torso.

On the list of 'completely stupid shit Jason Peter Todd has done’, and man, was that list long, stabbing a an eleven foot tall, fifteen-hundred pound crocodile in the thigh with a tactical knife had to rank high. Yet here he was, proving to himself and the entire world that yes, he really was a total dumbass and had no self-preservation instincts whatsoever.

Bruce would be so proud.

The blade, as sharp and handy as it was, sank through the inches-thick skin to nick the bulging muscle beneath, but stopped there and wouldn't come out. Jason cursed under his breath and ducked back when Croc lifted the same leg up to stomp down on him. He grimaced when he felt the vibration in the ground and made a note to stay away from those feet from now on. Croc was moving, pivoting as fast as he could with his tail dragging behind him, which was still faster than Jason would have liked, and tried to follow him.

Jason tucked in and out once there was a clear exit that left him at Croc's back. He was up the plated hide and sinking another, smaller knife into the soft place that marked Croc's ear. The monster bellowed, jerking away and slamming them face first into the same stack of crates Jason had pushed off of earlier. Jason dropped to the outside-

"Hood, Robin is slipping!”

Fuck. Jason changed position, taking advantage of his opponent's bent-forward posture to drop to his hands and slam both booted heels into the place under his jaw where his throat was softest. Jason grasped the handle of his knife and ripped it free and rolled away. Springing to his feet, he sprinted for the dock and made it to Robin just as the kid's head dipped underwater. Jason grabbed him and hefted him up solidly unto the wood-wood that was quaking beneath them- “FUCK!” - the curse fled his lips as a giant hand closed down on his leg with crushing strength.

Then he was air-born, body flung upward, then snapped back down with enough force that a hoarse shout left him. He smashed into the wood. Stunned, Jason went limp as Croc lifted and brought down again, then again, until every cell of his body was screaming.
"Jason!!? JAY!!"

Tasting blood in his mouth, Jason sucked in a ragged breath of air before he fought to pull his shit together. The next lift, he forced his body to tighten and curl, felt the strain of it through his bones and muscle. His hands, curled into claws, swept down in an arc until he sank his fingers into a glowing yellow eye. He felt the soft tissue resist briefly before it caved with a wet squelch.

The pressure on his leg released immediately and he collapsed hard to the splintered wood beneath them, gasping for breath. Above, Killer Croc was screaming in pain, clawing at his face and stumbling back. Jason searched frantically for the kid. Robin was where he'd left him at the edge of the pier, safe.

Jason heaved a heavy sigh of relief and got a knee beneath him. His leg hurt like hell, but he could still wiggle his toes and roll his ankle so nothing was broken. "Should have stayed in bed today," He wheezed, "God damn it."

Then Croc hit him with the full strength of his tail and sent him soaring through the air and into the cold-as-shit ocean.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Posting a little early since I was late last week. <3

Finished the prequel! Its fast and furious at 11 chapters long. I decided to go ahead and hold off on posting it until this story is better established or finished.

Warnings for this chapter include: Brief description of past suicide, more stuff I probably should have researched, near-drowning, Jason-typical language and a small family reunion that Jason definitely wasn't ready for. Also, feelers.

The suicide big is limited to one paragraph. If you need to skip it, stop reading here: "He did not need saving anymore." And pick up here: "The sharp words that had been building up on his tongue..."

Hope you guys enjoy!

Jason hit the water like it was a concrete wall. It ripped the air from his lungs and made him stiffen. Most of his suit was water proof, but the cold still breached it where there were tears and stole the life from his limbs. He didn't- couldn't- move until a muffled splash followed him and holy shit Croc was in the water and coming for him. For fuck's sake.

Jason reached for his utility knife, twisting in the water to face the yellow-eyed monstrosity that was suspended in the darkness across from him. Blood from Killer Croc's face and body threaded through the water in curling black tendrils. Jason could see thin clouds of his own raising from his leg and side where the thrashing had gotten him. While watching Croc's face, he saw the pupil of his remaining eye widen until it was almost round. Jason couldn't tell if it was to compensate for the lack of light or because Croc could taste Jason's blood in the water.

Oracle's voice cracked with static in his ear, "Hood! Please tell me you're-"

"Kinda busy right now, O!" Jason wheezed.

Come and get me. There was no doubts in Jason's mind. He was helplessly outclassed here, and it was very likely that he would die. Again. But not without a fight. He clenched the knife tighter and tread water, silently daring his enemy to make a move.

A subtle shift in muscles, and Croc struck, quick as lighting. Jason didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of avoiding or blocking him, so braced himself and took it. Claws raked across his stomach, but the kevlar and body armor took the brunt of it, leaving him with a handful of gashes instead of being completely split open. Croc circled around in the same motion, other arm closing around Jason's chest to crush. Jason caught a glimpse of dully glinting teeth in his peripheral, and he twisted to sink his blade into Croc's open maw.

His flesh, even without the huge plates of armor, was thick. The jagged edge still sliced through part of Croc's tongue and pierced the softer tissue beneath it. Jason forced it down, twisting the blade until it sank completely through so that the tip poked out under his chin. Croc twisted, releasing Jason to
reach for the knife. Jason got both feet on his chest and shoved off, propelling himself toward the surface.

"Nightwing is almost there! Just hang on!"

Frigid water moved around him. It was his only warning before he was yanked back down. Croc appeared over him, filling his view. The knife was still in his mouth and forcing it to stay open, firm even when he roared at Jason. Then he had a bloody fist- cuts from the knife or his own teeth?-around Jason’s neck and was dragging them both into a steep dive.

The mask Jason had on was waterproof, with a lightweight filtration system built into it. It was the only way he'd managed to stay conscious this long under water. But now? Croc had him by the neck and was squeezing down with unrelenting pressure. Croc was going to suffocate or drown him, whichever one came first.

"’s there! Ho-ood?! I'm loosing yo-ou- J-ason?! Ja-” Oracle's voice snuffed out in his ear, and he knew that he was beyond help now.

Jason scraped against Croc's wrist with both hands trying to think over the panic rising in his chest. They were deep underwater now. Darkness encased both of them. He could barely see the glint of the eye glaring down at him. His helmet switched to night vision to compensate. Right. Time for something crazy and stupid and definitely suicidal.

Jason dropped one of his hands to the pistol at his thigh and undid the strap securing it. He pulled it out, clicked the safety off and blindly shoved it where he guesstimated Croc’s mouth to be. He fumbled at first, missing the open maw, before he managed to shove the whole piece, his hand and part of his wrist in. He set his thumb on the hammer just as Croc’s free hand wrapped around his helmet and squeezed.

The visor before his eyes flickered – Jason started to pull back on the hammer – the carbohydrate, lead-lined shell of the helmet cracked beneath scaled fingers – his index finger looped over the trigger – cold water forced it's way through the breach – Jason took his last breath of air – Croc's hand squeezed tighter – Jason felt the resistance of flesh against the barrel of his gun - the helmet fell away in jagged pieces – their eyes locked.

Jason pulled the trigger.

The noise of gun fire was dulled, but he felt the pressure in his hand, through the water, god in his head- Killer Croc jolted in the water, stiff. Jason fired again. And again, shivering from cold and strain when the pressure built up in his ears to bursting.

Killer Croc flinched each time, so Jason knew he hadn’t killed him yet, but didn't react when Jason wedged his hand back out, gun included. He didn't want to leave his knife, but it was either stay down here in flooded hell to work it free or bust ass to the surface so he could breathe. Instead he secured his pistol and turned his attention to surviving. He kicked off of Croc’s shoulder with the full strength of his legs and swam up.

Light filtered down, and he adjusted course toward the closest pier when they came into view. A body in familiar black and blue kevlar dove in nearby, head full of perfect black hair turning back and forth, searching. Jason twisted and moved toward him, catching his attention.

Nightwing gripped the arm he extended and pulled him in close. Jason didn't even struggle when the other arm closed around him and squeezed him tight. They surfaced, finally, and Jason sucked in an embarrassingly loud gasp of air.
“Jay,” Nightwing said, voice raw with bone-deep relief.

“Robin?” Jason wheezed, letting the older guide them to the pier. He gripped the wood with both hands and shakily pulled himself up. Damn fight had sucked all of the life right out of him. Or had it been the cold?

“Some lacerations, broken bones and burns.” Nightwing hauled up beside him and hovered like a mother hen, “Already got some field dressings on him. I'll take him to Leslie after we're done here.”

Never one to be shy, Nightwing already had both hands on him and was feeling for any injuries in Jason's extremities and ribs. Jason felt the faintest echo of irritation over it, but it was nothing like the old impulse to shove him away, maybe hit him, for assuming he was allowed to fuss over him. Of course, that had never stopped the older before, and even if Jason was still a two hundred pound ball of pent up rage and insult, Nightwing would just come right back. So he let it be.

“Killer Croc?” Nightwing lifted one of Jason's hands and stared hard at it until Jason looked down and saw what it was that had his attention. Jason's forearm and hand were punctured in several places, where the kevlar and body armor had failed. A couple of Croc's teeth were lodged in his flesh and the armor.

“Stunned.” Probably not dead, though that was a possibility. Better not to tell him, though. Jason had been doing a damn good job of not bringing any Bats down on top of his head, which meant keeping a clean no-kill streak while he was in town.

Nightwing herded him to solid ground and had him sink down on a crate beside Robin, who was still out cold but patched up. Nightwing was already breaking out the med kit and field dressings. “As in, he'll be up and charging at me as soon as he catches his breath, or as in he'll need surgery to be functional again?”

Jason could taste blood and knew it was all in his teeth and down his face. So he smiled, real sweet and innocent like. “Come on, Dickiebird. You oughtta know the answer to that already.”

Nightwing paused, head canting up and to the side to look at Jason from his peripheral. Even though he was wearing a mask over his eyes, Jason could see the sudden tightness in his expression. He couldn't tell if it was from his old nickname for him, or because he assumed that Jason was lying through his teeth and had just killed Croc in cold blood.

But then the older was reaching for Jason's face. A hand gently carded through his hair, pushing it out of his face. “Facial and head wounds. That'll need stitches.” Nightwing muttered, “multiple lacerations.” The hand that had been in his hair moved down to roll the neck of his suit down and reveal the huge, ugly bruising that was already blooming there. “Jesus.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, “you missed one hell of a fight.”

“From the way O was freaking out, it sounded more like a massacre than a fair fight.”

Jason thought back on the moment Croc had caught him distracted and had pounded him into the wooden pier-

“Your arms broken.”

-What?

Nightwing had both hands curved around Jason's lower arm, face tight again. “Not a bad break but how the hell did you take Croc down in the water and swim back up?”
Jason tried to think back. Actually, now that they were talking about it and the rush of a fight was leaving his system, that whole side of his body felt like shit. Really, everything did, but holy fucking hell. Then he remembered.

“Hit me with the tail,” Jason grunted, “I don't know. Couldn't really feel anything until you said something, so thanks for that.”

“God, Jay.” Nightwing checked his ribs next and yep, those were definitely fucked up, too. Then down to the leg that Croc had grabbed early in the fight, which Jason had subconsciously left stretched out in a clear signal of 'this is tender'.

“Gone through worse. You and the kid have, too.” Jason pointed out.

Nightwing hesitated, conflict sharp on his face. Despite his condition and the pain he was in, Jason found himself stiffening. He knew that look. That stupid-dammit, he was a grown man. He'd died three times, started and ran a militia and took them to war, had fought in another, had the shit beat out of him every which way that old, broiling fury stirred in his belly. He did not need this right now. Not from anyone, and especially not from one of them.

He did not need this asshole who still saw him as a sassy little punk that had been taken away and tortured. He did not want that look of intense pain and regret and 'please, Little Wing, let me save you'. Jason was not that kid that had been taken and tortured and killed. He did not need saving anymore.

He had done it himself, over and over again- his thoughts took a sharp and dark turn, yanking flashes of his third death to the front of his mind. Roof gravel rough beneath him, concrete against his back, cold breeze that went right through him, pale morning light that reflected off the metal of a pistol, ice-like barrel to his head- No. His fingers flinched, a ghostly impulse to reach up and touch the scar where the bullet had broke through his skull and tunneled cleanly through tissue. Point blank in the head, a steady, sure hand, and he'd still somehow fucked that up. No.

The sharp words that had been building on his tongue died in an instant. He was just tired, and he wanted to go home. He wanted to sink down on his couch and stare at the television while Sasha curled up nearby and made her sarcastic little quips. He wanted to go home.

Nightwing just sat there for a moment, watching him. Probably expecting an explosive reaction to his ridiculous need to be the 'heroic big brother'. Jason didn't say anything, though. It wasn't worth it. So the older started on a patch job for his injuries. Silence fell between them, which was awesome. Jason didn't know if he could deal with anything else. Nightwing must have sensed it, because as soon as the thought crossed his mind, the dumbass opened his stupid mouth and said something.

“I didn't think you'd show tonight.”

Jason's eyes slid closed as something dark and ugly and painful rose up in his chest. He couldn't even begin to sort through that mess, or why it mattered this much that apparently they'd known he was in town, but none of them had expected him to step in even when it looked like the Kid was going to get killed. But the worst of it was that it wasn't their fault. This was what his life and his long list of phenomenal, rage-induced fuck-ups had created.

He had done this. He had gone off against Batman's orders all those years ago. He had come back with an army and almost completely destroyed Gotham overnight. He had been dead-set on killing Batman. Even after he had got his head back on semi-straight, even when they had tentatively tried to guide him back on track, bring him home, he had shot their efforts to pieces with that last meltdown.
Nightwing was looking at Jason again, and there was a gleam of hope there that he was desperately trying to choke so it'd hurt less when Jason turned on them again. Because he would, eventually. That was what he did. He would always hurt the people that cared about him.

Jason's hands were shaking. He wanted to cry, to scream, to throw a punch, to fire a round of bullets into the air, anything to vent the ugliness in him. He did not want to be saved. He did not want to be trusted. Thankfully, Nightwing took the sudden shivering as shock or cold.

His voice returned to the carefree tone that went with his hero persona, “I'm glad you did, though. And its good to see you again. Just wish it was under different circumstances.”

That was a blatant lie. The only time any good came out of them being together was an impromptu team-up to take down some asshole that was too much for just one of them to handle.

“You sticking around for a while?” Nightwing splinted his arm and started to wrap it once the worst of his bleeding was taken care of. His voice was light, but Jason could feel the weight behind the words like bricks on his shoulders.

Jason tip-toed around a direct answer, “Got business here. Was trying to keep my head down, but I woke up today and thought it would be fun to wrestle a fifteen-hundred pound crocodile in the ocean.”


Jason had been holed up in Gotham for more than a few months, which meant that he'd escaped being noticed longer than he'd originally thought. Did they know Sasha was staying with him? That he had even been there that night? Or maybe Oracle had known about him a lot longer and had been keeping it to herself, watching and waiting. Not surprising. Out of all of them, she had the most cause to be cautious considering he'd kidnapped her back when he was hellbent on making Batman suffer.

“Jay?”

Jason exhaled quietly, “I'm not looking for a fight.”

The other stared at him, expression unreadable. “Jason. You're always looking for a fight.”

Jason dragged a hand down his face, “No, Dick. I'm...” He didn't know how to say it. How to take the pain and the grief and the cold and the catastrophic loss of himself, and fold it all down into words. He didn't know how to tell him that he had died three times since he was fifteen. He didn't know how to admit that one of those times he had done it to himself out of a desperate need for peace. He didn't know if he could take the way how he'd woken up in the hospital and cried for days, because for some reason, he had come back. How did he express being heartbroken, knowing that it would never end?

“I'm tired,” Jason finally settled on, “I don't want to fight anymore.”

“...Okay.” Nightwing's voice was almost inaudible.

Nightwing was finished, so Jason slid his feet closer and jerked his chin toward Robin, “Make sure he takes a break. Kids a bigger workaholic than B.”

“Take your own advice. You off?”
“Yeah. Got business, remember?” Jason stood up. Luckily, it hadn't been his dominant arm that got messed up, so he would be able to fire a grapnel and get home fast and out of sight.

“Hey,” Nightwing said before he could take off, “don't be a stranger, alright?”

Jason snorted and waved at him as he left.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

For those of you who guessed, last chapter will definitely not be the last we see of Dick or Tim, but it may be a bit before we do. There's still a lot of groundwork there that needs to be covered for everyone's good.

Warnings: Pain and comfort, mentions of past character death, mentions of past suicide and past suicidal ideation, feelers.

Also, this is probably obvious, but I'll be the first to admit that I don't know ANYTHING about firearms. I did a quick search to see if a few things were possible and that was it. I'm terrible.

Have a great day! <3

Jason dragged himself through his bedroom window at twelve thirty at night. He had stopped on the way in at a safe house to properly stitch himself up and wrap up his ribs. Then he'd sat alone in the dark and drank just enough to take the edge off of his pain, physical and emotional, and made the long trek home.

Sasha was still awake. He'd expected that. She was sitting on the couch, in the hooded leather jacket she'd stolen from him, leaning forward and staring at the television. The broadcast for Croc's and Robin's showdown was still playing, and probably would be for a long time. It was rare to catch live footage of Robin, or any of the Bats, getting their asses handed to them on a silver platter. Jason caught glimpses of himself on it, and grimaced. Whatever rep he had left in Gotham was going to suffer for that. Wonderful.

Not that it matters, he reminded himself as he shut the window behind him. He may suit up once in a blue moon, but he was still very much 'out of the game'.

Sasha's head snapped up and turned toward him. Her voice was biting, but there was no hiding the relief in her eyes, "Look at that. You survived."

"And made it home in mostly one piece." Jason agreed, then nodded at the TV, "what all did you see?"

"Well, saw Robin get thrown around like a sack of potatoes. And then you jumped in, and got thrown around like a sack of potatoes. And just so you know, everyone lost it when you popped up. Apparently you're supposed to be dead."

Jason couldn't help it. He laughed. "Whats new?"

Sasha cut him an odd look. He had a feeling they'd be coming back to that later. "And they freaked out even more when you saved Robin from drowning. Guess they expected you to just let him die?"

"Guess so." Jason gingerly stripped out of his jacket and the shirt beneath it, leaving him in kevlar, then body armor.
“Then you got bitch-slapped into the water—”

“It was not a 'bitch-slap'. It was a tail-slap, and it hurt like a mother fucker.” Jason defended.

“-and Croc dove in after you and you stayed down...for forever.” Her tone went soft. She was still staring at him, raking her eyes down his form and looking at his injuries with a critical eye. “Then BlueBird Guy got there and—” Sasha's voice went cold as ice with sheer disapproval “-took his sweet time with Robin while you were at the bottom of the sea for god knows how long before he decided you were important enough to check on, too. I thought you were gone.”

Uh oh. It sounded like Sasha was as crazy about Nightwing as she was about Robin. Maybe even less. Which was almost unheard of- Dick was everyone's favorite. What even was this life, where there was a teenage girl that wasn't foaming at the mouth for either of Bruce's picture-perfect sons, but instead took it upon herself to be protective of Jason. It was...daunting.

Jason stumbled to his room to change but left the door cracked just enough to hear and be heard. “Helmet had a re-breather modded into it. It's better at filtering toxins and can provide some oxygen for a small time in the water.”

“Your helmet was broken when you came back up.”

Jason grimaced as he stripped down to his briefs. He glanced down at his body, which had become a canvas for an abstract art piece of purples and reds and yellows and blues. Nice to know he looked as bad as he felt. He pulled out his loosest clothes and slid into them before he shuffled back out and into the living room.

Sasha was in the kitchen. Jason said, “Croc cracked it while we were under.”

“How did you get away?”

“I shot him in the mouth until he stopped trying to drown me.”

Sasha blinked at him like an owl, “You can shoot guns underwater?”

“Yeah. Its not something I would have done in any other situation, but yeah. Has to be really close to the target to do any damage though, and it gives you one hell of a headache.”

“He survived.”

“What makes you say that?” Jason paused at the bar when Sasha motioned toward a cup of warm tea that was sitting on the surface. He eased onto a stool and took the cup into his good hand and slid it closer to sniff it. His favorite kind. For the first time in hours, Jason felt a deep sense of calm and relief settle him. He leaned over the mug, just feeling the heat of it on his skin for a minute while Sasha moved through the kitchen.

“Because Bluebird Guy didn't kick you back into the water for killing someone. Isn't that why they leave you alone? Because you don't kill anymore?”

Jason let his eyes close, soaking in the warmth and the familiar company. He realized that Sasha was probably the only person he knew, anywhere, that he trusted with his identity that didn't regularly make him feel like he was coming apart at the seams.

More dishes settled on the bar, but he ignored it, “Yeah. That's how it works. And his name is Nightwing.”
Sasha sat beside him on the stool, the sleeve of his old jacket brushing his arm. “Tightding, okay.”

Despite the pain he was in and the exhaustion from his reunion with his so-called family, Jason cracked a smile at that. Then one of the dishes was pushed closer to him, prompting him to look at a plate of chocolate chip cookies. Chocolate chip cookies that were still slightly warm from the oven. Sasha had voiced her concerns more than once now that he had died. Sasha had stayed up all night. Sasha had baked them cookies and brewed him his favorite tea. Sasha was sitting beside him, just barely touching her arm to his in a familiar gesture he had often made for her to help ground herself.

Jason's chest went tight. Tears pricked the back of his eyes. He just stared at the cheap dollar store plate of cookies and clutched his tea and- and dammit, he couldn't stop it. The tears came. Silently, slowly.

And Sasha, who he absolutely did not deserve, continued to talk softly beside him to fill the heavy silence with soothing sound. Continued to keep her elbow to his, continued to remind him that he was home. He was safe. That someone saw him for what he was now. Not the boy that died before anyone could save him, and not the man that was misguided and too much of a lost cause.

*-*-*

Jason, for obvious reasons, sat out their training sessions for the next several days. Instead, he sat down and watched her go through her stances and punches and kicks and blocks and critiqued her. Sasha did her best to follow his suggestions, focused and calm. He was forever impressed and relieved by that. She was so different than the terror he had been.

He called for a break and they met at the bar where they sat side by side and guzzled their waters. Sasha capped her bottle and looked ahead with a sense of purpose, “I tell you something about me, you tell me something about you?”

Jason could almost smell what was coming, like a blood hound. But Sasha did a lot of talking and shared very little about herself and her past unless it was necessary. Fair was fair. So he nodded at her. He started small, “Whats you're favorite book?”

“You would ask me what my favorite book is,” Sasha said with a smirk. “Does Captain Underpants count?”

“Captain...what the hell is that?” Jason said, voice raising a smidgen in almost-outrage.

She was grinning widely now, “A graphic novel about a school principal that goes out in a red cape and his underwear to fight things like evil toilets.”

“What the hell. Is that what they're teaching kids in school these days?”

“Honestly, its kinda tame compared to some of the crap I've heard about you guys dealing with. Giant crocodile men, penguins, aliens.” Sasha took a drink, “Whats your favorite color? Its not red, is it?”

“Don't have one.” Jason said, “the red helmet is symbolic.”

“What? Everyone has a favorite color. And whats symbolic about the color red?”

Jason huffed, “When I was younger, it was green. Green like the grass in the park, like mom's favorite sweater.” Like Joker's hair, Joker's eyes. He stopped having a favorite color when he was fifteen. “I didn't come up with the Red Hood get up. I picked it back up, though, made it mine. Red is just part of the brand.”
Sasha nodded, satisfied for now. Jason let it sit, nursing his water until she crossed her arms over the bar and leaned forward, eyes downcast. “You don't have to tell me, but before you left to fight Croc the other night, you said something, and then something else when you came back.”

“The dead comments?”

Her brown eyes flicked toward him, uncertain. “You don't have to tell me.”

Jason met her eyes and held them. “It's not a big deal, kid. You would have found out eventually. I've died three times.”

“Three times?” Her eyes were sad.

“Three times. First time was a gunshot wound,” Jason touched two fingers to his chest where the scar was, “I was fifteen. Resuscitated by surgeons. Second time I got tangled up in a rescue mission, twenty-two. Gut-shot. That one was...ugly. Woke up in the morgue, still don't know why.”

“The morgue? You'd been dead for that long?”

Jason paused, then looped a finger over the collar of his shirt and pulled it down to show part of the 'Y' shaped autopsy scar on his front. Sasha stared, but there was no fear or disgust on her face. She was just calm. He supposed that, by now, few things could surprise her anymore.

“And the third?”

“Gunshot.” Jason turned his head to show the bald scarring on the side of his head. “Twenty-two, six months after. Don't know about that one either. Went through bone and brain tissue. Pronounced dead, then came right back. Docs were baffled.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yeah. These two are still tender, but most of it is just phantom pains when I remember.” Jason stilled when her fingers pushed through his hair, just barely touching his scalp to get a better view of the bullet hole in his head. She was careful not to touch the actual scar, which he appreciated. She understood from personal experience how painful scars were, how important it was to treat them with respect.

“Who did this to you?”

“That one?” He didn't want to tell her, didn't want her to see him as someone that had completely broken himself.

“Yeah?” Even she sounded unsure, but she swallowed and said more firmly, “You don't have to tell me. I just...you're like me. Or maybe I'm like you. We...we both know now, don't we? That the world isn't perfect. Kids don't always get saved when they need it most. More good people die than bad. Heroes screw up.”

“Heroes screw up.” Jason agreed quietly, “yeah. We are alike, aren't we?” He mirrored her, folding his arms across the bar's surface. “I did it to myself.”

“You...”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” Her elbow touched his. Grounding him, or grounding herself?
“Everything I’d ever been or known...it wasn’t mine. I was tired, and I couldn't do it anymore. So I sat on the roof and put a bullet in my head. Then I woke up again.”

She finished, “It felt like there was no end to it, no matter what you did?”

“Yeah.”

“I wish you hadn't hurt like that. Jason?” She waited until he was looking at her again. “For...for a minute, before you came and got me out of the fire, I had no one. I had nothing. And maybe you didn't have anyone or anything still. But you were there. And I am here. We have something.”

Jason looked at Sasha, at this kid that he had stumbled upon and taken in. This kid that was alive and still full of so much fire. This kid that looked back at him and wanted to understand, not to 'save' or to reintroduce back into a broken family. She just wanted to talk, to keep him on the ground and right beside her. And somehow, that soothed the ache.

Jason reached over and gently tugged on the hood that was over her head. Her eyes brightened, circles of warm chocolate. It was easy to admit; “You know what, kid? This whole time I thought I was the one taking care of you.”

“Jokes on you,” Sasha sniffed, “you'd be lost without me.”

“Yeah,” There was no doubt in his mind. “Yeah, I would.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Wow, hell of a response to last chapter!

A lot of people are asking if Jason is a meta or if this is the Arkham Knight version of him- In this story he WAS the Arkham Knight, so he hasn't been revived by or even touched a Lazarus pit. He is also not a meta, he's human besides his inability to stay dead. There IS a reason why he won't stay dead, but it won't be until later that we learn about it. He is also most definitely not immune to pain or injury, and tends to have a slow recovery rate after the initial healing of whatever killed him.

Got a little backstory in this one and Sasha asks the Big Question.

Hope you all enjoy!

He'd been expecting it ever since he started her training, and he knew it was inevitable after his tangle with Killer Croc. Still, it took a while for Sasha to work herself up to asking, like she was really thinking it through. She finally did though, six months into her training. Jason was back to sparring with her, though he could tell Sasha was pulling her punches.

They were eating dinner on the couch, listening to the news reports about a Nightwing sighting in Crime Alley. Close, but not close enough to worry about. He'd been hauling ass, too, which meant he was on his way to stop a crime in progress. Sasha was sitting nearby him, their elbows touching. It'd been a long day; sleep full of nightmares for both of them and relentless training to burn through the restlessness.

“Are you ever going to go back out as the Red Hood?” She asked suddenly, watching the news cast while they sat around and discussed heroes and vigilantes and the differences between them all.

“Maybe someday,” Jason said. He honestly didn't know, though. It'd been all he had, all he wanted to do, for a while. To take Batman's first major failure and take something of the Joker's for a change and twist it into something that belonged to him. But things had changed. He had changed. He was tired of fighting. Fighting evil, Fighting Bruce, fighting himself.

“You said you died when you were fifteen, and came back. Why did you keep fighting?”

“Most of it was because I was pissed off and hurting, and it felt like my death had meant nothing.” She looked at him then, so he explained, “the first time I died, Joker captured me and shot me. Then he had me revived, kept me locked underground beneath Arkham Asylum for a year. Joker was in and out. He'd break out, he always did, and would cause trouble until Batman caught him and tossed him back in. Over and over again, like a game, because Batman doesn't kill. Which meant that every time Joker or someone else got free, they killed scores of people.”

“In the middle of all of that, Batman picked up another Robin. He'd lost me to that life, and he refused to kill bad people, so obviously the most logical thing to do was pick up another kid and slap him in a suit and send him to war. He'd learned nothing. He'd done nothing, but guarantee that it would all happen again. So I spent the next few years building myself into something that could
destroy everything Batman was, and turn Gotham into a place where cold blooded killers weren't treated with more mercy than victims."

Sasha hesitated, realization dawning in her face. “You were the Arkham Knight. You raged a war on Gotham. The night Batman died.”

“He didn't know who I was at first. It took him all fucking night to put it together, even after I dropped hints every chance I had. When he did, he tried to bring me home.”

“Did you go home?”

“I didn't have a home.” Jason looked at her, “didn't even remember what a home was. But after that last fight, I cracked. Refocused my anger, took on Red Hood, shot him free when Scarecrow had him in shackles. It was the last time I ever saw him.”

“Did you forgive him?”

“I don't know.” Jason scraped a hand through his hair, “It's a lot to forgive. I don't blame him for not being there to save me when I was a kid.”

“But he let the cycle continue. Helped it, even.”

He nodded, “I tried to break it as Hood. I built up safe houses and a stronghold in Crime Alley, and completely focused on cleaning house. Can't stop crime, but that doesn't mean that you can't make it safer for the people caught in the middle and take out the real villains.”

“Why did you stop?” Sasha crossed her arms over her knees and rested her chin on them, watching him.

“I had a meltdown, almost killed someone then threw myself off a building. Once I could walk I left Gotham.” Then he'd gotten tangled up in the hardest mission of his life, one that had left him and too many kids dead. He tried to swallow down the memories before they could take root.

“And why did you come back?”

“I was hurting for something familiar. Gotham's a shit show, but it's where I was born.”

Sasha nodded to herself and processed. “Gotham is a big city. Looks like Robin's the only one really protecting it. Nuttwing lives somewhere else, right? If...If you ever decide to go back into the field, will you take me with you?”

Ah, there it was. Jason slanted her a look, “Like a sidekick?”

“Or a partner,” She shrugged, “It was hard watching you get hurt, and then it was like no one was there to back you up when you needed it. And what if Pyg gets back out?”

“He will.” Jason said, because there was no doubt about it. They all got out.

“I'm not stupid. I know that the next time he breaks out, this-” She motioned at herself with one hand “-will happen all over again. More people will get hurt, more people won't be saved in time. I want to stop it. I want to help.”

“You could get killed. Two of the three times I died was because I was trying to be a hero.”

“I don't even feel pain, Jason. And I'm not going to be the dumbass that goes off on her own because I think I'm tougher than I really am.” She hesitated, then said, “I'm not Robin. You're not Batman. If
we do this, we stay together. We trust each other. And if we go up against someone that won't stop hurting people no matter how many times they're put down? We stop them.”

Well, considering that was the speech he was about to give, Jason turned his head to look fully at her, eyes narrowed as he analyzed her. He almost told her that it wasn't an easy life, that there were major risks, that it would change her forever. But then he remembered that Sasha's life already wasn't easy. She'd already been subjected to major risks, some that had been catastrophic to her. She had already been changed forever. She wasn't some little kid begging for the cape when she had no idea of what the world was capable of. She knew. God, did she know. There was no going back from it.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Sasha sat up straighter, “Really? You mean it?”

“I've been waiting for you to ask for weeks.” Jason said, “so I'm guessing that you've been thinking really hard about it.”

“And that's it? You're okay with it? I was honestly expecting a fight.”

“I watch your back, you watch mine. That's the only way this is going to work. And you train. You learn everything that I have to teach you.”

“I thought I was already doing that.”

“Ooooh no. We've barely even scratched the surface.”

She made a face, “Really?”

“Yep.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Sass, fluffiness and hugs.

Jason hadn't been lying.

There was so much more.

Within the week he was asking her if she was ready to leave the safe house. His reasoning was to build up her free-running training in the park, but they would go early in the morning when there wasn't as many people out, and the ones that were would be busy with their own routine. The idea of leaving the apartment made her stomach turn, but this was what she asked for so she put on her big girl panties and did it.

She was glad that she had. The park was quiet and serene in the pre-dawn chill, and mostly empty. It was scary to be outside, but Sasha had missed it. And it was a new place. Gotham was an ugly city, but the park was beautiful. She could add another area to her too-short list of new places she'd been to.

Jason had them warm up before he took off across the park, hurling himself over benches and doing rolls and jumps and flips at a full blown sprint. He slowed down once to snip at her about how he was growing old waiting for her, and she jumped right in with a grin on her face. The difference between them was vast- Jason had been doing this for years, and Sasha had only been at it for a few months. She wasn't as surefooted, wasn't getting as much air or landing things as smoothly. Her first run through the park was just pitiful.

But they came back, again and again. It became part of their routine, one that Sasha loved. She improved every time they went, and Jason started to change the course they took to bigger and more difficult obstacles. She fell and landed badly more than once, but each one helped her learn, and eventually she was almost able to keep up with him.

In sparring, Jason started to hit harder and faster. He was also becoming unpredictable, completely dropping all of the cues she had taught herself to look for. Sasha gave as good as she got, or she tried to, but he still managed to block or evade most of her strikes. Jason also started to teach her moves that were less speed and evasion, and more about using her enhanced strength to take on someone. Grapples, throws, and take-downs that would never work for her if she hadn't been altered into a living Terminator.

After weeks- months- of this, Jason got her started in other areas. Detective work was challenging. She went back and forth between hating it and loving it. He taught her how to see, how to analyze everything. People and their body language, mannerisms and vocal patterns. Locations and crime scenes; how to read blood splatters, bullet marks, shattered glass and the way bodies were positioned. She studied known murderers, and learned all of their calling cards and what kind of victims they went after.

Jason taught her how to act and speak undercover, how to become someone else and make it believable (she didn't know why this was so important since she didn't have much of a face to begin
with anymore). He showed her how to collect intel from credible sources, the ins and outs of reconnaissance. They researched all of Gotham's villains, notable dealers and crime lords; how they moved and how to deal with them.

Jason and Sasha eventually began exploring Gotham city itself, so she could learn it's lay out from the ground up, and so he could get a new grasp on how the people were, where the things had slipped from Robin's attention and suffered. Sasha was leery at first, but she wore a mask to hide most of her face, and people here were so desensitized to masks and oddities that they didn't even blink at her. Jason walked her through his- their- turf over and over, until she had completely memorized where the hookers were, where homeless people stayed during the night, where people were most often assaulted. Where Leslie’s clinic was, a place that accepted and helped anyone that was in need. Jason told her that he had almost grown up in that clinic, that Leslie knew him well and was trustworthy. That was where they would go if they needed more care than they were capable of doing for themselves.

Then Jason started to take her to the rooftops to look at the city from above. He had her tell him exactly where everything was. Sasha was able to point out the clinic, hooker alley, Robin's main territory, the Clock Tower (which was home to Oracle, who Sasha had never even heard of), the haunts of big time villains, all of the bridges and what parts of Gotham they connected to.

Months and months and months of all of it. It consumed their lives. Jason was using her training as a way to re-acclimate himself to things and rebuild his brand. He filled out until he was borderline professional wrestler, helped along by a good diet and constant exercise. He also pulled a complete overhaul of his uniform. The pants and boots stayed the same style but were replaced, and he spent an entire weekend working on new holsters and a new utility belt, then another weekend outfitting a new leather jacket – this one black with no hood- with compartments and pockets that he could fill with nifty toys. The helmet was also changed. He added lenses for 'eyes'. The shirt he replaced with a plain gray one, no symbols or brands on it.

Sasha kept waiting for him to tell her she was ready, or to at least give her a suit. But Jason didn't. He just kept pushing her to be better, faster, stronger. By the time it was her birthday, the time she'd spent with him rounded off to little over a year, most of which was spent working her absolute ass off trying to do him proud. She knew why he was making her wait so long, and though he had updated his look and equipment, he hadn't even put it on, never mind suit up and go out.

Sasha planned to corner him one day, taking the time he was gone grocery shopping to think of exactly what she'd say. By the time he came through the door, carrying a ton of stuff like always, she had a mental power point with bullets ready for all the reasons why they were ready to move on to actual field work when she noticed something odd.

Jason had a backpack.

Well, he had bought a heavy duty one a while back for carting supplies up to the apartment. But he had another one that he had somehow attached to the old one so that they both hung off his shoulders. And it was purple. Jason dropped everything on the bar and Sasha got up to help, blanked out for a second while he swung off both backpacks and set the new one, very purposely, on top of the fridge.

“What's with the back pack?” She asked.

Jason slanted her a smirk. “Nosy?”

“Yeah. Problem?”
Jason shook his head. They put everything up, and Jason pulled the new pack down. Sasha could tell there was something in it, though it hadn't nearly been as packed as the one holding the groceries had. He gestured with his chin at the bar, so she hopped up on one of the stools and pulled the mask she'd been wearing up into her hair so she could see clearly.

Jason leaned against the bar on the other side and slid the bag towards her, “You turn sixteen, right?”

She blinked at him. He knew? She couldn't remember ever telling him, and since it was so close to the anniversary of her being turned into a dollatron, she was more than happy to skip it. Then Sasha remembered who she was talking to. Former Robin, former Arkham Knight, current Red Hood. Of course he would have found out what her birthday was. He probably knew her social security and had stalked all of her old social media pages, too.

“This is for me?” Sasha blurted, blinking again. “You bought me something?”

“Nope. Bought me something. I was just going to let you open it so I can see the look of disappointment on your face when I take everything inside and say its mine.”

She gave him a flat stare to show just how amused she was by that, and turned the bag to face her. It was well made; the canvas was thick and the stitching was really nice, heavy duty. Sasha tipped it toward her and unzipped it, pausing when she looked inside.

There was a- was that a helmet? A motorcycle helmet. Her eyebrows furrowed when she reached in and pulled it out. Solid in her hands and gleaming under the light. The base of the helmet was black, but there was a design made up of a range of purples and reds and blues. It took her a second to realize that they were wings, stylized butterfly wings that were open and curved from the front to the sides. The visor was tinted and had an iridescent shine to it. It was beautiful, feminine and free. Strong in the bold sweeps of colors across the black.

Her brain did a full shut down while she held it, just staring at the wings. She smoothed her thumbs over it, then set it down gently in her lap. She said, “What is this?”

“A helmet.”

“No kidding?! I meant, why?”

When she looked at him, he give an exaggerated shrug but kept his mouth shut. She glared at him, then went back to the bag and found more. A heavy jacket made of canvas with a soft lining. At least that made sense. It'd be cold soon, so yeah, a thick jacket would be nice. At least, one she could wear while they were out. Couldn't exactly bring the Red Hood’s iconic leather one out into public.

Sasha unfolded it and slipped her arms through to try it on, careful not to jostle the helmet in the process. At the bottom of the backpack a small digital camera, composition book and a package of ball point pens. She set them on the table and looked at Jason in outright confusion. “Is there a theme to all of this or...”

Jason flipped the composition book open and revealed a couple of pamphlets of road maps and-

Oh.

Sasha’s hands clenched her new helmet until her knuckles went white as Jason turned everything toward her so she could look at it. “I want you to plan us a road trip. Won't go too far, but far enough away to get the hell out of Gotham for a weekend. There's a couple of parks with campsites, ones known for its dinosaur tracks, or if that's not your thing, there's a little country town in the next state over that's been overrun by hippies and artists. They've restored a lot of the old square but made it
into their own. There are a couple of attractions there, including a junkyard that's been turned into a huge art gallery. Figured all of the colors would be a nice change.”

“You want to go on a road trip?”

“Yeah. It would be nice to take a quick break before we dive into Gotham's underbelly. Its your choice, though. You decide where we go, or if we even do. If you don't want to, then its fine if we stay here. Just keep the helmet and jacket for next time.”

“You want me to choose?”

“Yeah.”

Sasha couldn't stop staring at the maps and the pamphlets and...and just everything. It had been forever ago that she had told him about her dreams to travel, to see every part of the world within her reach. How she'd spent hours making imaginary road trips, collecting information and pamphlets and histories on wildlife parks and attractions and museums and towns. How did he remember that? She'd forgotten they'd even talked about it.

“This is for my birthday? Really?” Sasha looked up at him, because she had to make sure. Jason wouldn't do something like this then laugh it off as a prank, but she had to be sure.

Jason nodded, “We'll leave next weekend, so you've got plenty of time to think about it. Then when we get back, we'll work on your suit.”

Sasha couldn't breathe. Something weird and familiar rose up in her and it took her a second to realize that it was excitement. Joy. Sasha set everything on the bar and hopped down so she could go around and hug him tight. One of his arms fell to enclose her shoulders. She felt safe there, happy.

“Thank you, Jason.”

“Happy birthday, kiddo.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Going to post a little early since tomorrow is going to be pretty busy and I may not get around to it. Hope you enjoy it!

Warning: Feelers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weekend of their road trip, Sasha had worked out a route that would take them by one of the parks on the way to the town of artists, then found and added a couple other places to the trip all by herself. True to what she'd told him (and what he'd hoped that she'd do), she spent almost every second of her spare time working on her 'travel guide', which was a big but surprisingly organized compilation of information on their stops, including addresses and coordinates in case they somehow couldn't find them, estimations of gas and maintenance costs while on the road, hotel rates and decent restaurants to stop at, alternate routes and a slew of other very detailed notes that Jason would never have even thought to consider.

And she worked on it with fervor, clearly excited to finally put this odd addiction to use. Jason was relieved by it, because it told him that he'd chosen the right gift for her, and it showed him a side of Sasha he hadn't seen yet.

He hadn't been sure at first. Jason wanted to do something nice for her, but all of the things he knew that she liked were from before Pyg's alterations. Sasha went back and forth between reminiscing about her childhood and burning herself out trying to forget. The last thing Jason wanted to do was trigger her, but he decided to take the chance, and it was paying off.

The weekend went by too fast. They followed her notebook, which never led them astray and always had a solution when they hit a snag. Sasha came alive the moment they left Gotham. Every place they stopped, Jason caught himself looking at her instead of their surroundings, just to see the excitement in her eyes. She looked and acted like an actual sixteen year old kid, and not the old soul Pyg had forced her to grow into. She smiled and laughed, and was completely enraptured by the outside world.

They stopped at the park and spent the day wandering around, then went down into the river and stood in the dinosaur tracks. Jason watched Sasha tilt her head back and close her eyes. The water was cool against their legs, the rocks smooth against their toes. Sasha opened her eyes and stared up at the green canopy above them, and something soft and peaceful settled in her.

Jason realized in that moment that he loved her, that somehow, in just a little over twelve months, she had become the center of his entire world.

This beautiful kid standing right beside him, barefoot in the river, desperately absorbing every second of peace and quiet she could find. This kid that had watched her life go to ruin in a single night. This kid who had every right to hate the world. Sasha had been scarred by the worst parts of human nature, but Jason had never seen someone that embodied all of the best parts the way she did.
Sasha...Sasha was hope.

Jason would do anything to see her succeed. He would give anything to see her rise above the scars. It filled him with a purpose so strong, so vibrant and almost violent in it's need, that it burned. It was heavy, heavier than shackles on hands, the brand on his face, the scathing ache of loss, the barrel of a gun to his head, the finger on the trigger. It sank deep into his bones, and for the first time in years, he felt real again.

He didn't care that she wasn't his. Not biologically or legally or even logically, but somewhere on a level deeper than all of the pain and grief, Jason knew that he would have been so proud to have her as his kid. That he was regardless and always would be.

“What are you staring at?” She said, cutting him a cautious sideways look.

“A nerd.” Jason said, not even trying to get a rise out of her like he usually would have.

Sasha snorted at him. “Takes one to know one.” She looked around the ravine. “I like it here.”

“We should come camp for a weekend.” Jason offered, “it's nice. Quiet.”

She grinned at him, “That would be awesome. So we're going to do this again? The road trip thing, I mean.”

“Yeah, definitely.” He nodded.


*_*_*_*_*

“Come here.” Jason said after he set up their lap top. Sasha had a towel in her still damp fire-engine-red hair when she came and sat down next to him on the twin sized bed.

They were at the hotel, their last night out before the long trip home. It'd been quiet. Jason had crashed on the bed almost as soon as they got in, while Sasha was busy organizing post cards and brochures of all of the attractions they'd stopped at through her travel notebook and writing in it. Then she'd hopped in the shower, and Jason had gotten up and started doing research and pricing materials for her new suit.

Sasha squinted at the screen at first, confused by what she was seeing. “So what am I looking at?”

“Your suit, eventually.”

That got her attention. She leaned forward, brown eyes bright. “Really? Wait, how do you guys even get your suits? Do you make them? Like are all of you heroes by night and seamstresses by day?”

Jason rolled his eyes at her joke, “Sometimes, yeah. We'll have to get your measurements before we order anything, but this is where we'll start. Body armor.”

“Like yours.”

“Mhm. Mine came from the same place.” Jason changed tabs over to the company that sold the kevlar suits, “here are your options for a base. You have an idea of what you want?”

Sasha reached for the laptop so he gave it up to her. She flipped through the colors available until she found a shade of purple that she liked. Of course, it would be purple. “Purple,” She said, “and red. I think. Maybe a cape, but like a little one?”
Jason raised his eyebrows, “A little cape?”

“Yeah,” Sasha squinted at him, “maybe to the knees?”

“Capes are handy for misdirection and if its made of the right materials can save your ass, but having a cape leaves you open to having it caught or grabbed.”

“What about a quick release function?” Her eyebrows furrowed, brown eyes drifting away in thought. “You remember when you found me? The first thing you did was cover me in your jacket. I don't know how to explain it, but it helped.”

“It creates a barrier,” Jason said, “a physical separation between the victim and everything else.”

“Yeah.”

Jason's eyes softened, “You want it to help victims.”

Sasha nodded, “Yeah, that's most of the reason. The other would be for misdirection and deflecting things like you said. What was Batman's made of?”

Jason said, “It changed as his technology advanced. But for you, I think the best would be fire retardant material with a kevlar weave.” Jason reached over and clicked through the tabs for a company that sold kevlar and other materials by the yard. He ran a search and clicked on the appropriate material. “More purple? Red? Black?”

“No black,” Sasha said, going through the color options again. “Red. All about that misdirection, right?”

“A big red target always draws the eye.” Jason nodded, “That's why one of Robin's base colors is red. Utility belt?”

“And why your helmet is red, right? I'm gonna get a utility belt?”

Jason cut her a look, “Yes, you're getting a utility belt. And a mask. They go with the cape.”

Sasha shook her head, “No mask.”

“What?”

“No mask.”

“Your identity-”

“Is lost anyway,” Sasha said quietly, “I want them to know, all of them. That there is a reason why I'm fighting, that I was someone who wasn't saved.”

“No mask then. But I want you to have something to protect your eyes, and they're mandatory.”

She made a face but accepted it. “Okay so what's next?”

“Armor.”

“Jason, we already-”

“Nope. Something to go over your suit. Legs, knees, shoulders, lower arms, hands.” Jason snorted at the way she rolled her eyes.
“Jason, I'm practically a robot. I don't feel pain, I don't go down easy. I don't need a full suit of armor.”

“This is how it works,” Jason said, “I know you're a badass and that you're getting better every day, but Sasha, you are not invincible. I cannot put you at any more risk than necessary. I will do my absolute best to keep you as safe as possible. That includes teaching you everything I know, preparing you for every situation, and making sure that you are properly outfitted in armor and gear. Argue all you want with me, but you won't win this one.”

“...Okay.”

“Okay.” Jason went through the tabs again, “Boots.”

“Oh, wow. Those are awesome.”

“Everyone needs a good pair of ass-kicking boots.”

Chapter End Notes

I really don't know the process of these guys getting their suits but I tried to come up with something that was at least a little believable, especially for someone that doesn't have access to a company that can just crank out whatever they ask for. In this story, most of Jason's stuff is what he hand-tailored or built from scratch himself to fit his needs and looks like he's going to pass that adaptivity down to Sasha.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Ahhh I'm so sorry. I had finals the past two weeks and I was on a crunch to get an onslaught of assignments caught up and I just got carried away with it. By the time I remembered, it would have been easier to just save the update for the following Friday. I'm late today because I decided to take apart my turtle's enclosure and deep clean everything which took hours longer than it should have.

Okay, no more excuses! Hope you guys enjoy this update and I can't wait to see you next Friday!

Warnings for this chapter include: Hero details no one talks about, Seamstress/tailor Jason, healthy character growth and some standard sassiness and cuteness.

The materials for the suit came within a week or two of each other, Sasha could hardly contain herself as she sat beside Jason at the bar and pulled everything out of their boxes. The body armor fit like a glove, having required exact measurements. The kevlar suit had to be altered, which Jason helped her with. It would always amaze and amuse her that the big bad Red Hood knew how to hand sew. Those were the easier parts of the suit making, and soon she had an actual uniform. Or most of one, anyway.

The kevlar suit was rich and purple, and she might have freaked out a little at how perfect it was. The cape fabric was a vibrant red that immediately drew the eye. They took more measurements, cut and worked on sewing the cape together. Sasha had to practice on some scraps before she was confident enough to try hemming the actual thing. Jason had a spare utility grade quick-release clasp that he hid in the collar, and even managed to arrange the folds to make it look like the collar was one solid piece that just slipped over her head.

The outer armor pieces came in, unpainted, and Jason let her pick out some high grade paint for them so they blended in with her color scheme. He'd rolled his eyes when she nabbed some more purple, a few shades darker than the suit to give it some dimension. Every piece was painted in it, even the parts that would go around her boots.

Jason had to piece together her belt and goggles from what was left of the scraps and parts he already had on hand for his own suit. He had Sasha sit down with him through most of the process to show her exactly how he did it. She made sure to take notes for future reference, because there was no way in hell she'd remember everything in detail. The purple utility belt supported red pouches and compartments all the way around.

The goggles were her favorite part of the suit, and way better than anything she could have imagined him putting together (though she shouldn't be surprised. From what he'd hinted at in the past, he made all of his own helmets and patched his own gear all the time). The frame around the tinted, iridescent lenses was made from carbon fiber plates he'd measured, cut and painted, and were completely packed with tech, all interwoven in a tiny mess, connecting to a little dial and buttons on the right side of the frames. A second plate that snapped perfectly into place over them. Strong elastic bands went through the loops, then more, smaller plates slid smoothly over them in an interlocked but articulated pattern until they broadened out over her ears, which had a built in comm unit that
would always be linked directly to his.

“Obviously you've done this before,” Sasha said, sliding the goggles on. She blinked at him through the red lenses.

“A few times,” He said dryly, “how do they feel?”

“Awesome.” And they did feel great, probably looked a little dorky but hey. If Jason could get away with wearing knee pads and a big red helmet, she could get away with some suped up goggles. “How do they work?”

Jason told her. Sasha felt for the buttons and dial with her fingers as he got up and went to the light switch. The room went dark just as she pushed down the top button then twisted the dial and the lenses flickered into night vision. “Holy crap!”

“Guess everything's working.”

“Does your helmet do this?!" She turned the dial again, flipping to 'normal vision', then back again. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” Jason leaned against the wall by the switch plate, arms crossed over his chest. “Its not as fancy as the stuff Robin and Nightwing use, but they have access to better resources and tech. What we have hasn't failed me yet, though. When we get re-established in Crime Alley and start stealing drug money, we'll get you something better.”

She reset the goggles and pulled them up to her hair line, “They're perfect, Jason. Thanks.”

He flipped the light on and came back over, “Lets talk about your load out.” He sat down at the bar and pulled her utility belt closer to look at it, “Most of the tools you've trained with will be on this belt at all times.”

Except guns, because she had expressed that she didn't want them. Jason had been completely cool about it, since she wasn't really much of a long or even mid range fighter. He had made her train with them, though, enough to identify different kinds of pistols, rifles and shotguns. Gun safety, how to assemble and disassemble a piece, how to tell the difference in weight between a loaded and empty gun. How to deflect and remove them from an enemy's hand. How to properly dodge, how to treat a gunshot wound. Anything and everything she could possibly need to know, Jason had pounded it into her memory.

Jason pulled one of his cases of supplies over, and opened it to show a mix of different tools and weapons she recognized and knew how to use. Smoke pellets, a knife, re-breather mask, med kit, a small tool kit, shuriken (that he had already painted purple, bless him) and other odds and ends. Under his guidance, she filled each compartment on the belt herself until it was packed with all sorts of goodies.

“We'll be doing a lot of training in full suit so you can adjust to the weight and learn where everything is and how it works. You'll have to teach yourself to move with the cape, too. Everyone may make it look easy, but those things are a bitch to deal with sometimes.”

Sasha wasn't even disheartened by the announcement that there was more training before they went out. She was just too stoked about the suit, and the reality that this was all actually happening. She nodded to show that she understood.

“You thought of a name yet?”
Sasha grinned sheepishly at him, “No. I have no idea what to call myself.”

“Sometimes,” He said, crossing his arms over the bar and leaning on them, “we’ll put on a suit and
wait for the public to name us. Other times, we take over a name that already exists. So you can
always wait until someone decides to name you.”

“I know you picked up Red Hood. What about the others?”

“Robin was passed down to me from the original one. Arkham Knight was a name that was given to
me by someone else.”

“I think I’ll let them come up with something.”

“Lazy.”
She snorted at him, “Whats it like, suiting up for the first time?”

“There aren’t words,” He said after a long moment of thought, eyes distant. “You'll get it.”

*_*_*_*_*

Two and a half months later they suited up for the first time.

Sasha gave herself a long moment of silence to look at herself in the mirror and just see what she had
become in this last year, what she could still become in the future. She didn’t shy from her reflection
anymore, even though the twisted visage staring back at her still felt like a stranger. This was who
she was now, though. This face was hers, and hers alone.

Her hair had grown out to just short of her shoulders, with a hairline that sat high on her skull. Her
natural color before Pyg had been brown. A mousy, boring brown, that she used to hate with a
passion. Now it was wild and as red as Jason's helmet. Her eyes, thank God, were the only trait that
had stayed the same. Well, maybe not the same. They weren’t as shallow as she remembered them
being. They weren't the eyes of someone that couldn’t see the world for what it truly was, couldn't
see her father for what he truly was.

No, that naive little girl was gone. A survivor, a warrior, stood in her place. She would never be a
victim again.

She suited up, leaving her goggles on her forehead. Sasha turned from the mirror and moved into the
living space where Jason was already waiting, completely dressed in his updated Red Hood gear
with his helmet tucked under a arm. On his face was a dark red eye mask with white lenses- a
precaution in case he needed to remove his helmet in front of civilians for whatever reason.

Jason canted his head in her direction, and his expression softened for just a second in what she
swore was fondness before it turned into a sharp, crooked grin. “You look like a badass.”

“I feel like a badass,” Sasha said quickly, “lets go!”

Jason chuckled, jerking his chin toward the window. They both slipped out and climbed up. It'd
terrified her the first few times she’d done it, but by now, a full year since she first started training,
she'd come to treat the climb with indifference.

They stood side by side at the top, scanning the dark skyline. Sasha pulled her mask down and made
sure everything was in place. Jason set his helmet on his head and sealed it. His voice spoke through
the comm link and right into her ear; “Everything good?”
Sasha couldn’t stop grinning as she filtered through night vision and back to make sure it was on par. “Perfect. Where are we off to first?”

“Let’s swing through Assault Alley and loop around the territory. I’m sure we’ll find something to get into.” Jason shrugged a shoulder toward ‘Assault Alley’, which was what she’d started calling the biggest hotspot for crime in their yard. “You ready for this?”

“I’ve never been so ready for anything in my life.”

“You know the way.”

It was all she needed. Sasha took off running for the edge of the roof, slipping a hand to her belt for her grapnel in a motion that had been hammered into muscle memory. Sasha leaped off the edge and threw herself into the night, feeling the thick, musty Gotham air pull at her cape and hair. She fired the grapnel and swung across to the next building over, Jason right behind her.

Sasha didn’t laugh, even when the excitement threatened to burst out of her. She stayed focused and clear, just as Jason did, and together, they flew.

A week later of diligent patrolling and hero-ing, Gotham city was all a loud bustle over the return of The Red Hood, and the brand new warrior that fought alongside him. The public seized the first appearance of a female hero in Gotham since the old days with Batgirl, and women from across the city praised and defended her fiercely. But it was the civilians she saved, that saw her up close and witnessed her pounding their attackers into the ground with unrelenting strength, that knew her by the red cape and the even redder hair.

They named her Scarlet.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Warnings for this chapter: Nerdy references, language and *DrAmA*.

Hope you guys enjoy and you have a fantastic weekend.

“Who would win, Liam Neeson or Ray Park?”

“What?” Jason said around a mouthful of food, “you realize that that actually happened in Star Wars, right?”

“Star Wars?”

“I know you are not about to tell me that you haven't seen Star Wars before, especially when you know who Ray Park is.”

Sasha tried to hide her grin behind a huge bite of her 'lunch', “Well duh. I was just checking to see if you knew.”

Jason snorted, shifting. His combat boots scraped noisily across the roof gravel, “Did you forget that I've been a nerd longer than you've been alive?”

“You mean did I forget that you're the last of an ancient race that was killed off by the meteor that took out the dinosaurs?”

“God damn, you are sassy as hell today.” Jason stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and focused on chewing.

Sasha swallowed her bite and grinned cheekily at him, “Alright. I got it. Bruce Willis and Keanu Reeves.”

“What, like John McClane versus John Wick?”

“Yes.”

Jason had to think hard about that one. He looked over the dark skyline, brows furrowed like he was trying to answer the deepest questions of human existence.

Sasha let him have it, content in the quiet as they rested. Tonight had been a slow night. Really, the whole week had almost been boring after a month of nonstop ass kicking. Jason had told her as soon as things slowed down to not get comfortable. Any kind of peace in Gotham was a lie; 'things always go to shit'. She had yet to see anything really, really bad, but she knew it was coming.

Still, Sasha did not for one second regret asking Jason to jump back into the fold with her. Jason himself seemed to thrive like this. He was made for this life- protecting good people and stopping the bad ones from doing further harm. And he adapted to having her beside him seamlessly, which was something else entirely.
Besides wanting to help people like herself, Sasha had wanted to be capable of backing up Jason. He was tough as nails and had been in the business years longer than she had, but he wasn't invincible. Watching him tangle with Killer Croc on television a while back had made her a nervous, heartbroken wreck. When he'd been pulled under, she was certain that he wouldn't make it. Especially after the pounding he'd gotten on the pier. And Nightwing, whose name she still refused to say in conversation, had arrived and spent all of his time on Robin.

Jason told her about Oracle, how she was their 'eye in the sky', and was generally in touch with everyone in the field. Minus Jason, for obvious reasons, but she could still contact him. So Nightwing had to have known. He knew that Jason was probably drowning in the ocean, and he left him.

Sasha wouldn't have been so done with him in a different situation, since Robin did need help. But so had Jason. Jason, who was being held underwater, clawed and bitten and beaten, and in need of immediate help. Sasha would never forgive them for that. She was even a little pissed off at Jason for not calling Nightwing out. Maybe they weren't on the best terms, but she wasn't stupid. She knew that there was history between all three of them, that once they'd meant something to each other.

If she ever saw Nightwing -or Robin- in person, it would take everything she had not to beat the living hell out of them. Then she would keep doing what they had failed to do, which was watching Jason's back. And she could rest easy knowing that he would always watch hers. Jason finally spoke up again, “I don't know. I can't believe I'm saying this, but probably Keanu, only because he's John Wick, though.”

Sasha nodded in agreement, “Think you're right. Your turn-”

And speak of the caped, bright-colored devil, Robin dropped into sight a few rooftops away, very clearly approaching them. “Dammit.” Jason muttered under his breath.

Sasha bristled, brown eyes cut into a razor-sharp glare. Jason leaned back a little, the elbow of his jacket brushing hers. Sasha eased up enough to breathe without hissing. She opened her mouth to swear that if Robin so much as blinked at them funny, she'd punch him into next week. But Jason interrupted her, voice low. “Nightwing on the left.”

Sasha glanced that way out of the corner of her eyes, and sure enough, there he was. It didn't escape her that they were approaching from two different directions, to corral or trap them. Like enemies. Or wild animals.

White hot rage flooded her, and she twisted to stare at the older of the two in open challenge. Jason huffed beside her, “Easy, Sasha.”

Both of the heroes landed on the same roof in front of them. Well, mostly in front of them. Nightwing was a few paces to the left, eyeing them with a deep frown on his face. Sasha reigned her wrath in, forcing herself to relax and take another bite of her lunch.

Jason raised an eyebrow at their unwanted visitors, both of which looked like they were building up for the lecture of the century. “Go on then, get it over with.”

“I can't believe you,” Nightwing said first, cutting off Robin just as his mouth opened. His voice was strained with tightly leashed outrage, but it gradually rose. “After all of the grief you gave B about bringing another kid into this, and here you are, with a kid, a civilian-”
“Hey!” Sasha snarled, snapping everyone's attention to her. She glared hellfire at Nightwing, “Look at me. I am right here, so if you start talking about me, you say it to my face.”

He did. His eyes snapped to her and stared. Sasha's goggles were off her head and safely secured to her belt. She knew what he was seeing, what he was trying to process. Probably doing a double-take at first, because he might not be able to tell at a glance that she wasn't wearing a Halloween mask, or maybe that her hair wasn't a wig. A few more seconds of careful, attentive studying and he'd realize that it was all real.

Shock flashed across his features, but it was quickly slammed by a wall of careful scolding. At least he knew better than to gawk. His voice softened, now that he was talking to a 'kid'. “You don't understand. This isn't a life for—”

“You're an asshole.”

Nightwing reared back like he'd been slapped.

“You think I'm just some stupid, starry-eyed girl in love with the cape?” Sasha pressed, “that I looked out the window one day and saw you being a hero and just decided to throw whatever future I had away and risk my life to do the same thing? That he just slapped me in a suit and sent me to war because I asked nicely?”

All of them were silent. Jason was still touching her elbow, and it stopped her from completely losing it on them. Sasha bared her teeth at them, “There's no 'civilians' here. Or 'kids'. Leave us alone.”

Dead quiet. Jason eased beside her. Sasha made sure to stare at the others a moment longer before she pulled her eyes back down to her meal.

“You're her.”

That was Robin. Sasha had only heard him speak once, over a year ago when he had promised to come back for her and her father. When he had looked her in the eye and swore to save her. Jason's words echoed in her head; 'Bats don't always break their promises, but I've learned not to be surprised anymore when they do.'

They'd failed to save him, and they'd failed to save her. Maybe it was a stupid thing to hold a grudge against, maybe it was completely out of their control, but Sasha was still human beneath all of her alterations and suit.

“I didn't know you'd survived.” He said. She heard him shift and looked up to see that he was sitting down on the roof across from them, looking at her thoughtfully.

“How would you have known?” She said. Robin grimaced.

“I'm sorry.”

Sorry didn't fix anything, but Sasha felt something that had been coiled painfully in her chest loosen. Some of the angry haze left her and she considered what her life would have been like if he had kept his promise, if Jason hadn't come and gotten her instead. Jason, who had invited her into his home, his life, had kept her safe, had been understanding and respectful of her trauma, had stayed up every night taking care of her like she was his own blood.

So when she said the words, she knew that she meant them. That they were the truth. “I'm not.”

She saw Robin's attention flicker to Jason. Jason had been quiet since his initial greeting, letting
Sasha speak her mind as she saw fit. It was nice to be respected like that.

“You've been with Jason this whole time?”

Sasha hesitated, glancing briefly at her partner. Jason was chewing quietly on the rest of his lunch, pretending to be indifferent but still watching the others from the corner of his eyes. It really wasn't any of their business, but she would humor them since they were being somewhat polite.

“Yeah.”

“It's been a year.”

Sasha didn't say anything to that, just kept watching him. Nightwing finally shut his mouth and settled into a crouch nearby, watching the exchange carefully. Sasha noted that he was tense, and his eyes kept flicking back to Jason. Every time it did, his mouth tightened. He still had words to say. Sasha was glad to be between them.

“I've heard that you do good work together.”

Last year, Sasha might have taken that as the praise it was disguised as. She knew better, though. He was prodding through compliments, trying to warm her up to him so she'd be more open.

Jason chose that moment to speak, voice amused with an edge of warning, “Yeah, I'm sure that's exactly why both of you came all the way over tonight. To tell us how we're doing such a good job.” He wasn't falling into the trap, either.

“No-” Nightwing edged forward.

“Nightwing-” Robin tried to stop him, but he was completely ignored.

“We came to stop you from making another huge mistake. You can't just, just-”

“Pick a kid off the street and put them in a suit?” Jason said bitingly, green eyes sharp. It stopped Nightwing cold for a moment -aforementioned history, it had to be-, but the other retaliated.

“Dammit, Jay!” Nightwing snapped, “what the hell are you thinking?! I thought that you had changed! You said that you were tired of fighting! What the hell do you call all of this?!”

“First of all, pick something to yell at me about. Either its about Scarlet, or its about me-”

“Its always about you!!”

“He didn't do it,” Sasha said, “and he didn't just send me out. You have no idea what I'm capable of.”

“Somehow, that doesn't make me feel any better about this.”

“Well that works out great, because its none of your damn business.”

“It is if it puts you-”

Sasha lost it. “In danger? If it puts me in danger. Look at me, dammit! I was in danger! So was my dad, and a bunch of other people! We were all in danger! I was one of two people that made it out of that lab alive! Guess who the other one was? That piece of shit monster that did this to me because someone prioritized getting him safely in jail while I watched my dad die!”
“I was a kid, a civilian then! And look what happened!” Her hands were shaking so she clenched them into fists. “Jason got me out of there. Jason bought me clothes and cooked me food. Jason offered to teach me self defense so I would have a fighting chance if it ever happened again. And I, as in me, asked him to keep training me, to help me become someone that could help 'civilians' that are 'in danger', and to help Jason since you weren't about to!”

“Me?! What does that even have to do with this? And I have tried to help him, again and again. We all have, and it never works-”

“So you just decided to stop trying?! Because that's exactly how you support someone that needs it. By giving up on them when things get hard.”

Nightwing pulled his shoulders back defensively, “You have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Oh, I think I do, you fu-”

“Oh for the love of god,” Jason groaned, “would you two just fly back to your nest so we can finish up and get the fuck home? Scarlet has trained her ass off for a year before she even put on a suit. That's double the amount of training Robins go through before they get a suit. She knows what shes doing and even if I wanted to change her mind, it'd be impossible because she's hardheaded as hell. So take your bullshit concerns and go away.”

“And one more thing,” Sasha said as she glared at them. “I am not a 'huge mistake'. ” She kicked gravel at Nightwing, who looked like he'd just swallowed a lemon.

“That's not what I meant. If you get hurt or die, your blood is going to be on his hands.”

“No, it'll be on mine because it was my choice.”

“That's not how it works, kid.” Nightwing sounded tired. Clearly, he wasn't going to drop it any time soon. Drastic measures were needed.

Sasha turned her head away to look fully at Jason. He shifted his eyes to her, sharp and clear in the moonlight. Slowly, Jason nodded at her. Whether it was permission or agreement, she didn't fucking care.

Sasha turned around, pulled her fist back, and slammed it into Nightwing's nose.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Warnings for this chapter: Some blood, smack-talk and sack lunches.

There was absolutely no way they were going to get out of Nightwing and Robin's stupid lecture. Maybe Robin had been about to approach it more calmly, and maybe they would have been prepared to listen and converse peacefully, but that wasn't how things were going.

So when Sasha finally turned to him, seeking some kind of affirmation to do something about it that would get them further than shouting at each other, Jason nodded at her and sat back. Watching her fist break Dick's nose had been immensely satisfying, and he soaked it up. Jason fought the urge to grin when Robin scraped a hand down his face and sighed loudly in exasperation, completely done with every one of them.

Nightwing was laid out on his back from the force of the punch, staring up at the sky in stunned silence as blood gushed out of his nose and rolled down from the splits in his skin.

Sasha was up on her feet and by him. She kicked him over to his side with minimal effort, almost like an afterthought, so the blood didn't run back down into his throat. Nightwing reacted on instinct, striking out, but Sasha was quicker and gracefully dodged him. The man sat up, staring at her from behind his mask, “You...You just-”

“Yeah, I know. I hit you. Because you wouldn't shut up and listen. You listening now?”

God, Jason loved this kid.

Nightwing studied her for a long moment before he dipped his chin in challenge, “You sure you want to do this, kid?”

“I'm not just some teenage girl. If I can drop Jason's ass, then I can sure as hell drop yours.” She cracked her knuckles and canted her head to one side.

“Okay, then.” He was on his feet in a single, lithe movement and closing in. Sasha watched him as she shifted into her own stance, dipping one shoulder just enough for the cape to slide down and hide part of her body. Misdirection.

Nightwing pulled his punches, more interested in testing than actually subduing her. Sasha, on the other hand, was clearly not holding back. When the first of her strikes landed, Nightwing wheezed, and Jason felt his face break out into a knowing grin. Yeah, it sucked to get hit with one of her punches. Like getting kicked by a very big, very angry mule. Even better was when Nightwing struck her with more force than he had been trying for, and the look of outright shock on his face when she took the blow without so much as a blink.

Robin settled beside him, but Jason remained calm as he monitored the match, “She's fast.”

“Hits hard,” Jason said proudly. “Once she started really getting good, it was hell to spar with her.”

“She's a lot like you.”
Jason paused at that, giving a low whistle when Sasha worked her opponent into a painful grapple and said some smart ass remark about Nightwing 'putting himself in danger' by mouthing off to her. “No,” Jason found himself saying softly, “she's better.”

“You're going to look out for her?”

“I've been looking out for her every day since I brought her home,” Jason admitted, “always will.”

“I meant what I said, about you two doing good work.” Robin stretched his legs out beside him, shoulders easing into a deceptively relaxed state, “is she the reason you got back into the game?”

“Yeah. Couldn't argue when she told me why she wanted it to happen.”

“And that was?”

Jason looked at Robin, seeing the seventeen year old boy behind the mask. The one that had taken his place, had reached out to him more than once even after Jason had hurt him. The seventeen year old kid that was up late every night protecting a city that was too big and too ugly for him alone.

“To help you,” Jason said.

Robin fell quiet, and they both returned to spectating the match. Nightwing had the advantage of height, flexibility and experience, but Sasha was doing a damn good job of keeping him on his toes. Finally, he raised his hands in surrender, “Alright, alright! I get it. You're tougher than you look.”

“Denser bone and muscle structure, can't feel pain, like living marble,” Sasha helpfully supplied, “and all of the extra strength and speed that comes with it.”

“Jesus,” Nightwing said, bewilderment in his voice, “experimentation?”

“I was supposed to become one of Pyg's dollatrons,” Sasha said calmly, “but Robin swooped in and interrupted him before he could get to my brain.”

Nightwing just stared at her, and whispered, “Jesus,” again He eyed her critically for a moment, then looked at Jason. “A full year's worth of training?”

Jason didn't answer, knowing that Sasha would want to speak for herself. And she did, with mild irritation that she was being talked over, yet again, like she wasn't there.

“Yeah. Everything that Jason knows how to do, he taught me. Martial arts, free running, detective work, the whole nine yards.”

“So you're both serious about this.”

Sasha threw her hands up in the air, pivoting on her heel to give Jason a 'is this guy for real?!' look. Jason snorted, “Yes, Dickface. We're serious. She's good to go in most situations, even ones that Robins were never trained for.”

Nightwing's face tightened at that, because he knew Jason was talking about the kind of 'situation' that had led to him being killed.

“And you'll stay together.” Nightwing sat down across from them. Sasha returned to Jason's side and sank down close enough that their arms were touching. Robin was watching, so Jason knew he was cataloging that little detail for the full breakdown of tonight's interaction he'd do later.

“Anywhere I go, he goes. Anywhere he goes, I go. That was the agreement.”
Nightwing and Robin both chewed on it for a little while before they made eye contact. Robin nodded, and Nightwing's face broke out into a blinding grin. "You would find a mouthy bruiser to be your sidekick, Jay."

Sasha huffed in clear annoyance, and the man's grin dimmed. He glanced at Sasha again, studying her expression. Of course, now that she had proved just how out of place his concerns were for her well-being, he was more fixated on the fact that Sasha very clearly did not like him. She was still packing the grudge she'd developed while watching their fight with Croc on the news, and probably wouldn't let it go for a long, long time.

"Birds of a feather flock together," Jason said wryly. He watched Sasha from the corner of his eyes until she picked up her last little baggie of trail mix and started popping the pieces into her mouth. Good. After that little showdown and the stress of this entire reunion, she'd need the energy.

Sasha snorted, "I'm not a big nerd like you are, Jason."

It wasn't her best jab, or even said with her usual sassiness, but Jason seized it for what it was- a distraction. He rolled his eyes, "Says the one who's seen Star Wars enough times to know the names of all the actors."

"Hey, don't diss on my infinite well of useful knowledge."

"Hah! Is that what they call unhealthy obsession these days? That's hilarious."

And there was that tightly leashed hope in Nightwing's eyes, hope he was desperately trying to strangle. Just like the night Jason had a throw-down with Croc. He looked like he was having a really tough time fighting it right now, as he stared at Jason hard enough to qualify as creepy. Jason cleared his throat, "Don't you two birds have places to be?"

"Its our break, actually," Nightwing said, "mind if we-"

"Yes."

Sasha cut him a slanted glare.

"So, yes, we can have lunch with you?"

"No-"

"No, you don't mind if we share lunch with you?"

Sasha ground her teeth and tipped her head back to glare at the sky in raw frustration. Jason could relate. Nightwing, meanwhile, was grinning. "That's so nice of you, Scarlet. Especially after you broke my nose."

"Don't even. You were asking for it. You're asking for another one right now."

"Damn, I think you've got a bigger attitude than Jay."

"Birds of a feather," Robin reminded with a smirk.

Clearly, they weren't getting rid of the cheeky bastards. Jason exhaled slowly through his nose. Sasha seemed to come to the same conclusion. She shifted back a little and away from Nightwing. Jason saw her hand start to lift in the familiar motion of pulling a hood over her head. Trying to form a barrier. Looking for security.

Jason's spare jacket didn't have a hood on it, or he would have handed it over to her. She was still
eating, so he didn't slide his helmet to her. Instead, he scooted a small canteen of water across the gravel with his boot and left it there. Sasha picked it up and took the gesture for what he had intended it for, crossing her legs under her so that her knee was just barely touching his. Sasha unscrewed the cap and took a drink.

Around them, Nightwing and Robin were busy pulling out their own sack lunches and working through them. They sat in tense silence, all chewing on their food or sipping their water. Then Nightwing cleared his throat and opened his big stupid mouth, “So, are you both just going to keep doing this?”

Sasha closed her eyes and Jason could almost hear her grudgingly counting to ten in her head. For being a sometimes-hotheaded teenager trapped on a roof with two of her least favorite people, she was showing insane self-control right now. “City's too big for Babybird,” Jason said, “we'll take some of the load off of his shoulders and help when he needs it.”

Relief softened Nightwing's face, and even showed a little on Robin's. Robin swallowed his food and said, “I didn't get to thank you for helping with Croc at the pier.”

Jason shrugged one shoulder at him, “Sorry I didn't get there sooner.”

“You probably saved my life.”

“I think we've got enough dead Robins in the family.” Jason ignored the way their calm expressions soured at his comment.

“Do you have to do that?” Robin said, “I was hoping you grew out of those awful 'I died' jokes.”

And Sasha, bless her soul, chose that moment to chime in. “He'll stop when he's dead.”

Jason had never been so proud in his entire life. He grinned at both of them when Robin face-palmed and Nightwing moaned out, “Oh, god, there's two of them now.”

Jason glanced at his kid and saw her wearing her own shit-eating grin of triumph. Their night hadn't completely gone to hell after all, then.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Glad everyone enjoyed the last few chapters!

This chapter's warnings: Jason-typical language, mild panic attack, (very) brief scene of rape, some blood, mild disfigurement and torture.

It was colder than tits outside.

Jason sat huddled in his jacket, looking down on the streets below with a sharp eye while Sasha did her best to turn herself into a vigilante burrito with her cape. Every once and a while she'd risk sticking a hand out to snack on her lunch. She grumbled about the chill, and Jason didn't have the heart to tell her that Gotham got much, much worse.

“You think everything's okay in Amusement Mile?” Sasha asked after she swallowed this last bite.

“Robins got Nightwing to back him up. If they need us, they'll let us know. Or Oracle will. One of the two.” Jason lifted one shoulder in half a shrug.

“Oh good. Nutding can lecture the bad guys into submission,” She said with mocking cheerfulness. Jason smirked, forever amused that she still didn't care about Nightwing, not even after the few times they'd come into contact and he'd tried really hard to lay the charm on her. Sasha wasn't having it, though, and Jason knew that it was driving the man crazy.

It'd been a few weeks since Robin and Nightwing had cornered them on their own turf to grill him about Sasha. They'd settled into something like a truce. It would probably never be a full blown partnership, and they damn sure would never be as tight with Jason and Sasha as they were with Oracle and themselves, but it worked. They respected each other's space -sometimes- and Nightwing had been able to ease off the constant back-and-forth between Gotham and Bludhaven to help Robin, which worked out great for everyone. The asshole still dropped in, though, without warning. Usually it was to pester Robin. Once it had been on Jason and Sasha, which hadn't gone the way poor Dick had planned when the teenager moved impulsively to neutralize the threat when he suddenly popped up right next to her.

It had laughed his ass off at Nightwing's second broken nose within weeks of the first, both done by the same girl.

Robin, thank god, was quietly keeping his distance. They caught sight of him once or twice in passing. Jason was almost positive it was his way of making sure they knew he was still aware of them, that he was watching, but it was a lot less invasive than Nightwing shoving his way into whatever they were doing. Sasha seemed to have a similar opinion, because she eventually stopped glaring at Robin whenever he appeared, but continued to show her teeth at Nightwing no matter how friendly he was being.

Sasha crunched on her trail mix beside him, pulling him out of his thoughts. “You think Harley will ever get over Joker?”
Jason followed her line of sight and looked toward Amusement Mile. Harley Quinn and her cohorts were out and making a ruckus in her boyfriend's old territory, which was why Robin and Nightwing were teaming up. Well, Robin had gotten to the scene first, and Nightwing had invited himself to join in to make sure nothing happened to him. The scare with Killer Croc still hadn't worn off yet.

“I don't know,” Jason huffed, eyes sharp when he remembered the sheer jealousy Harley had held for him while Joker spent an entire year torturing him. The way she'd somehow managed to be crueler when it was her time to watch him, her turn to torture him. When she'd claimed that he would become Arkham's Knight in shining armor, the title he'd seized with both fists in his bloody crusade.

It was the same jealousy and hatred that had been in her eyes when she told him, a few years after when he was settled as Red Hood, that Joker had always had Jason in the palm of his hand. That he was the one responsible for making Jason into who he was, since he was a screaming baby in his mother's arms. Jason had vehemently denied it at first, because it had to be impossible. His life seriously couldn't be anymore fucked up than what it already was, that there had to be something that was still his. But Harley spoke the words- they were out, and they couldn't be taken back.

It was meant to fuck him up, and oh, it had done exactly that.

An elbow prodded his gently, and he snapped out of the pain-ridden memories. He was rigid, body almost shaking with too much restrained emotion. Not anger, but pain and grief and loss. He could have dealt with Joker killing and torturing him, with time. But Joker having created him, his life? Nothing Jason had been or was belonged to Jason. Not Red Hood, not Arkham Knight, and definitely not Robin. That...That had been the worst part. That his life had been manipulated until he was forced into that role, just so Joker could kill him. Just so he could suffer, and die.

Sasha leaned a little more heavily unto his arm. “Can you take a breath?” Her voice was quiet, calm, her version of the tone he used to soothe her through her night terrors. It worked wonders. Jason did as asked. A few minutes passed where he made himself focus on nothing but breathing, until he felt steadier. He pressed back against her arm lightly in thanks.

“So,” Sasha started, “wanna head home?”

“Yeah. I'm beat.”

She rolled her eyes, “Old man. We barely even did anything tonight.”

“We stopped a robbery and an attempted murder.” Jason reminded as he stood up. Sasha finished off her trail mix and stuffed the bag back into her belt. “Sounds like you're getting a little cocky.”

“Nah.”

Jason let Sasha take the lead, keeping a careful eye on her in case she slipped. He doubted she would, but life did enjoy shitting on them. The way home was ingrained into his bones, so he was able to divide his attention between looking out for her and keeping one eye on the ground to catch trouble as it happened.

He would have missed it if he hadn't been looking.

It was just a flicker of movement, just out of sight and easily mistaken for nothing. But he saw it, and his gut tightened in an instinctive need to investigate. He was already altering his course, “Scarlet.”

He heard the whine of a grapnel behind him as he closed in for a closer look- a man in an alley, pressed behind a dumpster and out of sight of anyone on the street. Moving forcefully, almost
struggling. Jason caught sight of a smaller body folded between him and the wall, white knuckled hands spread on the brick wall and trying to push back. Wide, terrified brown eyes peered out from his shadow, desperately seeking help, before they closed in pain-

Jason saw red.

He landed in the alley, the thud of his boots making the attacker jerk. The man tightened his grip on his victim and snarled in warning, trying to ward off whoever was approaching. Jason stepped softly, completely focused and predatory in his fury, until he was looming over them.

It was then that the bastard unwound a hand from the victim's- was it a child?!- hair to reach for his pocket. For a weapon. Jason grabbed the reaching hand with one fist and curled the fingers of the other around his neck. He kept his grip painful, but non-lethal. For now. The asshole jumped under Jason's touch, hips stuttering until his brain caught up and he stopped. He started to twist, but Jason deftly slammed his face into the brick wall.

Stunned, the man went slack in his hold. Jason eased his head back and said softly in his ear, “You're going to remove yourself, gently, then you and I are going to have a long conversation. If you try to fight me, I will break your neck.”

He wheezed, shivering. Slowly, he shifted back and toward Jason. Against the wall, the kid got himself back in order with quaking, harsh movements.

Sasha was already coming forward, face unreadable but hard. Jason knew that she would take care of the kid, so he yanked the rapist away to give them space. He bashed the man's head into the dumpster nearby.

Behind his helmet, Jason bared his teeth, high on the first real rage he'd felt in years. He could taste it in his mouth, like blood. When he spoke, it came out dead calm, “Hello there. You must be new, allow me to introduce myself.”

A pitiful gurgle met him. The man was struggling weakly, but Jason's fists were iron. He waited, and the asshole managed to grind out, “Hood.”

“Oh, so you do know who I am. Then you know what happens to rapists in my streets, don't you?”

“Please.”

Jason hauled him back and brought him forward into the metal with more force than he could probably handle. Something cracked. The man wheezed in pain. He bent over the assaulter, helmet by the man's face. Jason's voice dropped to a dangerous rumble, “Did they beg for you to stop while you hurt them?”

Silence. Jason pulled on his thin hair until his mouth dropped open in a soundless cry.

“Y-Yes!”

“And did you stop?”

“No.”

“Then why should I?”

“Please. Please don't- I-”
Jason heard Scarlet talking softly behind them. He turned his head just enough to catch a glimpse of her. She was pulling the bright red cape from her shoulders and draping it gently around a too-thin boy's shoulders. Those same wide, brown eyes were watching Jason, unblinking. Traumatized. Jason adjusted his stance so that he blocked as much of the man's body from the kid's view as possible.

“Scarlet, take him to the clinic.”

The boy- couldn't be older than thirteen- clutched at the edge of the cape like a life line, drawing himself into it to hide. Scarlet squatted down beside him and offered a hand without touching, and asked, “Is it okay if I pick you up?”

The boy jolted at her words. He looked between Sasha, not even blinking at the blatant disfigurement of her face, then back to Jason. He blinked, then slipped a trembling hand out- god his arms were skeletal- to rest his palm in Sasha's. The girl smiled warmly at him. When she drew him into her arms, he went willingly. Sasha cut Jason a look, 'Make him suffer', then fired her grapnel gun into the air and lifted out of sight.

Jason returned to his prey, “Now that there's no little ears around, you and I are going to have a very long chat.”

Jason dropped him to the ground, stepped over his back as he started to crawl away, and sank the heel of his combat boot into that extended hand until the bones shattered. The man screamed.

“This hand,” Jason said with mock gentleness, “you had in his hair so he couldn't pull away. And this one,” the other hand crunched under Jason's foot, “you had somewhere else on his body, to keep him still. And this, this right here-”

It didn't take much effort to get the asshole on his back and uncurled enough to step on his stupid cock, still dangling in the air from when Jason had yanked him away. He bore down on his groin with his full body weight, until the man was a writhing, sobbing, bloody mess.

And still, the fucker had the nerve to scream for his life, begging Jason to let him go, to spare him, god, he'd never touch anyone again if he was just given the chance.

Jason sank down to a predatory crouch beside him, “Oh, I'm not going to kill you. I'm just going to make absolute fucking sure that you'll never be able to do this to anyone ever again.”

At the look of dawning horror now on his face, Jason stepped down on his wrist and crushed it.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

This is a note that probably should have gone at the beginning of the story, but all of the reoccurring characters in this story are cannon characters at some point in the DCU. It's just with some I've heavily altered to fit the story I wanted to write. I thought it would be appropriate since this story does branch off of the Arkham storyline and they had already done a lot of changes to the main characters for the same reason.

(Also, for those of you that were wanting to see some blood, sorry to disappoint D: This is mostly a family-found and recovery type of story so there's not much torture or vengeance in it. However! I will be uploading the prequel soon and it's an entirely different ball game, so try to stick it out with me a little longer and you'll have some new reading material.)

Hope everyone having an okay week! Enjoy!

Warnings for this chapter include: Mentions of torture, child abuse and experimentation, Jason's compulsive need to help little under dogs.

Leslie Thompkins was the owner of the clinic in Crime Alley, a place of neutrality and safety that took in anyone in need, regardless of background. Jason said that he had spent a lot of nights as a kid—before and after becoming Robin—right here in this building. That Leslie was honest, open minded and didn't put up with any bullshit. That she genuinely wanted to help people, which was becoming a rarer and rarer phenomenon in the modern world.

Leslie welcomed them with open arms and no questions asked.

It was Sasha's first time meeting the woman face to face, though Jason had talked enough about her that she felt like she knew the her personally. Even if she knew nothing about Leslie, or what she'd done for Jason and hundreds of other people, Sasha would still like her as much as she did right now.

Leslie assessed the situation with one sweep of her eyes, and immediately altered her body language and softened her tone a little once she realized there was a small— and man, he was small—victim wrapped up in Sasha's cape.

“This way.” Leslie turned and led them toward the back of the clinic and into a small room with a table and fully stocked cabinet.

Instead of talking over him and at Sasha, Leslie prioritized making a connection with the kid. She told him her name, where he was and what she did. Then she asked for his name, which was Peter, and told him that she wanted to examine him, and how. There was no room for nonsense, and she didn't coddle or pressure him. It reminded Sasha a lot of the way Jason had treated her when he first brought her home.

Sasha knew without a doubt that Leslie was every bit as good and honest as Jason had made her out to be. Peter would be in good hands here, and she was itching to put her fist through the rapist's face before Jason beat him senseless. Sasha turned to leave.
“Scarlet?”

His voice was so quiet, so thin. Everything about him was just threadbare. Sasha stopped cold and looked back at him, seeing the brown eyes that were so very different from hers. Where Sasha's were a rich and pure chocolate, Peter's had gray in them, and they changed in the light. They were more silver now, tree bark colored around the edges.

Sasha held his eyes for a minute, then looked at his entire face now that she could see it in the light. It was...it was almost like hers. But that didn't make sense. If he was like her, was he another would-be dollatron? Or- No. That wasn't right. He was light as a feather, and the grip he'd had on her arms while she carried him had been weak. He was also very clearly in pain. All of his facial features were still in tact, but his skin looked odd. Gray and mottled with rough patches, cracking around his eyes and mouth where his skin wrinkled while making expressions.

So, skin disease? Maybe something he was born with? Sasha didn't have a clue, and from the furrow of Leslie's brows, she was stumped, too.

“Yeah, kid?” Sasha said.

“Where are you going?”

And ouch, Sasha's heart. He was terrified, fists still curled in the fabric of her cape even though he'd pulled it out of the way when Leslie had asked.

“I'm not going anywhere,” Sasha tried to smile, hoping it didn't scare him too much, “I'll be right outside this door, okay? Right there. Anyone tries to come or go, they'll have to go through me. In the meantime, you keep my cape safe. I'll be coming back for it.”

Peter nodded. “Okay.”

Leslie spoke up before she could step out, “When Red Hood gets here, you make sure he sticks around. I need to talk to him.”

Sasha seriously doubted that Jason would leave without making absolute sure Peter was going to be safe, but she nodded anyway. “I'll make sure he knows.”

Then she slipped out and settled against the wall to wait.

*_*_*_*_* *

Jason came dragging in a couple hours later, helmet in his hands as he meticulously scrubbed some blood off of it. His expression was tight, and there was a rigidness to his shoulders. He met up with Sasha in the hallway and joined her against the wall.

“He still alive?”

“Yeah but he's wishing he wasn't,” Jason said, “how's the kid?”

“Better than I thought he'd be. Right now, anyway,” Sasha said, gesturing with her chin at the closed door, “his name is Peter. Leslie got him talking.”

Some of the tension eased out of Jason at that. “That's good.”

“She wants to talk to you, by the way.”

Annd there was the tension again, like he was a kid and his parent just told him they'd be discussing
his bad behavior. Which, to be honest, probably wasn't that far from the truth. Sasha grinned at him, “Whats wrong, Hood?"

“Leslie's lectures are worse than Nightwing's.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah. Yikes.”

The door opened and Leslie stepped out, clipboard in hand. She stopped to eye both of them, first Sasha, then Jason. “Its about time you came in.”

Jason tilted his head to one side, “You're busy. Didn't want to waste your time.”

Leslie cut him a sharp look that clearly said she didn't believe one ounce of his bullshit, but pressed on anyway. “Damage could have been much worse, may get that way regardless once the trauma sets in. Physically though, he's going to recover with some time and care.”

“But there's something else.”

“Yes,” Leslie took a breath, “there's a list of 'something elses'. Mid stage three starvation. He has all of the symptoms, and is badly dehydrated. I have him on a drip now and I've ordered a high protein meal, but its going to be a task to get him back up to par.”

“He's been on the streets for a while, then.” Jason guessed, his tone dropping to the quiet rasp Sasha had come to associate with bad memories.

“I asked. He said he doesn't have anyone to go to, and can't go to the police or a shelter.”

Sasha looked back and forth between them. There was obviously something significant about that, because Jason huffed. “Of course not,” He said, “there's a reason why he's on the streets to begin with.”

“Abuse.” Leslie nodded, “he didn't say what kind or by who, but...”

“But?”

“This child has been altered. Either the abuse was so bad it needed to be surgically repaired, or this is something else entirely.”

The world came to a standstill. Sasha stared, trying to make sense of what she was hearing and the feeling of her stomach dropping into her feet. Jason was staring at Leslie with a heavy sort of focus, “You think experimentation?”

Leslie shook her head, “I don't know, but there's mass scarring all over his body, and they're not very clean, either. His joints feel wrong, like they don't fit, and his arm slipped out of place twice during the examination with very little effort. Artificial, I'm assuming, but I won't know without an x-ray. His bones, too. From what I could feel in his arms, they're too thin, even for a growing boy. Then there's the matter of his skin. Its dry and brittle all over his body, some sort of condition or disease that I don't recognize. I would say symptoms of starvation or Eczema, but if it was then it would have to be impossibly progressive.”

She hesitated, suddenly exhausted, “Peter was completely defenseless when he was assaulted. In this state? He couldn't risk a real attempt at running, or fighting, without serious or even fatal injury. If he had, it would've taken energy that his body just can't produce. And while we're on that subject,
Where did you take the predator?"

"To Gotham General," Jason said, "where an entourage of cops will keep an eye on him. He would have died otherwise, and I wasn't about to bring him here. I don't want him anywhere near the kid."

"And you left him alive? Did I hear that right?"

Jason scowled, "Yes, because I'm supposed to be playing by the rules while I'm home. He deserved slow torture and death but the worst I did to him was cripple him. He won't be using his hands to hurt anyone else and he'll never piss standing up again. When he recovers the GCPD will be up his ass. If they aren't, I'll be up all of their asses and they'll wish that they had been."

Leslie nodded in approval. "What should we do about the boy?"

Sasha spoke up, drawing both of their attention. "The scars and alterations sound like they're from experimentation. If he's someone's project," she spat the word out with as much disdain as she could, "it could explain why he's starving on the streets. I'd choose starvation over going back on the table any day."

"If someone has the resources to do those things to a kid without repercussions, they'll be searching for him because he's an investment." Jason agreed, "and if this is the case, the odds that he has anyone at all are slim."

"I can't keep him here," Leslie said sadly, "not permanently. And I wouldn't be able to care for him the way he needs while running the clinic."

Jason looked at Sasha. Sasha looked at Jason. He was still wearing the eye mask, but she had learned to read his expression through his lower face and body language. He pushed off of the wall and rapped his knuckles gently on the door before cracking it open and asking if it was okay to go in. Peter's soft voice filtered through the doorway. Jason went in and shut the door quietly behind him.

Leslie was watching the door curiously, "What's that boy doing now?"

Sasha had a pretty good idea already. Jason wasn't the kind of person to leave someone in need to fend for themselves, especially if they were a child. Sasha herself was clear proof of that. "I think," Sasha said, feeling her face soften into a small smile, "that Jason's going to need a bigger apartment."

Leslie's attention snapped to her. Sasha realized a little too late that she might have said too much, but really. If Leslie had watched Jason grow up, and if she had called him by name while he was masked, then she already knew more than she should.

Leslie was looking over Sasha now, "Scarlet, is it? You're new. Last time Jason was in town, he was still a lone wolf."

"Ha! I don't even want to know how he functions without someone to keep his butt in line."

Leslie's expression became fond, "Did he bring you in, too?"

"Yeah. Yeah, he did."
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

One of my reviewers used the term "Jason 'cinnamon roll' Todd" and so I'm just gonna borrow that for a hot minute.

Warnings: Jason 'Cinnamon Roll' Todd, The one true fungus, mentions of past abuse and experimentation, The Bruce Wayne Phenomenon.

So glad you guys are enjoying the story still! This feedback is awesome! Love everyone and I wish you the best today!

This kid.

Jason's skin was a cage of emotion as he looked at the boy. Leslie hadn't been kidding- he was a wreck.

Sasha's cape was still secure around his shoulders, hiding most of his frailty behind it. But his face was in clear view, with hollowed eyes and cheeks. Gray skin that was riddled with painful looking roughness, cracked and scabbed at the corners of his mouth and eyes and under his nose. His hair was long and thin, lighter in places- symptoms of extended starvation. Eyes that were gray and brown at the same time, eyes that watched him closely but calmly.

Jason stopped at the door. He paused for just a second to think it through before he said, “I just wanted to let you know that that monster will never be able to hurt anyone else.”

Sharp focus in the kid's face, almost savage. Jason watched as he took a deep breath and the tension bled right out of his body. The kid licked his chapped lips and winced, “I didn't think anyone could see it.”

“I'm sorry we weren't there sooner.”

“But you were still there, and he's not walking free.”

Jason was floored by how calm he was. He couldn't tell if it was because the kid was in shock and still numb to everything, or if this was genuinely how he was coping with it. Time would tell.

“I'm Peter.”

Jason raised his free hand and peeled the eye mask away. He hoped Peter would take it as a sign of trust, in exchange for the trust Peter was placing in him right now.

“Jason.”

“Hi, Jason.”

“Hi, Peter.” He smiled at the kid, “is it cool if I sit down for a minute?”

Peter nodded, so Jason came a few steps closer and flopped down in Leslie's rolling chair. “Thanks.”
“What happens now?”

“I'm not going to take you to the police or to a home.” Jason recognized the instant relief on the kid's face, and his heart hurt for him. “But I can't leave you on the streets.”

Peter's jaw tightened, his brows furrowed. “So—”

“So I've got an idea. It's kinda crazy, definitely something to think about, but I've got a decent apartment that's warm, a nice couch that's great for naps and a fridge full of food that's yours to eat. No tricks or conditions. You decide its not for you, then you can leave. I'll even drop you off anywhere you want.”

“You...you want me to stay with you?”

“I know that it's a lot to ask, but yeah. Well, I should say us. Scarlet lives there too. She's kind of a handful, but she grows on you like a smartass purple fungus.”

Peter just stared at him, for several breaths. Jason gave him the time he needed to process what was being said. The boy swallowed, “I don't...I don't get it? Why would you do this for me? You don't know me, I'm...I'm not,” Peter closed his eyes and took a breath. “I'm not natural. Or normal. And you don't need me there. You don't want me, you just don't know it yet.”

“Oh, kid. I put on a big red helmet and jump off of buildings every night. There's nothing 'natural' or 'normal' to any of it.” Jason grinned, “and what makes you think that I wouldn't want to help you? Why else would I ask?”

“Because you just don't know.”

“Because of your skin, or is it something else?” Jason tried to soften his voice, but Peter still flinched when he said the words.

“Not just skin. My whole body,” Peter whispered, “It's...it's not right. Not how its supposed to be. So things don't work and there's just problems. You don't want them.”

The way he worded things and drew into himself as he said them shoved any lingering doubts that his medical issues weren't hereditary right off the table. Someone had done this him, just like someone had done it to Sasha. These poor kids. What the fuck was wrong with the world? They should have been protected.

Jason fought the urge to drag a hand down his face in case it sent the wrong message. He took a breath instead to steady himself, then leveled the kid with a calm stare, “Peter, I don't know who you are, you're right. And I'm not even going to pretend to have an idea of what you've gone through, what you're still going through. I do know what I want, though. I want to help you. I want to make sure you get enough food, that you have a safe place to sleep, that there is someone out here that will stand up for you. Even if its not me or Scarlet, I want to make absolute sure that you have all of those things, and I'm not going to stop until you do.”

“But why?”

“Because you deserve it. You're worth every bit of it and more.”

Peter cried. Small tears that pushed their way from his eyes and rolled down the sandpaper-rough skin of his cheeks. He winced when they touched the cracks at his mouth, and argued, “You'll change your mind.”
He said it with such feeling, like he already knew. Like he desperately wanted to believe it, but he wouldn't dare do it because he couldn't handle one more broken promise. Like it had happened before. Something in Jason broke. The hollow that yawned open inside of him was old and familiar. He got that, at least. Wanting the love, the support he knew he should have, that everyone else had, but fearing the damage it would cause when things inevitably went to shit.

Jason took another breath, stuffing his hands in his pockets when they continued to shake. “Well, you don't know me, either. If you did, you'd know that I am stupidly hard headed. I don't compromise and I very rarely change my mind, even if its for the better. I've got a lifetime of scars to prove it.”

Peter still wasn't convinced. Words wouldn't get him any further, so Jason leaned forward to stand up. “Well, the offers still there. Think about it. Scarlet and I will come by and check on you later, if that's okay?”

“Yeah. That would be...nice.”

Jason nodded, “Get some rest, kiddo.”

“Okay.”

Jason stood up and replaced his mask and helmet before he stepped back into the hallway. Sasha was still waiting on him, brown eyes fixed on his helmet as soon as he was out. “Well?”

“We may or may not pick up another mouth to feed,” Jason said, “he's going to think about it.”

Sasha's eyes gentled. “You really can't resist sticking your neck out for us rejects, can you?”

“Nope. It's a problem, I know.” Jason's thoughts took a sharp turn and he found himself thinking about Bruce, and the gaggle of kids he'd taken under his wing. He ruthlessly shoved the thought away before it could take root.

“He's good with us coming back to visit later. Ready to go home?”

“Yeah.” Sasha pushed off of the wall and followed him out of the clinic.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Warnings for this chapter include: A nerd with good handwriting, cookies, the magic of new blankets.

“This is insane,” Sasha said when she walked out of her room at four-thirty in the morning and saw Jason sitting at the bar with his lap top, a half eaten sandwich, a cup of pens and highlighters, and a five subject spiral that was already two and a half subjects full of writing.

“So, are finals coming up or is this just your midlife crisis?” She shuffled into the kitchen to make a glass of water.

Jason didn't even look away from what he was doing. He was working on a bullet point list of things. When Sasha sat down beside him and leaned over to see what it was he was so focused on, she found a 'Mom Blog' page on his screen with a list of home remedies and recipes for soaks and salves. There had to be fifty tabs open on his browser.

“Peter?” She blinked like an owl at him.

“Leslie's never seen his skin condition before,” Jason finally said, exhausted, “she's given me a few ideas of where to start, but most of this is just guesswork. I don't know if any of it will make a difference, or if it even works.”

“Guess it doesn't hurt to try.”

“Its better than nothing.” Jason straightened to look at her, “Can't sleep?”

Sasha shook her head. “Cookies?”

“Yeah. Cookies sound awesome.” Jason stood up and made his way around the bar. Sasha pulled his notebook over and thumbed through the pages. They were all crinkly and textured with his surprisingly neat handwriting, filled top to bottom, margin to margin. Several places were highlighted, though they were all done in different colors. Color coded, but she didn't know what color meant what. Some of the pages and sections were folded at the corner, already separated so it'd be easy to divide them up later and slap labeled tabs -which he already had filled out and organized by the cup of pens- on them.

“Man, you really know how to take notes.” Sasha squinted at one of the recipes for a lotion designed to help with dry, cracking skin. “And your handwriting is way prettier than I thought it'd be. That's kind of disturbing. I was expecting some half-assed chicken scratch or something. Or really old person scribble where you can't even read it.”

Jason snorted at the fridge. His hands were full of bricks of cold cookie dough. “Nerd, remember?”

“No kidding.” Sasha flipped back to the page he'd been on and left it alone. “So how do you think things are going with him?”

Jason set the dough down on the counter and bent at the stove to pull out some cookie sheets. “He's
still unsure. He wants to trust us, but he doesn't want to risk it.”

Sasha nodded, “Sounds about right. You should try telling him the same crap you told me when I was new. About being special and all of that.”

Jason slanted her a sharp look, “That wasn’t ‘crap’. It was the truth. You are special, and both of you are worth everything you want, regardless of what happened to you.”

“Aw. That's so sweet. You're like a fortune cookie, but like a biker fortune cookie. A squishy biker fortune cookie.”

He rolled his eyes dramatically and went back to the cookies. “I am not squishy.”

Sasha grinned at him. “So are we going to go see him today?”

“Yeah. We'll bring him some new clothes, too. Maybe a blanket so you can get your cape back.”

“Awesome.” Sasha folded her arms over the bar and sank down over them. She watched him push the cookies into the oven, smiling to herself when he pulled a chunk of cookie dough off the last brick before bringing the rest to her. Sasha took a piece, too, and closed her eyes at the taste.

“I didn't ask you,” Jason started as he sat back down on his bar stool, “and I should have. Are you okay with him staying with us?”

She swallowed, “Well where else is he going to go?”

“Not what I asked.”

This time, she rolled her eyes. “Its fine, Jason. I've always wanted a little brother, anyway. I just want him somewhere safe, and what place is safer than right here, with us?”

Jason tugged gently on her hood, and Sasha's smile returned.

*_*_*_*_*

Sasha and Jason kept their promise and returned to the clinic to check in on Peter and bug him for a while. Each time they showed up, he just kind of stared at them like he was trying to decide if they were real or a figment of his imagination.

When they arrived this time, Jason had a bag with two changes of clothes and a plush blanket. Peter took them slowly from him, staring at the bag like it held the magic cure to all ailments. Jason sat down and watched as Peter went through the items- two pairs of the softest lounge pants they could find, two t-shirts and one hoodie, a bag of thick socks, and the blanket- and paid close attention to the boy's hands. Peter rarely showed any part of his body besides his face. His hands had always been hidden in Sasha's cape or the blanket provided for him by the clinic.

They were small and narrow, fingers that were too thin, with knuckles and joints that were pronounced and painful. His skin was taunt over them and had been stretched and scraped so bad that they were covered in hard scabs and red cracks. Peter could barely move them, and when he did, blood seeped through the scabs where they’d become separated.

Sasha was nearby, so she leaned forward and helped him unfold everything to look at it. Peter relaxed a little and gladly let her take over things. Once the blanket was pulled out, a ridiculously soft thing with the image of a wolf pack running through snow printed on it, Peter did the exact same thing that Sasha had when she picked it out. He brought it close and rubbed his face into it like a cat.
His eyes closed in bliss and he smiled faintly.

Jason glanced at Sasha and found that she was looking after Peter with the softest expression on her face. She had picked out the blanket herself and had been eager to give it to him. She'd already removed any tags or packaging, so Peter dropped the scratchy clinic throw like it was poisoned and replaced it with the new one.

“Thanks.”

Sasha sat back down, “You're welcome.”

Peter opened his eyes again and looked between them, then said, “I used to be scared of running into you guys.”

“Me?” Sasha said with mock offense, “But I'm so cute. Almost cuddly.”

Peter looked at her, at her body armor and kevlar and the spots of blood on her suit from when she'd bashed some asshole's nose in, and the wild, fire-red mess of hair that sat too high on her head and the clear disfigurement of her face. And he smiled. Not out of malice, not to make fun of her. It was honest. Real. Jason felt a burst of fondness in his chest for both of them. For Sasha, because she was herself. For Peter, because that's what he saw; her. He already really, really liked this kid, and he hoped Peter would continue to trust them, that he would let them help.

“You're all just...I mean, all of you. You guys and Robin. I know you're heroes, but you've really hurt some people. They're bad, but still.”

“It's not ideal, but that's not really a bad thing,” Jason shrugged, “it makes sense to be afraid of someone that's trained and known to take down people. If nobody was scared of us, we wouldn't be doing our job. It's actually good, because it means you recognize a threat even if it's packaged nicely.” It also meant that Peter had been betrayed by people he once perceived as being protectors, but that wasn't something Jason was going to point out.

“Yeah, that makes sense.” The boy nodded thoughtfully. “But you won't hurt me.”

It sounded more like Peter was reassuring himself than just making a statement, so Jason simply shook his head and let the boy think.

Peter curled his fingers carefully into the blanket. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what, kiddo?”

“What you said about helping me and not changing your mind?”

“Every word.”

Peter averted his eyes. “Okay.”

Sasha leaned forward, eyes hopeful, “Okay?”

“Okay. I...I want to try staying with you.”

“Okay.” Jason said quietly.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Decided to post early since I'll be at a con tomorrow! Hope everyone is doing okay and getting lots of sleep and drinking plenty of water in this summer heat!

A reader asked in a comment a few chapters ago and I never answered, but because this is post Arkham Knight, Bruce and Alfred both are presumed MIA since Knightfall Protocol, where Bruce said 'fuck it, I'm just gonna blow it up', then slipped away in secret to avoid the backlash of being publicly unmasked. We will say that his reasoning for not trying to return or salvage the situation is because he knows Gothams in good hands between his proteges. The boys assume that they are both alive and enjoying their retirement in a bachelor pad on the beach somewhere, though he hasn't been heard from since the night of Arkham Knight's siege. The only one that could possibly know how to contact him would be Barbara, but that's because Barbara is Barbara.

Also, all of this love everyone's laying on Sasha in this story <3 I'm really glad you're enjoying her and that you think I've done her justice.

Warnings for this chapter include: Mentions of rape, a shameless jab at Batman's extra-ness, Jason trying not to be a clingy mom and some fluffiness.

Leslie wanted to keep Peter for a few more days, so Jason used that time to prep. After agreeing to stay with them Peter told them what size he wore in everything and some small things he just wanted to have at Sasha's suggestion. Just like hers, his requests were modest. When Jason stepped outside to talk to Leslie, she had added a long list of foods and beverages and supplements to get him back up to speed. Then later that day when they were both home and free for a long conversation, Jason discussed all of the things he'd researched with her over the phone for her input. Leslie approved quite a few of the home remedies and recipes, and he marked these in his notebook and added the supplies to his list right under the rest of Peter's stuff.

Jason also made a call to the Replacement to let him know in advance that Red Hood and Scarlet would be taking some time off. What he didn't tell Tim was the reason why. The last thing he needed was an impromptu drop-in from Robin and Nightwing for another stupid lecture. It wasn't any of their business anybody. Thankfully, the kid didn't ask too many questions, and once Jason made it clear no one was sick or injured, he didn't press for details and promised to let Nightwing know so he'd have some back-up in the field.

The following days were spent cleaning the apartment thoroughly, since Peter's immune system would be shot until he got better, and shopping for everything on the list.

When Peter was cleared to leave, Jason and Sasha arrived as civilians to pick him up. Peter was quieter than usual. It was slow going to get him up to their apartment, but once he was there Peter stopped in the doorway and carefully looked over their place. “You live in an apartment like normal people.”

“Well where else would we live? A secret cave?” Sasha said, standing patiently outside. Jason was holding the door open, watching Peter assess the space. “You gonna go in or what?”
Peter shuffled stiffly inside, holding his blanket against his chest with both arms. He continued to look around, “Can I sit down?”

“Anywhere you want,” Jason shut and locked the door behind them, “you hungry?”

“Yes,” Both kids said at the same time. Sasha grinned at Peter, who blushed and quickly looked away. Peter made his way to the couch and sank down unto it with a quiet sigh. Sasha joined him, though she kept a comfortable space between them, and clicked on the TV.

Jason moved about the kitchen, listening to the background noise, but more focused on prepping a meal that was fulfilling for all of them but would still work with Peter's dietary needs. Eventually, Peter started a conversation with Sasha about what they were watching in halting, cautious words. Sasha responded with her usual sassy remarks until the wariness slipped from Peter's voice.

Jason smiled to himself.

*-*-*

Peter was more trusting than Jason thought he would be. Which was incredible.

When Jason asked if he could look at Peter's hands a few days later, he'd expected at least some hesitation, but Peter carefully unwound his hands from his blanket and set them very, very gently in Jason's waiting palm.

They were still painful to look at, though Jason could see some improvement. Really, just these past few weeks where he'd first spent in the clinic, and then at the apartment, was making a difference. He wasn't filling out yet. His body was still adjusting to several small meals and cups of water a day, and it'd be a while yet before he finally started to put on some weight. But a little color had returned to his skin, and in some sparse places, it was even softer.

His hands were still scabbed over and cracking. They were cleaner looking at least, no signs of infection. Jason had wanted to start treating them and the bad places on his face the moment he was aware of them, and he knew that Leslie had done it every day that he was in the clinic, so now they just had to stay on top of it.

“I gotta be honest,” Jason dipped the fingers of his free hand into the medical salve Leslie had sent home with them, “I didn't think you'd want me anywhere near you for a long time.”

Peter tensed, “Because the rapist was a man?”

“That's some of it.” Jason carefully smoothed the salve into Peter's skin and watched for any signs of distress. There was just a few involuntary twitches of his fingers from pain, but Peter didn't try to pull away or ask him to stop. “You've been on the streets for a while. You don't survive out there by trusting strange men, whether they offer to help you or not.”

“I don't have much of a choice. I'm in bad shape and its getting colder. You stopped him and helped me, and you feel safe. I had to take the risk, or die.”

Peter was thirteen years old. He should not be talking about his own death with such clarity or indifference. But Jason remembered being that age. Back then, he had known that he would eventually die on the streets. It was inevitable. So he had turned himself into a fighter, and was determined to stave it off for as long as possible. Peter, though. He was different, and Jason knew that those differences were fatal in that situation, that he couldn't fight. His only choice really had been to trust Jason, a complete and armed stranger, and hope that he was genuine. It made Jason's chest tight with grief and cold fury.
“I'm glad you did.” Jason switched hands.

“Me too.” Peter looked up at him from under his long brown hair, “you and Sasha...you're both safe.” His voice wavered, hopeful but wary at the same time. Jason had the sudden urge to fist fight the entire world for what it'd done to him.

“As long as you're here with us, you are protected. Between Sasha and I, they would have to be one hell of a fighter to get to you.”

“I believe you.”

Sasha joined them then, walking around the couch with one of Jason's books in her hand. “Hey, old man nerd.”

“Hey, tiny girl sass-queen,” Jason said, finishing up with Peter's hands. He started on Peter's face then, who was looking curiously at Sasha from the corner of his eyes.

“Wanna make yourself useful?”

Jason slanted her a look, “You mean you want me to read you a bedtime story?”

“So what if I do?” Sasha challenged. She flopped down on the other end of the couch, “I don't think any of us are gonna get much sleep tonight.”

Jason nodded, “Alright.”

“What are you reading?” Interest sparked in Peter's eyes.

“Tolkien. We started with The Hobbit. Now we're on Two Towers.”

“We'? You read them together?”

“When I can't sleep,” Sasha's voice softened. She was wearing the hooded leather jacket, and her favorite mask- the butterfly one. “or when he can't. Sometimes we'll bake cookies and hang out on the couch until the suns up.”

“Can I see the book?”

Sasha passed it over to him. Jason shifted away from Peter when he was finished with his skin and sat back to give him some space. Peter opened the book and thumbed through the pages, a gentle sort of wonder on his face.

“You like books,” Jason realized.

“I love books,” Peter corrected, “I've just never had one. And I'm not good at reading.”

“Well you're definitely in the right place, then. Jason's got enough to start his own library. Stacks of them.” Sasha smiled, “he's always reading.”

“And you're welcome to any of them.” Jason promised. Peter gave the book to him, and Jason flipped it open to the place he had bookmarked. As he read, Sasha wiggled her way closer until she was leaning against his arm, pulling one of the throw blankets with her. Peter settled more into the cushions, finally relaxing for the first time since he arrived.
End Notes

Ages of Present Bat Family:
Dick: 28
Barb: 29
Jason: 23
Tim: 17
Sasha: 16

I hope you enjoy reading this project as much as I've enjoyed working on it.
Thank you for reading! <3

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