Waxwings

by eyemeohmy

Summary

The road to redemption is plenty bumpy, full of sudden twists and turns, and numerous obstacles and hurdles that, sometimes, you've just got to drive right over to proceed. You pick up things on the side of the road; not all hitchhikers are wanted, but most are needed.

Jim Starling's case is really no different, except for the fact it actually, really is very different.

Notes

It's been one whole fuckin' episode, folks, but here I am, back with another needlessly in depth character study of Jim Starling. The heart wants what the heart wants. But since I've written the fall of Jim, why not give a redemption arch a shot? This is based entirely on an in-joke between Baba and I that just spiraled out of control to the point where "hahaha this is so silly" turned into "hahaha okay but what if serious".

Please take heed of the tags and warnings; there's some sensitive content herein, folks. (This
includes psychiatric hospitals, therapy, past and current trauma, etc.)

More tags will be added as the fanfic progresses. I decided to take this sumbitch one chapter at a time instead of writing and posting it all in one go. Please pardon any grammatical errors, per usual. Dedicated to Baba: this universe is as much hers as it is mine. Dedicated to a few other people I'd name but uh, I'd rather wait to see their reactions to the fic before putting out any names.
During the final season of the Darkwing Duck show, Jim Starling vividly remembered one scene in episode 4, For Whom The Bombs Blow. After a particularly large explosion that devastates a block of St. Canard, Darkwing is wounded and the noises of the world around him fade into one single, monotonous ring. As he slowly sits up from the rubble, Darkwing can barely register the screams and cries of panic around him among the dust and ruin. Time slows almost to a stop. The heaviness of the scene was used to convey a heightened sense of tragedy, fear, and confusion.

Like right now, for example. Which was funny, because Jim could easily remember filming that scene, but not the circumstances to this very real calamity. He couldn't feel most of his body, but he did feel something warm and wet trickle down his face, turning half his vision red. Two ducks were bent over him, and they looked terrified and worried and...

Why was one of them dressed up as Darkwing Duck? Jim didn't know why, but it angered him a little.

Although Jim only heard that high pitched ringing in his ears, he could make out some of what the two were apparently yelling at him. He was going to be okay. An ambulance was on the way. Everything would be all right. Don't worry. They both seemed so damn concerned, they even had tears in their eyes, and Jim, once more, couldn't understand why.

For some reason, Jim thought, why would they care what happened to him? They should hate him. After all he'd done.

What... had he done?

Why should they be mad at him?

It was all a bit too much, frankly, and Jim just needed a moment to settle his thoughts. Just a second to close his eyes and recompose himself. He never intended on falling asleep, but he saw no reason to fight the exhaustion.

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Jim had many vivid dreams. Mostly recollections twisted and morphed from his time on the Darkwing Duck show. Reality meeting fantasy, but most of the time they ended up becoming nightmares. Darkwing fought the Fearsome Four but never defeated them; every time he thought he had the upper hand, they were quick to overpower him. They'd grow in size, colossal giants, and squash him like a bug. They'd change shape and become monsters that devoured and swallowed him whole.

Sometimes they even transformed into Darkwing Duck, and those were the more horrifying nightmares, Jim--Darkwing--watching himself tear him limb from limb while laughing maniacally.

Darkwing Duck was losing control, weakening with every new dream, and Jim couldn't fight it. Wasn't totally aware of his existence outside the role he played in his dreamscapes enough to try. Not that it mattered; even if he were to try and force himself to wake up, his brain wouldn't listen. The dream would continue or change. There was no ending to this tunnel, but he kept running, searching for that infamous light.

"... Darkwing Duck!"
Jim’s bloodshot eyes snapped open. The light was blinding, but he refused to stop running. If he did, he would fall through the ground and be sucked back into the darkness. But a voice was calling him, calling Darkwing Duck, and Jim moved entirely by instinct and memory alone as he stood up from the puddle of dark water, fixed his tattered cape, and ripped off the rope binding down his arm. He picked up the spear beside him, blood on his hand. Darkwing slid a foot back, got into attack position as the flashing cube of light drew closer and--

"Jim!"

Jim blinked, and when he next opened his eyes, he knew he was no longer dreaming. This was real— he was awake. And he was standing on a hospital bed, his robe tied around his neck and fashioned into a cape. The spear in his hand was an IV stand, and the warm blood on his arm came from the needle he’d unceremoniously and thoughtlessly ripped out. That cube of light was a boxy TV playing commercials, propped up on the ceiling.

And he wasn’t alone. Standing at the foot of his bed was a duck he knew. It took him a minute to recognize those frightened, concerned features, especially without the mask and suit on. Good Lord, was this mallard wearing a sweater vest?

"Jim!" the mallard exclaimed, hands raised and nervously bouncing from one foot to the other, unsure of what to do. "Jim, settle down! You're all right!"

Jim blinked one eye at a time. "Bwuh?" he croaked, voice dry. But hadn't he been summoned? The people were calling his name! Jim looked up at the TV again; a news anchor was discussing Darkwing Duck, how he'd thwarted yet another bank robbery. They showed a security cam photo of Darkwing as he helped a wounded hostage out of the bank.

First of all: this never happened on the show. This wasn't in any episode.

Second of all: that Darkwing Duck was not Darkwing Duck. At least, it wasn't Jim.

Third of all: ... Wait. Hold on.

Jim slowly looked down at the mallard. As it dawned on Jim, so did it dawn on Drake—that was his name, Jim remembered, Drake Mallard. That outfit perfectly matched the one he wore when he and Jim... when they were fighting on the studio set that day.

Drake smiled, embarrassed and red in the cheeks.

"I, uh. I can expla--"

"Mister Starling!"

Three doctors ran into the room, all shocked to see Jim on the bed, wielding an IV stand like a weapon and posed dramatically. "You're awake!" the blonde doctor said. "What happened to your--"

"You!" Jim shrieked, pointing a finger shaking with righteous fury at Drake.

Drake swallowed. "Jim, just calm d--"

With a battle cry, Jim pounced on the younger duck. He meant to pin him down, nice and agile and very Darkwing Duck-like, but as soon as Jim moved, his legs gave out and all he ended up doing was falling clumsily like a sack of bricks on top of Drake instead.

Then, once more, Jim was plunged into darkness.
Jim needed a few more minutes to process what he'd just been told. Fortunately, he hadn't been out for very long after trying to feed his fist to Drake Mallard. Unfortunately, he'd been in a coma for three months. Doctors diagnosed him with severe head trauma, which would explain the bandages around his head, with a few minor injuries. His wrist was in a splint and there was a burn scar on his top bill.

Just one last problem.

"What is the last thing you remember before blacking out?"

Jim sat in the hospital bed, back in his robe, IV in his arm. The doctors and his agent sat around him, laptops open in their laps. Drake had left the room.

"... I... remember the fight, but only bits and pieces," Jim explained. He recalled those shards of memories, giving as many details as possible.

"What's the last thing you vividly remember, Mister Starling?"

"Ah. I was on the phone with my agent. He was telling me about a gig I had at a store opening. I told him it sounded stupid, but he insisted I go since I need the money. I remember telling him to 'piss off' because I was trying to cook and dropped a boiling hot burger on my foot. Wait, is that how I got the burn on my bill? I don't remember eating the burger..."

The agent nodded. "That was three days before the signing," he explained. "And, no, Jim. You got the burn from the accident, remember? The doctors just read you the laundry list."

"You don't recall anything after that phone call up to your fight in the movie studio?"

Jim opened his mouth, but didn't speak. He narrowed his eyes, searching his mind. But nothing came up. He felt his chest constrict, his breathing picking up. "No, I... I r-remember some things, but I..." he swallowed, licking his bill. "But I... I just need a few more minutes to think! Ten minutes, fifteen, an hour--no! Four days, tops! Hold on! Wait... No! Okay!"

The blonde doctor stood up, closing her laptop. "That's enough for now," she said. "He's getting stressed out. You should rest, Mister Starling."

"I've been asleep for three whole freakin' months!" Jim snarled as his heart monitor spiked, beeping furiously. "I've done enough resting!"

The doctor placed a hand on his shoulder while another fiddled with his IV. "It's very frustrating, Mister Starling, I understand," she said, "but we need to take this nice and slow. You sustained some serious injuries."

"But I feel fine!" Jim insisted, carelessly tugging and wiggling the IV catheter. The doctor took it from his hand. "I'm fine! It's fine! I'm fine! It's fine, I'm fine."

"You're on some powerful painkillers, Jim," the agent said, standing and fixing his tie. "I'm surprised you're even lucid, what with all the morphine they're pumping into your system."

"Wait. Are we not on the moon? This isn't a moon hospital?"

The doctors looked to the agent. The agent pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "Nope, that wasn't sarcasm this time," he said. "Trust me, I know the difference."
"I'm Jim Starling," Jim snapped, his head suddenly heavy, "I deserve the best treatment at the best facility. I want a room with a view of Earth. Tell them I can afford it. I'm Batman."

A doctor checked their watch. "He'll be out in three, two--"

Jim's head dropped back onto the pillow, snoring and drooling.

A vulture in a black suit stepped up to Jim's agent. "Maybe that's why he didn't say anything to me," she grumbled.

"No offense, but nobody really enjoys seeing their lawyer."

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They told Jim everything again. Asked him more questions. This time he could remember more. And this time he was given a new diagnosis: short term memory loss. But his doctors believed he'd regain those lost memories slowly over time. And he remembered enough to know what a fool he had made himself, all the pain he caused. Especially to one person.

"Jim..."

Jim didn't look up from his plate of food, numbly stirring his chunky mashed potatoes. "Didn't think you'd be able to make it," he said. "Given your... busy schedule."

Drake swallowed pensively. He checked down the hall, slowly closing the door.

"There's no cameras in here, if you're worried."

"I'm not," Drake tittered, folding his coat over an arm, "I'm... surprised. That you wanted to see me."

"You should be the last person I want to see," Jim snorted, "I could say the same to you, and yet..." He bent back his spoon, released, catapulting a lump of potatoes at the TV. Drake jumped. "Here you are. And apparently, here you've been the past three months, visiting me a couple times a week. Now... why is that, Drake Mallard? Or should I say," and Jim finally looked up, meeting Drake's wide eyes, "Darkwing Duck?"

Drake swallowed again.

Jim narrowed his eyes. "... You wear sweater vests?"

"Uh, sometimes?"

"Answer my question."

"Well... It's hard to explain," Drake replied, rubbing the back of his neck. He slowly crossed the room, Jim's eyes following like a hawk watching its prey. "But, if you don't mind me changing the subject, I think you want to know more about the... other me."

Jim cocked a brow. "Yeah," he sighed, "that's fair." He flopped back against his mound of pillows. "Y'know, when I first saw that news clip, I thought maybe it was from the movie, but the movie was cancelled. And that's when the chatty nurses filled me in on Darkwing Duck's escapades throughout St. Canard. Stopping evil and serving justice."

Drake sat down in a chair. "Yes. I mean, it's a lot of, ah, stressful work, but... I'm doing my best. I'll only get better over time, I think."
"Who else knows?"

"Mm? Oh, about my secret identity?" Drake laughed, scratching his head feathers. "Er, well... Not many people, thankfully. Launchpad--you remember him, right? Alistair Boorswan, Scrooge McDuck, Ben Willards--Megavolt's actor--and a few other witnesses from that day."

"And no one's said anything, huh?"

"Well, I want to say it's because I asked very nicely," Drake chuckled, but then Jim gave him a deadpan glower and he coughed, "but, no. It's more along the lines of... me having saved their lives. Besides, I think they approve of my work."

Jim snorted. "'Your work...'"

Drake blinked, brows slowly furrowing. "Yes, Mister Starling, my work," he said firmly. That got a slightly surprised look from his bedridden semi-ex hero. "I know you don't want to accept that I'm Darkwing Duck, but I am. I'm actually out on the streets, fighting crime. And it's... It's a lot thanks to you, you know." His head bowed a little. "From what you taught me growing up. From your words of wisdom that helped shape me into who I am today."

Jim twitched, gripping his blanket. "Don't put that on me. I'm tired of being told I give people hope and make all their dreams come true," he scowled, angrily dropping his plate on the floor. "You know how much pressure that puts on me? And it's not even me you oh so love and adore and worship. It's Darkwing Duck. A fictional character. I'm Jim Starling, and I'm the one who tried to... to..."

"Kill me?"

Jim winced. "Well, I wouldn't go that far..."

"You did electrocute me, try to blow me up, dropped a piano on my head..."

"I also saved you from that explosion!"

"Doing so out of the good of your heart or your ego?"

"Maybe it's not as simple as that," Jim grumbled.

Drake looked sad by that remark. "I know," he said, "most things never are."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"I'm not going to tell anyone about your superhero business, so... don't worry."

"Thank you, Jim."

"But I still want to know--"

"--Why I kept visiting you all this time?" Drake interrupted. Jim scowled but nodded. "That is... also complicated. And I've never been particularly articulate when it comes to expressing my feelings, but..." He took a deep breath, sat up straight. "I... It's stupid, I know. And I know you think I'm dumb and naive. But... Well, Launchpad had faith in you. He was able to bring you down, break through to you. He still thought there was a hero inside of you, Jim, and..."

Drake looked down, pausing a moment; when he looked up again, his expression was serious, eyes locking with Jim's and sending a shiver down his spine. "And I do, too. What you did was terrible
and you hurt a lot of people, and I'm still upset, but I don't... I don't hate you. I guess I can't. You saved me in the end, even if you did so for the wrong reasons or whatever, but I remember seeing clarity in your eyes. I saw the regret and disgust on your face, the same in the reflection you saw, I imagine. And it...

Jim waited for him to finish. Drake inhaled. What he said next almost felt heartbreaking.

"You... were my hero. I want to believe you still are."

Jim remained silent. Drake didn't push him.

"Kid."

Drake raised his head, a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

"Never meet your heroes," Jim said, "they'll only disappoint and let you down in the end."

Drake smiled weakly. "Maybe. But, you know... I wanted to make sure you were okay. I didn't want... I really thought you could use..."

"No one else came to see me, I take it," Jim snorted. "The nurses and doctors said you and the fainter were the only ones."

"Launchpad. His name is Launchpad McQuack. And apparently, yes, we were the only ones who visited you."

"Bet I've lost all six of my remaining fans thanks to the incident," Jim grumbled, shrugging. "News must have had a field day with that."

"Er..." Drake scratched at his cheek. "Well... About that."

Jim widened his eyes. "What happened? What'd you say?" His feathers ruffled down his back, afraid, angry.

"We kind of... glossed over the entire thing. Omitted some pretty important details," Drake said, looking guilty, "we said there'd been an accident on set from a prop malfunctioning and exploding."

"That friggin' thing was fully operational! And they call me insane."

"Nobody but those present know you were even there. And we've decided to just keep the truth to ourselves."

"I know it wasn't to protect my pristine image," Jim chortled bitterly. "Possibly... Ah, yes. If the public knew what really happened, some might make connections between a certain actor and a certain crime fighter."

"Yes," Drake said bluntly. "That's why. And, of course, a number of personal reasons. Alistair’s pride, for example."

Jim shook his head. "I'd thank them, but I doubt they want to hear from or see me ever again. Either way, doesn't matter. Scrooge McMoneybags is still squeezing me for cash." He scowled, clawing at the front of his robe. "Ten thousand in property damage. That's nearly half my savings right there."

"So, they told you, huh?" Drake sighed. "I thought they'd wait a little longer, when you were feeling more... level headed."
"My agent told me the day after I woke from my long beauty sleep," Jim explained, giving a loud, dry laugh, "good thing he quit; means I got a little extra pocket change to throw Scrooge's way."

"I mean, you can't really blame him. You did hijack and nearly destroy one of his studios," Drake pressed. "And I suppose your agent neglected to mention that it was through Launchpad's pleading that Scrooge isn't bleeding you of every penny you've got. It's also why he wants to settle this outside of court, too."

Jim blinked. "Fain--Launchpad did that for me?" Drake nodded, and Jim's face twisted up as if he'd eaten something extremely sour. "Why?"

"I told you," Drake smirked, "he's your biggest fan. And you did save him. More or less."

Jim exhaled, staring up at the ceiling. "Knew the guy was a dimwit, but seriously..."

"He's a lot more forgiving than I am," Drake confessed. "But we both know that you... suffered. A lot. It doesn't excuse what you've done. At all. But the doctors said outside all the injuries to your head and body, you had a complete and total mental breakdown. I mean, that much was obvious, but."

"Oh," Jim giggled, "is that what it was? Just another mid-life crisis, you know how it goes. Sometimes we lose our minds and try to hijack a movie production, sometimes we drop our normal lives to dress up and become a crime fighter. Both very, very crazy if you ask me."

"Yeah, maybe," Drake said, still smiling, "but, you know, it's all about getting back up."

Jim winced. "You call this 'getting back up?' he snapped. "Aside from me losing my marbles, aside from the fact I'm only conscious and coherent right now is because they're feeding me a bag of horse tranqs, aside from the fact I'm going to be broke and on the street after I pay off Scrooge, as a bonus, I'm most likely going to see a month’s worth of mandatory time in a psychiatric hospital with maybe a side of community service. Oh, did I mention I lost my apartment and now all my stuff is rotting in a storage unit downtown?"

"Jim, I... Again, I'm not all that eloquent with words," Drake said uneasily, "but you... kind of, sort of, should’ve expected this. I mean, crime and punishment. Besides, they’re saying it’s unlikely you’ll do prison time. You’ll get the help you need, and... and you won’t be homeless. I won't let that happen."

Jim sneered. "Oh, yeah? Gonna let me rent your couch?"

"Yes."

Jim blinked. Drake blinked.

"... Uh. Well, I mean... It... It all depends on... How things go. And. How you... do. After everything is said and done."

"Now you're just patronizing me," Jim hissed. "But you don't need to worry anymore. I survived. I mean, I guess, depending on how you look at it. But now you don't need to pity-visit me. Move on with your life. Well, lives."

"I know."

"Good."
"... But... I'd still like to visit you while you're here, if that's all right?" Drake fidgeted in his chair. "They say you won't be discharged for another couple weeks."

Jim stared at Drake as if he were a living, talking banana. "Kid, are you out of your nutty nut-sized mind?" he spat. "If I were you, I'd cut me out of your life completely. Shit, I know you're all about mercy and forgiveness, but there's just..." Jim slowly looked away. He stared at his medical bracelet, his name written in chunky black letters. "... There's just no helping some people. Not everything can be forgiven."

"That's really up for me to decide, and Launchpad, too," Drake insisted. "And it's up to you to prove that you're worth being forgiven."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Why would I care? I don't care. Okay? I don't care. I don't care if you love me or hate me or want to keep me in a jar in your closet. You or Lunchbucket. Both of you can piss off forever, that's how little I care," he snapped, folding his arms.

Drake tilted his head, studying Jim.

Jim squirmed, uncomfortable. "What?" he spat, beak pursed.

"I think I'm starting to understand a few things."

"Oh, being cryptic now, are we?" Jim laughed angrily, teeth grinding. He flipped onto his side, turning his back to Drake, throwing the blanket over him. "Go to Hell, I don't care."

Drake stood from his chair, slipping on his coat. "I'll see you next Wednesday," he said, walking to the door. He stopped, looking back at the sulking lump in the bed. "Unless you don't want me to?"

The lump shifted but said nothing.

Drake smiled lopsidedly. "Take care, Jim."

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Drake did return. And so did Launchpad. When they first met eyes, Launchpad looked like he was about to pass out. He swayed, but Drake held him firmly by the arm, supporting the large bird. Launchpad shook his head, nodded, and the two sat down.

"So, Mister Starling!" Launchpad exclaimed, voice painfully loud and high. "How's the food he--"

"Seriously, you two are crazier than an outhouse rat," Jim growled, though there was no real menace in his voice. Just exhaustion and mild irritation. "Crazier than me even, coming here like we're the best of chums."

Launchpad sat upright, eyes wide and sparkling. "Friends? We're friends?"

Drake glowered at Launchpad a moment, turned his half-lidded stare to Drake. "Really?" he grunted. "Is he on the same shit I'm on?" He pointed to the machine feeding him morphine.

"No, I... I know."

Jim looked back at Launchpad. The larger duck was staring at his feet, a distressed expression on his face. "I guess I just... don't wanna be angry," he continued, fingers digging into his knees, bundling up the fabric. Drake placed a hand on his shoulder. "I don't like being angry, yanno? It's super draining and not fun at all. But I know it's just something you gotta be sometimes. It's healthy that
Jim blinked, surprised. "I've got enough anger for all three of us combined," he said.

Drake cleared his throat. "Jim, do you remember what I told you?" he coughed. "About... Scrooge..." His gaze was intense, as if he were expecting Jim to say something.

It took Jim a moment. "Oh. Right," he grumbled, "so... I guess thanks to you, Scrooge is going easy on me. Only taking half my money instead of everything plus my soul."

Launchpad laughed. "Nah. I mean, unless your soul was bound to some magical item, then I think--"

"The trial is set for the fourth, right?" Drake asked.

Jim nodded. "Yeah. That's when I'll be discharged." He ran a hand down his face. "That's when I get put on medication for killer migraines I'm expected to experience most likely every day for the rest of my life."

Launchpad and Drake exchanged looks. "Do you... need a ride?" Launchpad asked, grinning weakly. "To the court?"

Jim squinted. "... Are you offering to chauffeur me to court for an incident where I nearly killed the both of you?"

"Yeah!"

Jim reeled back. "What is it with you?" he demanded. "Why are you--"

"Mister Starling, no offense an' all," Launchpad said, raising a hand, "but you're not the first person who's tried to maim or murder me. I've got enough enemies already. Most by association 'cause of Mr. McDee, but I don't mind."

Drake stood, hands clasped together. "Jim, if we're causing you any distress by being here, then we're both happy to..." Drake paused when he heard a small snicker from Jim, the older duck slumped forward, shoulders trembling.

Launchpad leaned over to Drake. "Should I call the nurse?" he whispered.

Jim threw his head back, cackling.

"... I should probably call the nurse."

"No! Don't call anyone!" Jim laughed, wiping the tears from his glazed eyes. "Just--just--my God, you two-- Are you really asking if you make me uncomfortable? Are you--are you apologizing? To me?" He threw his arms around his belly, guffawing. "Ho-ho-holy shit! Wow! Wow!"

Drake frowned, Launchpad nervously shifting in the chair.

"You two are a riot!" Jim laughed, slapping his knee. He started coughing, then hacking, and then Jim was snarling, grabbing at his head, face twisted up in pain. His heart monitor flashed, beeping rapidly.

"Jim!" Drake cried. He ran to the door, calling down the hall. "Help! My friend's having--"

"I said--don't. Call... anyone!" Jim snarled, tearing into his feathers. "I just-- too much-- Gotta--"

Jim followed Launchpad's instructions, breathing alongside him. When Launchpad inhaled, he inhaled; when Launchpad exhaled, he exhaled. Little by little, Jim stopped panting, muscles relaxing. He slowly lowered his hands from his head, tears wetting his feathers.

"Feelin' better there, buddy?" Launchpad asked, carefully patting Jim on the back.

Jim rubbed his lidded eyes with the heel of his palm. "Nn. Yea." He sniffed.

A nurse entered the room, quickly looking over his vitals.

"Mm'fine," Jim grumbled. The nurse took Jim's wrist, checking his pulse. Jim grit his teeth, yanked his arm free. "I said I'm fine!" he barked. Instantly regretted it, a spike of pain lancing the back of his skull. He scowled and lay down, burying his head deep into the pillows.

"We think he just got a little too excited," Drake apologized to the nurse, "over-exerted himself."

The nurse wrinkled his nose. "Well, I'm not boosting his pain meds," he insisted, glaring back at Jim. "So try staying calm, okay? Can you do that for me, sir?" He stormed out.

"Bedside manners suck here," Jim growled, cracking open an eye, "I'm gonna give this shithole one star on Yap! when I get out."

"We really should go. You need to--"

"Don't tell me that. I'm so sick and fuckin' tired of people telling me to rest," Jim scowled, grabbing fistfuls of his blanket. "Like sleeping is gonna fuckin' fix everything wrong with me and undo all my fuck-ups."

Launchpad shrugged, his smile weird and confused. "You're tired of being told... you're tired... huh? Heh..."

Drake gave him a disconcerting look.

Jim sniffed. "Tell me," he said, staring at the ceiling, "are you helping your friend here with his crime fighting? Did he make you his sidekick?"

Launchpad's eyes widened. He knew Jim knew, and Drake explained a few things, but-- "Uh... Well, I do what I can, yeah. I'm still learnin' a lot, though. He does most of the fightin'."

"He's not my sidekick," Drake stated, "he's my partner."

The two smiled sweetly at one another. Jim would have vomited if he saw it.

"Same difference," Jim spat, waving a hand. "You pilot that knock off Thunderquack or does he?" He glanced back at Drake and Launchpad from the corners of his eyes. "Which one of you pilots and which one of you rides along?"

Drake blushed. "Er, he pilots. I don't have a license. I'm afraid I'd just crash the thing." More than usual, he wanted to add, but decided it was best not to.

"And did you build that Thunderquack?" Jim asked Launchpad. "I've heard even idiots can be really, really good at one thing and nothing else."
Launchpad chuckled. "Ah, gee, than-- Wait."

"It looks good."

Launchpad blinked. "Huh? The-- The Thunderquack?"

Jim rolled onto his side.

Drake beamed. "Yeah," he said, touching Launchpad's arm, "he thinks it looks good."

Launchpad's eyes slowly watered, a wide grin on his beak. "Wow... Thanks, Mister Starling," he sniffed. "That... really means a lot. Like, a lot a lot."

"If it wasn't for the dedication and the help of your fanbase, Launchpad wouldn't have found the blueprints," Drake explained. "You'd be surprised just how--"

"Can you two... just go."

"Huh?"

Jim was silent a moment. "I need to rest," he mumbled, pulling the blanket up to his beak. "I'm tired."

"But you--"

Drake shook his head. "We'll go, Jim," he said. "Get some sleep."

"Feel better soon, Mister Starling," Launchpad said, worried.

The two ducks left, quietly whispering to one another. Jim pretended he didn't hear them, face buried in his trembling hands; teeth clenched so hard he could feel that horrible pain budding in the back of his head again.

Jim didn't care.

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Six days later, Jim was discharged from the hospital with a clean bill of health, more or less. His lawyer, Marrow, brought him a change of clothes--the same purple jacket and teal turtleneck from the day of the incident.

Jim found a note from Drake with his and Launchpad's phone numbers; he considered calling them for a brief second before trashing the paper and following Marrow outside. Jim winced at the bright light, quickly shoving on his yellow tinted sunglasses. He kept his head ducked down, squinting against the sunny beams. Jim got into the back of the small car, hand reaching for one of the bottles in his jacket.

"You already took two," Marrow reminded him, fixing her rear view mirror, "you can't take anymore for another four hours, remember? They only gave you so little for now."

Jim glared, withdrew his hand and wiped the sweat from his face.

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Jim and Marrow arrived at the courthouse twenty minutes later. Jim half-expected a horde of reporters hungrily swarming the court steps, but remembered what Drake said about the cover up.
Apparently no one got news of his trial date, however; not even a moderator from one of his few fan forums still updating regularly. The sun was too bright, the skies too clear; Marrow offered him her umbrella for shade.

"Thanks," Jim grumbled, opening the large black umbrella above his head. He felt like he was going to a funeral. Which fit, really.

Marrow picked up her briefcase. "Ready?" she asked.

Jim pushed up his sunglasses. Inhaled, exhaled. "Fraid I'll be goin' to Hell before you, Marrow," he said and took the lead.

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The hearing didn't last long. Jim knew what the sentence was going to be anyway.

One month in a psychiatric hospital undergoing mandatory treatment and regular therapy sessions. Once discharged from the hospital, he would be placed on parole for a year where he would be required to call his parole officer once per day to keep them updated on his status. And that's when his business with Scrooge McDuck would begin. When court was adjourned, he was a few thousand short in savings after all the fees were totaled.

"All things considered," Marrow said, shutting her briefcase, "you got off pretty easily."

Jim slumped in his chair, half under the table.

Marrow stared at him vacantly. "No thanks required."

"Considering how much I pay you an hour, yeah, I wouldn't think a 'thank you' is necessary."

"True. But you're welcome, anyway."

---

With only the clothes on his back, Marrow drove Jim to the hospital. He waited in the lobby until the nurses called him. Paperwork to fill out, physical and full body examination including blood work. The staff were nice enough but also distant; helpful without getting too involved. They gave him a medical bracelet, showed him to his room, and left him to get comfortable.

Jim sat down on the edge of the second bed. The first belonged to another patient, who was apparently spending some "quiet time" by himself for a while. It meant the room would be his for at least a day or two. There were two small desks, each with a chair, and a bathroom with a door that didn't lock. The window was thick and barred, covered in a sterile white curtain. Drake peeked outside; the lawn was surrounded by tall wire fencing, patients sitting or walking the grounds, a group playing kick ball.

It was all so... banal. Harmless and dull but quiet. Jim needed the quiet, he supposed. He flopped back on his stiff bed, hands folded over his stomach and staring at the ceiling.

Jim sighed.

"Starling." An orderly knocked on his door--that, too, did not lock, and would remain open at all times. "Time for meds. Group therapy starts in fifteen minutes."

Jim waved him off. He rolled like a lump from the bed, dragging his feet down the hall. There were
four other patients, all of them in line. They appeared normal enough, except the beagle with dark
eyes and an almost visible rain cloud above his head. After they took their medication, they filed into
the large activity room.

The nurse coldly gave him his plastic cup of pills and water. He stared at the three tablets--two white,
one pink. The nurse cleared her throat. Jim glowered, staring her right in the eyes as he knocked the
pills down dryly. She wagged a finger, and Jim snorted, bitterly leaning forward and opening his
mouth. He raised his tongue, moved it around, proved he'd taken the pills. Satisfied, she sent him off.

Jim joined the others in the activity room, plopping down in a chair in the circle. Two patients
whispered to one another while looking at him.

"I'm right here," Jim growled.

The blonde duck snarled, standing. "Oh, you wanna fight, asshole?" She raised her fists. "I'm
fucking--"

"No fighting, Hennah," the doctor interjected, placing a hand on her shoulder. She reluctantly sat
back down, her friend patting her arm. The doctor, a tall stork in a white coat with friendly blue eyes,
smiled at Jim. "Welcome, Jim. I'm Mara Bou, the therapist running this group. Before we start
today's session, would you like to introduce yourself to the others?"

Jim rolled his eyes. "Jim Starling," he grunted. The beagle stared at him, foot twitching. "I'm... an
actor. Was an actor." He bowed his head, felt his chest tighten. "I was..."

The raccoon dog beside Hennah bounced to her feet, raising a hand. "I'm Yuki! I used to do theatre
in high school!" she exclaimed. "Hiya, Jim!"

Mara shook her head. "What did I tell you about interrupting, Yuki?"

Yuki frowned. "It's rude." She sat down slowly.

"Not her fault this guy's so boring," Hennah grumbled.

Jim sneered. "Hennah, huh?" he chortled. "I think we're gonna be the best of friends."

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For a while, Jim went through the motions. He took his medicine, he attended therapy, he said just
enough to satisfy the therapists, both in group and one-on-one. They gave him assignments to do,
though they felt more like homework. Once he had to write a page's worth of the things he liked
about himself. Jim thought it was stupid and juvenile, but he ended up filling both the front and back
of the paper. His pride had suffered a huge blow, but it was always quick to re-inflate.

Although Hennah and Jim's relationship remained heated, to the point where sometimes orderlies and
therapists had to intervene, their squawking and squabbling upsetting the other patients. Jim and
Hennah both had hot tempers and were quick to offend. He told Mara Hennah's ego was too fragile,
she was just too easy to set off. And when the therapist suggested Jim and her may be in the same
boat, he went quiet and decided denial was the best approach in response.

It wasn't always boring and dull, however. The food here was actually really good. Jim hated
wasting his time just wandering outside, but as the weeks passed, he found it somewhat relaxing,
walking the compound. He still refused to interact with the others and take part in group events that
weren't mandatory. Jim wasn't here to make friends, and aside from Yuki, who was too friendly and
open for her own good, no one cared about him either.
Three times a week they had movie nights. Jim never missed those. Most of the time, they always had some show or movie playing in the background on their outdated TV; something harmless that wouldn't trigger the patients. Easy on the stomach, easy to digest, easy to hold their attention. Jim hadn't noticed that he often idly played with the yarn from the activity box. He thought it was ridiculous and demeaning to ask patients to do fucking arts and crafts, but... Well, it helped keep Jim's anxiety at bay, just mindlessly tying up yarn into a ball that grew day by day.

Jim wanted to request they put on Darkwing Duck, but it was, of course, denied. He knew better, but... Well, no harm in asking. Except there was. But whatever. And while Jim didn't think he was getting much out of this therapy shit aside from good medication, during one private session, everything abruptly changed.

"You know, Jim," Mara said, looking over her files, "I want to talk about you today, if that's all right?"

Jim snorted, melting in the chair adjacent of Mara. "Uh huh. Okay. Didn't realize I had multiple personalities, but hey, lemme just go wake up Jim for you."

"When we talk, a majority of the conversation is in regards to your work and time as Darkwing Duck," Mara explained.

Jim scowled. "One might say it's the only time in my life I ever felt well and truly alive. That dark and sad enough for you, doc?"

"Or, perhaps, you're having a hard time differentiating yourself from the character and who you really are, Jim."

Jim's eyes widened. He sat upright, gripping the armrests. "The Hell does that mean?" he snapped.

"I know more about Darkwing Duck than I know about Jim Starling," Mara said calmly. "And through our sessions, the lines have started to blur."

Jim guffawed. "Please! I know I'm not Darkwing Duck!" He bristled in the chair, grinding his teeth. "S'just... a show. It's not... I know who I am."

"I apologize for upsetting you, Jim."

"You damn well should," Jim growled. "Implying I'm so stupid that I forget my own--my own identity!" He laughed, but his head felt light. His stomach turned with nausea and his hands were shaking. He was just angry, that was all. "Darkwing Duck is-- There's more to me than Darkwing Duck! What happened at the studio was-- I mean, who wouldn't be upset?" Jim knew, however, he'd been more than upset. "I'm Jim! Jim Starling! An actor-- A, a, a-- I've done a lot of stuff outside Dark... Darkwing..."

Mara nodded. "Take your time, Jim. Collect your--"

"Why do you keep saying my name every other sentence?" Jim demanded. "'Do this, Jim.' 'I understand, Jim.' 'I'm gonna blow my brains out from everyone whining all the time, Jim.' Like you forget who... who I am." It dawned on him then, and he nearly tore the leather off the armrests. "No. Don't you fucking dare. Trying to worm your way into my head--" He jumped from the chair, angrily stomping his feet. "I know who I am! I'm Jim Starling! I was Darkwing Duck, yes, but that's not all I am! I'm a lot more! So much more! More than anyone you or this loony bin could ever understand!"

"Help me to understand then," Mara replied, still so relaxed and demure it made Jim want to rip off
There was plenty he could talk about, plenty of things outside of Darkwing Duck. He could go into the typical basics: his family. His family was... Well, Jim didn't know his family very well. Shelley and Fischer Starling were both very busy people with very highly demanding jobs. They weren't around often, and when they were, they weren't open or interested in engaging with their son beyond the bar minimum. They didn't hate or dislike him, probably, they just didn't have time to be proper parents and raise a proper family. Sure, his mom was apathetic and domineering and his father was always annoyed with something or other and therefore on edge at almost all times, but they never raised their hands to him.

Jim tried to think of a fond memory with his parents. Maybe a birthday party or something. A time they went out as a family.

... Maybe later. He did have caretakers. Nana Adler, who was a complete door mat and let him do whatever the Hell he wanted. Back then, Jim believed she was simply spineless, but now that he really thought about it... Had she pitied him? Had Nana Adler felt bad that he was but an afterthought to his mother and father? Did she let him get away with everything just so he could feel loved or happy? That couldn't be it.

Strigina Darcy was the complete opposite; he hated her, but for very different reasons. She was over-protective, always lecturing him, especially about the rich Starling history and how all his ancestors were great and powerful people, and she never once let him out of her fucking shadow. Strigina might as well have just kept him in one of those kid leashes, that suffocating old buzzard. And Nana Adler might as well have just taken a nap and watched TV all day while Jim tore up the house.

So family wasn't that interesting. Or lack thereof. It was hard to be bothered by something one never had. It was hard to miss what was never yours.

Friends, then. Jim had many friends growing up. Many of them were children of his family's coworkers and colleagues and he didn't care much for them, but they were technically friends. He had friends in school--why, Jim could smile happily back on the old days when he and his school chums would get into all sorts of trouble. Many fun visits to the principal's office, but hey, that usually got his parents' attention.

Jim had many friends, he just couldn't think of one in specific he actually liked or cared for. A best friend, that was. He had to have one or two of those. When he was working on Darkwing--right, no, couldn't bring that up. Were all those people he rubbed elbows with friends? Sure, why not. Jim wouldn't say he was a selfish person, but he'd never been very interested in the lives of others. He had better investments to make; a friend in need is a friend indeed, and when Jim needed a friend, he used them. When he didn't need a friend, he didn't use them. Use might not be the most kind of words, but it felt the most fitting.

Jim had friends now. His agent was-- no, nevermind, his agent quit. His lawyer-- God no, never. His next door neighbor swung by every once in a while, usually to complain but sometimes he was chatty when he had a few beers in him. But real friends...

Maybe skip the friend thing too. Love--Jim had been in love many times. He even had girlfriends! His first was Kimmy Hoot in fifth grade, but he supposed she didn't count. They were just kids, and the bitch dumped him just because he liked burning bugs with a magnifying glass on clear sunny days.

Jim had a girlfriend in high school--the sex was fantastic. He just wished he could remember her name; he always called her "Oasis". One of those free-spirited types who didn't like to be tied down
by relationships and monogamy, the rules and terms laid out by society. Jim could respect that, and often felt the same way. So while their... not-relationship wasn't a very serious one, unlike Kimmy, it had to count for something.

In college, Jim dated a girl he might have even considered proposing to, despite the fact that he never wanted to tie himself down with marriage. It lasted a year; even though they didn't see each other often, and when they did they tended to fight, but hey, opposites attract, they say, and Jessie was his complete opposite. She liked helping at charities, did a lot of volunteer work in her free time, always talked about adopting a kid and living in a nice cozy h-- Wait, did she consider Jim charity work? He was temperamental, self-absorbed, but he was also talented and charming when he wanted to be, what was there to fix?

Jim broke it off with her, not the other way around.

Jim liked to think he was an open minded guy. He experimented with men before, though they were just little flings. He did drugs, but never got addicted. He only drank once in a while. And yeah, maybe he did go through a spell after Da--after the show was cancelled where he just drank and did some drugs, but really, who could blame Jim? Nobody, Goddammit, and it wasn't his fault he'd wound up spending a few nights in jail on a couple occasions. He'd broken some laws, but they weren't that big of a deal. He hadn't killed anyone--a little grievous bodily injury, maybe, but one could recover from that.

If someone came up to you while you were wasting away at a bar and tried to pick a fight, you had every right to defend yourself. Maybe that guy had been the bar owner. Maybe he was trying to get Jim to leave because he was bothering the other customers with his bad attitude and angry lectures. Sue him--and maybe once that did happen, but they settled that little matter out of court.

Kind of like now, actually, with Scrooge McDuck.

Jim felt a headache coming on. It wasn't his fault the best years of his life happened during his time as Darkwing Duck. Everything else that came before and after that wasn't important anyway.

"Before we end today's session, Jim," Mara said, handing Jim a piece of paper, "for tonight's assignment, I want you to write out your future goals. What you hope to do with your life once you've left the hospital and finished your sentence."

Jim snatched up the paper. "I don't have to do these, you know," he snapped. "I just don't have anything better to do, that's all."

Later, after an hour of adding fifty more strands of yarn to his watermelon sized yarn ball, Jim finally sat down at his desk to do his homework.

Future goals, huh?

Most people considered building a family, marrying, settling down. Jim never cared for a family, never wanted kids, and hated settling for anything, let alone a dull life in the suburbs with irritating, nosy neighbors and Sunday BBQs with people you secretly hated but tolerated for your wife and kid's sake.

Jim needed a nagging wife like he needed a hole in the head, and kids were just messy and clingy. Jim didn't mind them as much; he didn't care for them, but he enjoyed the company of his younger fans. He didn't have to raise them, after all. No, a family would only make his problems worse, and increase the amount of migraines he experienced every day to skyrocketing levels.
Jim supposed he wanted to get back into acting. He'd done gigs outside of Darkwing Duck, after all. Few and far in between, but he wouldn't consider himself a wash-up. He'd just need to land a role as big as Darkwing Duck—or one that would at least keep him financially stable. Which he most definitely was not.

Nevermind that. Jim's breakdown would barely have any impact on his acting; Hell, only a handful of people even knew what happened that day. Jim met and knew actors who'd done terrible things, committed crimes worse than him, who still got jobs, who were still in the spotlight, who still had loyal fanbases that would defend their actions despite clearly being in the wrong. One simply needed charisma and good looks—Jim had both, even if he was starting to lose his touch on the former, and some would say balding and wrinkles weren't very attractive for the latter.

Number one: get back into showbiz. Make a big comeback.

And... Well, anything else that came after that would be a bonus. Jim would be happy just working again. To see his face on TV and in the news (for completely positive things). Jim would make the world forget what happened. He fared tougher weather just fine in the past.

That's all that mattered, in the end. Jim being loved and praised. Nothing, absolutely nothing else could give him that same satisfaction and fulfillment in life.

---

"Well, I'll be damned. You two really did come."

Jim watched Drake and Launchpad squirm in their chairs across the table.

"We said we would, if you allowed it," Drake explained. "You did sign off on our visits."

Jim sighed, sitting back. "Suppose I did. So what do you want?"


Jim glowered. "Stop staring at my ball."

Launchpad quickly averted his gaze, swallowing.

Jim tried not to smile. These two buffoons... Better than talking to his lawyer over the phone, however.

"Do you mind talking about your time here?" Drake asked, folding his hands on the table. "I mean, if you'd rather not, we understand. But we heard you're doing--"

"When did you two get married?"

Launchpad and Drake looked to one another, surprised.

"P-Pardon?"

Jim reached across the table slowly, tapping the ring on Drake's hand.

"Ah. We didn't think you'd notice," Drake chuckled. "It was last week. A private ceremony."

"But you shoulda seen the cake," Launchpad moaned, rubbing his belly. "I spent the entire night in the bathroom. It was awesome. No regrets."
"And you didn't think to bring me a slice?" Jim groused.

Launchpad bolted upright. "I can go get a cake right--"

Jim couldn't help it. He just had to laugh. It wasn't bitter, it wasn't mocking, it was... genuine. Kind of warm. Jim instantly went silent again, smile set into a deep frown. "And you thought it'd be wise to marry with such... busy and demanding jobs?" he sniffed, a snooty little look on his snooty little beak. "Sounds stupid to me." Also sounded a little familiar, too.

"There are certain benefits to marriage, you know," Drake said, undeterred. "And maybe you do have a point, but we don't regret it." He placed his hand over Launchpad's, and there was that nauseating shared look of love and adoration Jim so hated.


"We don't mean to rush," Drake said, "but have you given any consideration to our offer?"

Jim cocked a brow. "What offer?"

Launchpad grinned, eyes sparkling. "About movin' in with us!"

Jim did a double take. "Oh, you--you were serious? That was serious?" he spat. He laughed, and this time it was meant to be cruel.

"We figured until you get back on your feet and find your own place," Drake explained, nervous. "Unless you have someplace else you can stay?"

"No." The word came out before Jim could even catch it.

"Then... someone who can spare you room?"

Jim ran a hand down his beak, sighing. "Just worry about yourselves, all right? I'm fine. I don't need you, I don't need anyone. I've been alone a long time; I can take care of myself."

The newly weds nodded.

"The offer is still on the table."

"Yeah, well, you can de-table it. I won't need it," Jim grumbled. "So, we finished here?"

Launchpad and Drake exchanged looks again, and with a big smile on his face, Launchpad whipped out a piece of cake on a paper plate. "Surprise!" he exclaimed. Drake beamed, lightly waving his hands in the air. "We did save you a piece of cake!"

"Staff said it was all right, that you can you have it," Drake said, blushing, "you know... if you want it."

Jim stared, bug-eyed, at the piece of cake. It was... purple and black, and he knew why. His heart skipped a beat as he slowly looked up at Drake and Launchpad.

What absolute nerds. A Darkwing Duck themed wedding cake? Not only was it dorky, it was a bit self-indulgent and egotistical, considering Drake's occupation.

"Wow," was all Jim could say.
Launchpad leaned forward and whispered, "It's got blueberry cream in the middle." He winked.

"You probably shouldn't lean forward and whisper things, LP," Drake tittered, looking up at the camera and sitting his partner back. "We won't keep you, Jim, if you want to end this visit early."

Jim... thought about it, but didn't answer. Not right away. "I've got paperwork to do," he said, brushing off his shirt. Another assignment from Mara. "So I need to go anyway."

Drake smiled. "Of course. It was... nice. Seeing you again."

"Yeah!" Launchpad added.

Jim really did not understand these people.

"Would you like us to visit again? Same time next week?" Drake asked, in a way that reminded Jim of a little kid asking their parents if their friend could stay for dinner and maybe a sleepover.

Jim sighed. "I'll think about it."

Launchpad gave a thumbs up.

---

Tonight's assignment from Jim's therapist was to write about his life. Once more, outside of his time as Darkwing Duck.

Jim sat at his desk, tapping the pencil against his beak, sometimes chewing on the eraser. He'd been staring at the paper for ten minutes now. Not that he couldn't think of anything, there was just nothing of note worth writing about. Whatever, so long as Mara was satisfied, it didn't matter; she asked for Jim Starling's life story, so she'd get it, simple and boring as it was.

Jim wrote about his parents. It was two sentences. *Always busy and at work. Serious type of people.*

He was almost compelled to add: *Don't know why they got married and had a kid.*

Maybe it had something to do with passing along the Starling name. Maybe it was a marriage of convenience. There were benefits to being married, after all. And with a kid, you could find so many reasons to call out of work or excuses for being late and whatnot. Striginia did say the Starling bloodline was important, after all.

Shelley and Fischer had done their part in ensuring the Starling name lived on. It was in Jim's hands now to see where it went next--and right now, he was dragging it through the mud.

Jim mentioned his two caretakers. *Nana let me do whatever, Striginia wouldn't let me do anything at all.*

Friends? *I had friends. I still do. I'm just not big on socializing as I once was.* Most of that was a lie, but it wouldn't be the first one he'd told Mara.

Lovers? Partners? *Some of those as well. I didn't care for anything long term, so I was happy with what I had. I was seeing someone before I got thrown into this crummy joint.* Now that wasn't exactly a lie. He and his dentist flirted like crazy. Did Marrow count? It was nothing romantic or sexual, but they knew each other intimately. Well, *she knew him* intimately, and only the parts pertaining to her job.

Work? *I'm on sabbatical leave.*
Goals? *See previous assignment.*

There. Finished. Jim sat back, reading his paper. It amounted to one whole paragraph. He quietly switched to his sheet of goals, holding them side by side.

*Get back into acting, become world's beloved sweetheart once more.*

Jim recalled something he said to Mara during their first therapy session. "I mean, I had it, baby, I was walking on the sun," he laughed, giving her the finger guns. His smile wilted. "But, you know. That's physically impossible. Some would say I burned up. Or out."

"Like Icarus, the wolf who flew too close to the sun, only for his wax wings to melt and plummet him back to Earth."

Jim shrugged. "Except I still have wings," he insisted.

"When you walk on the sun all those years, bathed in its light and warmth," Mara said carefully, "and then slowly, the sun begins to set and you find yourself in the dark of night... That can be really jarring, can't it?"

Jim frowned sadly, looking to the floor. "It's like... I'm reaching for it, but I can't grab it. The light's fading, y'know?" he mumbled, nervously bundling his hands together. "And it was *right there*--my golden opportunity. I could have had it all--back. I could have been walking on the sun and the moon and the stars. A fresh start."

Mara nodded. "Once you've touched the sun, what else is there? What else could possibly compare to that glory and euphoria? That sense of importance?" she asked. "And while it may seem impossible and implausible right now, you can still grab hold of the sun again. You'll find it in other places. Not only within yourself, but those around you. Family, friends; a support circle that you need to bring together instead of push away."

Family? Shelley and Fischer were never what he or anyone else would consider a family, especially a functioning one. Fischer was dead, and he hadn't spoken to his mom since he finished college.

Friends? Whatever "friends" he still had never showed up to check on him at the hospital, never made any phone calls or attempts to reach out. Jim didn't blame them--he wasn't very good at keeping friends. The closer someone is, the more likely you see their flaws, and Jim didn't know why he kept people at arm's length, considering Darkwing Duck had... no... A support system? Aside from mandatory therapy and medication... Well, he'd have a parole officer who'd check up on him every day when he got out. Jim had enough money to rent a new place--for a few months. At least until he was off parole and people stopped breathing down his neck. Jim already planned on secretly living in the storage where he kept all his belongings if he could no longer hold down rent. He could make due with that until he found a new job as--as--as an actor who rose from the ashes and then--then--

Jim brushed the papers into the air with an angry sweep of his arm. He slammed his elbows into the desk, fingers threading through head feathers and digging into his scalp. He chewed his tongue until he tasted blood. Crying would hurt now, but it would help him sleep later. It always did.

---

Jim was tired, his eyes red and puffy, but he couldn't sleep. His roommate was snoring up a thunderstorm. And although he brushed his teeth, Jim couldn't get the taste of blood out of his mouth.
Jim spotted the slice of cake. He'd knocked it to the floor during his fit. Jim squatted, scooping icing back onto the plate. He intended to throw it away, but after instinctively sucking the frosting off his fingers, once that blueberry cream hit his tongue... Jim stared at the cake a moment before sitting on the floor, quietly eating it with his hand.

It tasted really, really good. Jim decided to eat the cake slow and savor it.
Happy Trails To You

Chapter Notes

As previously stated, mind the tags. More in depth discussion of mental health and child abuse/neglect. Again, I tried to keep Jim's overall problems as general as possible, i.e. not assigning any specific mental illnesses, etc, as well as simplifying elements involved.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To be loved was the ultimate dream.
To be hated was the ultimate disappointment.
To fade into mediocrity, to be nothing but a shadow, to never stand out among the crowd was Jim's ultimate nightmare.

---
Mara started today's session with Jim simple enough.
"How are you feeling today, Jim?"
Jim slumped in his chair, massaging his temples. "Tired."
"Tell me about it, please."
"I'm tired. And I don't want to talk about it," Jim confessed. He pulled his legs up to his chest, hugged them. "How many more days do I have left in here? Fifteen?"
"We mustn't stop now, Jim," Mara stated. "So I need you to try talking with me. Anything, really. Like, how did that cake taste? The one you received from the Mallard-McQuacks."
Jim narrowed his eyes. He finally looked up at Mara. "Like I could have my cake," he said, a wry grin on his bill, "and eat it, too."

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"I'm sorry Launchpad couldn't make it," Drake apologized, carefully and slowly sitting at the table. He winced, minding his right arm in a sling.
"Get that falling down a flight of stairs?" Jim smirked, resting his chin on his hand.
Jim bobbed his head. "Where's your other half anyway?" he asked.
"Currently helping Mr. McDuck with a project," Drake answered, frowning. "I don't know why; they already have a pilot."
Jim grinned, showing his teeth. "Is someone perhaps jealous?" he sneered. "Feeling second best? Old windbag jeopardizing your time with the wife?"
Drake scowled. "That's not it," he insisted. "It's just... LP is my partner, as you know; we keep a hectic schedule. Our job is extremely hazardous. He's always busy these days. I worry he might get sick, run into the ground." He chewed his bottom bill. "While we decided he'd focus solely on our work, he always makes room to help out Mr. McDuck. And the sort of things Mr. McDuck get up to aren't exactly par for the course with an old duck in retirement. The extra stress and risks might be... a little too much for him to handle one day."

"Your boy seems attracted to danger and adventure," Jim said, "he might be something of a junkie." He snorted, staring at his fingers drumming on the table. "Suppose he'll say he got that trait from watching Darkwing Duck as a kid with plenty of space to fill between his ears."

Drake smiled crookedly. "I think your work factors into it, but not entirely," he replied. "He's very spirited. I think he was destined for his--our--sort of life." He blushed, a little ashamed. "It's why I have a hard time asking him to take it easy. I'm no better."

Jim sat back. "Starting can be difficult, but once you start running, it's almost impossible to stop. Because when you stop, when you stand still--that's the worst. That moment in between..." He trailed off, gaze drifting through Drake. "The worst."

"But sometimes we need to step back and take a breather," Drake pressed, "before we can get back up and start again. There's nothing wrong in taking baby steps. So long as you're moving forward, right?"

Jim frowned. He looked away. "Doesn't count as moving forward if all you're doing is stumbling," he grumbled, "and walking right toward a dead end."

"You know, you can always scale and climb those walls to get to the other side," Drake said, beaming. "You've done it a few times. Literally."

"What if there's nothing on the other side?"

Jim winced as Drake slowly reached a hand across the table. One finger was bound up in bandages, a pretty sparkly pink bandaide on his thumb.

"Or maybe you just need a helping hand to get you over that fence?" Drake offered, cheeks rosy red. He turned his hand over, inviting.

Jim looked between Drake and his hand. He was shaking, and he didn't know why. Like he'd just been electrocuted. His gaze continued alternating from hand to the younger mallard's face, confused, even a little frightened. Was this a test? What if he failed? Every time he messed up, it always ended very, very poorly for Jim and those around him.

Yet.

Jim raised a hand, fingers twitching. He stared at Drake's, waiting for it to strike like some five-headed cobra, but slowly lowered his hand. His trembling fingers were so close to Drake's, close enough to touch--

Jim withdrew his hand, firmly planted it in his lap. "Yeah, well," he snorted, glazed eyes blinking furiously, "my stunt days are over, remember?"

Drake still smiled, even after the rejection. He pulled back his hand. "Two weeks until you're discharged," he reminded. "I take it you've been making some big improvements?"

Jim scratched the burn scar on his bill. "Maybe they're just waiting to spring the bad news on me for
the last day," he grunted, "'surprise, you're still as fucked up as the day you arrived, we're gonna need you to stay another month and wring you like a wet cloth for more money.'"

"I dunno about that!" Drake laughed, but it wasn't demeaning. "Expect the worst--"

"--But hope for the best," Jim grumbled, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

---

"This is... quite impressive, Jim."

Mara looked over the yarn ball nearly the same size as the mallard. "Almost an entire month's work," she said. "And so many bright and beautiful colors."

"I'd run out of yarn if I only used one color," Jim snorted, leaning against his massive ball.

"What the Hell are you gonna do with it?" Hennah asked, stepping up beside Mara with Yuki.

"Oh! You could use it like one of those exercise balls!" Yuki giggled. "Or ride on it while rolling down a steep hill!"

"Yuki," Mara said, "that is very dangerous."

Hennah smirked. "Not for Mr. Dangerwing Duck here, right?" she taunted. "Bet the moment you get outta here, you and that ball will just unwind all over again."

Mara raised a hand to the blonde duck. "Hennah, stop antagonizing Jim," she said firmly. "You know you'll be spend a day in the private room down the hall if you start another fight."

"No use locking her up in solitude," Jim snorted, grinning at Hennah, "nothing can help this crazy broad--"

Yuki screamed as Hennah shoved Mara aside, decking Jim across the face. Jim fell backward, knocked out of his chair. "I'm crazy?" Hennah screeched, red in the face. "What does that make you? You think you've got it so fuckin' bad--you're just some washed-up wannabe actor!"

"Hennah!" Mara snapped. "Stand down!" Three orderlies quickly ran into the activity room. The beagle curled up under his chair, shaking, Yuki watching on in horror.

"Boohoo! Poor wittle Wimp Stawwing! Nobody wuvs me anymow!" Hennah laughed bitterly, spittle flying from her beak. "Go beg those loser friends of yours to bring you more cake to cry into!"

Jim's eyes widened. He slowly sat up. "What'd you say?"

Orderlies took Hennah by the arms, pulling the cackling, squirming duck back. "Oh, come on! We all heard you moaning and blubbering that night! Pitiful, unloved, unwanted Jim, you're nothing! And you'll always be nothing!"

"That's enough, Hennah! Please take--"

Jim threw the chair out of his way, stormed up to Hennah. "Say that again!" he shrieked, eyes absolutely manic. "Say that again!" Another orderly stepped between the two, forcibly guiding Jim away.

"Poor little Jimmy! Nobody loves you, everybody hates you, best you go eat worms!" Hennah guffawed shrilly as she was dragged out of the room. "Hope your dumb yarn ball keeps you warm at
night in the streets, grandpa! 'Cause no one gives a shit what happens to--" The door shut on Hennah before she could finish.

Yuki helped the beagle out from under the chair. "She didn't mean any of that, Jim," she reassured, voice shaky. "Well... Maybe not all of it."

"Yuki, everyone, please return to your rooms."

Jim panted and heaved, fists shaking at his sides, the orderly remaining firmly planted in front of him. The other patients filed out of the activity room. Mara looked back at Jim, frowning sadly. "What Hennah said was cruel and wrong--"

"If I'm suppose to be here for you to fix me, how can I do that when you have shrieking harpies like her constantly on my back?" Jim barked. "Why don't you move her to another ward?"

"It's a matter of space," Mara explained. "But Hennah has every right to be here just as much as you do."

Jim growled. "She's a liability! Dangerous to everyone around her, not just me!" He pointed at the door. "You're just gonna let that freak get away with everything? Think a time out will improve her shitty, disrespectful attitude? She doesn't deserve to be here; she's just some snot-nosed little punk who couldn't make it in the real world and--and..."

Jim's left eyelid twitched and fluttered. It was in that moment he realized what he'd just said.

"Jim? Are you all right, Jim?"

Jim rocked back and forth, eyes rolling in his head. Mara was speaking to him, but he couldn't understand what she was saying. Her face was a swirl of colors. The world was spinning, too. And then everything was ignited in flames, and Jim didn't have the time to scream from the sudden onslaught of pain as he fell to the ground, convulsing.

---

Darkwing Duck woke with a startle, sitting up from the dirty, rain-slicked street.

He panted, sweat wetting his eye mask and the collar of his turtleneck. Darkwing felt his face, pat down his jacket, touched the hat on his head. After a few more gulps of air, he cautiously pushed himself back onto his feet. The world tilted for a second, but with a shake of his head, everything realigned properly again.

"Kee-ripes," Darkwing moaned, "what a nightmare." He looked around the alley, finding his gas gun. Picked it up. "Never wanna go through--"

"Again with the costume?"

Darkwing spun around, raising his gun. His eyes widened at the shadowy figure approaching him. It was Megavolt, but... not. No longer a rat, but rather a tall, white-feathered lady duck.

"Seriously, child," Shelley said coldly, adjusting her coke-bottle goggles, "that is not armor, nor is it a shield. It will not protect you, just as your little fantasy world cannot keep you from facing reality."


"Little Jimmy always with his head in the clouds!" Quackerjack giggled, the tiny bells on his
costume jingling as he skipped up beside Shelley. No, this wasn't the real Quackerjack either. The outfit was the same, but his face was all Nana Adler's. "Just like a little balloon! Up, up, and away! But you know what happens to balloons, Jimmy!" Nana held out a doll of Striginia Darcy, a much more daunting replacement of Paddywhack. She thrust a needle into the doll's head. "Pop!"

The Striginia doll exploded, spitting up cotton. Darkwing gasped and recoiled.

The doll immediately collected her guts, grumbling as she sewed herself together again. "And you were always full of hot air, Jim," Striginia-Paddywhack snapped. "Always so full of yourself. You've put the Starling name to shame. Had you only listened to me, you wouldn't have turned out to be such a failure. So narcissistic and vain. You've no reason to be so proud when you've yet to earn anything meaningful in your wretched life!"

"Aww, don't be too hard, Miss Striginia," Nana Adler chided, bopping the doll's head. "Jim's doing his best! Even if his best is riding on his high horse all through town and trampling on everyone else!" She flicked her jester hat, transforming it into a cowboy's hat. "Yeehaw, ya varmint! Ain't you just the hero this lil' town so desperately needs! Or maybe you need it!"

"Nine out of ten ex-friends, ex-colleagues, and relatives agree," Liquidator guffawed, slithering out from a manhole in front of Jim. His watery face morphed into Fischer Starling's. "You're nothing but a big disappointment to everyone around you."

"This..." Darkwing Duck shook his head. "No, you're all--"

"Jim, you need to try a little harder, Jim. Jim, you're so stubborn, why won't you listen to anyone, Jim? Jim, we're only trying to help, Jim."

Darkwing hadn't noticed the vine reaching down and snaking around his throat until it tightened, choking him. Darkwing gagged and kicked, tearing into the floral noose as it slowly lifted him off the ground.

The flowers atop Bushroot's head blossomed into Mara Bou's. "Jim, do you even remember who you are, Jim? Who you really are, Jim?" she purred. "Because you are no hero, Jim. Heroes save people, Jim, but you can't even save yourself, Jim."

Jim gagged, his face turning blue, eyes watering. He reached blindly for his mother, father, his two caretakers watching him, hoping one of them would help. He couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't beg them to grab his hand.

"Jim, are you even trying to get better, Jim?" Mara tsked. "Jim, can you even change, Jim? You can't help but be who you are, Jim, and I know these things, Jim. I'm a therapist, Jim. I know better than you, Jim; everyone here knows better than you, Jim."

Nana Adler and Striginia cackled. Fischer chortled. Shelley simply grinned--a small one, but it was louder and more deafening than any of their laughter.

Jim seized up in pain, going entirely stiff as something tore out from his chest, popping the buttons of his suit as it burst out and expanded. "And what you are is a selfish, egomaniacal, cruel, angry little boy," the growing black mass bubbled and chuckled, its top forming into a head. Crimson red eyes and a smile full of fangs. "But," it said, eyebrows quirking, "that's perfectly fine."

Darkwing gasped as the vine was cut from his neck; he fell to the ground, landing painfully on his rear. When he looked up, Mara had joined the rest of the Fearsome Four. They were cowering, terrified, backing away from Darkwing Duck.
No, not Darkwing...

Darkwing looked back to the shadow towering over him. "Who cares what these morons and hacks have to say? You're so much better than them! Since when did their opinions ever matter?" the shadow laughed darkly. "They gave you nothing, but expected everything from you. They told you to rise to the top, but never lent you a hand. Not like you ever needed one; relying on others is messy and weak. You're much stronger than them, much better without anyone."

The shadow dropped the gas gun in Darkwing's hands. "They wanna make you the bad guy," it snickered beside his head, "but nobody wants to be the villain of their own story, right?" One inky tendril guided Darkwing's finger around the trigger. "So, be the hero, baby! And take out those who would stand in your way. They're the monsters. Darkwing Duck always makes sure the criminals pay!"

The gun shook in Darkwing's hands. He swallowed the large lump in his throat, wide eyes glazed with tears. "I... I don't..." he choked. Their looks of fear tore at his heart. "No, I... I don't wanna hurt- - It wasn't supposed to end like-"

"You didn't care about hurting that little idiot who tried to take away your good name!" the shadow roared. "You didn't care if you maimed or even killed him! What's stopping you now, hero? Come on! Take 'em out!" It shoved Darkwing's head forward, keeping it in place, forcing him to look the frightened Fearsome Four in the eyes.

"N-No, no!" Darkwing cried, trying to shake his head loose. "No, it--it's different! Things aren't... things aren't so easy l-like that..."

The shadow glowered. "These nitwits really got to your head, didn't they? That's a big shame, kiddo," it snorted, "'cause you coulda been somethin' great. Coulda gone so damn far, if you only embraced who you really are." The figure sighed, releasing Darkwing and coiling up in front of him; it took on a new shape, one Darkwing immediately recognized.

The red cape, the purple mask, the wide brim hat. It was him.

No. It was his evil clone. The maniac who tried blowing up St. Canard before Darkwing Duck apprehended him. But they never did get that far, and so the two would remain in purgatory, stories unresolved and incomplete.

"Fine then," the evil clone growled, easily plucking the gun from the mallard's hand. He turned it on the four sobbing, quivering villains. "I'll do everything myself."

"Don't!" Darkwing cried, tackling the clone around the waist. The evil twin snarled. "You can't kill them! I don't want to-- This isn't who--" He whimpered. "I was just a-afraid, I didn't-- I didn't want to lose my second chance! I just w-wanted to walk on the sun again, t-that's all!"

"Guess it's harder to deny your demons when you're looking them right in the eyes, 'ey, Jimmy boy?" the clone laughed. He took Darkwing by the cape, yanked him off and threw him into the garbage. "Now just sit back and watch; let me show you how it's done. Trust me, kid, you're gonna thank me later."

Darkwing scrambled and kicked in the pile of black, smelly garbage bags, but every little movement only pulled him under, deeper and deeper. "No! I don't want this!" he gasped, clawing into the air, struggling for purchase, head and body almost completely swallowed. "Stop it! That's not--"

"You're wrong, you foul fiend!"
The clone hissed, whipping back around.

Darkwing went still, and immediately stopped sinking, wide eyes looking down the alley.

"If you knew anything about Darkwing Duck," the emerging figure shouted, "you'd know his message was always about hope!" With a flap of his cape, another Darkwing Duck appeared— younger, his outfit modified, but Darkwing Duck nonetheless. "And although the sun has set, it does not erase all those previous good and glorious days!"

"Figured you'd show up, you annoying twerp," the evil clone spat. "You're always lurking here in our private little St. Canard. Always fighting with me, thinking your pathetic tiny spark is going to extinguish my flames." He cackled, growing to a colossal size. "You're old news, Deadmeat! Your days are over!"

The younger Darkwing Duck smiled sharply. "You're just like that big balloon of hot air," he jeered, cocking his gas gun. "Just one little poke and--"

The evil clone screamed, enveloped in acidic purple gas. "No!" he yelped, rapidly shrinking and melting down. "You can't kill me! I can't die!"

"True," the younger Darkwing said, approaching the writhing puddle, "but I can defeat you. And I'll do it as many times as it takes until you've finally accepted the truth." He kicked the hat off the blubbering blob's head. "I'm here to stay."

"Curse you! This isn't over!" the blob whimpered, swirling 'round and 'round down the sewer drain until he was gone.

The younger Darkwing Duck beamed, turning to his fellow masked mallard in the trash.

"Who... who are you?" Darkwing croaked, flabbergasted.

The younger hero held out a hand. "You know me," he said warmly, "we just haven't talked in ages. You gave me a bit of a make-over, but I've always been here. You know what they say, right?"

Darkwing slowly reached out. The younger duck grabbed his hand firmly, helped pull him from the trash. Darkwing blinked, and suddenly the hand he was holding was much smaller--the other Darkwing was now a little duckling boy with a big, hopeful smile, wearing an oversized wide brim hat, a blanket cape, and Darkwing Duck t-shirt.

"Darkwing Duck always gets back up!" the duckling cheered, pumping a fist.

Darkwing widened his eyes. "I--I do know you," he said. "I met you before. So long ago. You were... in the beginning, you here there. At one of my first signings." Back then, the duckling had been a sobbing mess, he was just so overwhelmed meeting his hero. He even made his mothers cry, and Darkwing couldn't deny that little tear of his own left unshed.

Darkwing knelt before the kid. "It really has been so long," he said, smiling wearily, "way too long."

"That big meanie was wrong, y'know," the duckling reassured. "You aren't all bad. You told me I could be a superhero one day. So you can be a superhero, too! You just gotta do it, right?"

Darkwing chuckled. "I'm not as strong and spirited as I once was. I'm tired, kid, but..." He patted the duckling on his head. "Guess I just gotta keep getting back up."

The duckling laughed joyfully. "Yeah!" He squeezed Darkwing's hand still holding his.
Darkwing squeezed back.

"... Ah, aa--ou, ou, J-Jim, you're--"

Jim sluggishly opened his eyes, momentarily blinded by the egg-shell white light above. He blinked a few times, vision adjusting.

"Jim?"

There he was again. That younger Darkwing Duck, but he wasn't wearing his fancy new costume. He looked surprised and worried, too.

"Jim?" the younger Darkwing asked. "Jim, can you hear me? Are you awake?"

Jim blinked again. He opened his mouth. "Yuh," he coughed, throat as dry as a desert.

The younger Darkwing grinned widely. "Jim! You're awake!" He turned away, shouting for someone, reappearing in Jim's vision a second later. "Thank goodness!"

"What'd I miss?" Another familiar voice, and then another familiar face. "Is he alive st--oh! Oh! He's awake! He's awake! Hey you guys, he's awake!"

Jim winced. This one was a bit too loud. "Where..." His hand twitched--he was holding something, and very tightly too. He looked down. It was the younger Darkwing's hand, which was turning blue and purple.

"S-Squeezing a bit hard, Jim," Drake tittered, eyes watering, "y-you don't gotta let go, j-just loosen up a--"

Jim took back his hand, tucking it under the blanket. "Where... am I?" he rasped.

"Audubon Bay Hospital."

"You had a seizure!" Launchpad shouted. "You almost died!" He wobbled, tears flooding his eyes.

"N-No, LP, he wasn't--you didn't, Jim. You did have a seizure, but no, you weren't going to die," Drake reassured. "Doctors said you might experience episodes like these from time to time. Something got you worked up and stressed out really bad, they said, and that's what triggered it."

Launchpad held his can of Pep! in Jim's face. "You want my soda? Wait, no, probably wouldn't be good to drink soda right now. ... But if you want it--"

A doctor and nurse entered the room. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Mister Starling," the doctor said, checking Jim's vitals. "You had a general seizure. Although it didn't last long, it took a rough toll on your body. You've been out for a little over a day now. Fortunately, you're going to be all right. We're going to keep you another night for observation, but you should be just fine."

"We hooked you up to the good stuff," the nurse giggled, winking. She propped up Jim's head, helping him to drink a cup of water.

"Glad to have you back, Jim," Drake said, and meant it.

Jim snorted, pushing aside the cup. "Shoulda kept me under. Two weeks. Finished hospital stay," he coughed.

"I don't think that'd count," Drake tittered.
The doctor and nurse finished briefing and looking over Jim before leaving. Launchpad sat at the foot of the bed, munching on chips, blissfully smiling and refusing to take his eyes off Jim.

"How long have you been here?" Jim asked.

Drake sat back in his chair. "Not long. Only an hour or so," he answered. "We were really worried. Launchpad almost crashed the car when we heard the news." Although that wasn't much of a shock.

Jim groaned, closing his eyes. "That dumb bitch..."

"Don't get worked up now," Drake said, patting his shoulder. "You just need to--"

"I've met you before, right? When you were just a kid."

Drake widened his eyes, sitting back.

"It was at the St. Canard mall," Jim mumbled, squinting, "in the food court. First season of the show, I did a signing there. And you came. You wore this stupid hat and a blanket as a cape. You just cried and cried like a big baby. Got snot all over my new jacket."

Drake laughed, wiping at his eye. "Y-Yeah! That was me. I sure was crying; I was just so happy to meet you. It was a dream come true," he said. Launchpad smiled at him fondly. "My moms lectured me on the car ride back home, saying I made them cry, too, and in front of Darkwing Duck, no less! Called me super silly, but said I left quite an impression."

Jim sighed. "I forgot for a while. I forgot... a lot of things." How good it felt hugging that little brat and telling him how proud he was of him. How good it made him feel knowing this boy cherished and loved his work and everything he'd done. It made him work harder, really push himself.

And maybe he'd pushed himself a little too far. All sweet fruit rots in the sun over time, he supposed, but it'd been his fault for leaving them out. Taking these things for granted and forgetting...

"LP, what are you doing?"

Jim turned his attention to the larger bird, standing on his chair and beating the ceiling mounted TV. Launchpad glanced between the two, like a child who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Oh, just turnin' on the boob tube," he explained, "they're playin' the Adventures of Prince Leonis: the Hunt for the Platinum Hound on channel 5. Figured we could watch it; you said visitin' hours are open for another two hours." He switched on the TV, punching the buttons. "You guys are gonna love it. It's got everything! Action, adventure, romance, comedy, zombies, singing nuns..."

Drake was going to show Launchpad the remote, but stopped. "I don't think Jim wants to watch movies right now," he said, looking expectantly at Jim. Almost... hopeful, too?

Jim furrowed his brows. He might have turned them down, but it was better than just going back to sleep or counting weird shapes in the ceiling to pass the time. "I'm hungry," Jim huffed, "I'll watch the movie, but one of you needs to go get me a big bowl of pistachio ice cream first."

"What if they don't have pistachio in the hospital kitchen?" Drake asked.

"When's the movie starting, big bird?"

"Uhh, fifteen minutes."

Jim snapped his head back to Drake. "Get in your car, drive to the nearest store, you'll get back
probably with a minute to spare. Assuming you go," he paused to glance at his wrist, as if he were wearing a watch and checking the time, "right now."

Drake scrambled out of the chair, rushing out of the room.

"Got it!" Launchpad cheered. "Nice clear image, too!" He went to step down, only to trip over the armrest and land face first on the tiled floor.

Jim just watched Launchpad, sipping his water.

---

Fortunately, there was pistachio ice cream at the hospital kitchen. Drake returned ten minutes later with the ice cream, four drinks, and a freshly nuked, buttery bag of popcorn. Launchpad shut the door (with permission, of course) and switched off the light as Drake handed out everything: two waters for Jim, coffee for himself, and a mystery drink for Launchpad.

"Since you had your two sodas for the day," Drake said, "instead I got yooooou..." He held out the carton of chocolate milk to his partner.

Launchpad beamed. "Yes yes yes!" He took the milk and popcorn and smacked a kiss to the side of Drake's head.

"Please," Jim grumbled into a spoonful of ice cream, "I'm sick enough already."

"Sorry, sorry."

The three settled in to watch the movie. Jim thought the kids would be the type to chat through a film, but they were both very quiet, completely engaged. Launchpad so much so that half the time he missed putting popcorn in his mouth, letting it fall to the ground, totally oblivious.

During commercial breaks, Jim would share a few stories about the film's production. When he was Drake's age, he'd been on the set; at the time he was still a blossoming actor, yet to be discovered. His father's colleague's brother was a producer for the film and allowed him to visit the studio one day.

Jim said the lead actor was actually very quiet off camera and kept to himself. The actress playing his lover, on the other hand, was boisterous and a little over-the-top, but very friendly and warm. Jim passed by her as staff went to fixing her giant gold wig and make-up. The moment she spotted him, a grin split her muzzle, and she took his hand, gave it an enthusiastic shake. She asked who he was, if he was an extra, if he was interested in acting. Jim got to hold one of the prop Platinum Hound statuettes as a special effects artist complained about recent heavy reliance on CGI.

Drake and Launchpad were captivated by his stories, giving him their full attention. Dreamy looks on their faces, full of admiration and awe. Launchpad would ask follow-up questions, but always right before the commercials ended and the movie came back on, leaving them unanswered but quickly forgotten come next break.

Jim never did see the end of the film, however, as he fell asleep a half hour in. Drake and Launchpad didn't leave; they continued watching and munching on popcorn. Drake took Jim's water bottle and empty ice cream bowl off the bed, laying out one of Jim's arms slung over the pillow. Launchpad, sitting on the other side Jim, pulled up his blanket, tucked it beneath his chin.

Drake and Launchpad resumed watching the movie as nuns sang Prince Leonis a sweet melody about his upcoming doom.
Jim woke the next morning. As expected, Drake and Launchpad were gone. After a few more tests and a physical examination, Jim was discharged and returned to the psychiatric hospital.

In less than a week, Jim would finish his time at the hospital. Mara assured him he'd been making great strides, but he was still nervous. After his fight with Hennah, he could be set back for another fifteen days.

Drake and Launchpad hadn't shown up in the couple days since his return. Not that he minded; they were busy, after all. He spoke to his lawyer over the phone about Scrooge's lawsuit and other such business, but that was it.

Six more days until Jim was to be discharged, but today it was Yuki's turn. Jim leaned against the activity room window nearby as Hennah, Mara, an orderly, and six patients wished the tanuki goodbye.

Hennah threw her arms around Yuki, hugging her tightly. Jim could see she was trembling. Yuki returned the embrace, nuzzling the top of the duck's head. "T-They say we c-can't write to each other when we're... That our time h-here shouldn't..." Hennah croaked, standing back. She wiped uselessly at her face, but the tears kept falling. "I don't want-- I don't want this to be the end, Yuki."

Yuki sniffled. "It isn't. I promised we'd remain friends, remember? We'll meet up again! Once you get released, we can throw a party and obaachan can make her famous lemon custard green tea cake I told you about!" she exclaimed.

Hennah laughed weakly. "It still sounds s-so gross."

The two friends hugged each other again, weeping--sad tears, happy tears. Mara placed a hand on Yuki's shoulder and the two let go, drying their eyes. "See you soon, Hen," Yuki said, holding out her pinkie. "I promise!"

Hennah hooked her pinkie around Yuki's, shaking it once.

"Yeah. Same. Now get outta here, doofus."

"Bye everyone!" Yuki said, waving to the other patients and orderlies, half who waved back. She spotted Jim. "Bye, Jim! Be nice to Hennah, okay?"

"Yuki," Hennah scowled.

Jim shrugged and gave her a limp wave. He smiled when she turned to leave.

The day resumed as normal, except Hennah was mostly quiet during group therapy. She barely touched her dinner and was absent for movie night. Jim hadn't really thought much about it. He smirked to himself; if only he had a piece of cake to smear in her hypocritical face right now.

That night, Jim laid in bed, half-asleep. He'd gotten used to his roommate's horrendous snoring. He'd also come to enjoy the nights where an orderly would sit in the hall and play their guitar, singing the patients to sleep. Tonight was an oldie but a goodie, Happy Trails, one Yuki liked and often requested. Jim remembered a night in the middle of his stay, the orderly had to stop playing to tell Yuki, who was singing along, to be quiet and not disturb the others.

Yet even with the buzzing in Jim's ears, his roommate's comically loud snoring, and the guitarist's playing and singing, Jim swore he could hear crying. Next door--where Hennah slept. Where Yuki...
used to sleep. They were muffled, tiny little whimpers, as Hennah struggled to stifle her sobs.

Jim frowned. He rolled on his side, knees tucked up to his chest, throwing the blanket over his head. Hennah eventually stopped crying, and the orderly was singing a new tune. Jim inhaled, exhaled.

"Happy traaails to you," Jim sung under his breath, closing his eyes, "some trails are happy ones, others are--" He yawned heavily, settled into the mattress, and fell asleep.

---

The weather was crisp and cool, autumn in full swing. Jim decided to go for a walk around the compound, taking in the piles of brown leaves, the gentle breeze. The rest of the ward were sitting bundled up and chatting. The beagle stretched out on the short dead grass, sleeves and pants rolled up, attempting to tan himself.

Jim stopped when he came across Hennah, sitting in her usual corner. Yuki wasn't there, which felt wrong; the two had practically been glued to the hip. Hennah glared up at Jim; he could see the bags under her bloodshot eyes. She nursed a cigarette between two fingers.

"Whatta want, Starling?"

Jim realized he'd been staring. He wanted to tell her to stop bawling so loudly when people were trying to sleep, but he just... didn't feel like it. "I didn't know you smoked," he said, hands tucked in his coat pockets. "You look and sound like a smoker, though."

"I didn't smoke 'cause Yuki didn't like it," Hennah grumbled. The mention of Yuki, however, and her brows twitched. She tried to keep a strong face, but her eyes misted over. "Go away, Starling, I ain't in the mood."

While Hennah was blunt and straightforward about how she ended up in the hospital, what she'd done, her own problems, there was still a lot about her that remained a mystery. It became clear over time that Hennah was either apathetic or aggressive towards others, even her own therapist. But with Yuki she felt comfortable and chatty, always smiling. Yuki was just a big beam of sunshine, and with Hennah's well known trust issues and fear of abandon--

"Sun's nice in this spot, so I'm sitting here," Jim grunted, plopping down a few feet away from Hennah. The blonde duck hissed, but didn't say anything. She wasn't nearly as hostile with Yuki gone; nobody to protect, nobody to show off to, nobody to appear as strong and independent. "If you don't like it, you can fuck off," Jim added.

Hennah still didn't say anything, didn't try to sock him in the face again. She took another drag of her cigarette, exhaling smoke and steam. Jim rested his head against the fence, the warm sunshine lulling him back to sleep.

"Hey."

Jim opened his eyes. Hennah took out the spare cigarette tucked in her hair, held it to Jim. "You need to get a light from one of the orderly's, but... take it. I don't want it."

Jim fidgeted. "I don't smoke. Bad for my body. I gotta keep in shape." He expected Hennah to mock him; why would some old man who wasn't even in showbiz anymore want to keep in shape? But she didn't, just as she didn't take any of the previous openings Jim left her.

Hennah shrugged and slid the cigarette back into her ponytail.
They didn't talk, but they didn't fight, sitting side by side, four feet apart. Jim bathing in the sunshine, Hennah smoking her cigarette.

Jim could bet she, too, was relaxed and yet feeling completely and totally alone.

---

Three more days. Jim woke earlier than usual, took a shower. He wiped the steam from the mirror, mumbling to himself. When he looked up, his eyes widened and he dropped his towel.

Jim leaned up to the mirror, carefully touching the little black feathers around his right eye. An orderly came in to deliver Jim news, shrieking when the duck promptly fainted afterward.

---

Striginia was always telling stories about the Starling family to Jim.

Jim's maternal grandfather, who died shortly before he was born, was a swan. It would explain why his mother looked a little different compared to grandma, who was 100% mallard. Shelley was taller than her husband, her legs a darker shade of orange; her beak was just a tad longer and sharper, and there were black feathers masking her eyes, really making the icy blue pop.

Give or take some wrinkles and a cane, Shelley Starling looked almost identical to the woman she was years ago. That serious, enigmatic frown, those half lidded eyes, that impeccable posture, her straight chin length hair always neatly combed. Some things never changed.

"Jim," Shelley said, hands folded over the diamond orb on her cane.

"Shelley," Jim replied from across the table, mirroring her expression almost perfectly.

"It has been a very long time. You contacted me, asking if I could see you. What is it that you wanted from me?"

"I put in that request the second day I was admitted," Jim said a little bitterly, "and I was still high on my morphine."

"I am here now, am I not? You know I keep a very busy schedule."

"Retirement never did suit you."

"What do you want, Jim? I have a meeting in an hour."

Jim shrugged. "I told you, I was loopy when I sent the request," he snorted. He knew Shelley wasn't impressed with his poor posture and crude talking, even if she didn't show it. "So, seems like you kinda wasted your time, huh?"

Shelley stood from the table. "It seems I have."

"Wait," Jim said suddenly, raising a hand. He winced; fucking stupid idiot. Shelley turned back to him, but didn't sit down. "... Since you're here, we might as well, I dunno... Do that thing parents do with their kids... Ah..." He couldn't think of the word, scratching his head.

"Bond?" Shelley helped.

"Mm, that's way too strong a word."
"We have never been an open, intimate family, Jim," Shelley stated, "you know that. You were comfortable never speaking to me again, and I was comfortable with your decision. Especially after all of this."

Jim's grin twitched. "Y'know, you're lookin' a lot more swan-like now," he said. He pointed at his own black feathers. "In case you haven't noticed. Great timing, by the way."

"The features become more apparent and develop predominantly with age," Shelley explained. "However, as your genetics are only 25% swan, the most that will change will be the plumage around your eyes. Do not expect anything else." She turned on her cane, a fierce tap resonating off the ground. "However, given your current interest in family genes, your questions will eventually pertain to why your father and I had you, and why we were mostly absent from your childhood."

Jim gagged. "God, please. Even I'm not that pathetic."

"Your... surroundings, as they are, have a tendency to heighten your emotions," Shelley said. "You are encouraged to explore yourself and all the complexities therein. It is only natural your upbringing come into question. I will tell you the truth, and it may not be what you want to hear."

"Benefits, convenience, accident," Jim sighed, rolling his eyes, "am I getting any warmer?"

"Progeny," Shelley answered. "To continue the bloodline. Nothing more, nothing less."

Jim laughed. "Oh, yes! Eesh, but I must be a great big failure on that front."

Shelley narrowed her eyes. "Do you wish for me to demean and belittle you? Talk down to you like you are still a child? Perhaps then you might not feel so bad, might get away with your mistakes, as children so often do." She managed to frown even deeper than Jim thought physically possible. "You are an adult, Jim. You are responsible for your own actions. My opinions have no bearing on them. I have done my part, now you shall do yours--whatever path you choose to take. If you believe yourself to be a disappointment, that is all on you. I am not going to hold your hand and reprimand or coddle you. I never have, and I never will."

"Maybe if you actually had any part in my upbringing," Jim snarled, "instead of saddling me with two old biddies--"

"I could have done many things, but I did not, and I cannot. That is the past. You cannot change the past."

Jim's fingers curled into fists. "Isn't--isn't there anything you ever regret about being such an awful mom?" he snapped bluntly.

Shelley tilted her head. "No. Because I do not have the time nor energy to waste on regret and other frivolous nonsense. Had I told you I was sorry, would you forgive me? Considering the mallard you are now, would your pride allow that?" She stepped towards Jim. "Would you feel relief, would you feel loved, would the chip you've carried and built into your own tomb on your shoulder fall apart? Would all your bitterness and resentment simply melt away?" Shelley poked him hard in the leg with her cane. "Or would you use it to lord over me? Would you take my attempt to reconcile with you as me baring my throat in submission to sink your teeth into? Would you find great power in holding me under and watching me flounder?"

Jim's beak worked open and closed. "It--That..."

"It is very intoxicating indeed," Shelley interjected, "having power over others. But you cannot beat love and affection into someone. You make the choice: torment them with fear, or embrace them"
with love. Or do neither, and let them wallow in your shadow."

Jim blinked his eyes rapidly, shaking. "Something... just something," he swallowed, grinding his teeth.

"Give an inch, take a mile," Shelley sniffed, looking down her narrow beak at her fuming son. "In the end, you are in here not because of me or your late father, but by the choices you made yourself. I will say, however, I wish things would have turned out different for you. You are no longer a young duck, Jim. Your sun is slowly setting. Start looking before you take anymore blind leaps in the future, I suggest."

Jim said nothing, staring at the table.

"I take it we are finished?" Shelley asked. Jim didn't reply, so she continued, "I am not opposed to talking with you again in the future, but if you decide to shut me out once more, I will not fight it." She knocked on the door. "Goodbye, Jim. Take care of yourself."

Shelley was seen out by a nurse. A minute later, an orderly stepped inside to collect Jim. "You okay there, Mister Starling?" she asked.

Jim pushed himself back from the table. "She said my 'sun is setting,'" he grumbled.

The orderly wasn't sure how to respond.

Jim snarled. "That hag doesn't know shit." He shoved past the orderly. "Never did, never will."

---

"Tomorrow I bust outta this joint," Jim said, sitting on the grass against the chain link fence.

Hennah snorted. "Not unless you've won Mara over," she said.

Jim narrowed his eyes. "I told you, I'm an actor," he grunted, "and a damn good one. She's eaten up everything I've fed her."

Hennah shrugged. "Whatever you say."

"You can have my yarn ball."

Hennah raised her head, brows perked. "Wha?" she replied. "That ginormous eye sore?"

Jim grabbed the cigarette from her mouth, took a drag. "Yup," he said, puffing out three perfect rings of smoke.

Hennah eyed the older duck. "Thanks," she mumbled, snatching back her cigarette. "I guess."

---

That night, Mara had given Jim one last assignment: write down everything he learned during his stay at the hospital.

"I'm impressed with your response, to say the least," Mara said, tapping the paper in her lap with a pen. "Although I can see where you've chosen to gloss over and omit things. There's a little fibbing, too, but the court has cleared your release."

Jim hid his immense relief. "These things take time, don't they, doc?"
Mara nodded. "Of course. Your new therapist and psychiatrist will continue getting you the help you need," she replied. "Speaking of which, you've been doing well with the medicine we've prescribed you. I recommended you continue taking them with some adjustments to the dosage as needed. Your psychiatrist will see to helping you manage everything."

Jim had written just as much in his paper. The medication was great, it kept his headaches at bay, any serious migraines at a minimum, and definitely helped improve his more manic moods. The fatigue, however, he could live without, but he didn't want to deal with Mara and the doctors taking any sort of complaint as a reason he should stay or try different medication.

"Aside from my little tiffs with Hennah," Jim preened, "I've more than proven I'm no threat to myself or anyone else."

"You two do appear to be getting along lately." Mara smiled kindly. "Continued therapy will do wonders for you in the future." She looked over Jim's file. "Before we get into your future goals and continued treatment, I'd like to ask you a question, as well as give my overall assessment."

Jim fired a pair of fingers guns, clicked tongue to the roof of his mouth.

"The doctor monitoring you at Audubon Bay Hospital sent us copies of your examination, including a page on irregular brain activity suggesting you had something close to a night terror your first day there," Mara explained. Jim's finger guns tipped down. "I would like to know the content of that nightmare, please."

Jim licked his bill. "I... don't remember most of it."

"Jim."

Jim scowled. "A bunch of old faces from the past were pissin' me off and bothering me, that's all," he grumbled, angrily folding his arms. "They said a bunch of garbage and then I woke up."

"I know we already discussed your mother's visit during our last session, but was she among the people heckling you in your dream?"

Jim hesitated to answer. "Shelley Starling doesn't heckle. Teasing and taunting aren't emotions that were uploaded into her robot computer brain."

"I see."

"But yeah. Maybe she... might've been there."

"What did they say to you?"

"I told you, it was just a load of bullshit."

"I think you're avoiding the question, Jim."

Jim sat forward, bristling. "Stop throwing my name around so casual--" He stopped; breathe in, breathe out, sit back. "Sometimes a dream's just a dream. Yeah, yeah, yeah, 'but Jim, it could be a projection of your subconscious attempting to tackle more serious--'" Jim stuck out his tongue, blowing a raspberry. "It wasn't, all right? My brain had just short-circuited, as you recall. That's it."

Mara eyed her patient. "All right. Now allow me to give you my assessment. Is that all right?"

"Shoot." Too frustrated for finger guns this time.
"Jim," Mara said, "I think you suffer from a severe lack of personal identity."

Jim cocked a brow.

"Growing up, you were raised in extremes. Nana gave you free range to do whatever you wanted, while Striginia strictly oppressed and controlled your behavior. Your parents and caretakers never taught you proper and balanced discipline," Mara continued. "You sought attention from the two people who denied you it. Nana would approve and Striginia would disapprove of anything and everything you did. As children are malleable at such a young age, much of their personality is built through interactions. We learn how to evolve and understand our surroundings and the world better--that there is no simple black and white, good or bad."

Jim dragged his fingers down the armrest. "Are you implying I didn't have any friends to help... 'shape' me? I told you I had friends. I had plenty of friends who liked and supported me."

"You were raised much in isolation from your environment and your own lack of social skills. You were never that close to these friends, and you admitted to having caused a lot of trouble--for the attention, mostly. You were simultaneously the center of the universe and yet nowhere in the world."

"If I was some sorta awkward loser as a kid," Jim laughed, spreading his arms, "tell me how I became such a successful actor, loved by millions? I wasn't acting like I was charismatic and naturally talented. I just am."

"Your relationships in the past were all one-sided in how you handled them. You kept everyone at a distance, stuck to those you knew would keep things superficial. And if you felt they weren't giving you exactly what you wanted, and started seeing your flaws, you immediately sabotaged and cut them off. You demand only love and respect, as Nana Adler would tell you, but you cannot and will not let anyone see you for anything but perfect, as Striginia Darcy expected. You need to be in total control."

"And what's wrong with that? With only wanting to be my best self? With only wanting to surround myself with people who appreciate me?" Jim argued.

"Because if you're not in total control," Mara pressed, "you feel completely and utterly powerless and weak. Hostility and intimidation are the only methods which you see fit to keep things in your order. After all, your parents were--are--very powerful people who expected only the best from you. Striginia was the same. Nana was just proof you could get away with how you treated everyone so poorly, but her lack of focus and intervention also failed to provide you with attention you needed."

Jim jumped from his chair. "So you're basically saying you just see me as some possessive, egotistical jackass?" he snarled.

"Please sit down, Jim," Mara said, "and let me finish."

Jim was too close to his discharge date to test Mara and backfire everything. He reluctantly fell back in the chair, tense and glowing.

"I don't think you're a bad person, Jim. I think you just work and only see things in extremes. Darkwing Duck was a power trip fantasy. As you once told me, you could have your cake and eat it, too," Mara resumed. "But I don't think it's just power you seek. It's still that approval; to be loved for who you are. In order for that to happen, you feel you need to be the best, or nothing at all. You want to be loved unconditionally, while placing severe and unreasonable conditions on everyone else. After the show was canceled, your neurosis only got worse. There, you pushed people away; at your weakest point, your pride was badly wounded, so you went straight for aggression. You
became afraid of being irrelevant; once more, you'd be in your parents' and the world's shadows. When you had that second chance at a comeback, being denied the opportunity devastated you to a breaking point."

Jim scratched at his arms under his sleeves. "Are you done yet?" he grumbled.

"Almost. Please bear with me. It is, after all, our last session together," Mara pleaded. Jim nodded once. "Thank you, Jim, I think what you need is to find that balance--a way to both love yourself as well as discipline yourself. A way that keeps things from reaching critical mass, so to speak, and inevitably imploding, even by the smallest of triggers. To avoid another episode like the one at the movie studio."

"Just like a little balloon! Up, up, and away! But you know what happens to balloons, Jimmy!"

"It's okay to reach out and ask for help. It's okay to let go of the past. Your family and Darkwing Duck are not the be-all, end-all of your life. I hope you find peace and solace one day, Jim. I hope you find stability and middle ground. You can still be in the sun without it burning you up. You can find the support and love you need without needing to be in total control and flawless. You can be imperfect." Mara smiled again. "You can still be a hero."

Jim cleared his throat. Sniffed. "Really, all you had to say is 'you were at the very top only to suddenly be thrown violently to the ground and the fallout was too much for you to handle.' That I just 'put up a front' to cover my 'insecurities.'" No finger guns, but plenty of finger quotations.

"Oh, yes. That sudden sharp turn threw your worldview and way of living completely off balance. There are many contributing factors. As you know, nothing is ever quite that simple, is it?"

Jim groaned.

"Thank you for allowing me to speak candidly, Jim. I must admit, I'm only working with what you've told and shown me in just one month's time, and you've much more work ahead of you. At least you have started your journey, and that's very important."

"That's me, always getting back up," Jim mumbled, sinking his chin in his hands, "just like Darkwing Duck."

"Oh, that reminds me," Mara said. "You know what I've said about the Mallard-McQuacks visiting and offering you a place to stay. I suggest you keep your distance. For the sake of your health, getting close to them could get very dangerous."

Jim laughed. "Please. I've no intention of wasting my time with those id--with those two. I know better," he gloated. "I told you, I already have my own place, and Marrow is helping me with the lawsuit." He looked up at Mara, eyes dark and lidded, smug and confident. "I don't need them at all."

---

As Jim expected, the other patients didn't bother personally wishing him goodbye. What he did not expect was Hennah doing just that.

"Don't fuck up again, Starling," Hennah chided, "or else you'll be thrown back into this lousy dump."

Jim smirked. "I never make the same mistakes twice."

"I named it Francis," Hennah murmured.
"What's that?" Jim craned his head back.

"The yarn ball," Hennah groused, blushing, "I named it Francis. It sounds pompous and conceited, just like you."

Jim snorted, peering down his beak at her like a king would a peasant. "I'll allow it."

---

Jim finished all the necessary paperwork. They returned his jacket, sunglasses, wallet, and the umbrella Marrow had lent him. He lingered at the door for a moment; a bit cloudy, but fairly sunny outside. He patted down his pockets—pill bottles still there. Jim looked back at the hospital lobby, the receptionists chatting among themselves.

Jim slid on his sunglasses and stepped outside. The doors thundered when they slid shut behind him, surprising the mallard. He opened the umbrella, ducking beneath its comforting shade. Breathe in, breathe out. A few short steps before Jim settled into a comfortable stride to the curb.

Jim had told Drake and Launchpad he'd be discharged later that afternoon. That'd been a lie; he didn't want them to show up, try to give him a lift home. However, when he called Marrow to pick him up, she told him there'd been a work emergency and she'd be sending a cab instead.

Jim turned, peering up at the third floor of the hospital over top his sunglasses. His former ward. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he thought he heard the muffled sounds of a guitar being played from inside. However, Hennah suddenly appearing at one of the thick, frosted windows and flipping him off was indeed very real.

Jim flipped her back off.

Ten minutes later, a yellow taxi pulled up.

"Jim Starlin, right?" the driver asked.

"Starling."

"Yeah. You?"

Jim squinted. "Yes." He expected the driver to get out, open the door for him; check if he had any luggage to put in the trunk. Instead the driver jerked a thumb over his shoulder and started the meter.

Jim shut the umbrella; a glimpse of sunlight bounced off his glasses, sending a quick, sharp pain through his right eye. He climbed into the back seat, hands atop his umbrella like a cane.

"Your friend gave me your address," the driver grunted, "but, uhh... I didn't catch the last part. Was it 124 or 128?"

Jim blinked. "The... street?"

The driver wrinkled his nose. "Nah, man, your apartment number. Do you not remember your address or somethin'?" He shook his head, looking dubiously at the hospital. "Places like these—probably lobotomized ya, or electro-shock therapy'd your brain."

"My brain was not scrambled, thank you very much," Jim growled, squeezing the umbrella handle, "and if you're insinuating I came here because I'm 'crazy,' you're dead wrong. Do you even know who I am?"
"I didn't say anything, and you already told me you're Jim Starling. Just so you know, the meter is running."

Jim sighed. "Just... drop me off at the front of the apartment complex. I'll figure the rest out on my own."

---

Jim arrived at his new apartment twenty minutes later.

It was... small, and the neighborhood wasn't the safest, but it would make due. Marrow had brought over some of his things out of storage—important paperwork, his bed, plates and cutlery, most of his clothes in bags by the closet, TV, and radio. Other such essential necessities. She left him a couple food items on the counter, and shampoo, soap, toothpaste, and cheap new toothbrush by the bathroom sink.

"There's also a box of miscellaneous items I thought you'd want by your bed," Marrow had told him during their call. "If there's anything else you need, let me know, but I won't be able to pick them up until Friday."

Jim sat at the foot of his bed, rifling through the box. Books, DVDs, a journal he kept securely locked, various chargers, address rolodex, wrist watch, laptop--

Jim stopped, hand lingering above the last object in the box. He was honestly amused; he didn't think Marrow had a sense of humor, but it was fitting it'd be morbid. Jim took out the Darkwing Duck bobble-head. He smacked it, his own voice sneering back at him: "Let's get dangerous!"

"Dangerous, huh?" Jim said blankly. His therapist did advise him to avoid anything triggering and dangerous. His fingers tightened around the toy's neck, ready to crush it.

Old habits die hard.

Jim placed the Darkwing Duck bobble-head on top of his TV, and stared at it in silence for a while.

---

And so Jim's life begun again. Third time's a charm.

Jim called his parole officer once a day at the assigned time; welcomed him when he came for house visits on Saturdays. Attended appointments with his psychiatrist, and resumed therapy. Received a new primary care physician, hand delivering his records and setting up an appointment for a general exam. Took his pills diligently by a very strict schedule. Looked for jobs—simple but paid well enough, nothing related to acting at the moment. Started up the process of his little money matter with Scrooge McDuck. Ate healthy, drank lots of water, bought and tended to a potted plant, went to bed at 9PM and woke up at 6AM.

Avoided neighbors, even when they spoke to or greeted him. Spent free time sitting on his bed, staring at the ceiling or the TV, half the time switched off. Trashed nearly half his contacts in his rolodex. Kept count of the days since he last spoke to and saw Drake and Launchpad. Tried desperately to forget their phone numbers. Accidentally zoned out frequently, once while cooking eggs and setting off the fire alarm. Unknowingly started shutting down in therapy. Frequently had nightmares where he woke up screaming and throwing fists. Noticed just how quiet his apartment was most of the time. Cried a lot. Yelled at himself for crying a lot. Got into heated one-sided arguments about not going to the liquor store and saving money. Neglected his plant until it was withered up, brown, and mushy. Ended up calling one of his old "friends," only to not respond to her
three hellos before spending a minute listening to the dial tone. Missed an interview for a job in favor of falling asleep after eating ten cups of caramel flan in the bathtub while the shower ran.

And more recently, received weird and concerned looks from passersby as he sat on a swing in a nearby empty playground at 8:30 at night, drinking from a gallon jug of chocolate milk.

Jim took a shot of his milk. He exhaled, digging his feet into the sand, started swinging. Just barely, but enough to distract him as he watched the ground sway back and forth. Jim hummed along to the music in his head. Happy trails to you, da da da da.

"Hey, old man. You havin' an old man crisis?"

Jim looked across the playground. An orange and cream tabby boy, eleven or twelve, sat on top of the jungle gym, watching the duck curiously.

"I'm not old," Jim spat, "I'm... in my prime." He stopped swinging. "What are you doing out? It's past your curfew. Brush your teeth, go to bed, snuggle up to your doll, dream of cookies and..." He looked at his milk and sighed, ashamed.

"The authority and powers that be don't control me," the kid responded. He climbed down from the jungle gym gracefully. "Also, my mom's asleep and doesn't know I'm out." He walked over to Jim, so casual and unafraid.

"Didn't she teach you not to talk to strangers?"

"We get plenty of weirdos like you hanging around here. Also, you're like, a hundred years old. I could beat your ass with one hand behind my back."

Jim scowled. "Clearly, you don't know who you're talking to," he snapped. "Otherwise you would not challenge **Darkwing Duck**."

"Darkwing? Is that your name? What an edgelord."

"What does that even mean," Jim hissed.

"Man, you just crawled outta yer mummy's tomb, dude," the kid laughed. "Gotta say, though, never seen a bum drinking milk. There alcohol in it? Gimme a sip, I got like almost a whole dollar in my pocket I can give you."

Jim rolled his eyes. "It's not spiked," he said, taking a drink, "and you're either incredibly naive or incredibly stupid."

"Are you gonna fight me, gramps? Gonna try and kidnap me?" the kid taunted. "Come on. I'll give you a head start." Before Jim could say anything, the boy snickered and waved a hand playfully. "Nah, I'm just playin' with you. You said your name was Darkwing, right? I ain't seen your face anywhere."

"Funny," Jim blanched, "since my face used to be everywhere."

"You some sort of celebrity?"


The kid shrugged. "Okay, but if like, I got your autograph, how much would it sell for online?"
"Kid, can you just go home? Seriously, isn't your bedtime at 6?" Jim bolted upright, quickly checked his watch. "Dammit." His own curfew was in five minutes, and it'd take at least fifteen to walk home.

"I'm not tired," the kid replied. "Also, my name's Ben. So, you really are famous then?"

"I was under the impression everyone knew about Darkwing Duck. I mean, the other one."

"Yeah, I heard of 'im, but he's mostly St. Canard's guy. Here we got Gizmoduck."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Of course."

"And you can't be that Darkwing. How can you fight? Won't your bones turn to dust?"

"Show some respect, boy," Jim belched. "But no, I'm not that Darkwing Duck. I'm the original. I did a--did a show--you had to have heard about it, especially with the-- Anyway. My hero's name was Darkwing Duck. I fought crime, saved the day, got the hot girls, guns, and gadgets, once ate a bunch of live spiders for a scene where I'm forced to play the villain's game in order to save his hostage, the mayor's granddaughter."

Ben's eyes widened. "You ate live spiders? Really?"

"Oh, yes. But the scene went unaired. Animal rights' people were all up in arms about it."

"But they're spiders."

"I know, right? Who gives a shit about spiders."

"Spiders are dumb."

"Why do we even have spiders? Useless bottom feeders, all the other bugs hate them, say he's a delusional curmudgeon..." Jim trailed off, taking another long drink of his chocolate milk and spilling some on his coat.

Ben shrugged. "Actually, some spiders are pretty wicked lookin'. My friend's sister got bitten by a black widow and almost died. It was so cool," he said. "What kinda spiders did you eat? Were they tarantulas?"

Jim raised a finger, took a deep breath--released it with a spitting wiggle of his tongue. "Go home, kid."

"I wanna know what kind of spiders you ate!" Ben insisted. He sat down in front of Jim in the sand. "Also, did you rescue the lady? Was she hot? Did you guys bang?"

Jim shook his head, eyes squeezed shut. "One, one, one question at a time," he growled. "The spiders were daddy long-legs. There were at least a dozen of them. The director told me they'd show a shot of the spiders, then cut away, and I would be putting a bunch of fake spiders in my mouth. But I'm no coward; the scene needed to feel authentic, really make the audience worry about Darkwing. So I put my hand in the box, scooped some up-- You know what was really gross? Dan throwing up all over the table afterward."

"Who's Dan? The bad guy?"

"The actor. The bad guy's name was Megavolt."

"What'd he do?"
"A lot, but for this particular episode--" Jim paused. "You need the full story to better understand the scenario and plot. It was a three episode arch, after all."

"Is it awesome?"

"Incredibly awesome."

"Okay then, tell me!"

Jim was tempted to kick some sand in the kid's face and make a run for home. However, something about Ben, being so eager to listen, showing just a slight hint of intrigue in his eyes... Jim looked at his milk; his throat was suddenly very dry, tongue clicking against the roof of his mouth.

It couldn't... hurt. Right?

"It started as a normal, average day for Darkwing Duck," Jim started, "which meant he was fighting a gang of drug dealers in possession of experimental alien tech weaponry..."

Jim lost track of the time, retelling the episodes' plot to Ben. Even though both of them should have been at home in bed, neither cared. Jim's head felt light as he recalled certain scenes and poignant dialogue he wrote himself, riding an old high he long missed. The kid was fascinated, occasionally chiming in to ask questions. It reminded the duck of his talk with Drake and Launchpad--not right now at least, but later.

"... And that's how I fit my whole fist," Jim laughed, pulling his sleeve over his right hand, "down his throat."

"Cripes!" Ben gasped. "Is that even possible? Can you show me how?"

Jim narrowed his eyes then beckoned the kid over. "... Lemme see your hand," he ordered, "make a fist."

Ben ran up to Jim, holding out both hands curled up into tight fists. Jim looked and turned them over, humming thoughtfully. "Nn... Yes... Still small enough to fit. Probably could get into a guy's chest cavity, if he's big enough. You would still need to break his jaw first to ensure maximum--"

A motorbike pulled up to the park with a low snarl of its engine, shooting twin beams of light across the playground. "Aw, shit!" Ben gasped, covering his eyes. "It's the fuzz!" He took off in a sprint, almost tripping over a seesaw.

Jim immediately turned away from the lights, a pulse of pain hitting him in the temples. "Wha--huh? The Hell?" he sputtered.

A figure stepped in between the beams, casting an imposing shadow on the sand, hands on hips, cape fluttering--

"Wait. Is that..."

Jim flinched, recognizing the voice instantly. The lights dimmed, and Jim slowly looked back up. Darkwing Duck stepped forward, blinking, dumbfounded. "Jim?"

Jim dropped his milk jug. "... No?"
IIRC, Drake was meeting Jim for the first time in the episode, but hey, we all playin' fast and loose with canon here *super hard*.

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