Into the Brighter Night

by shoalsea

Summary

When an unknown enemy threatens Robin, Gotham's vigilantes come together to keep him safe.

Unfortunately, they're protecting the wrong Robin.

Or: Tim Drake plans his own rescue. Things get complicated.

Notes

Most of this fic is based on pre-boot canon, but I've pilfered a few aspects from New-52. Specifically, Duke Thomas has a minor role in later chapters and Damian's death and resurrection are mentioned but not discussed in detail. Later chapters include characters and events from the original 1998 Young Justice comic, but not the new 2019 run.

Villains mentioned in this chapter are original characters. The title is from the song "Dream State" by Son Lux.
Bruce

Bruce and Alfred are in Russia on business when it happens.

It’s 9:14am in Moscow when Gotham goes dark. All signals cut off abruptly, as if the city simply dropped off the face of the earth. For all Bruce knows, it has.

He gets an error message when he calls home. Oracle doesn’t pick up, doesn’t send him a warning or an explanation. There’s nothing.

They’re all there. Every single one of his kids is in Gotham right now.

By 9:41 Bruce is at Ostafyevo Airport, readying the jet for takeoff, and the news is reporting a shield of some kind encircling the city. No word yet on whether it’s technological in nature or mystical, but either way nothing’s getting in or out.

When the shield falls at 10:05 and communications come back online, he and Alfred are already in the air, heading east as fast as they can. Oracle calls moments later.

Not immediately. She waits before she contacts him. That’s how he knows the news is going to be bad. Very bad.

After the call, she sends him files. Audio recordings from the comms and video footage from the boys’ masks. She’s synced them up so that he can see everything unfold from all their perspectives at once. He sets the jet to autopilot, watches all the files at once, calls the Justice League, and then watches each file individually, one by one.

He’s about to replay all the videos at once when Alfred puts a hand on his shoulder and says, “It seems we have a visitor, sir.” He already has his own oxygen mask in place.

At an altitude of 40,000 feet, that can only mean one person.

“I came as soon as I heard,” Clark says once they’ve depressurized the cabin just long enough to get him inside. He motions toward the television screen, “Are these the files Oracle sent us? I haven’t had a chance to watch them yet.”

Bruce doesn’t answer. Just hits play again.

The screen is split into four different feeds. Dick and Damian at the top, Jason and Tim at the bottom. The time stamps in the corner are synced up.

Damian and Dick are wrapping up a mugging in an alleyway on the Eastside, Jason’s on the other side of the city, mid-brawl, and Tim’s tucked away in an air vent, staring down at a room full of thugs and humming quietly to himself.

Barbara opens up a shared comm line just after 2:00am and announces, “It’s that time again, folks,” in an overly chipper voice.

Dick’s securing the restraints on the last of the muggers and chimes in, perfectly in sync, when Barbara singsongs, “Roll call!”

The feed from Jason’s camera is a mess of motion and noise, but he still manages to make his snort of disdain audible over the din.
“That’s Red Hood accounted for,” Barbara chirps. “How’s your raid going?”

“Fan-fucking-tastic, O.”

“Red Robin?”

Tim’s voice comes out low and bored, “Present.”

It’s Barbara’s turn to snort. “Way to sound enthused, Red.”

“Stakeout,” he explains, voice just barely audible. Barbara rarely monitors the video feeds in real time unless there’s a pressing reason to do so. Most of the time she keeps a map showing the location of their trackers in the corner of her screen while she works on her own projects and monitors the audio on their comms.

“What, are you in the building with them?” Jason asks.

Them looks to be the ragtag remnants of Gotham’s latest mob war attempting to broker some kind of peace long enough to conspire against the city’s vigilantes. The meeting’s attendees are less interesting than the fact that Jason already knows exactly who Tim’s watching. The last time Bruce asked, Dick didn’t know what Tim was working on, and Red Robin’s a few days behind on making his reports.

“Vents,” Tim says.

“Ugh, what a waste of time. Look, ditch that and go to the wharfs. I need you to check something for me.”

“Why?”

“Cause my intel sucks and I’m bagging nothing but peons here. If a deal’s going down tonight, it must be happening somewhere else. I hit the Narrows, you take the wharfs.”

“Negative.”

“C’mon—”


“Do not call us that,” Tim says, at the same time Jason growls, “Fuck off, N.”

Bruce knows that Dick’s been cautiously optimistic about Tim and Jason working together. They’ve talked about it a few times in between discussions about Damian and his progress.

In theory, it sounds like a good idea. Both boys work independently more often than not, but their cases occasionally overlap even if the territory they’ve staked out in Gotham does not. Red Hood’s been stable now for more than a year, and Red Robin’s been getting more ambitious in his operations within the city. Most of the time, he calls Black Bat when he needs backup, but he and Red Hood have been cooperating more in recent months.

In practice, it means that Bruce doesn’t always know what the two of them are up to at any given time. Keeping track of Jason’s activities as the Red Hood had already been difficult enough. His knowledge of Bruce’s methods made it easy for him to cover his tracks. When Tim began working with him, Bruce expected things to get easier. He assumed that Tim would start offering intel on the Red Hood’s operations. Instead, Tim was always tight-lipped every time Bruce asked. Enough
so that he was beginning to think it was a problem until Dick intervened and explained that Tim’s reticence was likely the only reason Jason agreed to work with him. If Red Robin started making regular reports on his activities, their alliance would likely fall apart.

Oracle is the same way. Now that she and Hood have brokered some kind of agreement, she gives him the same support she gives every other member of the team—but she doesn’t report back to Bruce unless it’s absolutely necessary.

He still doesn’t like it, but this fragile peace they’ve managed to build is more than he hoped for before he was lost in the time stream. And the two of them seem to get along well enough. On the audio they’re still arguing, but there’s no malice in it.

Barbara sighs and raises her voice to say, “Robin?”

“Currently occupied,” Dick answers, and Bruce can hear the smile in his voice. “But I have a visual on him.”

Damian’s screen is centered on two young women huddled against a dirty alley wall, their arms wrapped around each other. The would-be victims of the muggers Dick and Damian just dispatched. On Dick’s screen, Damian’s a small figure on the other end of the alleyway. He’s standing ramrod straight, and his face is serious while he speaks. Bruce knows that if he’d been there, standing next to Dick, his oldest son would have leaned over to him and whispered, “Adorable,” with absolute glee.

“—old are you?” one of the girls asks.

“Irrelevant,” Damian says. His tone is matter-of-fact. A few months ago he would have answered impatiently, if at all. A year ago he would have taken the question as an insult and probably castigated the questioner for the presumption.

He’s more patient now. Of all the changes that took place in the year Bruce was gone, this transformation was the one that surprised him the most when he returned. Jason and Tim’s alliance is, as far as he can tell, built primarily on shared professional interest. But the warmth between Dick and Damian is something altogether different. A brotherly bond that seemed impossible back when Damian was new to the family and still clinging to his status as the blood son.

On the audio, Barbara says, “That’s everyone then. Assuming you’re good, Nightwing.”

“Always,” he says.

“Arm’s not bothering you?”

“Nah, I’m going easy on it. Letting Robin do most of the heavy lifting.”

Damian, in a sign of maturity far beyond what Bruce would have expected of him, continues his conversation with the two women without comment. Jason laughs and says, “You’re just getting lazy in your old age.”

“Har har, very funny,” Dick says. “O, you can let B know that the city hasn’t burned down in his absence, but that it’s still going to the dogs. The kids these days have no respect.”

“What makes you think he’s gonna call?” Barbara asks, but there’s a laugh in her voice.

“Because he always calls,” Tim whispers. “And he’ll be up by now. He has a meeting in less than an hour. Also, tell him not to step on Red Star’s toes if at all possible. We kind of owe him.”
“He’s not gonna be doing any of that stuff while he’s gone,” Dick says with conviction.

“He better not,” Barbara says.

On the plane, Clark looks at him. “Broken ribs,” Bruce tells him, before he can break out the X-ray vision. Hurt in the same fight that injured Dick’s arm. It’s the only reason he let Tim bully him into this particular trip. That, and because Tim insisted that Bruce had to go because Tim wasn’t welcome in Russia at the moment. For reasons he hadn’t gone into at the time.

Tim has a habit of doing that. Skirting around things with a vague promise to discuss it later.

Bruce is only just now realizing that it’s been nearly a year since he returned from his journey through time and so far “later” still hasn’t come.

Jason’s screen is a blur of motion now. He’s on his bike, speeding down the sidewalk instead of the street for some reason. Still complaining. “Seriously. Double-R. I promise what you’re doing now can’t be half as interesting as helping me track down these asshats.”

Tim sighs. “I’ll look into running them down tomorrow, all right?”

“Fine,” Jason grouses. “Go back to napping or whatever the fuck it is you do. Honestly, I don’t know why I even—”

This is, by rights, where Barbara should have started the files. The moment when the night turns. Bruce isn’t sure why she left in the preceding minutes. It’s possible she was just in a hurry. If he thought that she meant it as a kindness—showing him all of his boys together and, however briefly, well—he would have rebuked her. But if she did so deliberately, he suspects she has some other motive than kindness in mind. One that would have been difficult for him to trace on a good day. As it is now, his mind is speeding forward, analyzing all the information at his disposal, but his chest feels weighed down, constricted, his dread like a block of ice that won’t budge.

Damian’s screen shifts with whiplash speed, reacting to a sudden presence just outside of the alleyway, batarang in hand, ready to fight. No hesitation between registering the threat and responding to it. He places himself between the women and the hulk of metal hovering four feet above the street. Dick’s by his side in seconds. Says “Oracle,” in a tone more suited to Batman than to Nightwing.

Jason’s rant cuts off mid-sentence, and he slams on his breaks. Tim’s camera goes perfectly still for just a moment and then he’s retreating through the vents as quickly and quietly as he can. In the resulting silence, Barbara’s rapidfire typing is the loudest sound on the shared commline.

“What is that?” Clark says at the same time Damian bites out a terse, “Identify yourself.”

It looks more like a vehicle than a robot. A shining chrome pyramid, bigger than a motorcycle but smaller than a car, its edges and corners rounded. It floats in the air as if gravity has no hold on it. No whir of an engine, no displacement of air, nothing to show what’s keeping it stationary four feet above the ground.

“Greetings, Robin of Earth,” the pyramid says in a flat electronic voice.

“Who are you?” Damian demands.

“Who we are is irrelevant.”

Oracle’s voice is calm and controlled. “Red Hood is heading your way. Red Robin’s extracting
himself from his stakeout. Batgirl and Black Bat are suiting up now. Hood’s the closest. ETA
twelve minutes.”

“Ten,” Jason says, tearing around a corner. “The girls are gonna hate having their movie night
crashed. What’s got Big Bird all excited?”


“Too cowardly to share your name?” Damian spits out. He’s moving, slowly edging to the side.
Trying to draw the thing’s attention away from the alleyway and the two women within it. Damian
doesn’t look back to check on them. He knows that Dick is moving in tandem with him, taking his
place, motioning for the women to retreat, risking a glance to confirm that they have.

“We have been sent to retrieve you.”

“Retrieve?” Dick says, trying to get the thing’s attention. It doesn’t respond.

“I’ve got it,” Oracle says. “Real name unknown, referred to in the JLA files as the Tetrahedra.
Bounty hunters from, you guessed it, outer space. Legally entitled to operate in various sectors of
the galaxy. And known to do so illegally elsewhere when it suits them.”

Over the comm, Tim says, “Tetrahedra,” in his quiet oh shit voice at the exact same time Jason
says, “Are you guys being attacked by a geometry problem?”

“Everything I’m getting here screams Do Not Engage,” Barbara says.

“You have been accused of crimes by the honorable Bezneetan,” the pyramid says.

“Who?” Damian says.

“What did they just say?” Tim asks.

“You will be returned to the honorable Bezneetan,” the pyramid says, “so that he may enact what
justice he judges appropriate.”

Damian lets out one of his tiny tt noises, clearly unimpressed. “And what justice would that be?”

“You will be put on trial,” the pyramid says, “and when you are found guilty, our employer will rip
off your limbs one by one.”

“What the fuck,” Hood says into the comm line. Damian sneers. He and Dick make eye contact.
Not so much as a nod, but they’re wearing the same determined expression, though they likely
don’t know it.

Tim says, a little out of breath, “Who did they say?”

“Come with us peacefully,” the pyramid says, “and we will do your fellow citizens no harm. You
have ten seconds to comply.”

“Don’t engage,” Oracle says. “These things are packing some serious firepower. I think we need to
call in—”

Everything happens at once. The pyramid moves. Damian goes low, ducking beneath it, slapping
on an explosive charge that detonates seconds later. As far as Bruce can tell, the only effect of this
is that the Tetrahedra’s momentum changes. It doesn’t appear to turn, but the direction of its
movement reverses to follow Damian.
“We’ve lost communications,” Oracle says. Her voice is still calm but there’s an edge to it now.

“I can still hear you,” Jason says. He’s yelling over the roar of his bike now.

“We’ve been cut off. I can’t get through to anyone outside of the city,” Barbara says. “It’s like they just dropped a Faraday cage on top of Gotham. Nothing’s getting in or going out.”

Four panels in the pyramid open and long, spindly mechanical arms emerge. Damian has a batarang in one hand and his grappling hook in the other and he looks supremely annoyed when Dick catches his eye and grimaces at him. But he shoots the grappling hook and zips up to a nearby rooftop, away from the alleyway and the streets and potential bystanders. Dick jams an escrima stick into the aperture where the Tetrahedra’s claw-machine arms are coming from and hits stun. It has no effect and the pyramid pays him no mind as it rapidly floats up toward Damian. Dick takes a half second to check that the women in the alley are fine—as well as the thugs he tied up—and then takes off after them. By the time he reaches the rooftop Damian is dodging arms and jamming his sword into the base of one of the robot’s arms. There’s a screech of metal and then Damian dances out of the way, looking furious, with only the sword hilt and a short length of broken blade still in his hand.

“I’m working on getting around this communications blockade,” Oracle says. “And this is not the kind of thing that’s going to go unnoticed for long. B probably already knows. And the League as well. So the name of the game, right now, is keep away. Stop fighting and get away from those things. Red Robin, are you all right? Your tracker’s not moving anymore.”

Tim’s touched down on a rooftop and is looking out across the dark expanse of the city.

“Did they say Bezneetan?” Tim asks.

Barbara, frustration leaking into her voice, says, “Yes, something like that, but I’m not finding anyone by that name in our databases or the League’s.”

The video on Tim’s screen goes black.

In the airplane, Clark jerks a little, surprised, looking away from the screens where Damian and Dick are scrambling across a rooftop.

“I’ve heard of him,” Tim says. “Head of a mid-grade mercenary outfit that went under about four years ago. No word of them since. Also definitely from off-world.”

“No shit,” Jason says. “We already figured that much out.”

“What’s wrong with his camera?” Clark asks, staring at the fourth of the screen that’s now blank.

Bruce can’t find the words to explain. Alfred answers for him. “He turned it off.”

Tim’s voice is impatient. “Off-world means a ship. That’s likely the source of the shielding. O, can you get me access to the drones?”

“Priorities,” Dick says. He and Damian are retreating rapidly, using their knowledge of the city to stay one step ahead. They’re less than a minute away from one of Jason’s safehouses. The one where he keeps enough explosive materials to level a building.

“The girls and I can handle finding the ship,” Oracle says. “Stay on route. You’re closer.”

“The girls have the car. They’ll have a better chance of outrunning this thing. I only have my glider.
Leave the ship to me. Red Robin out.”

“Red—”

“Just leave him to it. I’ll be there soo—” Jason’s voice cuts off abruptly, but the noise coming from Dick and Damian’s comms is loud enough no one else on the comm line seems to notice when it happens.

Bruce leans forward, turns down the volume on Dick and Damian, knowing Clark will still be able to hear it anyway, and ramps up the volume on the audio they recovered from Jason’s helmet.

“Whatever you’re about to ask me, the answer’s no,” Jason growls. “If you can’t say it on the open channel, I don’t think I want to hear it.”

“Listen,” Tim says, “I need you to do something when you catch up to them.”

“I just fucking said—”

“Listen,” Tim says again, voice even but emphatic. “This is not a fight we can win outright. I’ve heard of these guys. They got into it with Lobo years ago.”

“So fucking what?”

“So they’re still around hunting down bounties. Which means they survived that fight. If we keep engaging with them, we won’t.”

Jason lets out a wordless growl of frustration. “If this is supposed to be a pep talk, it sucks ass. What’s the plan if it’s not fighting? Give the kid up and wave goodbye? B’ll fucking love that.”

“Giving them what they want is generally the only way to get rid of them, yes.”

“Jesus fuck. Are you saying we give them the brat?”

Jason sounds furious. Tim, when he answers, is still calm. “No. I’m working on another solution, but I need enough time to find that ship and get to it.”

“Then what—”

“Buy me that time. Just play keep away for as long as possible.”

There’s an audible explosion, and Jason starts swearing. “Thosefuckersjust used my C4.”

“It won’t be enough,” Tim says. “Focus.”

It’s not. Dick and Damian are already tentatively optimistic, but Barbara’s ordering the girls to go faster and she’s right to do it. The mangled, superheated metal heaped on the rooftop begins rapidly reconfiguring itself. By the time it’s reconstructed—still glowing red-hot—two more of its kind have floated down from the sky to join it.

Dick grabs Damian by his hood and hurls him over the edge of the roof, ignoring his squawk of indignation, and follows just behind him.

Jason’s still speeding toward them, exasperated. “I don’t see why you couldn’t tell me all this on the open line. That’s basically the plan already—”

“If you get caught,” Tim says, “don’t fight them. Just give them Robin.”
“No fucking way.” Jason’s voice is ice now.

“They don’t target civilians or bystanders. They get in, find their target, and get out. Minimal fuss, minimal damage. They’ve cut us off from the rest of the world because they know Earth’s full of metahumans, and metahumans mean a messy fight. They’ll only attack you if you’re actively hindering them. It’s one of the reasons they’re legally authorized to operate in some sectors of the galaxy. The second you stop getting in their way, you’ll stop being a target to them.”

“If they take the kid—”

“They will do exactly what they said. Take him, alive, to their employer. That gives us time to get him back. If you fight them, you will lose. And they won’t go out of their way to kill you, but they also have no reason to keep you alive if you get in the way. The bounty’s not on your head.”

“There’s no way N agrees to this.”

“I know. You’ll need to incapacitate him first and then make a run for it with Robin. Nightwing’s already injured, he shouldn’t be in this fight at all. Actually incapacitate them both. Robin won’t leave Nightwing willingly and won’t believe me if I tell him that N’s safe the second he’s no longer a threat.”

“But I’m supposed to believe you?”

“You know I wouldn’t put him in danger.”

“And how exactly am I supposed to drop them both? And avoid the murdery mathematical concept at the same time?”

“Figure something out. They trust you enough to expect you to help in an emergency. They won’t see this coming. Find your opening and take it.” There’s a long beat of silence. Then Tim’s voice, softer this time. Apologetic. “I know this is a big ask. I know. But I promise it will work. I just need time and I can take care of the ship. Get Robin, keep him away from those things long enough to get him to the girls, and everything will be fine.”

“This plan hinges pretty solidly on you,” Jason says after another beat of silence. “How exactly are you going to bring down that ship by yourself? Assuming it even exists, which we haven’t actually established. I mean—”

“Does it matter?” Tim snaps, patience abruptly gone. “I’ll take care of it. Just trust me this one time. I’ll owe you. I’ll never ask you for anything else ever again. Just—”

“Jeez, all right, I’m coming up on them now.”

“Okay,” Tim says, calm again. Relieved. “Okay. And remember, if you have to choose between fighting them or giving up Robin, just let him go.”

“I’m not—”

“If they try to leave the city with him, I’ll be in a position to intercept him. He won’t be leaving on that ship, I promise.”

“The ship we haven’t even found yet.”

“Nearly got that one figured out. Trust me. And get Robin away from them now. Red Robin out.”
“Oh, fuck you,” Jason says. Then, back on the open comms, “Cavalry’s here, boys.” And he’s roaring around the corner, gun already in hand.

He manages it. Stuns Dick with his own escrima stick, grapples Damian onto his bike—gets a knife to his leg in the process—and is roaring away while Dick’s still swearing into his comms and Barbara’s asking him what the hell he’s doing and Damian is shrieking in outrage and betrayal and only quiets when Jason says, “They’re after you, not him, dipshit.”

“They’re fine,” Barbara tells Dick. “Hood is getting them to the girls. I’m still working on this damned shield, but Red Robin reported a hit on the ship. A literal hit. One of the drones went down over midtown.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“Not sure. Red Robin stopped off at a safehouse after he deployed the drones. Hasn’t moved in a couple of minutes and isn’t taking my calls. I think he’s working out what do to about this ship.”

“Whatever it is, he better figure it out quick,” Dick says. He’s only just now managed to drag himself up off the street, his breathing still a little shaky from the stunning. “Keep calling him. I’m going after the others.”

“Bad idea,” Barbara says.

“Gonna talk me out of it?”

“Worse idea.” There’s a hitch in her breath, barely perceptible, as the other two screens abruptly blur into a tumble of motion and the audio feed is nothing but the crash and screech of metal hitting pavement. “The motorcycle just crashed.”

“Are they—”

“The girls are two minutes away.”

“—fucking go.” Jay’s voice, rough and a little slurred. On Damian’s screen, his helmet is half-shattered, pieces of red scattered on the ground beside him. His own camera’s already mostly obscured by blood, and it’s not looking at Damian. It’s looking at the things behind him.

“I will not. They came here for me. And that’s exactly what they’re going to get.”

“For fuck’s sake, kid—”

“We’re almost there,” Stephanie breaks in. “Hang tight, guys. The actual cavalry is now officially—”


“What?” Stephanie says.

“The fucking ship. And these things have just...stopped.”

Jay’s camera is fully obscured now, but Damian’s swings upward, toward the night sky. There are lights there, just above midtown. Three bright white lines hovering just below the Gotham smog.

Then his view cuts back down to the pyramids. They hover motionless for another moment. Then
“They’re leaving!”

“Did we scare them off?” Stephanie asks. Jason starts laughing. It sounds painful.

“Highly unlikely,” Damian says. “It seems Red Robin has proven himself useful for once. That, or the Justice League has intervened and driven them away.”

“That almost sounded like a compliment,” Stephanie says. Predictably, she gets only a small "h" in response.

“Everybody okay?” Dick asks.

“Yeah, yeah, just peachy.”

“Ignore Red Hood,” Damian says. “He’s severely injured himself due to his abysmal driving skills.”

“First off, fuck you, that thing hit us. Secondly, you *ride* a motorcycle, you don’t drive it. And thirdly—”

“Come on, cowboy,” Stephanie says. “No more riding tonight.”

“I’m good,” Jason says.

“What, are you going to walk home? Like that? Sorry, dude, but your bike’s done for. You’re coming with us.”

“Agreed,” Cass says.

“I’m fine—”

“I’m heading over there now.” Dick’s up on a rooftop, ready to jump.

“Wait,” Barbara says.

“What?”

“Just wait a minute. I can’t—” There’s a pause. Then, “Communications are back online. And the ship’s leaving.”

“Cowards,” Damian says.

“The fuck did you do to piss off that Beelzebub guy anyway?” Jason asks.

“I did nothing. I’ve never heard of this Bezneetan before. Perhaps he’s an enemy of my grandfather’s. Or—”

“Whatever, like I even care. Hey, Red, how’d you scare that thing off?” The rest of the comm line goes quiet, clearly expecting an answer. “Red Robin, hellooooo. I’m talking to you. I followed your fucking plan, the least you can do is answer me.”

“What plan?” Damian asks, sounding suddenly furious. “You and Red Robin were conspiring behind our backs?”

“Yeah, to save you and N from your own stupidity.”
“And yet you are the one now lying injured on the side of the street like a—”

Dick’s voice cuts through the comm. His Batman voice. “Red Robin, respond.”

“What’s wrong?” Stephanie asks. “Why isn’t he answering?”

Barbara answers. “We haven’t been able to get him on the comms in over ten minutes. His tracker has him at the safehouse on Mortimer Avenue.”

“Heading there now,” Dick says. “Red Robin, if you can hear us, respond.”

“Maybe whatever he did to the ship knocked out his comms?” Stephanie suggests. There’s hope in her voice, but it’s being beaten out by dread.

“On my way,” Cassandra says. When Damian’s camera whips around to look for her, she’s already gone.

“I’m on route. Stay with the others,” Dick says.

“You’re hurt,” Cassandra answers. “If there’s a threat, you’ll need me.”

Dick doesn’t argue with that. He’s not far from the safehouse, but Cassandra still beats him to it. He finds her sitting on the floor in the space between the ratty couch and the coffee table, her legs pulled up to her chest.

“Where is he?” he asks.

On the comms, Stephanie says, “Black Bat, did you find him? Is he there?”

On the camera, Cassandra doesn’t move.

“He’s not here,” Dick says.

“Oh fuck. *Oh fuck.*”

“Batgirl, calm down,” Barbara says. “We don’t know—”

“Four years,” Stephanie says. “He said this Bezneetan guy hasn’t been heard from in *four years.*”

“And that has you indulging in hysterics?” Damian says, voice filled with contempt.

“Shit,” Jason says, realization coloring his voice.

“What?” Damian’s voice is going childishly high now. A clear sign that he’s frustrated and anxious and struggling to cover it.

“You weren’t Robin four years ago,” Stephanie says. “He was.”

Dick’s joined Cassandra on the floor beside the coffee table. She’s still not moving but his focus isn’t on her anymore. It’s on the bundle sitting on the table.

It’s the Red Robin uniform, neatly folded. And on top of it is a note.

**Sorry. I have a plan. Please trust me. Do not follow.**
By the time Bruce and Alfred make it back to the cave, Jason and the others have already gone over all of the evidence half a dozen times.

The footage from the others’ masks and from his helmet. The uniform and the note. And two more videos Barbara managed to dig up.

The first is just a few seconds of Tim crossing a rooftop. According to his Red Robin tracker, he should have been at the safehouse on Mortimer at the time, but they know now that he’d already ditched that uniform by then. Jason recognizes the area, but the camera’s at a strange angle that shows the rooftop as a diagonal slope when he knows that it’s flat and level. Must have been knocked over some time in the past few days. That’s probably the only reason it managed to catch sight of Tim. He somehow avoided every other hackable camera in the city. Jason doesn’t doubt there are some piddly CCTV tapes out there with footage of him from a storefront or a home security system, but without an online connection, those are out of Oracle’s reach.

In the video, Tim lands on the rooftop just as he’s coming into frame, skids a little bit—probably his boots sliding on gravel or broken glass—and then he’s off again, racing across the length of the roof in seconds, leaping off the building and out of frame. Moving like he’s got hell on his heels. Like his life depends on it.

It’s dark and the camera quality is shit, but even so, when Barbara pauses the video—catching Tim just before he disappears—they can clearly see the R on his chest.

It’s his old Robin costume. Red, yellow and green. Close, if not identical, to what he’d have been wearing four years ago.

The second video contains shitty cell phone footage uploaded by some college kids on Twitter. They’d been up at 2am, noticed when communications blacked out and immediately went to the roof of their building to see if any part of the city was on fire or otherwise threatened by imminent destruction. True Gothamites.

The video starts just as a red flare arcs up from one of the highest skyscrapers in that part of town. The kids follow the light across the sky for a moment—idiots—before thinking to zoom in on the building where it came from.

It’s too dark to see anything for a few seconds. Then the white lights from the Tetrahedra’s ship appear in the sky above. They’re bright enough to reveal a small figure hanging onto the side of the building’s spire, his cape buffeted by the wind. Then the kids zoom out again, trying to capture a view of the massive ship hanging above the city, but the lights are too bright and the camera’s autofocus keeps fucking up the image.

When they finally manage to get the lighting right, the camera focuses not on the ship itself, but on a dozen pyramids now descending from the sky and heading straight for the tiny figure on the roof.

It happens quickly. By the time the camera zooms in again, still failing to focus, the blurry figure on the skyscraper is already gone and the pyramids are flying upward and disappearing back into the ship.
Damian was what Jay’s mom would have called spittin’ mad after they watched the first video and outright furious when they watched the second. “He didn’t even try to fight!”

What followed was one of the worst meltdowns the brat’s had in months. Lots of yelling in English and swearing in Arabic. A few destroyed practice targets. Tons of noise.

Still nothing, apparently, compared to some of the tantrums he’s thrown in the past, at least according to the stories Jason’s heard about Damian’s early months at the manor. But the brat’s been a bit more even-keeled lately and Dick’s apparently out of practice at calming him down. He manages it, eventually, but not until after all the racket’s scared off most of the cave’s bats and ratcheted up Jason’s headache from ‘pretty fucking bad’ to ‘damn near debilitating.’

He’s been sitting on a medical gurney in a corner of the cave ever since Stephanie stitched up his leg. She’s nearly as furious as Damian, but on her it looks a hell of a lot more like fear than anger. And while Damian’s ire is laser-focused on Tim right now, hers is directed at everyone and everything.

Cass must be in the cave somewhere too—he’d have noticed if she took the elevator up to the manor or left through the cave entrance again—but she hasn’t made an appearance since she and Nightwing got back.

Dick’s fraying around the edges now, though he’s hiding it pretty well. He’s gotten Damian to quiet down, isn’t taking the bait when Stephanie snaps at him, and hasn’t given Jason any shit for zapping him earlier and taking off with the brat. But Jason’s known him long enough to be able to tell that he’s freaking out. It’s in the way he keeps moving around, checking up on everyone else, never stopping or slowing down for too long.

Once Damian’s finally calmed down—and even cleaning up the mess he’s made instead of leaving it for Alfred—Dick handles Stephanie. They talk quietly for a moment, then she nods and pulls out her phone to make a call. When Jason catches her eye and draws a quick question mark in the air, she signs back D.P.

Day Patrol. One of her nicknames for the Signal, since that's all he's allowed to do so far. Duke’s only got a few months of training under his belt and seems to spend most of his free time trying to keep his newfound career a secret—apparently his cousin still hasn't caught on to the fact that he's got a metahuman vigilante living under his roof—so he’s not supposed to take part in bigger, more complicated operations. Though that hasn't stopped him from showing up whenever he thinks someone needs him.

He always greets everyone else on the team—from Damian all the way up to Bruce—as simply, "the night shift," which Jason thinks is exactly the kind of irreverent attitude they all deserve.

Having Stephanie call him is a smart move. It keeps her occupied and lets her vent, and it saves Barbara from having to catch him up on the mess he probably slept through.

Dick’s good at that kind of thing. Dealing with all of them.

The only person he doesn’t come anywhere near is Jason. Probably too afraid of pissing him off.

Jason would be just as furious as Damian if he wasn’t already too preoccupied with pain and nausea. His head’s killing him, one of his arms is bruised to the bone, and the stab wound in his leg is gonna slow him down for weeks. But there’s no fucking way he’s taking any pain meds until he sees Bruce and finds out what the plan is. How they’re going to get the kid back.
They’re all just about ready to explode when Bruce and Alfred finally pull into the cave.

They’re not alone. They’ve brought Superman with them.

Objectively, that’s a good thing. Superman means the Justice League is already involved. But there’s something about them that feels off. Jason’s seen a lot of weird shit in this cave, including Superman more than once, so he can’t quite figure out why the sight of them feels wrong.

Alfred immediately comes over to check Jason’s condition and starts his subdued, British form of fussing—because of course he does—but Bruce looks like he doesn’t even see anyone else in the cave. He goes straight for the table. Oracle’s been keeping him up to date, so he’ll have seen it all already, but he still stops. Touches the uniform for a moment. Picks up the note.

That fucking note. Jason could tear it to shreds. Of all the cryptic, useless things to say.

It’s so stupidly Tim it almost hurts. The first two lines are written out neatly in block lettering. The kind of writing Tim uses when he’s labeling something or when he’s making notes that he’s going to share with other people. Jason’s seen it a thousand times on the case files he and Tim have been passing back and forth these last few months. Sorry. I have a plan.

The second half is nearly illegible. Scribbled down hurriedly, almost like an afterthought, in the chickenscratch Tim usually only uses when he’s writing for himself. Please trust me. Do not follow.

Like hell they won’t.

Bruce is still looking at the note and the uniform, frowning at them like they’re freakin’ puzzle pieces, and Jason’s just about ready to say something he knows he’ll regret the second it’s out of his mouth. He’s leaning toward, What? Already planning his memorial case?

Then Superman comes to stand next to Bruce and it finally hits him.

It’s Bruce standing next to Superman. He’s still in his civilian clothes.

Jason doesn’t like that. He knows it’s probably because Alfred wouldn’t let him change into the suit with his ribs still battered up. Knows that Bruce is still hurt enough that putting on the suit is a very bad idea, because once it’s on, it probably isn’t coming off again. Not until they find Tim. But he doesn’t like it. Seeing Bruce as he is. Looking like a guy who just lost his kid and not like the detective who’s going to find him.

“What’s the plan?” Dick asks, and just this once, Jason’s happy to hear his voice. Glad someone’s breaking the silence and getting things moving.

But Bruce doesn’t answer. Clark’s the one who speaks. “The Justice League is already mobilized. And we’re in contact with the Lantern Corps.”

“And?” Dick prompts.

“Dick,” Clark says, “if I knew where they were, I’d already be on my way. But without a direction —”

“The Watchtower failed to track their ship,” Bruce says. Jason expects him to sound angry or judgmental, but his voice is just flat. Empty.

“Every satellite and surveillance system on the planet failed to track their ship,” Clark says.
“Apparently the tech in their corner of the galaxy is more advanced than we realized.”

Stephanie’s standing by Bruce, bouncing on her toes a little, clearly anxious, but it’s Clark that she addresses. “You said ‘where they are.’ What do you mean by that?”

Damian scoffs. “Clearly he means Red Robin and the people who took him.”

Clark sighs. “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

“Sorry,” Barbara says, her voice coming through the cave’s speaker system. “I need to catch you up on a couple of things.”

Dick perks up like a golden retriever hearing the word walk. “You have something?”

“Not exactly. We haven’t figured out how to track Red Robin or the Tetrahedra, but we do have a trail of sorts to follow. And we can thank the League for cluing us in. Less than 20 minutes after the Tetrahedra’s ship disappeared from Gotham, the Watchtower detected the signal of something else leaving the atmosphere. A different ship in stealth mode.”

“One of theirs?” Dick asks.

“We don’t think so. Ten minutes after the shielding around Gotham went down, Helena Sandsmark received a voicemail from her daughter.”

“Sandsmark?” The name sounds familiar, but Jason can’t quite place it.

“Wonder Girl,” Steph says.

A picture appears on the big screen of the cave’s main computer: a grinning blonde that Jason recognizes from news coverage about the Titans. Last he heard, she was leading the team more often than not.

The audio begins: “Hi, Mom.” She sounds out of breath and there’s a roaring sound in the background. Like she’s standing in the middle of a windstorm. Or flying at high speed. “So, you’re gonna totally hate me for this, but, um, I’m not gonna be able to make it to brunch tomorrow. I know I promised and I’m really sorry, but I’ve gotta—something came up and—I know I also promised no more off-world stuff without warning you ahead of time, so, um, this is me warning you. I’ve got to go right now, I think it’s gonna be a few days at least, but maybe more, and I really, really have to do this. I promise, Mom, it’s really important. Don’t worry, I’ll be with the guys, we’ve got a plan, everything’s gonna be fine. So don’t freak out. And don’t call the Tower, okay? It’s not exactly a Titans thing. It’s not a League thing either, so please don’t bug Diana about this. If you could just not mention this to anybody, that’d be great. Again, so sorry. Love you, bye!”

“Dr. Sandsmark sent it to Diana immediately,” Barbara says. “And the Titans received a similar, albeit more cryptic call. Cassie formally handed over leadership of the team to Beast Boy and Cyborg, citing ‘some personal business’ that she needed to take care of. At the time, none of the other Titans were aware that Red Robin had just gone missing.”

“She mentioned ‘the guys,’” Jason prompts.

“According to Diana, that always means the same thing.”

The picture on the screen changes to four kids in civilian clothes: the girl, Cassie, is in the bottom corner of the photo, grinning widely, with one arm stretched forward to take a selfie and the other casually thrown over Tim’s shoulders. He’s grinning at the camera in a way Jason doesn’t
recognize. Bigger and more open than the small smiles and smirks he associates with Red Robin. Behind the two of them is a tall broad-shouldered boy sticking his tongue out at the camera. Even in casual clothes, he’s the spitting image of Superman. The last kid is the smallest but somehow manages to take up the most space in the frame. He’s got one hand resting on Superboy’s shoulder and the other forearm balanced on top of Tim’s head. His feet must be dangling behind them or braced on someone’s back. Big golden eyes and a toothy grin.

Barbara continues, “Red Robin, Superboy, and Impulse.”

“Don’t you mean Kid Flash?” Stephanie asks.

Dick shakes his head. “Wally mentioned that he switched back to his old name a little while ago. He’s not really sure why though.”

“Well, it’s appropriate for this mission,” Barbara says. “Based on our current estimated timeline, Red Robin likely encountered Bezneetan during his Young Justice days.”

“Tim’s team before the Titans,” Steph says before Jason can ask.

“We think he got a message out to them before he was taken,” Barbara says. “Or, more likely, he set up a message to send out as soon as the communication blackout lifted.”

“Can you access the message?” Dick asks.

“No, whatever it was erased itself after they read it. Full Mission Impossible-style. Cassie’s voicemails are the best we’ve got. The Flash did find a handwritten note in his mailbox from Impulse, but all it said was that he’d be ‘out of town on business’ and would be back soon. There’s been no word from Superboy, but he hasn’t contacted anyone since before the blackout and his phone is currently out of service range.”

As far as Jason can tell, literally none of this makes sense. “So you’re telling me these three kids just dropped everything and took off to space? In hot pursuit of a ship that we can’t track? How the fuck would they even—”

Superman actually winces when he cusses, but Steph’s the one who answers. “They have a spaceship.”

“None of the Titans’ vehicles are missing,” Superman says. “They already checked.”

Steph shakes her head. “It’s not a Titans ship. I think it belongs to Impulse?”

Dick’s eyebrows shoot up. “Someone gave a spaceship to Impulse? Wally definitely would not have approved that.”

Steph shrugs. “I don’t know where they got it, but they had it when we invaded Zandia.”

“I’m sorry,” Dick says, “but did you just say you invaded a foreign country made up entirely of supervillains?”

Stephanie puts her hands up in front of her and says, “Look, I don’t really know the full story on that one. It had something to do with the new girl. Empress, I think? And I was just helping out, okay?”

Clark cuts in, “Even if they had a ship, we have no idea how they’re tracking Red Robin. They could be heading in the completely wrong direction or—”
“No,” Bruce says. “They know where they’re going.”

“How?” Dick asks.

Bruce touches the keyboard. The audio rewinds, then Wonder Girl’s voice is saying, “Don’t worry, I’ll be with the guys, we’ve got a plan.” And Bruce is still holding the note.

“Tim,” Cass says. She comes slinking out of the shadows to stand next to Bruce. Puts a hand on his arm. He’s got his back to them all and is still looking at the picture on the screen. Tim, and the three kids he called to save him.

“He’s got a plan,” Dick says.

Stephanie frowns. “And we’re not part of it.”

Jason pushes himself off the gurney and heads for the locker room, grimly ignoring his own limp and the alarmed and angry looks Stephanie and Damian are shooting at him. It’s clear that there’s no plan, not really, not yet, and even if there is, he already knows he’s not going to be invited onto this rescue mission. Not with his head and leg fucked up. Not with his shitty track record.

He’s still gonna stay. He’s already decided that much. He hates the idea of it, but the second he leaves the cave, he’ll be out of the loop.

He’s been back in the cave a few times in the last year. Usually just dropping off evidence or whichever injured Bat begged a ride off him after a bad fight. Never staying long if Bruce was around, but Tim’s always been good about letting Jason know when the coast is clear. He’s also broken in a few times to use the computer and has stolen enough equipment that Alfred’s started leaving him passive-aggressive notes about “manners” and invitations to come upstairs for tea.

Alfred still treats him exactly the same as he did before—before everything went wrong. Meanwhile Jason can’t have a single conversation one-on-one with Bruce or Dick without it turning into a screaming match.

It’s okay, sometimes, if the others are around to serve as a buffer. If they only talk about business and nothing personal. Leave the past behind them, just for the space of a mission. But mostly he’s avoided them and stuck with just Red Robin whenever possible.

He knows the others think it’s strange. Suspicious.

When he first returned to Gotham, he’d hated Tim. Hated him in a way you could only hate someone you didn’t know. The way he felt about Bruce and Dick was mixed up and messy. He loathed them. He loved them. He couldn’t stand to be around them.

In comparison, hating Tim had been easy. Clean and uncomplicated.

Then Bruce “died.” And after the battle for the cowl, Tim disappeared. Just dropped off the map completely.

That left Jason feeling itchy between the shoulderblades for months. He kept waiting for the kid to pop back up. To seek revenge for being stabbed and left for dead. It’s what Jason would have done.

The few times he ran into Dick-as-Batman had been awkward and painful. They’d fought each other more than once, but never the way they had before. Like their hearts weren’t in it.

When Bruce had been around, Jason had been trying to get their attention. With Bruce dead, he
changed strategies. He knew how the Bats operated—how they think, what they look for, who they prioritize—which meant he knew how to stay off their radar. With Tim gone and Dick trying to take care of the brat as well as the whole rest of the goddamn city, it really hadn’t been that hard.

He kept things quiet. Embedded himself more firmly in the city’s criminal underworld. Killed off his targets when they were out of town or while the Bats were distracted by some other crisis.

He wasn’t hiding from them. He was *plotting*. Cleaning up the city his way. The smart way. Not nearly as satisfying as the dramatic confrontations he’d set up in the past, but it was *working*. He was making a difference.

And maybe part of that newfound restraint could be blamed on Bruce’s apparent death. Without him around as a target, Jason found it harder and harder to summon the same white-hot rage that had been driving him forward for years. There were days when he couldn’t do it at all. Had to hole up in his apartment with books and booze and wait for the doldrums to pass.

At some point, when he was having more and more of those bad days, and fewer and fewer days where he was out in the city working, he realized that he needed to make a decision. Needed to decide if his crusade had ever actually been about fixing the city. Or if it had always, always been about Bruce. About all the ways his would-be father had failed him.

If it was all about Bruce, all about getting back at the Batman, then how was Jason any different from the other Bat-obsessed whackjobs roaming the city, unable to leave, always coming back home again?

That had been a bad night. A night of sitting and thinking instead of moving, planning, attacking. Eventually he’d had a drink, and then another, and by the time dawn broke he was well and truly plastered and willing to admit that he’d been chasing revenge and not much else ever since he’d come back.

*If you would revenge yourself, dig two graves.* One of those old cliches with no real provenance. The kind of thing they discussed in English class while reading *Hamlet*. Back when Jason was alive and in school and still got into arguments with people about books and literature and the meaning of things.

He’d been more than ready to put them both in the ground if he had to. But in the end, Bruce had died. And Jason had lived. And he’d had to decide just what he was going to do after that.

He did believe in the crusade. God help him, but he did. He sat on the roof of his safehouse, watching the sun rise over the slums of Gotham with the worst hangover of his life just a few short hours away, and he knew that he wasn’t going anywhere. This city was his. Gotham would be his gravesite someday, but until then he was damned well going to clean it up. Kill the people who needed killing. Make it a better, safer place.

Still Bruce’s impossible crusade at its core, even if his methods were far more pragmatic than the Batman’s had ever been.

But then Red Robin came back to town. Set up shop in Crime Alley. Hit the streets with renewed vigor.

Jason made a mistake then. He thought the kid would need time to reestablish himself. Figured he could lay low for a little while and see how Red Robin handled himself now that he was, for the most part, a solo act. Then he’d figure out his next moves from there.
The damn kid tracked him down in less than a week. Showed up at one of Jason’s most secure safehouses—which he’s pretty sure the punk did on purpose—and told him that Bruce was alive.

It was the same dumb move the kid had made before. Coming to Jason, alone. Just like when he let Jason out of Blackgate. Just like when he told Jason about Bruce’s will.

Insane, doing the same damn thing over and over and expecting a different outcome.

But this time something was different. Tim didn’t ask him to rejoin the fold. Didn’t even mention Jason’s work as the Red Hood, although the fact that he tracked him down at all meant that he had already gathered a hell of a lot of intel on the Red Hood’s criminal enterprises. Just came to tell him that Bruce was alive.

It should have pissed him off. The news itself, the messenger, all of it.

But he just couldn’t find that fire he had before. The screaming rage that burned him up and pushed him to power through every godawful thing that had happened to him since he woke up in the Lazarus Pit. Couldn’t even find his old, comfortable hatred for this kid who replaced him. It was a moot point. Tim wasn’t Robin anymore. He’d been replaced as well.

It wasn’t a cordial meeting, but it hadn’t ended in attempted murder, which was pretty good for the two of them. From then on, Tim made it abundantly clear that he was keeping tabs on Jason, but he never interfered with Jason’s operations except when he was planning to kill someone. Those targets started ending up in jail or witness protection before he could get to them.

It ought to have turned into an extended game of cat-and-mouse that ended with another one of their dramatic bullshit confrontations. But the truth was, Jason was getting tired of that game. Plus by then he’d figured out that Tim had Oracle monitoring him too. And it just wasn’t worth trying to outmaneuver both of them. So he stopped killing people. Just meant to take a break, get some other work done in the city, accomplish a few things, and lull Tim into a false sense of security. But then they started working together. And then Bruce really did come back. The damn kid had been right all along.

Jason figured that was the end of his little ceasefire with the Bats. But Tim never went running back to the manor. Didn’t really change the way he operated, although Jason could tell the kid was giddy with relief those first few months. And instead of telling the Bat all about what Red Hood was up to, Tim started giving Jason intel on Bruce. Mostly just enough information that they could comfortably avoid each other. And an occasional warning when he thought Bruce had been brooding more than usual and was likely to show up at one of Jason’s hideouts and try to talk to him about his mental fucking health again.

Jason didn’t manage to avoid all of those bullshit come-to-Jesus talks, but he’d have been caught out a hell of a lot more if Tim hadn’t been helping him.

The damn kid was the only person on the team dumb enough to trust Jason. And somewhere along the way, Jason started trusting him back.

Stupid in retrospect. The kid literally told him that they needed to trick Dick and Damian, but somehow Jason thinks he’s exempt from the same? That there’s no way the kid’s playing him as well?

Now he’s not sure who he’s more pissed at: Tim for tricking him, or himself for letting it happen.

He only gets five minutes to himself before he hears footsteps enter the locker room. He would
have heard them way before they got that close if the pounding in his skull hadn’t ramped up as soon as he didn’t have voices to distract him anymore. He’s sitting on a bench, head in his hands, elbows resting on his knees, and he doesn’t look up.

“You all right, Jay?” Dick asks, cautious. Too cautious. Like he’s talking to something wild and not a person.

Jason manages to bite out, “Fuck. Off.”

“I’m gonna take that as a no.” There’s a scuffing sound right in front of him. Way too close. He knows, without looking, that Dick’s crouched down in front of him. That if he looks up, he’ll see Dick’s stupid face painted over with concern.

“Stop pretending you’re not pissed at me,” Jason says. He keeps his head in his hands.

“For what? That stunt you pulled with Damian? It was a stupid move but—”

“For letting the kid just throw himself away like that.”

“Tim didn’t—”

“He handed himself over to alien mercenaries that the fucking Justice League can’t track. And I let him do it.”

There’s a pause and then Dick says, “You couldn’t have known.”

Jason looks up then, incredulous. “Did we listen to the same conversation? He was clearly up to something when he called me and I—”

“Tim is always up to something,” Dick says. “And when he’s made up his mind, it’s nearly impossible to stop him. Jay, he didn’t—he’s clearly got some kind of plan.”

“Of course he has a plan,” Jason says. “And it worked. He made a sacrifice play for the brat.”

Dick flinches. “He has more of a plan than that. Something beyond just getting captured. We have to trust him.”

“He lied about stopping the ship,” Jason says. “He could be lying about the plan too.”

“His friends—” Dick starts to say.

“They might be chasing after nothing. He might have sent them a goodbye, and they decided to go after him anyway—which is exactly what we should be doing.”

“And we will,” Dick says, slowly, patiently. Like he’s talking to a damn child. “As soon as we have a solid lead.”

“He said he’d never ask me for anything ever again,” Jason says. He played that conversation over and over again on what was left of his helmet while he was waiting for Dick and Cass to get back to the cave. He can still hear Tim’s exact words echoing in his head. “That sound to you like someone who thinks he’s coming back?”

Dick grimaces and shakes his head. “Oh, Jay, no. He didn’t mean that. He was just getting frustrated with you. He’s said that kind of thing to me a million times. ‘Just do me this favor and I’ll never hack your phone again.’ He doesn’t actually mean it.”
“You sure about that? The kid’s always been a little screwy. And he’s downright stupid when it comes to Robins. You know he is. How many times did he come to me after I tried to kill him?” Dick closes his eyes at this, like he just doesn’t want to hear it, but Jason keeps going. “If he was ever going to make a dumb mistake, it’d be something like this. Saving the brat by sacrificing himself.”

Dick doesn’t say anything for a moment. Can’t. He has to know that Jason’s right about this, even if he’s not ready to admit it yet. Finally, he says, “He wouldn’t do that to Bruce. He knows—he’s seen what happens when he loses one of us.”

The fact that he’s even referring to Jason’s death is pretty fucking serious. Because that’s not something they talk about anymore. Not since the truce. Bruce brings it up occasionally, but Bruce is a goddamn masochist and also the most emotionally stunted person Jason’s ever met.

But even Bruce at his worst has never been quite like he is now. Silent in a way that’s not angry or disappointed. Just brittle and sharp.

“He has to have some kind of plan,” Dick says again. Like a kid making a wish. Or a politician repeating a lie again so it’ll sound more true.

He looks so forlorn that Jason almost feels sorry for him. Because Dick’s the one who’s going to keep things on track if Bruce goes off the deep end. And the others are going to need someone to hold them together.

If Jason were anyone else, he’d agree just to make Dick feel better. But this team already has too many people who indulge in idealism and comforting lies. Jason’s the closest thing to a realist they have.

Still, the hard truth clearly isn’t what Dick needs right now. And Jason’s trying to get out of the habit of kicking people when they’re down.

With both the truth and lies ruled out, there’s not much else to say. So Jason just lets his head fall back into his hands and allows the silence between them to lengthen. When Dick puts a hand on his shoulder, he’s just too damned tired to shake it off.

Chapter End Notes

Impulse’s spaceship and the invasion of Zandia are both bits of canon from the 1998 Young Justice. Bart switching back to Impulse is from the 2019 run and I loved it way too much not to include in this fic.

I want to thank both my lovely betas: Eleanor (EleanorC on AO3 and EleanorChimere on tumblr), who patiently pulled out all the weedy bits that would have tripped up readers (absolutely saving the sentence flow) and gave me a much needed pep talk between chapters. And Nykyrianne (also on AO3) who helped me polish some awkward sentences and was very gracious when I kept answering her innocent questions with long rambling headcanons that don’t even appear in the fic.

I’m also on tumblr as shoalsea, but that account is brand new and basically empty at the moment. It will eventually include some batfam headcanons (heartwarming, heartbreaking, and just hilarious) that influenced aspects of this story. Feel free to stop
by if you have any questions or want to talk about comics.
Damian

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is an unsatisfactory patrol in every conceivable way. His partner, his route, the villains he encounters. If they can even be called that. As far as Damian is concerned, they’re nothing more than riff-raff.

He says as much to Batgirl at the beginning of the night, half-expecting that she’ll roll her eyes or find some way to twist the insult back on him. But she doesn’t respond. Either doesn’t hear or pretends she doesn’t.

It’s fine. Damian doesn’t care.

The night is busier than usual. Richard calls it a “ripple effect” and says that low-level lowlifes always try to test their luck in the aftermath of a strange-even-for-Gotham event. To be a criminal in Gotham means risking run-ins with the world’s best crime-fighters. And that means Gotham’s criminals are all the type that think they’re going to be lucky. They aren’t going to run into the Bat.

They, of course, wrong.

Nightwing and Black Bat are on the other side of town, putting down an attempted takeover of Arkham. This sounds much more worthwhile than clearing the streets of petty criminals, but Richard took Damian aside before the night began and asked him specifically to do all he could.

“It’s going to be a rough night,” he’d said. “And Bruce left the city in our hands. The best thing we can do right now—the best way we can help—is to keep the city safe. That way he doesn’t have to worry about it. Okay?”

He meant that they needed to protect Gotham so that Father could continue the search for Drake. He’d suited up as Batman—against Alfred’s wishes—and gone to the Watchtower to monitor the Justice League’s progress. Progress that has been, as far as Damian can tell, nonexistent so far.

It’s just like Drake to make everything as complicated and difficult as possible.

The night’s only saving grace is that Richard gave them permission to use the Batmobile, and Stephanie didn’t try to argue when Damian claimed the keys and the driver’s seat.

She’d snapped at him a few times over the course of the night, which he hadn’t been expecting. Normally when they work together, they trade a flurry of insults, but her barbs are always blunted. He might even admit, if pressed, that they often veer dangerously close to banter.

Sometimes, when he insults her, she just laughs and ruffles his hair. Looks at him almost the same way Richard does. With something that’s fast approaching fondness.

But all of that is gone tonight. It’s only to be expected. She may tolerate working with him, but Drake has always been her favorite. And now Drake is missing. And it’s Damian’s fault.

He should have known. In retrospect it’s obvious that a non-humanoid alien species would have difficulty distinguishing individual humans. Would not, in their distant corner of the galaxy, have heard that the mantle had been passed on. That Robin was an entirely different person.
He took it for granted that they meant him. Assumed that the crimes were his, that someone he killed in the past was in some way tied to this Bezneetan.

Absurd, in retrospect. As a detective, he should have been able to figure it out. But more importantly, Drake should have said something.

That, he assumes, is part of Stephanie’s anger. The subterfuge. Not to mention the slap-in-the-face insult of turning to the amateurs that he calls friends for help instead of his real team.

Damian is under no illusions about where he stands with Drake. They are part of the same family and that, according to Richard, means that their relationship is familial. But Drake has never seen it that way. He did not accept Damian’s early attempts at reconciliation when he first returned to Gotham after searching for Father. Granted, from his perspective now, Damian can admit that they were clumsy overtures at best. Insulting and degrading at worst. But he had tried. Drake had not.

He does not like to think about that time or the mistakes that he made. Richard has told him, time and again, to be grateful for the feeling of discomfort that those memories bring. “It means you’re growing, kiddo. You’re not the same person you used to be. That’s a good thing. It happens to all of us. And don’t worry about Tim. He’s coming around. All he needs is time.”

Damian wasn’t quite sure he believed that, but he’d been willing to set the question aside for the time being. He had other more important things to focus on. Being Robin. Getting to know his father and convincing him of all the progress he’d made under Richard’s tutelage. Proving himself worthy of what Richard gifted him so freely. Worthy of Robin, worthy of trust. Of love.

The problem of Drake, and the admittedly dishonorable way Damian treated him, could wait.

He’d thought that. Taken it for granted. Assumed they’d have time.

The night is ultimately unmemorable. With the number of crimes taking place—there may be some merit in Richard’s theory—he and Stephanie scarcely have a spare moment to catch their breath. But none of the criminals he cuffs even register. They’re beneath his notice. They’re not even interesting enough to keep his mind occupied.

He keeps waiting for a call. For news, good or bad.

It comes at the end of the night, just as things have slowed down. When Stephanie suggests they do one last lap in the Batmobile and then call it a night, Oracle chimes in smoothly, as if she’s been listening in and waiting for her cue.

“Just so you know,” she says, “we don’t have any news yet. But, Batgirl, I wanted to warn you. When you get back to the cave, you’re going to have a message on your phone.”

Damian’s already in the driver’s seat, ready to go, but Stephanie freezes, still standing in the street with the car door open. “A message?”

“No news,” Oracle repeats. “But yes. You have a message from Red Robin on your phone.”

Stephanie lets out a long, slow breath. And then says, all in a rush, “How is that not news? And why is it coming so late? And—”

“It’s automated,” Oracle answers. “It’s part of a system he triggered before he left. His away protocol.”

“Oh,” Stephanie says, all the energy in her voice abruptly gone. “It’s been twenty-four hours,
“Correct. It looks like he sent a signal to the system right before he was captured. It activated the protocol with a one-day delay. If he hadn’t sent the signal, it would have been automatically triggered in a week.” There’s a note in Oracle’s voice now: half exasperated, half affectionate. “Red does love his contingency plans.”

“The message. Do you know what it says?”

“I do. I didn’t want to invade your privacy, but I needed to check—”

“No, I get it. I don’t mind. What did it say?”

“Honestly, don’t get too excited. The twenty-four-hour message is pretty generic.”

“Does that mean there are other—of course, there are.” For the first time since Oracle’s voice sounded in their comms, Stephanie looks at Damian, visibly remembers that he’s there. “Did everyone get a message?” she asks.

“No. Not this early. So far it’s just you, Black Bat, and Nightwing. I didn’t actually get a text either, but there was a message waiting for me in his system. He expected I’d hack it if something happened to him. He’s...well, he’s certainly organized.”

“Thanks for the heads up.” Stephanie finally climbs into the car and motions to Damian to get going. He doesn’t need to ask if they’re still doing another lap. He turns the car around and heads straight for the cave. “And I know you already said, but...there’s really nothing? B hasn’t reported back yet?”

“He’s working on it,” Oracle says. And now she sounds tired.

Damian slept that afternoon, before patrol. A fitful, unsatisfying sleep, but it was necessary to ready himself for the night. He knows that Richard and Cassandra did the same. Assumes that Stephanie at least tried, though she looked decidedly ragged before she pulled on her cowl at the beginning of the night. But he’s not sure about Barbara.

The rest of the drive proceeds in silence. Damian has grown used to such silences from his father and finds that he prefers it to the endless chatter from everyone else on the team. Nevertheless, the change is unnerving.

It’s Drake’s fault.

When they arrive at the cave, Stephanie’s out of the car before it’s stopped moving, despite the fact that Oracle all but confirmed that the message contains little of value. She makes a beeline for the locker room where she keeps her things. Phones are never taken on patrol. Too distracting and too easily tied to their civilian identities. But Oracle always lets them know if a call comes through. She’s even been known to patch it through to their comms if it’s important enough or if it’s a slow night and one of Richard’s old Titan buddies wants to chat.

“What’s up her ass?” Todd asks. He’s lying on a gurney in the medical zone of the cave, dressed in sweatpants and a ragged t-shirt that says, *The book was better*. There’s a battered paperback on the floor beside him and his phone is balanced on his chest.

“You’re still here?” Damian says, rather than answering.

“Yeah, well, no one’s kicked me out yet.”
Damian doesn’t dignify this with a response. He suspects, in fact, that Alfred spent a considerable length of time convincing Todd to stay for a few days while he recovers. He apparently proved successful in that endeavor, but his efforts to convince Todd to move back upstairs to the manor have so far failed.

Damian would like to point out the foolishness of remaining in the cave when there are perfectly serviceable bedrooms upstairs—and much less of a draft—but Richard asked him not to, as he put it, “scare Jason off.” So he exercises restraint and only says, “She’s had a message from Drake.” He’s deliberately vague and regrets it immediately when Todd looks hopeful.

“From space?” He’s rising, swinging his legs over the side of the gurney, as if he’s planning to go somewhere.

“No, of course not,” Damian says, marching up to him and placing a hand on his chest before he can stand. “And what do you think you’re doing? You’re to stay off that leg. I heard Alfred say so this morning.”

“The leg that you stabbed.”

“Had you explained yourself earlier that wouldn’t have been necessary. And it’s a clean wound. I could have done much worse.”

Todd’s still glaring at him when Stephanie stomps back out of the locker room, still in uniform, with her cowl pushed down and her phone in her hand.

“Listen to this shit,” she says. “Just listen. ‘Hey, just a heads up, I’m out of town at the moment. Kind of unexpected. I need you to cover my route while I’m gone. Sorry!’ Can you believe him? Of all the stupid—”

“That’s from Tim?” Todd asks.

“Drake set up and triggered an away protocol in case of an unexpected absence.” Damian informs him. “Clearly, he did not anticipate the exact circumstances surrounding that absence.”

“Kind of unexpected,” Stephanie growls. “He’s just so—so—” She throws her hands in the air. “We need to find him and get him back just so I can kick his ass.”

Todd grins. “Now there’s a plan I can get behind.”

“You will be participating in no such mission,” Damian tells him. “Father will locate Drake well before you’ve recovered from your injuries.”

Todd scowls and opens his mouth to reply, but Stephanie interrupts. “Don’t. Whatever shitty thing you’re about to say—don’t. I don’t wanna hear it. I want to bitch about Tim right now. No shitting on Bruce allowed.”

Damian makes a face—he’s familiar with this particular turn of phrase but still finds it distasteful in the extreme—and Todd takes one look at him and bursts out laughing.

“I don’t know why we even allow you to be here,” Damian says. Regrets it immediately because Richard would be disappointed. But Todd just laughs again and reaches up as if he’s going to ruffle Damian’s hair. Richard may be allowed to do that and Stephanie may have gotten away with it a time or two, but Todd certainly hasn’t earned the right to take such liberties. Damian dodges and stomps off toward the locker room.
He’s nearly there when Todd says, soft enough that Damian has to strain to hear it, “Away protocol?”

“It’s as fucked up as it sounds,” Stephanie says. And that makes Damian stop. As far as he can tell, it sounds like an entirely logical system, although he has no doubt that Drake has gone overboard with it.

“I think Babs is gonna go over it with us when Bruce gets back,” Stephanie says. “But it’s basically a system he set up in case something happened to him.”

“Something like getting kidnapped by aliens.”

“Yeah. Or dying. Or getting lost in time. Or whatever bullshit nonsense happens to us next.” She’s pacing now. Damian lets himself slip back into the shadows—this spot is one of Black Bat’s favorites—and waits. After another moment, Stephanie says, “I just talked to Babs about it. There’s a bunch of messages. Short-term stuff, mostly, but also letters for a year from now. Two years from now. Like he’s planning to keep managing things from beyond the grave.”

“You think he expects to die on the job,” Todd says. He doesn’t sound like himself. His voice has taken on the same strange flatness that’s infected Father’s speech ever since he returned from Russia and looked down at the uniform Drake left behind.

The look Stephanie gives him is incredulous. “I think he knows it’s a pretty strong possibility,” she says. “I mean, look at what happened to the guy who had the mantle before him.” She gestures at Todd.

Damian expects him to make another one of his tasteless jokes—the kind that make everyone else on the team flinch—but instead he only sits there, looking stricken himself.

“Fuck, sorry, that wasn’t fair.” Stephanie pulls at her hair—a nervous habit that she never indulges in when her cowl is in place—and grimaces at him. “Tim’s just like this. It’s not your fault he’s a control freak with, like, insane dedication to being extra as fuck.”

“Yeah,” Todd says after a moment. “He’s kind of a freak, isn’t he?”

“Oh absolutely,” Stephanie says. “Like, I’m pretty sure Babs isn’t digging too deep into his files because she’s afraid she’s going to find out that he planned his own funeral or something.”

“Jesus,” Todd says.

Stephanie just shrugs. “Can you blame him? You died. Damian died. I fake-died. Long story, please don’t ask me about it now. Bruce disappeared into the fucking time stream. It’s enough to make anyone a little morbid.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Todd’s silent for a moment. Then asks, “Those kids that went after him. They any good?”

“You mean, are they good enough to save Tim from his own stupid plan? Yeah. I think so. They’re—they’ve worked together a long time. And their early days were pretty wild. There’s a lot of Young Justice stuff that went on that I think even Bruce doesn’t know about. As evidenced by this Bezneetan guy who wants to rip Tim apart like an insect.” Stephanie shivers and crosses her arms, hugging her own torso. “Can’t wait to find out how Tim pissed him off enough to inspire an expensive, robot-mercenary-based revenge scheme four years after the fact.”

“You don’t seem surprised by all this.”
“I’ve known Tim a long time,” Stephanie says. “I stopped being surprised by his bullshit years ago.”

Damian waits a little longer, but the conversation moves to Todd’s injuries. Then Stephanie starts summarizing their truly mind-numbing patrol and Damian retreats into the locker room before he’s forced to relive that tedium.

He sheds his uniform, folds it carefully and sets it aside to be cleaned. Richard and Todd are not nearly so respectful. The Nightwing costume ends up in a pile on the floor more often than not. Todd doesn’t use the facilities in the cave often, but when he does, he usually discards his clothes in a trail across the floor—a tripping hazard that Damian’s learned to avoid—and then complains when Alfred tidies up after him.

Damian’s not sure how Drake treats his uniforms after a patrol. He always ends his night at his Nest and rarely frequents the cave nowadays.

He forces himself into the shower and tries to ignore the twisting feeling in his stomach. The heavy sense of dread in his chest.

He knows why Drake avoids the cave—avoids him—but now it strikes him that there’s a lot about his so-called brother that he doesn’t know.

The immediate feeling that accompanies this realization is a shame that doubles back on itself and multiplies. First, the shame of having missed so much. One should always investigate an enemy properly. Drake isn’t an enemy—never was—but Damian once thought he was. So he should have gotten a better grasp on the person he meant to challenge and unseat.

The fact that he still thinks in such terms would horrify Father if he knew. That second shame feeds on the first and grows.

Damian is becoming far too familiar with the dissonance that comes with disappointing both of his parents at once, in drastically different ways. Mother, for not being as fierce and competent as he should have been. Father, for having so completely misunderstood the way that this team—this family—operates.

Richard would probably understand, to some extent, if Damian tried to put this into words. He would tell Damian again that it wasn’t his fault and that he was doing what he’d been taught to do. As if that automatically absolves him when they both know that it doesn’t.

And even Richard is disappointed in him. Sometimes for the same reasons that Father is. But more often than not, he’s most bothered when Damian acts inappropriately for his age or doesn’t react as he should. Fails to be a proper child. Or a proper person.

Father, at least, doesn’t expect him to be a kid. Not a normal one. He expects him to pretend when he’s being Damian Wayne, son of a billionaire socialite. But he’s not disappointed when Damian—the real Damian—disdains the things that Richard seems to think are so fundamental to the childhood experience.

Damian has tried to please all of them, has tried to figure out how to be himself and still fit into the shape of what they want him to be. But he can’t be a son that makes Mother and Father both proud. And he can’t live up to the legacy of Batman and act his age—whatever that means—at the same time.

He’s made his choice. Chosen his path. He doesn’t regret it. But the shame is automatic. A
weakness he hasn’t yet learned to shed.

And below that—below the heat in his face and chest that makes it hard to breathe—there’s a
deeper, uglier feeling in his gut that leaves him almost nauseated. A thing that he doesn’t allow
himself to think about very often, if at all.

Here, now, alone under the spray of water, he lets his head rest against the cool tile of the shower
and thinks about what would have happened if he’d succeeded. If he’d killed Drake instead of
merely injuring him. He thinks about the damage it would have done to Father and to Richard. To
Alfred and Stephanie and Cassandra and even Todd. To all the people who are tearing themselves
apart with worry because Drake was stupid enough to hand himself over to his enemies when he
had people who would have fought for him. Who wouldn’t have let him go.

But that’s why he lied to them. Because they wouldn’t have let him go.

Father will find him, of course.

Drake didn’t give up when they all thought Father was dead. He left Gotham behind and he found
evidence that proved Father was alive. Now Father will do the same for him.

That’s another thing Drake couldn’t have done if Damian had killed him. And it’s a debt that
Damian hasn’t yet freed himself from. At the time he didn’t truly acknowledge the role that Drake
played in assuring Father’s rescue. And adjusting to Father’s return—as joyous an occasion as that
had been—proved to be a challenge after Damian grew accustomed to working with Richard. That
transition occupied a considerable amount of his attention. With Drake avoiding him like the
plague, it was easy to ignore him and his role in Father’s rescue.

The knowledge of the debt he owed Drake had come to him slowly. He’d ignored the feeling for
months. Then begrudgingly acknowledged it, to himself if no one else. But he hadn’t acted on it.
He assumed he’d have time and the problem would take care of itself. Someday Drake would be in
need and Damian would assist him. Would save his life or the life of someone important to him.
And they’d be even.

It is, in retrospect, a childish idea. The dependence on luck, the lack of concrete steps and strategy
—it’s a wish, not a plan. And a poorly thought-out one at that.

He knows what Richard would say. That family doesn’t keep track. That he and Drake have saved
each other countless times. But Damian still feels that it’s a necessary step. And once Drake
accepts Damian’s place on the team, they can go back to coexisting separately. No need for further
family bonding. The only thing Damian wants—the thing the team needs to function properly—is
Drake’s trust. Everything else is superfluous.

It makes Drake’s duplicity rankle even more. He’s not only thrown himself into the hands of his
own enemies, but he’s done so when he could have easily let Damian go and be butchered in his
place. How dare he do that? How dare he make that decision without even giving Damian the
option of knowing what was going on?

He knows that the others now think that Drake doesn’t trust them enough. That his choice to
contact his friends from outside of Gotham confirms this fact. But Damian knows the truth.

He’s the one Drake doesn’t trust. And while that distrust has spread to the rest of the team, the seed
of it still started with Damian.

It’s his fault.
Oracle calls them together for a meeting the next day to discuss the away protocol. By then they all
know the outlines of Drake’s scheme, but she insists that they need to sort out tasks and make
decisions.

Damian is the second-to-last to arrive. Todd, of course, hasn’t left the cave since he arrived. The
others—Richard, Stephanie, Cassandra, Alfred, and even Duke—are already waiting.

Damian only agrees to attend because he knows that Richard and Father will both be there and he’s
barely spoken to them since Drake’s capture. But when he arrives, Richard is arguing in low tones
with Todd again, and Father is still absent.

Damian chooses to spend this time training rather than loafing around like the rest of the team. As
he begins, Stephanie approaches him and he readies himself to dismiss her—he has no interest in
training together at this time—but all she says is, “Hey, I need to talk to you when this is over,
okay?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer. Just turns and walks back to the conference table where Duke and
Cassandra are waiting for her.

Father finally arrives, still dressed in his armor and cowl, and immediately takes a seat. Barely
acknowledges them.

Even Todd looks taken aback.

“No news, B?” Stephanie says, acting as if nothing is the matter. She, Cassandra, and Duke are
seated at the table already, and Richard is helping Todd limp across the room. Alfred stands, as
always, at Father’s side.

Oracle is the one who answers, her voice issuing from the loudspeakers overhead. “The Lantern
Corps is investigating a couple of potential sightings of ships that match the description you gave
us of Impulse’s vehicle. They’re also following up on Bezneetan’s last known whereabouts. But no
news on the Tetrahedra. Or Tim.”

“We should be out there—” Todd starts to say, but Oracle cuts him off as if she can’t hear him,
even though the microphones throughout the cave are of exceptional quality.

“That’s everyone, I think,” she says, ignoring the sound of Richard shushing Todd. “Let’s get
started.” She begins by going over the protocol again, even though at this point everyone already
knows what it is. “As far as I can tell, it’s really just a modified version of his normal To Do list.
I’ve been in his files before and they were set up pretty much the same way then as they are now.
The only difference is that he added a complex tagging system and tied those tags to a series of
automated messages. It’s meticulous but also kind of a mess? There are a lot of notes that aren’t
filed or tagged yet that I can’t really make heads or tails of.”

A few lines of text appear on the cave’s main computer screen. COS—PW check. Call AF tmr. TF
questions? Ask LF.

The most recent just says, RH MG tmr.

“That one’s me, I think,” Todd says, pointing at it. “He was supposed to help me run down
MacGowan tomorrow—or, yesterday, I guess.”

Richard and Stephanie are able to identify a few more lines. Then Oracle begins parceling out
assignments. “We don’t need to get to all of this right away, but I wanted to go over it with all of
you together in case some of it is time-sensitive. I know—” she says, cutting off Todd before he
can interrupt, “—that we’d all rather be out with the League, looking for Tim. But until they have a solid lead, we’re going to have to sit tight. And Tim’s not going to appreciate it much if we let the city fall apart while he’s away. That’s the whole point of his protocol. To make sure things keep running while he’s gone. So I’m just going to dump everything on you now and you can help me figure out what needs to be addressed immediately and what can be put on the back burner.”

She goes over the files as she sends them to their phones or tablets. Most of what she sends Father concerns Wayne Enterprises. Meetings that Drake would have attended, contracts that require review, and reams upon reams of notes about departments and projects and shareholders and budgets. There are also a few cases—homicides and a string of burglaries—but Damian is fairly certain these are all investigations Father handed off to Drake in the first place.

Father goes over cases with all of them, of course. He’s given Damian extensive instruction on the art of investigation, and he sometimes talks through cases with Richard or Stephanie when they’re training. But Drake is the only one he calls specifically when he needs help. Drake does not frequent the Batcave often, but when he does, it’s usually because he and Father are working together on a mystery that’s proven especially difficult to solve.

Stephanie and Duke are both tagged with large sections of Red Robin’s usual patrol routes, and one small section adjacent to Red Hood’s territory is tagged for Todd. The relevant files contain maps of each neighborhood and extensive notations—who operates in each territory, which of Red Robin’s open cases are tied to specific locations, what times of night see the most activity and which are normally quiet. It goes on and on.

“He included food recommendations,” Duke says. “That’s not a joke. They’re all marked on the map.”

“Oh my god,” Stephanie says, leaning over to look at the image on his phone. “He gave you the good taco truck. Why would he give you the good taco truck?”

Red Hood and Nightwing get the rest of the cases that didn’t go to Father. They’re assigned a variety of different priority levels and seem to be loosely divided up by neighborhood. Oracle informs them that she already did a preliminary sweep through the ones tagged as high priorities and compiled a list. “Mostly missing persons cases,” she says. “When it comes to murders, Tim lets the GCPD do a lot of the leg work and only intervenes if he thinks they’re really screwing it up. Missing persons, on the other hand, don’t get allocated nearly the same level of resources. And depending on the circumstances of the disappearance, timing can be critical.”

Oracle herself was left with a list of villains that Drake was keeping track of abroad. “A lot of familiar faces,” she says, “but there are also some newcomers I’m not really familiar with. Anybody know anything about the Council of Spiders?”

“He mentioned them when he got back to Gotham last year,” Richard says. “Something about his feud with Ra’s?”

“Assassins,” Cassandra says.

Stephanie adds, “Assassins who hunt other assassins. I think? Tim didn’t really say much about them—you know how weird he is about his Eurotrip—but I know they pissed him off in a major way. Not as much as Ra’s, but getting up there for sure.”

Todd, meanwhile, has grown progressively more frustrated as he scrolls through his set of files. “There’s no way I can juggle all of this. He was not seriously working on all of these simultaneously.”
“Tim likes to keep busy,” Barbara says, a touch of weariness creeping into her voice. “I’m pretty sure he had his own way of prioritizing, but it’s not in his notes.”

“This is too much,” Father says, speaking up for the first time since he arrived.

For a moment, Damian thinks that he means he’s been given too much to do. Which makes no sense because if Drake could handle it, then Father certainly can. But then again, most of Father’s assignments concern Wayne Enterprises, so perhaps he simply means that he doesn’t have time to protect Gotham, search for Drake, and handle something as inconsequential as running a billion-dollar corporation.

But Barbara sighs and says, “I think that’s why there are so many notes. To help him keep track of it all and make sure nothing fell through the cracks.”

“Did you know?” Father asks.

“I knew he was juggling a lot,” Barbara answers. “And always taking on more. But I didn’t realize quite how much until now.” There’s a pause and then she continues, her voice a little softer. “To be honest, I think he felt guilty. The last time he left, he just...dropped everything.”

“When I was gone,” Father says, meaning when they all thought he was dead.

“Yeah, B. It was a bad time all around. I know he wasn’t really happy with how he handled it. It looks like he wanted to make sure that didn’t happen again. So he put together his contingency plan. Like he always does. And he went way, way overboard. Like he always does. I don’t think he was actively pursuing all of these things at once. He couldn’t have been. It’d be a crushing amount of work and Tim’s smarter than that. But he was keeping track of it all and chipping away at as much of it as he could.”

“It’s still too much,” Father says.

“Master Timothy is certainly not the first person in this household to take on an impossible crusade,” Alfred observes. There’s a hint of rebuke there, though it’s gentler than Damian expected. Alfred is perhaps the kindest person Damian has ever known, but he can be quite acerbic when he wants to be.

Damian expects Father to look chastised—a rare occurrence that’s nearly always precipitated by sharp words delivered in a mild tone—but instead he just looks tired.

There’s not much more after that. Damian keeps waiting for Barbara to divvy up more assignments, but instead she directs the discussion toward prioritizing what she’s already gone over. Father and Richard begin going through the cases together, Father still stone-faced and stiff, Richard looking increasingly grim in response.

Stephanie and Duke are trying to work out their modified patrol routes with Red Hood—whose territory they’ll have to cover while he’s convalescing—when Cassandra leans over and runs her hand over their map, wordlessly claiming large swaths of territory for herself.

“He might have something else set aside for you,” Stephanie says. But Barbara doesn’t chime in and Cassandra shakes her head.

“No,” she says. “I know what I am supposed to do.”

Her name appeared in some files, but only in cases that she’d brought to Drake or ones where Drake meant to consult her about criminal activity tied to Hong Kong. She hasn’t, as far as Damian
can tell, really been assigned anything. And doesn’t expect to be.

Neither has Damian.

He slips away while the others are still poring over their files. He thinks he’s made a clean getaway until he reaches the elevator and realizes that someone’s just behind him. It’s a lapse in situational awareness that would disgust Mother and Father.

Stephanie doesn’t speak until the doors slide shut. “Look,” she says, “I get it.” When he doesn’t answer, she goes on. “I’m pretty sure the only thing in the world that could piss you off more than having Tim give you assignments that you didn’t ask for is being the only one not assigned anything.”

“It’s insulting,” Damian says, speaking before he can stop himself. “Even Todd was given something.” That's the thing that galls him most. Drake has by and large been the one who slowly but surely dragged Todd back onto the team. But even that is, to Damian’s mind, further proof of Drake’s unfair treatment of him. Damian came to Gotham with only the training and education that the League of Assassins provided him. His beliefs and actions then were wrong, yes, but he has learned from his errors. Todd was trained and taught by Father. And he did the opposite of Damian. He regressed. He spit in the face of everything Father ever taught him, everything that Batman and Robin are meant to represent. Yet he is the one that Drake forgives and befriends?

It’s just not fair.

He doesn’t mean to let any more words burst out, but once it starts he finds that he can’t stop. “It’s as if I have nothing to contribute. As if I’m not worthy of having a place in his plans. On this team. He never thought I had a right to be here. He never trusted me—”

“D, that’s not it.” Her tone is calm and matter-of-fact. It makes him realize that he’s breathing hard, which is ridiculous and only makes him angrier.

His voice, when he speaks again, comes out exasperated and no doubt sounding like the child Richard always wants him to be, “Then why leave me out?”

“Because you’re Robin,” she says, just as the elevator doors slide open. “And Tim had very strong ideas about just what that means.”

He follows her out into the hall, hating how calm she is, and sneers, “How would you know?”

“I was Robin, remember? Not for long and it didn’t really work out, but I was. And Tim was a complete jerk about it, but we did talk. About what it meant. About how Tim saw his role in the city.”

“I don’t care how Drake did things,” Damian says.

“I’m just trying to explain so you’ll understand. Dick and Jason were Bruce’s partners, first and foremost, when they were Robin. They had to be. It was usually just the two of them. Batman and Robin. With some occasional help from Batgirl and, eventually, Nightwing. But mostly it was just the dynamic duo.”

She’s walking now, hands in her pockets. He scowls but follows. “I know all this.”

“You know, but you don’t understand. Things are different now, Damian. There are a lot of us. Everyone down in the cave plus all our other allies. Batwoman and Batwing and Bluebird and Huntress and Catwoman and—there’s a whole team. You’re used to it, but it wasn’t like this when
Tim became Robin. Jason was dead. Dick left. Bruce went off the rails for a while. Only worked solo. Can you imagine that? Your dad doing this crazy, ridiculous job all by himself?"

Damian can’t. It would be a fool’s errand. An impossible crusade. Even his grandfather doesn’t operate alone. There’s strength in numbers, in organization, in alliances.

“So Dick and Jason...when they were Robin, they had to prioritize Batman. They had to watch his back and be at his side, because there was no one else. But things changed while Tim had the mantle. Being Batman’s partner was still the core of it. But Tim loves to put together a system and that’s what he helped do. He helped Bruce build a support system. Forced him to accept help. Teamed up with people whenever he could. Tim worked with the Birds of Prey. He fought alongside Cass back when a lot of people still didn’t trust her. He tried to bring Jason back into the fold before he was ready for it. When he was Robin, he didn’t really have his own priority list. He kept a bird’s eye view of everything and when someone needed help, he showed up and he helped. His main job was always, always helping Batman. But sometimes that meant helping other people so that they could help Batman. Does that make sense?”

It does, in a strange way. Damian thinks Stephanie is giving Drake far too much credit. It could simply be dumb luck that Father acquired so many allies during Drake’s tenure as Robin. And some of the allies she listed were made after Damian took the mantle. But he can still see the outline of it. Can see how it might have made a difference. How the room full of people downstairs and the network of vigilantes in the city might not have come together if Robin had died with Todd.

His throat feels tight, but he forces the words out. “And he didn’t think I could fulfill this role.”

“No.” She rounds on him, looking frustrated now. “He never talked to you about this because—I mean, how could he? You wouldn’t have taken advice or instructions from the illegitimate Robin. The fake son. Plus you had Dick to guide you, and Tim had his own mission, and those first few months...he really couldn’t have handled it. You met him during the worst year of his life, Damian. During—but that doesn’t matter. Things got better and you didn’t need to hear what he had to say anymore. You were doing fine on your own.”

“There was no list of cases to cover. He didn’t assign anything specific because you’re meant to be a free agent. To help the rest of us as necessary. You think we’re all going to be able to handle our own workload and cover for Tim and find him? No way. Not on our own. You’ve got the hardest job of all. You’ve got to pick up the slack. You’ve got to help us when we need it and tell us when we’re pushing ourselves too far. You could start with getting Bruce out of his damned armor. He should not be wearing it any more than necessary.”

“The only one he deemed unworthy of assisting the team during his absence. He—”

“Damian, I just told you. For him, Robin didn’t need a list of cases to cover. He didn’t assign anything specific because you’re meant to be a free agent. To help the rest of us as necessary. You think we’re all going to be able to handle our own workload and cover for Tim and find him? No way. Not on our own. You’ve got the hardest job of all. You’ve got to pick up the slack. You’ve got to help us when we need it and tell us when we’re pushing ourselves too far. You could start with getting Bruce out of his damned armor. He should not be wearing it any more than necessary.”

“He shouldn’t be wearing it all, according to Alfred,” Damian points out. He doesn’t necessarily agree, but he can understand where they are coming from.

“And for the record,” Stephanie barrels on, ignoring him, “Tim did have notes on you. Not for you. At least, not for the first few stages of the protocol.”
“There are other stages?” Damian says. He knows this already, of course, but he won’t admit that he was eavesdropping on her conversation with Todd. It would be too much like admitting that he cares what they think.

“Yeah,” Stephanie says. The fight’s suddenly gone out of her. “Barbara didn’t really want to go into it with everybody just yet, but most of the away protocol is designed for a temporary absence. Weeks or months. Then there are letters. One at the one-year mark and another a year after that. Babs hasn’t looked at them. Says they’re flagged as personal. But you’d get those too. If he was gone that long.”

Damian doesn’t want to think about that. “And the notes about me?”

Steph smiles. “Just weird stuff. There’s a notification set to go off a month before your birthday. Apparently Dick promised to take you to some elephant sanctuary? And Tim seems to think that Dick definitely will forget about it by then and you definitely will not.”

Damian remembers that night. It was a throwaway comment Richard made during a stakeout. He’d been talking about Zitka, the circus elephant from his childhood. Damian did not think a circus was a proper place for so noble a beast and said as much. Elephant sanctuaries were obviously superior. Richard had argued, but not much, mostly just goading Damian to list off facts about elephants, which he was happy enough to do. He talked about their memories and their sense of community and the fact that they mourned their dead. He mentioned the length of the average gestational period, nearly two years, and Richard had said, offhand, “We’ll go in two years, then.”

It was a joke, Damian’s fairly certain of that. Father was still gone at the time and Richard would not have considered leaving Gotham for anything as frivolous as a vacation. But part of him had hoped that they might get to it someday. And Drake had been there at the time—not with them physically, but listening on the comms while he monitored the building they were watching—and apparently he’d made a note of it.

It makes Damian feel a strange tightness in his chest, but he brushes it off. It’s likely the note was really intended to brighten Richard’s day more than Damian’s. Richard often complains that Damian is the superior gift-giver—true—and laments his own inability to find gifts that are as thoughtful.

Mostly, he takes Damian places he thinks they’d both enjoy. Parks, art museums, special spots in and around Gotham. A trip to an elephant sanctuary, if they could manage it, would be exactly the kind of birthday surprise he’d delight in.

“There’s other stuff,” Stephanie says. “Mostly WE business. He knows you’re still planning to kick him out as soon as you’re old enough, so he’s got some projects earmarked for you. Not for anytime soon. Just...for someday. He definitely saw you as someone who had a place here, Damian. A long-term place. But he wasn’t going to presume to tell you what that place was. Especially since telling you to do something would have guaranteed that you’d do the exact opposite.”

There may be some merit to that last bit, but the rest of it...“Your feelings for Drake cloud your judgment,” he tells her, trying to keep his tone mild, to deliver the truth the way that Alfred does. Gently but without brooking further argument.

She sighs, rolls her eyes. “Bullshit,” she says. “But believe whatever you want. Just don’t waste too much time sulking about not having anything to do. Especially since it’s not gonna last. I called dibs on you, by the way. Dick already claimed you for tonight’s patrol, but I get you tomorrow. And check your phone, okay?”
They’ve walked a full circuit around the house and have returned to the clock. She steps back in, gives him a cheery wave with her middle finger—too much time spent with Todd, clearly—and disappears back down to the cave.

He checks his phone. There’s a text there that he hadn’t felt—his phone was on vibrate, but Oracle can easily override that—and it says she’s dropped a few of Drake’s files directly onto his computer.

That, he realizes, is suspicious in and of itself. He can admit that his hacking skills have not yet surpassed Oracle’s or Red Robin’s, but it sounds like this away protocol wasn’t meant to be difficult to access. Yet Barbara’s been careful to take control of all those files and to deliver copies to everyone rather than granting them access to Drake’s system itself.

It seems she’s going to keep them well guarded in his absence.

He wonders if it’s about the letters they’re meant to wait a year or two before receiving. He wonders if she’s given in and read hers already. Or read the rest of theirs. He would, if he had access. He’d read all of them.

For now, though, he settles for what she’s deigned to give him. His laptop is in his room, and the files are waiting for him when he opens it.

Most of them are simple text documents. The note about the elephant sanctuary. The WE projects Stephanie mentioned. A recovered file that mentions a problem with his grappling hook and noted that Alfred should be informed. Damian remembers that minor inconvenience. And how it had been repaired the very next day.

There’s a .jpeg labeled “blackmail material,” but it’s just a photo of Damian asleep in an armchair at Richard’s apartment. Undignified, certainly, but not actually worthy of extortion.

He spends most of his time trying to puzzle out the meaning in the Wayne Enterprises files. In addition to the project files, there are various notes. Most of them start with *Have B tell D…*

It takes him some time to see the pattern in it all. Drake’s not planning to tell Damian any of this. All of his notes—the elephant sanctuary, the grappling hook, the WE files—all specify having someone *else* interact with Damian. Never Drake.

It’s like he’s been circling Damian this entire time, keeping tabs on him, but never coming too close. Paying attention, yes, but not engaging directly.

He wonders how much of that is due to Drake’s own personal distaste for him and how much can be attributed to his belief that Damian would never follow any advice that came from him.

He wants to pore over the files, line by line. He wants to try hacking into Drake’s databases while Oracle is distracted by the others. He wants to run circles around the upper floors of the house until his body tires out and his mind grows quiet.

Instead, he considers his conversation with Stephanie. He thinks about all of the Robins who’ve come before him and all the different ways they’ve fulfilled that role.

Life with his mother was a lot of things, most of them harmful in retrospect, but there was a clarity to it. A hierarchy, obvious expectations, and a place meant for him and him alone. Here everything is different. Father has told him, time and time again, that there is room for all of them, including Drake.
“You can’t take Tim’s place any more than you could take Dick’s,” he’d said. “Your place was empty before. We just didn’t know that yet.”

But Damian doesn’t think it’s as simple as it sounds. Here you still have to carve out your own space and prove yourself before you can lay claim to a role and your own set of responsibilities. And as much as Father and Richard try to provide guidance, they also insist that they don’t have all the answers. That there are some things that Damian has to decide on his own.

He knows that this is a good thing. The rigidity of the League would have eventually stunted and constrained him, while the flexibility of his family in Gotham allows for growth. Here he can be whoever he wants to be. He just has to figure that part out first.

With a sigh, he closes the laptop and heads back down to the cave to see if anyone needs his help.

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick note: All chapters of this fic have already been written and are in the process of being edited. So updates should happen fairly regularly. However, upcoming chapters are a little lengthier than what I’ve posted so far, so they may take a little extra time. I'm planning to post about once a week, but if I happen to clean up a few chapters a little more quickly, I may occasionally post twice a week instead.
There’s no real news for two more days. Bruce is working on one of the consoles in the Watchtower and trying to ignore the time displayed in the corner of the screen.

It’s been well over seventy-two hours since Tim was taken. Bad enough in a normal kidnapping case that’s constrained to one planetary body. Even worse when the kidnappers have gone off planet. Every hour they’re traveling away from earth, the search area expands exponentially.

He keeps getting calls from Gotham, but he ignores them. If there’s an emergency, Oracle knows how to reach him. It’s likely only Alfred, calling to ask after his ribs again.

They still hurt, but it’s nothing he can’t handle. They’re not as bad as the headache he’s had for the last few hours. Or the tightness in his chest that started when Gotham went dark and has only gotten worse since. It feels a little like being hit by a freeze-gun. Like ice constricting his chest, making him conscious of his own breathing and the distracting rhythm of his heartbeat.

None of that matters. He needs to keep working.

Information on Bezneetan is scarce. There are some minor reports in the League’s database about a small but devastating mercenary force that appeared erratically in various corners of the galaxy. Literally appeared, according to some reports, using some new method of transportation that didn’t leave behind evidence of zeta-beams or boom tube technology. The mercenaries seemed to materialize out of nowhere, raided cities and satellites, and then vanished as soon as they were done.

Then, four years ago, a more permanent disappearance. The mercenary outfit attacked a planet called Myrg. In the process, Bezneetan’s identity—until then unknown—was revealed: a disgraced princeling from a faraway planetary system with a long list of debts and a longer list of questionable connections. Reports on what exactly happened during the incident are vague, but after attacking Myrg, Bezneetan disappeared and his organization hasn’t been heard from since.

Bruce focuses his research on Myrg and finds an immediate connection. The planet is ruled by Queen Ramia and her consort, Charles Dickles, better known as Doiby Dickles. An Earthling most recently affiliated with Old Justice, the team of elderly former sidekicks who tried to shut down Young Justice during their turbulent early days as a team.

Tim never mentioned a planet called Myrg or unmasking a mercenary leader and dismantling his organization, but Bruce doesn’t doubt that it happened. It would explain Bezneetan’s obsessive quest for revenge.

If Bruce had known Young Justice was regularly traveling to space, unsupervised, he would have put a stop to it immediately. Which is probably why Tim never told him about it.

Myrg will be the first stop in his investigation. The Lanterns have already sent someone, but they’re not likely to investigate properly and whatever incident happened between Young Justice and Bezneetan was over four years ago. There may be a trail, but it will be very, very cold.

His second line of inquiry is focused on the Tetrahedra. There’s more information on them, but it’s sketchy and less concrete. The pyramids they encountered in Gotham could be highly advanced
remote-controlled vehicles or possibly some new form of techno-organic life from a far-flung
corner of space. Extremely dangerous, but tolerated in various sectors of the galaxy because
they’re regarded as bounty hunters of a kind. Their operations are predictable and follow strict
rules. Minimal force is used. For them, this means they use exactly as much firepower as necessary
to get what they came for. If their quarry doesn’t put up a fight, they’re taken in peacefully. If they
mount a massive defense, the Tetrahedra match that force. They’ve razed cities and destroyed
whole satellite systems.

Even if they don’t hurt Tim, even if he cooperates with them fully, they will still hand him over to
Bezneetan without a second thought.

Bruce has returned to researching Bezneetan—that’s where he’ll find Tim, that’s where they are
now or where they’re heading—when the door behind him slides open and the smell of ozone fills
the room.

Only Clark would choose to fly to the Watchtower rather than using a transporter. “You’re back,”
he says. It’s a stupid, inane observation, but it’s the only thing he can think to say. Dick keeps
telling him that he needs to talk, that his silence is frightening people, but there’s nothing to talk
about. He needs to be working, not talking.

He needs to be working, but Clark is back and that doesn’t suggest anything good. He’s been on
the Watchtower frequently in the last few days, but he’d said goodbye less than ninety minutes
ago. Something about Metropolis.

If he’s back, there’s got to be a reason for it.

“Whoa,” Clark says when Bruce turns to face him. “Don’t give me the bad-news face. They only
told me first because they knew you’d take the call without bothering to let anyone else know.”

“What call?”

Clark smiles. “The Lantern Corps. They’ve found them.”

J’onn’s on monitor duty. When they reach the communications station, he’s sitting patiently and
listening. On screen Kyle Rayner is saying, “—sector that they absolutely should not be in. We’re
lucky they haven’t gotten themselves into any more trouble than they’re already in.”

“Where are they?” Bruce asks.

“Hi, Batman. Nice to see you too,” Kyle says. “And sorry, but I haven’t got them with me yet. I
didn’t find them. Kilowog did. I’ll be rendezvousing with him shortly. And before you ask, yes,
we’re pretty sure we’ve found the right pack of teen renegades. But if you want to confirm, here’s
what he sent me.”

It’s a picture of the four of them standing in a corridor and facing the camera. Tim in front of the
others, looking battered and bruised, but whole, with Wonder Girl at his side. Superboy standing
behind them, glaring with his arms crossed in a way that would look menacing if Impulse wasn’t
right next to him, mimicking his posture, his own expression decidedly skeptical.

They look like kids. Intensely annoyed kids.

The ice in his chest finally starts to break apart.

“Can we talk to them?” Clark asks.
“Er, not right now,” Kyle says, looking sheepish. “They’ve parked themselves in pretty much the worst spot they could find, so communicating is a little tricky at the moment. They’re anchored to an asteroid in an area of space that’s full of electrical storms and gravity fluctuations and—it’s kind of a nightmare? I don’t know how they even got there without killing themselves. With all the interference, Kilowog couldn’t even communicate with me until he left the ship and got out of the storm zone.”

“What are their exact coordinates?” Bruce says.

“Hold up. I haven’t outlined everything yet. When I said they couldn’t have picked a worse spot, I meant that on so many different levels. This part of space is controlled by a planetary alliance that is very strict about outside interference. Even Green Lanterns need permission before we can enter. The only reason they let Kilowog in is because he was chasing after the kids—who, by the way, are gonna need a Lantern escort if they want to leave without getting locked up just for being here. If you come after the kids here—if any of you come here without clearance—it could lead to an intergalactic incident. Which nobody wants. So you really can’t come pick them up, which is fine, ‘cause we’ll have them sorted out soon. Also, while I’m sharing bad news, you should know that we haven’t caught Bezneetan yet. And the Tetrahedra are long gone.”

“You located Red Robin,” Bruce says slowly, giving each word its proper weight, “but failed to apprehend any of the people responsible for his abduction.”

“Yeah, I’m just going to point out, again, that I was not physically present for any of this. And in Kilowog’s defense, the kids parted ways with Red Robin’s captors well before we caught wind of where they were. And they claim that Bezneetan is not a priority. That it’s his business partner we should be after.”

“Bezneetan is not a priority,” Bruce repeats.

“That’s what Kilowog said that your kid said. Red Robin claims that Bezneetan shouldn’t have the resources to finance the mercenaries he hired and that Bezneetan’s business partner is the one we need to be worrying about. And the business partner is not actually a person, it’s a corporation? What looks like a totally normal deep-space mining company located near this nightmarish little corner of the galaxy.”

“Wait,” Clark says. “Let me see if I’ve got this. You’re saying that the kids already rescued Red Robin and then immediately went off to investigate someone else who, as far as I can tell, is not involved in his abduction at all?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Kyle says. “Kilowog tried to talk them into letting this go, but they’re adamant that something’s going on and they won’t leave until we at least take a look at this mining operation. Picking a fight in an area as dangerous as this is a very bad idea. Also, personally, I really don’t want to fight a bunch of kids? Even if most of them do have superpowers.”

“There are no other reasons?” J’onn asks placidly. Kyle immediately looks guilty. J’onn can’t actually read someone’s mind through a video call—and wouldn’t, even if he could—but he’s often intuitive in a way that has nothing to do with telepathy.

“Well, the thing is, they’re really insistent that there’s something hinky going on at this facility and, well, this is an area of space that we really don’t get to poke around in very often. We’re only allowed here right now because we’re looking for the kids. The local authorities are hoping we’ll take care of things quickly and save them time and resources. Once we actually find the kids, we have to get out of here immediately.”
“You have found them,” Clark says, but Bruce already knows where this is going.

“Technically, yeah, but again—terrible parking job in a hellish asteroid field and also the most stubborn superpowered teens Kilowog has ever met. It would be easier to give the kids what they want. We’ve got a good excuse. We just pretend we haven’t found them yet but that their trail led us to this mining facility. Technically kind of true. We investigate, find something or don’t, and then grab the kids and head back.”

“You just told us that we can’t come because this area is politically sensitive...but you’re going to do an unnecessary investigation just to pacify some kids?” Clark says, disapproval coloring his voice.

That’s the moment Bruce realizes that Clark really is worried. Because he’s fairly certain that Clark Kent’s never once called an investigation “unnecessary” in his entire life.

“Look, they’re really stubborn,” Kyle says. “And some of what they were saying made sense? I mean, I think it did. Your kid,” he’s looking at Bruce now, “is weirdly knowledgeable about production chains and the manufacturing potential of—but that’s not the point. The point is, it’s hard to rescue someone who doesn’t want to be rescued, and we really can’t afford to have an intergalactic incident here. So we’ll go along with the plan and then the kids promise to come back peacefully. If we try to drag them out against their will, it’ll probably get messy, the local authorities might get involved, and then we have to figure out extradition. And nobody wants that.”

“How are they?” Bruce asks.

“Kilowog said they seemed okay? Red Robin looked like he got roughed up some, but he insisted that he didn’t need any medical assistance. And he told Kilowog to tell me to tell you that he’s still got all his limbs. So, yay for that? But look, don’t worry. When I get there, we’re gonna do a full sweep of the facility, just to mollify them, then it’s straight back to earth. Their communications system can’t penetrate the storms right now, but they calculated that conditions will improve in about two hours. They’re planning to call you then. You, being you specifically, Batman. Red Robin was pretty insistent that he needed to talk to you. He said they’d call the cave? Because apparently they know how to do that without needing to be patched through the Watchtower? I don’t know how to do that, but they said—”

“Two hours,” Bruce repeats.

“Yeah,” Kyle says, giving what he probably hopes is a reassuring smile. “And then they’ll be back before you know it.”

They leave J’onn the task of informing Diana and Wally.

Clark follows Bruce back to the transporter. Bruce doesn’t say anything, but Clark knows him too well for that to matter.

“You’re angry,” he says.

Bruce doesn’t dignify that with a response. He understands now why J’onn called Clark first and dragged him all the way back to the Watchtower. He wanted Clark here to keep Bruce from forcing the coordinates out of Kyle. To stop him from jumping on the first ship he can get his hands on and getting out there immediately.

He’s being handled, and they should know by now how he feels about that.

“We’re all worried about the kids,” Clark tells him for what must be the hundredth time. “Conner
“Conner isn’t your son,” Bruce says. He gets on the transporter without looking back.

The drive between Gotham’s transporter and the cave is just long enough for him to calm down. He doesn’t need to bring his anger home with him.

When he gets back to the cave, there’s a curtain covering the medical bay, which means Jason is asleep and still hasn’t allowed Alfred to bully him upstairs. Dick and Damian are out on the mats, training. He knows he’s made a mistake when he sees them. Dick’s face goes grim, like he’s bracing for bad news. Beside him, Damian lowers his sword and says, “Father. You’ve returned sooner than expected. Is there news?”

It takes him a second to figure out where he’s gone wrong. If he had good news—unequivocal, Tim-is-back-safe-and-sound news—he would have called it in immediately. If the news was unambiguously bad, he would wait to tell them face-to-face.

Barbara is back at her apartment in the city, fast asleep. Usually he would have told her—wouldn’t even have had to tell her since she can monitor Watchtower communications remotely—and the information would have been passed along to the team before he’d even made it home.

But she’s been working diligently for days and sleeping irregularly. Another sign of how off kilter everything is. A reminder of how many things he can’t take for granted anymore.

“They’ve been located,” he says first. Knows immediately that he’s being too terse and adds, “The Lantern Corps is in contact with them and reports that they’re all well.”

Dick understands immediately. “But you haven’t spoken to Tim? Or seen him?”

“No. We’re expecting a call in ninety minutes.”

The call comes closer to two and a half hours later. By then the cave is full. Dick’s taken care of reaching out and letting everyone know what to expect. Stephanie and Duke drive in together and begin sparring with Cassandra. Nothing too strenuous. Duke’s already done his patrolling for the day, but the girls will be heading out as soon as they hear from Tim. Normally, both girls would take this time to work on developing Duke’s skills, since his training schedule’s more erratic than anyone would like. But tonight they’re in a giddy, relieved mood, and it ends up being a two-on-one fight against Cassandra. Duke and Stephanie haven’t got the least chance of winning and don’t seem to care.

Dick’s joined Jason in his little corner of the cave, and they’re working on one of Tim’s cases. Dick’s managed to goad him into working together with the aim of solving it before Tim’s call just to rub it in his face. Bruce is fairly certain this is Dick’s way of keeping Jason calm and distracted. He’s been jittery the last few days, though it’s hard to tell if it’s because he’s upset about Tim, troubled by his own injuries, or just on edge after spending so much time in the manor. His spot in the cave is being slowly but surely domesticated—mostly through Alfred’s efforts, though Cassandra has been sneaking down some of her stuffed animals whenever Jason’s asleep. He’d be more comfortable with the privacy of a room upstairs, but he’s dug in his heels and refused every time it’s suggested.

Damian joined them earlier at Dick’s behest, but his temper has been frayed ever since their encounter with the Tetrahedra. When Dick and Jason fell into their usual pattern of bickering, he got impatient and abandoned them to sit with Titus and his sketchbook in another corner of the cave.
They all seem to be doing well under the circumstances. Bruce can’t take credit for that. He’s been neglectful the last few days. He knows that Damian has missed him. That Dick’s worried about him. That this is a golden opportunity to reconnect with Jason who will likely disappear the moment they confirm that Tim is truly safe and on his way home.

Parenting them has always been like this. Knowing that he should be doing things for them, but not knowing quite how to manage it. When he’s interacting with criminals or the GCPD, he always knows what he should and shouldn’t say. How to extract information. How to make an impression. How to inspire fear in some and how to convince others to cooperate. When he’s Batman, he knows exactly what he’s doing.

When it comes to his children, none of that is true.

He knows that they’ve needed reassurance these last few days, but he could never bring himself to provide that. He couldn’t give them empty promises and false hope. The best thing he could do was find Tim. Then things would be right again. Then he could focus on the rest of them again.

Now that Tim has been found, he should be tending to the others. Helping Dick and Jason with their case. Supervising the increasingly silly sparring session taking place out on the mats. Even just sitting with Damian, soothing the boy’s need for attention and affection.

Instead, he’s at the computer, still in uniform, trying to sort through Tim’s extensive notes on Wayne Enterprises. Understanding Tim’s To-Do list requires a great deal of context and many of Tim’s explanatory notes are more mysterious than helpful. It’s an inefficient use of his time. Tim will be back soon and can explain quickly enough what’s relevant without going into all of the extraneous details. He always does. If he brings a question to Bruce, it’s already been considered and thoroughly researched.

But he doesn’t really do that anymore. Nowadays, Tim can handle most WE matters on his own or with guidance from Lucius. Bruce’s official duties with the company have always been somewhat limited due to his playboy persona and frequent travels. Part of the reason Tim’s been able to take his place so smoothly is because many of the people on the board found that dealing with a teenage boy as majority shareholder was easier than dealing with Brucie Wayne.

Still, there are responsibilities that come with the role. And Tim takes them very seriously. More so than Bruce ever realized before he saw Tim’s notes.

With that in mind, he’s trying to get a handle on at least a few things that he can hold back. Tim shouldn’t be working on so much on his own. And these WE projects...they would be something to talk about. He and Tim don’t talk about much beyond work nowadays. Haven’t really since Bruce got back from his trip through time and immediately started Batman Inc.

He misses it, sometimes. Misses, selfishly, those few short months after Tim’s adoption when it was just the two of them. When Tim was just beginning to relax into life at the manor. Back then they talked every single day, on patrol and at home, about school and Gotham and the Titans and Tim’s numerous opinions on whatever constituted the current pop culture zeitgeist.

Jack Drake’s death was a tragedy that will haunt Bruce to the end of his days. But he can admit that he felt more than a little relief when he was finally able to take Tim into his home for good. Finally able to call him son.

Things had been good, for just a little while. Then Jason returned from the dead and tried to kill Tim. And then Damian’s existence was revealed and he also tried to kill Tim.
In spite of all this, Bruce is grateful that both of them have come into his life. Grateful for the privilege of being Damian’s father and for the chance to reconnect with Jason. He’d known it was difficult for Tim. He’d known, but hadn’t been able to fix it before he’d been lost in time.

Then he came back and everything seemed fine. Better than fine. Dick and Damian were a team, a new Batman and Robin. Dick managed, somehow, to become the parental figure Damian needed. Someone not of his blood who he nevertheless came to respect and love. Jason remained the Red Hood, but he’d come to a tentative truce with his brothers. He’d stopped killing, worked occasionally with Tim, and could be counted on to back up any Bat during an emergency. And Tim had become Red Robin. Striking out on his own, much like Dick did years ago when he became Nightwing. Working hard, following his instincts, finding proof that Bruce was still alive. Thriving in spite of his difficult circumstances.

In his absence, they grew in ways he never expected. Without him standing in their way, they flourished. And ever since his return, he’s done his best to be careful with them. To not damage all that they’ve accomplished.

They were better off, in some ways, without him.

That’s what he thought. Before. Now he’s trying to reconcile this with the little hints Barbara and Dick have been dropping in the last few days.

He’d known the year he was gone was difficult for all of them in ways that he can’t even imagine. And he’d known everything wasn’t perfect. Since his return, he’s noticed a rift between Tim and Dick, mostly due to Damian. And Tim and Damian still have next to no relationship and rarely spend time together. And both of those facts are odd. Because Tim looks up to Dick more than he looks up to Bruce, more than he looks up to anyone. And Tim never turns down an opportunity to build a relationship—or at least an alliance—with other vigilantes. Sometimes stupidly so. Breaking Jason out of jail when he was still unstable was a mistake, but one that he knows Tim felt compelled to make. The fact that he hasn’t continued reaching out to Damian is, in retrospect, strange.

He’d known, intellectually, that Tim struggled that year. He hadn’t thought he was still struggling. Not until he saw the full extent of the away protocol. The endless files and notes Tim’s left behind reek of an anxiety that Bruce wasn’t aware of. There’s a fear and stress here that he understands all too well. Tim’s not only taking on more than his fair share of work, but also trying to plan for a future that he doesn’t fully expect to see. Worrying about things falling apart in his absence.

It makes his chest ache.

Now, when he looks back on the last year, everything takes on a new meaning. He remembers Dick, right after Bruce returned, looking a little bit awed and certainly humbled as he said, “Tim knew. He never gave up on you.” Bruce had felt pride then, in his brilliant, stubborn son. But now, after talking to Barbara, he feels a strong sense of dread.

Tim was alone, the only one on that mission. Tim has never liked working alone. He’s always gravitated towards team ups and alliances. And often chided Bruce for trying to do things on his own.

And, according to Barbara, Tim didn’t really know that Bruce was alive. He just refused to give up because he had nothing left. No one else to follow. No place he felt he could call his own. So he went out and did exactly what he always warned Bruce not to do. Tried to work alone.

Bruce is trying to imagine a world where this is all he has left of Tim. Notes and To-Do lists and
the little parenthetical asides that he doesn’t quite understand but assumes are pop culture references.

He desperately wants to see his son again.

He’s barely managed to get through one report when the computer in front of him finally, finally indicates that a call is coming through.

He can hear the kids scrambling behind him, looking for domino masks and checking to make sure no one’s wearing anything too conspicuous or easily identifiable. There’s no reason to expect this transmission to be intercepted, but they follow strict rules about taking calls in the cave. They’re fine for now—the camera is set up at a careful angle that covers only the main computer chair and whoever’s sitting in it—but as soon as they’re all properly masked, Bruce expects a crush of people trying to squeeze themselves into frame. Dick will almost certainly hang over the top of the chair. Stephanie and Cass will throw themselves bodily over the arms. Jason and Damian are wildcards, but he could see either of them pushing their way to the front or perhaps hanging back and making fun of the spectacle the others are making of themselves. Alfred will stay back, watching, but close enough to speak, although he won’t, for a minute, because the relief will hit him hard. It always does. Duke will stay close to Alfred. He’s still new, still a little unsure of himself when things get especially chaotic.

It sounds like they’ve almost sorted themselves out when the screen in front of Bruce finally cuts to a blur of colored pixels that slowly resolves itself into a familiar face.

The wrong face.

“Heeeey, there, Bats. Greetings from space!”

“Impulse,” Bruce says, already feeling his patience draining away. “Where is Red Robin?”

“He’s here on the ship,” Impulse says. "Safe and sound. Didn’t you guys hear from the Lanterns? They were supposed to call you ages ago, but maybe their equipment didn’t work? I dunno. I had no trouble getting through once the storm slowed down a bit. I’m kind of the communications specialist around here. The Uhuru of the group. Although actually I’m also the captain, so I guess that makes me the Uhuru and the Kirk. And now that I think about it—”

“Impulse,” Bruce says again, letting his voice drop down into a growl. "I’d like to speak with Red Robin. Now.” He’s aware of the others starting to crowd closer. The screen is big enough that it can be seen from most of the cave and the volume is turned up, but they’re still drifting over, staying just beyond the sightlines of the camera.

Impulse is unfazed. “Sorry, no can do. He’s dead asleep right now, and Wonder Girl said not to wake him up. And since Rob’s out cold, she’s technically in charge.”

“How is he?” Dick leans in, one forearm resting on the back of the chair, so that he’s in view of the camera. Stephanie’s at his side. She puts a hand on Bruce’s shoulder and squeezes. Her way of saying, we’ve got this.

“Hi, Nightwing! Hi, Batgirl! Red Robin’s fine. A little banged up, but he’s still got all his limbs, so that’s a win right there. There was really nothing to worry about. We didn’t even get to do a proper rescue or anything. He was already out of his cell by the time we got there.”

“He escaped the Tetrahedra?” Dick asks.

“What? No. He escaped Bezneetan. We didn’t really see the Tetrahedra at all. Rob was super
adamant that we weren’t supposed to mess with them and that we’d screw up the entire plan if we did.” The quality of the video is a little grainy and occasionally lags, but Bruce is fairly certain he can pinpoint the moment when Impulse blurs, disappearing for less than a microsecond and reappearing in the same spot with what looks like a thermos in his hand. He takes a long slurp and adds, “I bet we could’ve taken ’em though.”

“What plan?” Stephanie asks.

“Figuring out what Bezneetan was up to. Duh. If we’d saved Rob while he was still with the Tetrahedra, we wouldn’t have been able to find Bez. Plus they’re apparently really chill if you don’t fight them. Weird and kind of scary, but not that dangerous.”

“As opposed to the person they handed him over to,” Jason growls. He doesn’t move into the frame.

Impulse frowns. “Who’s that? Red Hood?” He abandons his drink and crosses his arms, clearly annoyed. “Um, number one, yeah, we waited until he got handed over to Bezneetan because, again, it was part of the plan. Number two, we didn’t leave him alone for long. He was actually kind of annoyed because technically we were supposed to give him more time to gather information from Bez but we got kind of antsy—I mean, we’d been trailing the Tetrahedra for two days before they finally handed him over—but it mostly worked out okay anyway. And—what number was I on?”

“Three,” Cass says.

“And number three, what do you even care, dude? Aren’t you on the long list of people who’ve tried to kill him?”

Jason stiffens but doesn’t respond.

“Also, I’m not seeing Robin,” Impulse says. “I am definitely supposed to check on both Red Hood and Robin.”

“He’s okay,” Stephanie says. “Robin, get over here.”

Bruce expects a tantrum of some kind, but Damian only scowls and then leans in close enough to be seen.

“Okay, good. You were the two Rob was most worried about tangling with the Tetrahedra. He will be inexplicably glad to hear that you’re okay.”

“You were trailing the Tetrahedra,” Bruce prompts. “How?”

“We just followed Rob,” Impulse says.

“How were you following Red Robin,” Bruce says.

“Oh. He had kryptonite on him. Special kind. It has a weird and super distinctive radioactive signature. Easy to track if you already have a record of it and the right kind of equipment, which obviously I do. Gave Kon a hell of a headache, but Rob boxed it back up as soon as he knew we were there. It’s kind of a long story, but basically Lex Luthor does a lot of weird experiments on kryptonite because, duh, he’s Lex Luthor, and Rob hacks his systems every now and then to keep an eye on him, and when he comes up with something especially interesting, I go and steal it because, hey, Luthor should probably not be trusted with that kind of thing. And also because, you know, fuck that guy.”
“You and Red Robin have been breaking into LexCorp facilities,” Bruce says.

“Yeah, periodically. Wait, was that a secret? That doesn’t seem like something that’s a secret. I mean, everybody knows Rob hates that guy. He’s probably number one on Rob’s shit list. Well, okay, maybe not number one. That might be a tie with the Joker? Or, actually, the Joker probably wins out. But Luthor’s definitely a solid number two.”

“Not Ra’s al Ghul?” Jason asks.

Impulse scoffs. “Please. Ra’s al Ghul wishes he was that important. Rob would probably name him number one for most annoying, I guess.”

“Where’s this Bezneetan rank?” Stephanie asks. She squeezes Bruce’s shoulder again. Letting him know that she’s going somewhere with this.

“He doesn’t,” Impulse says. “He wasn’t even on our radar until he snatched Rob.”

“And where is Bezneetan now?” Stephanie asks.

“Dunno. We lost track of him. Once Rob got a look at his files, he said Bez wasn’t our main priority and that we needed to find out what was going on with this bogus mining operation before anyone caught wind that we were onto them.”

“So you just...let him go?” Dick says. “The guy who kidnapped and threatened to murder Red Robin.”

“Rob’s pretty sure Bez was going to torture and dismember but not actually murder him. So he’d be miserable and suffer, yadda yadda, insert some kind of metaphor about Bezneetan’s lost imperial dreams or whatever. Honestly, it was a pretty dumb plan, because if somebody cut off all Rob’s limbs, he’d probably just get Cyborg to give him some new ones and then get right back on the streets again. Also, we didn’t let Bez go, he just got away. I mean, maybe if we had two ships, we could have sent someone after him and come out here, but we only have the one, so,” he shrugs. “What can you do, yanno?”

“Where the hell did you get the ship?” Jason asks.

“If you must know,” Impulse says, “it was a gift. I’ve had it for ages.”

Jay isn’t having it. “And, what, your parents let you keep it?”

Impulse scoffs. “My dad’s dead and also not born yet, and my mom lives in the future. So they don’t really get a say.”

Dick leans in. “I know your legal guardians. What do they think?”

Impulse looks a little bit shifty. “My guardians. Yes. Well, they probably don’t know, exactly, but only ‘cause they never asked. Anyway, we’ve taken really good care of it and have been super responsible with the maintenance. It runs perfectly.”

“We being?” Bruce says, but he already knows the answer.

“Me and Rob.”

Jay makes a disbelieving sound. “You’re telling me that Red Robin—Mr. Responsibility himself—helped you hide and maintain a secret spaceship for years? Seriously?”
“Uh, yeah? Duh?”

“No offense,” Duke says, “but that doesn’t really sound like the guy we know.”

Bruce sighs. Stephanie huffs out a laugh. Impulse just looks unimpressed. “Are we talking about the same person? Robin numero tres, currently Red? The same guy who once hid an extra Batmobile in the batarang budget and shipped it to California in secret? The same guy who founded Young Justice, an unauthorized vigilante group of teens that started out with no adult supervision? And lied to the Justice League and the government to keep Secret safe?”

“Secret?” Duke says at the same time Jay sputters out, “He stole a whole Batmobile?”

“More like embezzled,” Impulse says. “But yeah, dude, it’s Rob. I know he gives off the straight-and-narrow vibe, like, 90% of the time he’s interacting with the public or authority figures, but that’s mostly because it’s way, waaaay easier to get away with stuff if you don’t ‘openly project an air of defiance.’”

“Oh my god,” Stephanie says. “He’s given you that speech too?”

“He’s given us multiple versions of that speech,” Impulse says.

Stephanie’s turned away from the screen now and is explaining to Duke, “Red Robin is kind of the definition of ‘I do what I want,’ but most of the time what he wants to do is at least nominally reasonable or responsible, so no one cares.”

“And when somebody does care,” Impulse says, “you just gotta be sneaky and smart. Comply until their backs are turned, you know? I mean, even with the Titans we—what?” he pauses, spinning his chair, clearly distracted by something off-screen. “No, I’m just talking to the Bats. I think there’s a whole flock of them.”

Conner Kent wanders into view, towelling off his hair and wearing what looks like some kind of maintenance jumper. “‘Sup,” he says to the camera, leaning in. “Superman’s not there, is he?”

“Nope,” Impulse says.

“Thank god. Where’s Rob?”

“Batnap.”

Conner puts his hands on his hips. “Dude. Weren’t you supposed to wake him up?”

Impulse spins in his chair again. “Wonder Girl said not to.”

“What, and he agreed?”

“No. He might have been unconscious at the time. Which, technically, means Wonder Girl is in charge.”

Conner groans. “He’s gonna kill you.” Turning to the camera, he adds, “Look, sorry about this, I’ll go get him.”

“Heynowaitaminute,” Impulse says. “Listen. I’m the captain, you gotta at least hear me out!” Conner rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t move. “Everything is still going according to plan, okay? Rob did in fact say that we should one hundred percent wake him up as soon as we could get a call through. True. But Wonder Girl said to let him sleep. And he definitely needs it.”
“Yeah, but, again, he’s gonna be pissed if—”

“Listen. I have thought this through.” When Conner just looks skeptical, he adds, “I have! I worked it out logically. See, if we wake up Rob, Wondy’s gonna be pissed off. At us. Right now. If we don’t wake him up, he’s gonna be pissed off later and he’s gonna be mad at her, not us. Therefore, we should do what Wonder Girl says.”

Conner looks mildly impressed. “I mean, I guess that makes sense, but—”

Bruce has had enough of this. He grinds out, “You’re forgetting about something.”

“What?” Impulse asks.

“Me.”

“Sorry, but this is a YJ thing. Leaguers don’t get a vote.”

“Impulse—”

On screen, Conner looks a little panicked. “I’m with Batman on this one, Imp. And as an official and founding member, I should get a vote. And I vote we do what Rob said.”

“Well, Rob and Wondy are co-leaders,” Impulse points out, “so they cancel each other out.”

“And you and I—”

“Would normally also cancel each other out,” Impulse says. “But! We are on my ship. The ship of which I am captain. And you are but a lowly ensign. So my vote counts for more, thereby tipping the scales to team let-Rob-sleep.”

Conner crosses his arms. “Number one, fuck you, and number two, that’s not how democracy works, and number three, I am not an ensign.”

“I gave you a chance to work your way up the leadership ladder and you refused. So it’s ensign or nothing!”

Conner shoots the camera a disgruntled look. “They’re gonna kill us for this. Damnit. Okay. Your problem, not mine.”

“Superboy,” Dick says, leaning in again, trying to sound conciliatory.

It doesn’t work. He’s barely got the word out before Conner throws his hands up. “Sorry, man, but these are YJ rules. I definitely don’t wanna get kryptonite-punched when we get back to earth, but you guys are way, way over there right now and Wondy is right here.”

“Plus, it’s just for a little bit,” Impulse says. “Based on our storm projections, we’ll be back in communication in, like, seven hours, I think? Maybe with a better signal too.”

“Yeah, all this static is killing my head,” Conner says. “I’m making like Robin and taking a nap. Sorry, folks.” With a wave to the camera, he’s gone.

“Like I said, we’ll call you back,” Impulse says. “Sorry and also please don’t tell the Flash. Bye!”

The signal cuts out.

Into the silence, Alfred sighs.
“These are the fucking kids Red called to save his ass?” Jason says, incredulous and furious.

Dick answers, sounding tired. “Yeah, that’s Young Justice all right. Think the Teen Titans but with very little oversight and no responsibilities. We probably should have expected something like this.”

“All of that nonsense about Drake’s rebellious tendencies,” Damian says. “Surely that was an exaggeration.”

Bruce can feel Dick glancing at him, hoping he’ll jump in. Tell the kids a story. They’re all as anxious as he is. They need distraction and reassurance.

“Master Timothy has always been very independently minded,” Alfred says before the silence lasts too long.

“Yeah, Stephanie pretty much nailed it,” Dick says, beginning to corral them all away from the computer. “Ninety percent of the time, he’s fine with following instructions because he agrees with you. But that other ten percent—”

Alfred stays behind. Lays a gentle hand on his shoulder and says, “Sir.”

“There’s more to this than they’re admitting.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“You think we should wait.”

“I wouldn’t presume to suggest anything of the kind,” Alfred says. “But if Master Timothy has a plan in motion, I would be very much surprised if our interference would in any way stop it.”

Bruce takes off the cowl. Closes his eyes. “You think I should wait. I should trust him. Trust them.”

He doesn’t have much of a choice.

Oracle’s meant to alert everyone when the next call comes through. Six hours later, she calls Bruce’s cell and says, “There’s a message.”

“Not a call?”

“No. Looks like a video recording. And we haven’t heard anything from the Justice League yet—about the mining operation or the kids.”

Something’s gone wrong. “Have you watched it yet?”

“No,” she says. “I wanted to let you know before I told the others.”

“I should watch it first.” Just in case.

Barbara sighs. “Bruce, we’re all in this together. They’re going just as crazy over this as you are. They can handle whatever’s on the video.”

“Alright,” he says, not sure that he agrees. But he trusts Barbara and he knows that he’s not at his best here. He can juggle multiple threats, multiple enemies, multiple mysteries—but when it comes to his children, he has never been able to strike the right balance. Always worrying about one to
the detriment of the others. Always not quite—or not at all—what they need him to be. “Call them all downstairs.”

Duke’s gone back home to his cousin’s place, but Stephanie apparently stayed upstairs with Cassandra. She comes down dressed in what looks like a combination of Cass and Tim’s clothes. Jason’s still in the cave, blinking and bleary-eyed from sleep. Dick and Damian show up with their masks in their hands even though Barbara’s message made it clear those wouldn’t be necessary. They must have had them at the ready, waiting.

The video starts the same way the message did: with Impulse sitting in a chair, grinning. But this time the quality is crystal clear. No static or interference. And Impulse doesn’t look quite as confident as he did before.

“Hail and well met and all that,” he says. In the background, Wonder Girl walks past with a massive piece of machinery balanced on her shoulder and says, “Is it this one?” to someone off-screen. There’s an answering call from Superboy that Bruce can’t quite make out.

“So things are a little hectic at the moment but I thought that, as communications specialist, I should probably record you all a quick message before things get really wild. Because it’s my responsibility. Also I feel kind of bad? I might have left a few things out and, you know, fudged the truth a little bit. But in my defense I really did think that we’d get to talk to you in a few hours! I didn’t know we’d be in such a hurry!”

Impulse looks genuinely apologetic, but Bruce finds himself watching the background more than the boy. Superboy hurries past. There’s someone else walking beside him, mostly hidden by his larger frame. Someone short and slight and dark-haired. Tim.

In seconds they’re off-screen again.

“So, basically,” Impulse is saying, “what happened is, we totally lied to the Green Lanterns. And by we, I mean Rob. Like a badass. See, we told the truth about the mining operation and how it’s sketchy as hell. And we did try to convince them that something was going on, because it definitely is. But the part where we said we’d let them investigate on their own? And then just go home when they fail to find whatever it is that’s going on? Yeah, no. Not gonna happen. Because Rob’s pretty sure the Lanterns aren’t gonna find anything, not because these guys are innocent, but because they’re too smart to get caught. If word about Bezneetan’s run-in with us has gotten out, then his business partners will be expecting some kind of investigation. What they won’t be expecting is for us to sneak in and do our own gatecrashing the moment the Lanterns leave.”

Impulse pauses to grin at the camera. “So that is the actual plan. Which we couldn’t tell you earlier because, you know, it depends on secrecy. And also we kind of didn’t know it yet, because Rob was going to explain after his nap. He’s still fine by the way. Super cranky, but fine. We kind of screwed up his timeline by not waking him up, so now we’re in a bit of a hurry. I don’t think we’re gonna be able to call you back for a day or so. Maybe a lot longer if the plan goes totally sideways. But, anyway, we didn’t want to leave you totally in the dark, plus we kind of need you guys to chill and let us handle this. Which I know is not want you wanna hear—we get told that kind of thing all the time and it sucks—but the fewer Leaguers involved, the better. That’s what Rob says, anyway, and it’s his plan. Sorry for kind of sort of lying earlier and also please don’t tell the Flash. I’m already in enough trouble as it is.”

“Yeah, no, we definitely need that one.” It’s Tim’s voice. Superboy flies past again, carrying some sort of tubing in his arms. And then Tim wanders into view and turns toward Impulse. “You good?”
He’s wearing something that looks like his Red Robin uniform, but the shape of it is different and there’s no cape. It’s a space suit, Bruce realizes. Streamlined compared to traditional astronaut equipment, but still bulkier than his normal uniform. There’s a helmet tucked under one of his arms. Impulse looks like he’s wearing something similar.

Tim’s stance is relaxed, but he leans on the back of Impulse’s chair like he needs the support. Probably injured. Definitely tired. The right side of his face is bruised—based on the spread, he’s probably got a black eye hidden under his domino mask, which means it’s possible his vision’s been compromised—and his lip is split on the same side.

“Yep,” Impulse says, popping the p. “Just sending out a quick and totally reassuring message to the Bats.”

Tim looks at the camera, “What, as a video?”

“Yeah, you said we ought to contact them. Otherwise they’re gonna totally freak when the news gets back to earth.”

“I was thinking more of a coded message sort of thing. Not—” he waves at the camera, “—whatever it is you’re doing.”

“I’m gonna encrypt the hell out of it first, obviously. And I’m being very persuasive!”

Before Tim can respond, Wonder Girl jogs into view, breathing a little heavily but looking smug. “We did it. You said it couldn’t be done, but we did it. With time to spare.”

Superboy floats over just behind her. “Is that everything?”

Impulse nods. “Yeah, I’m just letting the Bats know that our last message was bullshit but also that everything is totally under control and we definitely do not require outside intervention at this time.”

Wonder Girl and Tim exchange a look. “No offense, Imp,” she says, “but I don’t think you’re the most convincing messenger.”

“Also,” Superboy adds, “should we really be warning people that we’re about to flagrantly violate intergalactic law?”

“That’s why I’m sending it to Batman,” Impulse says. “He can keep a secret. And I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t nark us out to the Lanterns.”

“If we set a time delay, it won’t matter,” Tim says. “Pretty soon the Lanterns and the local security forces are already going to know we’re up to something. No narking necessary.”

Impulse is grinning now. “At which point we will already be in trouble. So we might as well let everyone know that trouble is part of the plan.”

Tim shakes his head. “If everything works out the way it’s supposed to, we’re not going to be in trouble. We’re mostly going to be causing trouble.”

“My mom is not going to appreciate that distinction,” Wonder Girl points out. “And I am definitely in trouble already. I do not need her to know I’m breaking space laws and probably going to get thrown into space jail.”

“You don’t need to put ‘space’ in front of everything,” Tim says. “You can just say jail.”
“Sorry, what’s Batman’s car called?” Wonder Girl asks. “What do you call the little things you throw at people? And your home base and your—”

“I am not responsible for the bat-based naming conventions of my team,” Tim says.

“Whatever, whatever,” Wonder Girl says. “Who’s this video supposed to go out to, again? Only the Bats? You better not include my mom.” She leans in to look directly at the camera. “Do not tell my mom about this. I’m sure she’s already freaking out enough. And unlike some people, I sent her a message before I left.”

Superboy hunches his shoulders. “I was in a hurry! Rob asked for help and he never does that.”

Tim frowns. “Yes, I do.”

“Not lately, dude. You’ve been all Gotham all the time.”

“I’ve been kind of busy, yes—” Tim starts to say.

Impulse interrupts. “Just admit that you love Gotham more than you love us. Even though it’s never gonna love you back. It’s a city, Rob. A terrible, dark, crime-ridden city.”

“You only think Keystone is better because they put you in their Flash Museum,” Tim says.

“I still vote no to the video,” Superboy says. “Because, again, it’s just going to get us into more trouble.”

“Kon, you are missing the big picture here,” Impulse says. “As far as trouble goes, we are fast approaching what I like to call the Total Saturation Point. Like sponges fully immersed in water, we are about to be in so much trouble that we literally cannot get into any more. We’ve already lied to the Lanterns and the Justice League and Batman. And we’re maybe gonna end up in space jail. One video letting everyone know they don’t need to worry isn’t gonna make a difference.”

“I feel like this is not a video that’s going to reassure anyone,” Wonder Girl says.

“Agreed,” Tim says. “But we should probably send them something. If only to make sure that no one comes after us. Assuming they aren’t on their way already.”

“They definitely aren’t,” Impulse says. “I was very persuasive! They’re totally not worried about you at all right now.”

“Um, Batman definitely looked worried,” Superboy says. “Mostly angry, but definitely worried.”

Tim sighs and runs his hand over his face. “If I had talked to them, I’d know if someone was coming or not. That’s why you were supposed to wake me up.”

“Rob, we have already agreed to move on from that unfortunate unpleasantness,” Wonder Girl says. “So. What do we need to make sure they know so that they don’t come here?”

“They should already know the political situation,” Tim says. “The problem is, they might not care if they think we’re in enough trouble. But the whole point of it being us and not them out here is that we can minimize the potential fallout if something goes wrong. The Justice League is the primary representative body for Earth when it comes to galactic matters. If the League comes here and causes trouble, Earth faces a lot of potential consequences. If, however, a few Earthlings with no authority and no status come and make trouble—” Tim shrugs, “—then we get in trouble, but nobody else does. And technically this doesn’t involve Earth at all, so the Justice League really..."
doesn’t have a reason to investigate.”

“Neither do we, technically,” Superboy says.

“Well, yeah,” Tim says, “but when’s that ever stopped us?”

“I feel like telling Batman that we have a plan that’s potentially going to end with you locked up in space jail is not going to convince him to stay put,” Wonder Girl points out.

“I’m pretty sure they could extradite us if they had to,” Tim says. “And if that doesn’t work, we could also break out. Security in this sector’s not nearly as good as they seem to think it is.”

“I just want it on record that I am one hundred percent in favor of going on the run and being galactic outlaws,” Impulse says. “Best road trip ever.”

Tim frowns. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come down to that. But while we’re talking contingency plans —”

The other three groan.

Tim puts up his hands. “Just hear me out. In the event that things go south, I think we should consider doing some damage control. And that means minimizing how many of us get in trouble.”


“You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

“I can tell when you’re about to suggest something stupid,” she says. “But go ahead. Make a fool of yourself.”

“I’m just saying. I’m the reason we’re all out here in the first place, and I’m the one who insisted we investigate this place. Knowing that it would lead to trouble.”

“You told us you thought something nefarious was going on and we all decided to come here and check it out. Together. And that’s how we’re going to get through this. Together. It’s not your fault that you’re the one Bezneetan fixated on.”

“It’s not about that,” Tim says. “It’s just the easiest story to sell. If someone needs to take the blame, I can. Worst case scenarios? One, I get locked up for a bit and then extradited. Whatever. I could use a vacation anyway. Two, I go on the run for a bit and then double back to earth. I can start over if I have to. Drop the name, find a new uniform. Change up my fighting style a bit and give up the bo staff. Probably work outside of Gotham for a while. It would be hard to prove I’m the same person, so I can get back to work almost immediately. Whereas your powers are all pretty recognizable. If someone comes looking for you on earth, you’d be easy to find.”

“Very logical,” Wonder Girl concedes. “Still the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard, but I’ll give you points for consistency.”

“So this is just your worst-case scenario that you felt the need to share?” Superboy asks.

“I don’t think it will be necessary,” Tim says. “But we should still consider it.”

Wonder Girl sighs. “Okay.” Superboy and Impulse immediately begin protesting, but she silences them with a raised hand and continues, “I have considered it. And now, after a full deliberation and consultation with the rest of the team,” she waves at the other two boys, “I have decided to veto the
fuck out of that plan.”

Tim sighs.

Superboy’s grinning now. “I like how most of the time your ideas are brilliant. Just, like, strategic masterpieces. And then you balance it out with absolute bullshit.”

“Can you imagine if we went on a rescue mission to get Rob,” Impulse says, “and then didn’t bring him back? I don’t think I could deal with Batman being that mad at me. I would definitely rather be intergalactic criminals instead.”

“We’re not going to be intergalactic criminals,” Wonder Girl says. “We’d be intergalactic vigilantes. Totally different.”

“Vigilantes are by definition criminals,” Impulse points out. “They violate some laws in order to enforce others. Which is basically what we’re doing right now.”

“Technically true,” Tim says. “It’s a career that requires a healthy dose of hubris.”

“Anyway,” Superboy says. “Now that we’ve satisfied Rob’s dumbass need to catastrophize—”

“It wasn’t that dumb.”

“Dropping your entire identity and starting from scratch is kind of extreme.”

Tim shrugs. “I’m really not that attached. Red Robin was always meant to be disposable.”

“I, for one, am one hundred percent in favor of changing your name,” Impulse says.

Tim sighs. “I know.”

“Red Robin is a terrible name.”

“I am aware that you don’t like it, Impulse.”

“Like, even Red Hood is better.”

Tim’s forehead wrinkles in a way that means he’s raising his eyebrows beneath the mask. “I’m sorry, did I just mishear you? Did you just say you preferred Red Hood?”

“I’m gonna go with Rob on this one,” Superboy says. “Being named after an accessory is dumb.”

“Fuck off,” Jason says, breaking the silence in the cave. Stephanie immediately elbows him, but they don’t quite break out into a scuffle. It’s the first movement Bruce has noticed in the cave since the video began.

“This is why you are my favorite,” Tim is telling Superboy.

Wonder Girl rolls her eyes. “Rob. They are both dumb. I think pretty much all color-based names are? I’ll give a pass to the Green Lanterns, since the color is an important part of their whole thing. But otherwise?”

“Wow,” Tim says. “I have never heard such complete bullshit in my entire life.”

“Name one—”
“Mistake, mistake, you’re making a mistake,” Impulse says.

Tim crosses his arms. “Black Bat. Obviously. Checkmate right there.”

“Hell yeah,” Stephanie says. When Bruce glances back, she and Cass are both grinning.

“Black Bat is not terrible,” Wonder Girl concedes. “Kind of creepy but—”

“Black Canary.”

“Oooh. Yeah, okay, I guess—”


“Are you gonna list everyone?” Wonder Girl asks. “You are, aren’t you? Please don’t.”

“We are getting sidetracked,” Tim admits.

“Oh, but real quick,” Impulse says. “If you do drop Red Robin and need a new name that no one will ever suspect is you, you know what would be a great alternative? One in keeping with tradition and also totally perfect for obfuscating your identity?” He’s grinning widely now.

“I can already tell that I’m going to hate this, but, yes, Impulse, please tell me what my next codename should be.”

“Two words: Red. Hood.”

Wonder Girl groans. Superboy laughs. Tim looks like he’s probably rolling his eyes under his mask.

“He better fucking not,” Jason growls.

“Language,” Alfred says.

On screen, Impulse is still trying to sell the idea. “There’s been more than one Batman before. And there are two Superboys right now. And you have to admit the helmet would be good for hiding your identity. Plus, having two of you running around would confuse the hell out of criminals.”

“I’m pretty sure even Gotham’s criminal population is smart enough to notice if Red Hood loses six inches and drops a hundred pounds,” Tim says. “Also, if I poach any other titles from him, he will probably not actually murder me, but he will want to. And right now I’m pretty sure he doesn’t? So, yeah, absolutely not.”

“Dude,” Superboy says. “You know if you break with tradition, you’re gonna have to pick something yourself. You’re gonna have to do some soul searching and actually express yourself and—”

“Um, no,” Tim says, grimacing. “I am absolutely not going to do that.”

“But then what—”

“I have other teammates,” Tim points out. “I’ll just use someone else’s name. Probably Black Bat.”

On screen, Wonder Girl looks extremely skeptical. “Seriously?”

In the cave, Cassandra is smiling even more widely than before.
“Yeah,” Tim says. “I’ve filled in for her as Black Bat before. Back in Hong Kong. And she’d definitely share the mantle with me if I asked. I already have a standing offer to be her sidekick when we grow up.” He’s grinning now too.

“It’s true,” Cass says, leaning against Stephanie and looking thoroughly pleased.

“Okay, glad we’ve solved Robin’s current identity crisis,” Wonder Girl says.

“I don’t—”

“But it looks like we need to hurry up, right?” She points to something off-screen. “We’ve burned through the rest of our time. We gotta be out of here in five minutes.”

“We still need to run through the safety check first,” Tim says.

Wonder Girl frowns. “How long is that gonna take?”

“At least ten minutes.”

“Then we’re gonna have to skip it.”

“We’re about to maneuver through an asteroid field in the middle of an electrical storm in a stunt that the Lanterns described as ‘suicidally dangerous,’ and you want to skip the safety check?”

“Rob, we just don’t have time.”

Tim crosses his arms. “About that.”

“Ooooh,” Impulse says.

“You didn’t.” Wonder Girl says, looking shocked. “You wouldn’t.”

“We have at least twenty-five minutes before our target window opens,” Tim says.

“You lied.”

“Yes,” Tim says. “It’s kind of like that time you promised you would wake me up and then didn’t. Remember when you did that?”

“Oh my god.”

“I told you he was still pissed,” Superboy says.

Wonder Girl throws her hands in the air, “I can’t believe you’re gonna be petty about this.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t see this coming,” Tim says. “Also, you’re wearing the wrong suit.”

“Wait, what?” She looks down at herself. Like the boys, she’s wearing a modified version of her uniform, but now that Bruce is looking more closely, he can see that hers doesn’t seem to match theirs.

“That’s a diving suit. For swimming. In water. A substance that is notably lacking in this environment.”

“Rob! I put this thing on like an hour ago.”

“And you have about ten minutes to change if you want to participate in the safety check. You
know, the thing where we test the equipment we need to survive in the cold and unforgiving vacuum of space?"

Wonder Girl points a finger at him, makes an inarticulate sound of rage, and then stomps off, yelling something over her shoulder.

Tim just cups his hands over his mouth and calls after her, “Next time wake me up!”

The other boys look amused. Superboy leans over Impulse’s chair to stage-whisper, “Don’t you hate it when Mom and Dad fight?”

Tim pivots back toward them, both eyebrows raised. “I’m sorry but did you just—” He stops, shakes his head, and then steeples his fingers in front of himself. “Pause everything. Kon, are you trying to tell me that you think Wonder Girl is the mom friend of this group?”

Superboy looks mildly alarmed.

“This is a serious question,” Tim says, “and it deserves a serious answer. In what world is Wonder Girl the mom friend?”

“No no no. I’m not having this conversation again.”

“It’s you, Kon,” Tim says, his voice serious. “You are the mom friend.”

“I am not.”

“Impulse, what does the science say?”

Impulse blurs and then his hands are full of papers. “The science says yes. Superboy is definitely, by all possible metrics, the mom friend.”

Tim spreads his hands. “See?”

“You guys can’t just cite ‘science’ every time you agree with each other.”

“Sorry, no,” Impulse says, waving what looks like a colorful bar graph. “I just checked and the science says that we can.”

“Factually accurate,” Tim agrees.

“You know what?” Superboy says. “I’m not even gonna do this. I’m not even going to waste time on this conversation. Aren’t we supposed to be doing an important safety check or something?”

“Such a mom friend thing to say,” Impulse whispers.

“We should in fact move on to the safety check,” Tim says.

“Do we really have to—”

Tim cuts Impulse off. “Yes, we have to do the safety check. The fact that you didn’t do a safety check before leaving the planet fills me with a deep-seated horror that I cannot adequately express with words.”

“Okay,” Impulse says, “but, one, you were in trouble. Two, we were in a hurry because of one. Three, it turned out fine then, so it’ll probably be fine now? Isn’t that, like, sea-and-space-faring mythology? If something goes well, you ought to do it the exact same way every time if you want
good luck.”

“No, dude,” Superboy says. “That’s sports superstitions. Also, we need to stop doing this counting thing. It’s getting out of hand.”

“Was that practical knowledge or tube knowledge?” Tim asks him.

“Tube, actually.”

Tim shakes his head. “I will never understand the logic behind what they chose to dump into your head and what they didn’t. Sports superstitions. Seriously.”

“Don’t think about it too hard,” Superboy says, patting him on the shoulder. “I never do.”

“Anyway, safety check. Get to it. Oh, Impulse, give me a hair tie. And Superboy, say something to the camera. We really are running out of time, so this absolute disaster of a video is gonna have to be our message home.”

Superboy looks at the camera, suddenly uncertain. “Uh, hi, tell the—tell my folks that I’m really sorry for not leaving a note. And skipping out on all my chores. Do not tell them about all the crime we are about to commit.”

“Wow,” Impulse says. “You really suck at this.”

“I’ll wrap this up,” Tim says. “Start the safety check for me? And do not skip anything this time.”

Tim watches them go, looks at the camera, and then sighs. Sits down in Impulse’s chair.

“Hi, B. So I’m guessing you aren’t super happy with me right now.” All the energy in his voice is suddenly gone. This is the Tim that Bruce recognizes from the past few months. Serious and self-contained. No more animated hand gestures. Even his face, half-hidden under the mask, is much less expressive than it was just moments ago.

“If there was any other way to get the Tetrahedra out of the city without risking death and devastation, I would have done it. But this was the fastest, safest way to protect Gotham. I’m not sorry that I did it, but I am sorry I couldn’t do it without lying to everyone. I just couldn’t risk any interference.”

He pauses, still expressionless, and then adds. “The others told me they talked to Robin. And that he’s fine. Tell him I’m sorry about this whole mess. And for wearing his colors. I had to make sure they recognized me. Without the uniforms, humans are pretty much indistinguishable to a lot of alien species.” He sighs. “I should have anticipated something like this. I don’t think this kind of thing is going to happen again, but I should probably still go over some of my less well-known enemies with Robin, just in case. And tell him—” Tim pauses again. “If he ever has a run-in with someone he doesn’t recognize, and I’m not around to explain, tell him to call Arrowette. Oracle has her number. She’s a civilian now, but she knows everything about our Young Justice days. And tell Robin he can trust her. She knows my name.”

Damian’s gone stiff and furious. “Why,” he spits out, “wouldn’t Drake be able to tell me himself?”

“He’s just being paranoid,” Stephanie says, her voice low. “It’s not—”

“I’m guessing you’re also mad about me calling the others,” Tim says. “But this isn’t a Gotham problem. And it’s definitely not a mission for Batman, Inc. It’s a YJ thing. And I don’t mean that in an ‘it’s our mess and we have to clean it up ourselves’ way. We’re not trying to prove anything.
We just...they’re the right people for this mission. We’ve dealt with this kind of thing before. And we all have fewer responsibilities to deal with right now. Gotham still needs protecting. Superboy, Impulse, and Wonder Girl do a lot of good, but none of them are responsible for a territory right now. It’s also better for it to be just us if anything goes wrong. We really are going to cause some kind of intergalactic incident. And that’s assuming the plan goes well. If not…”

He pauses, then shrugs. “I made it very clear to Green Lantern that the four of us are out here on our own and that we’re only loosely affiliated with members of the Justice League. If there are any repercussions, they’re on us, not you. I don’t really expect any of this to make it all the way back to earth, but if anyone does try to use this against you, you should disavow us immediately. It might be tricky. There’s a small chance they might send a telepath—there are a few of them in this sector that we’ve encountered before—but even then, I’m pretty sure you can be truthful so long as you just stick to the bare facts.”

Tim starts counting off points on his fingers. “You didn’t know what we were planning until it was too late and you’d never have approved it if you did. True. They’re not gonna like the fact that we were all mentored by members of the League, but there’s plenty of evidence that we primarily work as independent agents now. I live on my own and run my own cases. The fact that I work with the rest of the Gotham team just means that I’m an ally. It doesn’t make me your responsibility. Impulse has basically never lived with the current Flash and hasn’t worked with him outside of major crises in years. Same with Superboy. Wonder Girl is a little trickier. She and Wonder Woman still train together, but Wonder Girl works mostly on her own when she’s not with the Titans. She also made it clear before she left that this was not a Titans mission, but it still might be necessary for them to officially kick us out. Which would be a tough sell. But I don’t think it’ll come to that. It’s just a worst—let’s go with worse-than-likely scenario. And, come to think of it, the Robin costume’s good for that too. It adds another layer of plausible deniability. If things go sideways and you and the League get a lot of blowback, you can just point out that you have the real Robin. I’m just a pretender who stole his colors. Actually, maybe just let Robin do the whole interview.” He gives the camera a wry, tired smile. “If anyone can convince them that I’m not on the team, it’s him.”

“He’s kidding,” Dick says quietly, his hand on Damian’s shoulder. Damian doesn’t say anything. Just pulls up the hood on his sweatshirt so they can’t see his face.

“We’re probably going to be out of contact for a while,” Tim says. “There are a few ways this could go. In an ideal world, we’d be able to take our time and do this right. But if my suspicions are correct, we’re going to have to hit this fast. So a big blow up’s more likely. Whatever you hear, don’t worry. It’s gonna sound worse than it is.” He pauses, turning his head to the side like he hears something.

Wonder Girl jogs back into view, now wearing a different suit and carrying a helmet of her own. “Ready to go, asshole?” she says, already sounding cheerful again.

“Are you?”

“Yeah? Don’t tell me I’m still in the wrong suit.”

“No. Just thought you might be missing something.” He holds up one of his hands.

“Ah!” She grabs the hair tie he’s holding and starts pulling her hair into a ponytail. “I definitely don’t wanna go through the whole helmet hair fiasco again.”

“Being able to see out of your faceplate is kind of important.”
“Yeah, yeah. You still suck and I’m still mad at you.”

“Right back at ya.”

“You coming?”

“Yeah, one sec.”

He watches her jog off-screen and then looks at the camera again. Worries at his split lip for a moment. Then says, his words a little rushed now, “Look, B, I hate to do this to you because I know this is driving you absolutely crazy right now, but you really can’t come after me, okay? You need to stay in Gotham and protect the city. And to do that, you have to take care of the team. And to do that, you have to take care of yourself. If anything—look, if—”

He stops, clearly frustrated. Then tries again, slower this time. “If anything happens to me, you can’t go off the rails again. You know what I mean. After Hood—you can’t do that. I don’t think you will. I don’t think anyone would let you—it’s not like it was back then. You have people now. You have the team. But you still can’t—I’m just saying—”

Bruce is distantly aware that the sounds of shifting and shuffling behind him have stopped. That everyone’s gone silent and still.

“Look,” Tim says, “when we first met, I told you that Batman needs a Robin. And it’s true. Gotham needs Batman, and Batman needs Robin. But you don’t need me.”

Bruce doesn’t realize he’s gripping the arms of his chair until the plastic beneath his hands begins to crack. Even then, he can’t force himself to let go.

“We got really lucky, B. With Hood and with Robin. Way luckier than we deserved. But you know you can’t do that for me, right? I mean, this is probably something we should have talked about before I ran off to space and slept through our only possible window of communication—but I’m pretty sure you already know this, right? It wouldn’t work. It wouldn’t be me that came back. Not with Ra’s and—Anyway, I just wanted—we never talked about it, but I just wanted to let you know that it’s okay. And if anything happens, you’re gonna be okay. The team isn’t going to let you not be. But I still wanted you to hear it from me. And I know it’s not something you want to accept, but you know I’m right. I was right the day we met. I was right last year when everyone thought you were dead. And I’m right about this too.”

He pauses, looking at the camera, as serious as Bruce has ever seen him. Then he seems to shake it off. Relaxes again. “Anyway. I genuinely don’t think that’s gonna be relevant anytime soon. Please trust me on this one. Whatever’s going on here, my team and I can handle it. Also, speaking of the team, don’t be alarmed.”

He holds up a hand. “Wait for it. I am ninety-nine percent sure that—ah, there we go.”

A high-pitched alarm starts screaming through the ship, loud enough that it hurts to hear even through the video.

But Tim’s grinning again. He puts a finger to his ear and then says loudly, “Hi, there. Yeah, I noticed. Didja maybe skip a step in the safety check? After I explicitly told you not to? Yeah, I know. That’s why I chose this decibel.” The alarm cuts off. Tim listens to his comm for a moment, then laughs. “Yeah, yeah. I’m about to encrypt it now. Be up in a minute.”

He gives the camera a wry grin. “All evidence to the contrary, I promise we’ve got this and there’s nothing to worry about. My team’s got my back. There’s no one I trust more. And that is all the
time we have so. You know. I’ll see you when I see you. Red Robin out.”

Then he reaches forward toward the camera. And the screen cuts to black.

Chapter End Notes

The planet Myrg, Queen Ramia, and Doiby Dickles are all canon. The adventure with Bezneetan is not. Timeline-wise, it would have taken place very late in the original YJ series.

Impulse was given a spaceship by a sultan for reasons that I forget. Reasonably sure it's the same issue that the boys adopt the sentient Super-Cycle. (The original YJ was bonkers in the best possible way.)

Tim helping Cassandra with Black Bat business in Hong Kong is canon. Tim actually filling in as Black Bat is not canon but it should be. That story didn't fit into this fic, but I might write it some day.

Impulse mentions two Superboys. The other is Jon Kent. He's mentioned several times but not actually featured in this story.
“How’s it going?” Babs asks, her voice cool and calm in his earpiece. A soothing contrast to the atmosphere in the Watchtower. Bruce and the other Leaguers are standing together in a tight, anxious knot, but Dick’s broken away from them for a moment to sit and rest.

“How’s Gotham?”

“Still arguing,” Dick tells her. “About the same. Signal’s at home. Black Bat finally reappeared just in time for patrol. And Robin bullied Batgirl into suiting up. He was pretty nasty to her but I think it’s what she needed? They seem okay now. Bickering a lot, but I don’t think they’re angry. At least, not at each other. Black Bat’s with them. And Red Hood wanted me to tell you that he’s coming up there if you don’t leave soon.”

“Tell Hood he can argue with Wonder Woman.”

“Not fair,” Babs says. “You know she’s his favorite.”

She’s also the main reason they haven’t left yet.

Bruce told the Justice League about the message almost immediately. Clark and Wally are both dead set on going after the kids, but Diana’s successfully argued them down twice already and is apparently ready for round three.

“I know Cassandra,” she’d told them during the first argument. “She’s a good leader and a sensible warrior. She would not abandon her duties on Earth for something frivolous. If she and Red Robin both consider their mission to be a worthy one, I believe that we should trust them.”

The others didn’t agree, but their plan to go after the kids in a stealth ship and hope for the best depended on Diana’s cooperation. “I won’t stand in your way,” she told them, “but I have multiple loyalties here. If you go, I won’t cover for you when the Green Lanterns check back in. And I don’t think you’ll make it into that sector without their help.”

Wally still seems more agitated than worried. Clark, on the other hand, is getting increasingly anxious in a way that kind of surprises Dick. He’d thought that Clark and Conner still weren’t that close—Tim’s mentioned as much—but Clark looked like he was close to losing his temper with Diana more than once during their last argument.

It’s Jon’s fault, according to Damian. “He’s been pestering me via text ever since the four of them disappeared,” he’d told Dick the day before. “He’s likely hounding his father even more.”

Bruce still isn’t talking much. Before they watched that video, he’d at least been making an effort. He gently rebuffed most of Dick’s attempts to start a conversation, but he still checked in. Still asked after the others.

Now, he’s pretty much shut down. He’s stayed in that eerie blank state that’s been stealing over him off and on ever since Tim disappeared.

And Dick honestly has no idea what’s going on in his head when he’s like this. He can't tell if Bruce is really as laser-focused on the search as he seems to be or if he’s floundering the way that
Dick is. Can’t tell if he keeps going blank and silent because he’s concentrating or because he’s stuck in his own head and needs help getting out.

Right now, Dick can’t sit still for too long without the old nightmare feeling of paralysis stealing over him. The sensation of standing still and watching helplessly while something terrible unfolds right in front of your eyes and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. When that feeling catches hold of him, it’s like the intervening years never happened. Like he’s still in that circus tent, watching his parents fall for what feels like forever.

Dick wants to know if that’s what’s happening to Bruce—if he’s getting stuck and needs help—but he can’t bring himself to ask. Not when Bruce is wound up so tightly he looks like one wrong move could make him snap like a frayed wire. And if Bruce is just completely focused, Dick doesn't want to disrupt that. Doesn't want to risk sending Bruce back to one of the worst moments of his life just by mentioning it.

It’s just not something they talk about.

So Dick does his best to stay busy and tries not to think about the moment he found Tim’s uniform and knew he was gone. Tries not to think about that damned away protocol or Tim telling Bruce to let him go if he dies. To not even consider bringing him back.

He used to be better at pushing down all of his fears and focusing on what needs to be done. He could keep going, keep moving, keep working. But now, every time he tries to focus, a strange ache keeps creeping up on him. An overwhelming, distracting fondness for the kid he saw on that video. He hasn’t seen Tim grinning and goofing off like that since before Bruce disappeared. Realizes now that he hasn’t seen his little brother without a mask on his face in weeks.

That distance between them isn’t new, but he’s always attributed it to Tim’s busy schedule. In the months after Tim returned from his search for Bruce, he renovated the old theater in Crime Alley, helped Cassandra wrap up her work in Hong Kong so that she could move back to Gotham, started juggling increasingly ambitious Red Robin operations alongside his duties as the heir to Wayne Enterprises, and maintained the charade of Tim Wayne’s slow recovery from the fake shooting he orchestrated with M’gann’s help.

So Dick got used to seeing Red Robin more often than he saw Tim. And Tim-as-Red-Robin was different than Tim-as-Robin. Much more serious. More focused. And always a little bit guarded in his interactions with the rest of them. But that wasn’t unexpected. With Jason and Damian both on the team now, it made sense that Tim would be more careful when working with them. It kept the peace. He’s still just about the only person who can interact with Jason for extended periods of time without a vicious argument breaking out. And once Tim stopped letting Damian’s insults get under his skin, the fights between the two of them tapered off as well.

He’d thought this new seriousness was just part of Tim’s new persona as Red Robin. A change that Tim felt was necessary now that he was growing older and more independent.

But the Tim on that video—the casual, relaxed, constantly grinning kid, teasing and being teased—that’s someone Dick hasn’t seen since Tim’s days as Robin. The Red Robin on that video looked confident and at ease with himself, despite the chaotic and dangerous situation he and his team were facing. Which means the way Tim’s been acting in the last year has nothing to do with his new name and uniform. And everything to do with who he’s with.

That kid’s been in there the whole time. Tim’s just kept that part of himself hidden away in the last two years. It’s eased up occasionally. There have been flashes of the old Tim, but they’ve been few and far between. And Dick hasn’t gone searching for them. Hasn’t insisted the two of them spend
time together. He always accepted that Tim was busy with his own things. And Dick needed to take care of Damian first and then help train Duke and then—

There was always another “and then.” Always something else he needed to be doing. Someone else who needed him more.

You don’t need me.

How the hell did he let things get this bad?

“You still with me, N?” Babs asks.

“Yeah, sorry. Just thinking.”

“How’s the argument going?”

“Diana’s implying that she actually knows her protégé, whereas Clark and Wally don’t know theirs. Which...at this point might be kind of true. But they’re not taking it well.”

“And B?”

“He’s not participating,” Dick says. “But I think that’s just because if we get one more bad transmission, he’s planning to head out either way. He and Clark are pretty sure they can get the Green Lanterns to deputize them if they claim that no one else can handle the kids. That might be enough to get them into that sector.”

The first transmission, half a day ago, had been a report from the two Green Lanterns investigating the mining operation. They hadn’t found anything suspicious, and when they returned to the asteroid field, the kids were already gone.

The second transmission had been from a much more frazzled Kyle Rayner, reporting that they’d caught Impulse and Wonder Girl on the mining facility and were transporting them to a nearby planet for containment. The situation was serious enough that additional Lanterns were being called in as well, but Kyle still urged them not to come. The Justice League arriving uninvited would only make a complicated and chaotic situation even worse.

There have been no sightings of Superboy or Red Robin since their last video, and Impulse and Wonder Girl aren’t, Kyle told them, “willing to snitch.”

Dick’s got no idea what that means in the context of their plan. Whether they’re even still following the plan. He has no idea if Conner and Tim are alright or—

“You gonna let him go out there?” Babs asks him, her voice cutting through his train of thought. Calling him back to himself.

“Of course not,” Dick says. “I can go in his place. He won’t like it, but the Flash and Superman will side with me. Wonder Woman might even stay here with him. Hopefully she can keep an eye on him. But if she doesn’t, I think—”

“We’ll take care of it,” Babs says. “If you get on that ship, don’t worry about B or any of the rest of us. Just be careful. And focus on getting our boy back.”

He’d love to do that. To head out and forget about everything else except the search. But he knows he won’t be able to. Half of his mind will still be on Earth, worrying that some new disaster’s happening while he’s gone.
He was in space with the Titans when Jason died.

“T’m sorry,’’ he tells Babs. “For leaving you to wrangle everyone by yourself.”

He hears a little puff of breath against the microphone—a quiet, barely there laugh. He recognizes the sound of it. Knows the expression she must have on her face—a tired half-smile—and knows exactly what she’ll say next. “Don’t worry about it, N. I’ll manage.”

It makes him smile. Just like she knew it would.

It’s one of their private jokes. A watered-down echo of something he used to say back when he was still a snot-nosed kid in short pants and she was the brand new Batgirl. A new addition to the team that no one could quite figure out at first. Was she Batman’s partner? Robin’s? Something else entirely?

“You know the Batman?” Dick would say any time someone asked him about her. “Well, she’s the Bat-Manager.”

It’s not the first dumb joke he told her in the field, but he’s pretty sure it’s the first one that actually made her laugh.

He stopped calling her that years ago. But any time he asks her if she can handle something, she still smiles a bit when she says, “I’m the manager, right? I’ll manage.”

And somehow she always does. He knows she’s been busy as hell the last few days. Helping the Justice League sort through Green Lantern reports and evaluate potential tips. Working her way through Tim’s files just in case there are clues hidden away somewhere in his labyrinthine system. Contacting his friends and former teammates to see if they have any more information on Bezneetan.

He’s been focused on the rest of the team. Trying to keep an eye on Bruce and Jason and Damian and everyone else. But she’s been helping out with that as well. He knows that Stephanie’s been talking to her a lot, and that Duke and Cass have both visited her apartment at least once since this all began. Looking for guidance or comfort or just help understanding what’s going on and why.

“They don’t know,’’ she keeps reminding him. They weren’t around when Jason died. And Bruce brought Damian back as quickly as possible using a Lazarus Pit. He never admitted at any point that Damian might really be gone. That there was a possibility he couldn’t be brought back.

None of the others know what Bruce is like when he can’t do anything. When he can’t save someone.

So she’s been helping out with that too. Keeping them calm. Keeping them focused.

Initially, he hadn’t agreed with her plan. He wouldn’t have spent so much time on Tim’s away protocol. He thought they should be focusing all of their energy on finding him, not solving his old cases.

“Think that one through for me,” Barbara had said, clearly exasperated, when he tried to argue with her. “What exactly is Duke supposed to do right now? Or Stephanie? Or Damian? This isn’t just about Gotham, Dick.”

She was right. They all function better when they have a task to focus on. That’s why she’s checking in on him even though there are a million other things she could be doing right now. Because he’s stuck on the Watchtower, waiting for news, waiting for a decision to be made,
waiting to go. And it’s driving him crazy.

It’s been more than half a day already. The sun was barely rising on Gotham when he and Bruce left the city after watching Tim’s message. It’s already set by now.

He used to love seeing Earth from the Watchtower. Now he can’t stop thinking about how small Gotham is. How big the universe is. How far they’ll have to travel to reach Tim. How long that will take. How long they’ve waited already.

He can feel the panic starting to set in again. It’s been getting worse as the hours pass. He’s been awake for too long, but he can’t take a break now. Not while Bruce is still awake. He has to be ready to go. Has to be ready to stop Bruce from going. He has to—

“You still there?” Babs asks. Her voice is soft and a little sleepy.

He realizes, abruptly, that she might not have called just to check in on him. That she might need someone to talk to—or just someone to keep her awake—just as much as he does.

“Yeah,” he says, already feeling his heartbeat slowing down again. “Sorry. Are you okay? You sound tired.”

“I’m fine,” she says. “Definitely tired, but fine. And I’m about to call it a night. The comms are covered. I’m getting a few hours of shut-eye at home while everyone’s occupied. But I’ll keep my lines open. If you need me, just call.”

He knows she spent most of the day at the manor, keeping an eye on the others. The fact that she’s retreated back to her apartment to sleep during normal patrol hours is a testament to how damned hectic this week has been.

“I will,” he tells her. “And if we head out, I’ll find him. I promise.”

It’s not necessarily a promise he can keep, but he says it all the same.

“Just be careful out there,” Babs says. “I know that you’re—hang on.” Her voice sharpens, like she’s just snapped to full attention. “I’m getting a signal. Or, rather, the Watchtower is.”

The communications screen is signalling an incoming call. Dick moves to stand by Bruce, bracing himself for more bad news.

The face on the screen belongs to a Green Lantern that he doesn’t recognize. Humanoid in shape, but with reddish-purple skin and a ridged face that makes it look a bit like an overzealous Klingon cosplayer who decided to cover more than just their forehead. There’s a downward slope to the Lantern’s shoulders that speaks of exhaustion. “We have finally,” the alien says, speaking slowly, “caught all of your truly terrible children.”

“Oh thank god,” Wally says. Clark puts his hand over his heart like he can’t quite believe his own relief.

Bruce’s stern expression doesn’t crack. He looks like he’s still waiting for something to go wrong.

“O, did you get that?” Dick asks.

“I’m patching this transmission through to the cave already,” she says.

“All four of them?” Diana asks.
“Yes, yes. Your Green Lantern has confirmed their identities. But if you must see for yourselves…”

The Lantern fiddles with a communication device on their wrist and then the screen cuts to a video.

It’s all four of them. Tim’s leaning against Wonder Girl, letting her take most of his weight, and Superboy is carrying Impulse bridal style. They all look rough, but they’re alive and alert. Tim and Wonder Girl are both deep in conversation with a group of aliens, and Impulse keeps squirming in Superboy’s arms, twisting himself around to listen to what they’re saying.

“Is this happening in real time?” Bruce asks.

“It’s from an hour ago,” the Lantern says.

“You found them an hour ago—” Wally starts to say, but the Lantern cuts him off.

“It has been a very stressful day. Mostly due to your offspring.”

“What have they done?” Clark asks.

“There is an official list somewhere,” the Lantern says. “I believe it includes trespassing, conspiracy, theft, kidnapping, evading arrest, jailbreak, stealing military property, damaging military property, injuring an officer of the law, and a multitude of other crimes.” The Lantern pauses to give them what Dick interprets as a serious look. Then their expression abruptly morphs into something less severe. “They’ve also saved several thousand sentient beings from enslavement and almost certain death.”

“Sorry, what?” Wally makes a time-out motion with his hands. “Run that last one by me again.”

“Essentially,” the Lantern says, “two of these earthlings got themselves purposefully arrested, knowing they’d be taken back to the nearest military outpost. Then they broke out, stole a military ship, and flew back to the mining facility with a full armada chasing after them. Once there, they reunited with the others. The two strong ones engaged us in battle while the two small ones sabotaged the mining facility. And then this happened.”

The image of the Green Lantern is replaced by a split screen and the sound of alien voices shouting in a language Dick doesn’t recognize. The screen’s now showing at least a dozen different views of what must be the mining facility—an enormous but dilapidated space station—as well as footage from what looks like the bridge of a spaceship. One of the consoles in that ship is displaying something that looks a bit like a sonar screen. Dick can see a big red dot straight ahead—the mining station—as well as a dozen smaller green dots slowly converging on it.

Then, suddenly, every view of the mining station goes dark. And the little sonar screen is filled with red.

The alien yelling intensifies and then someone zooms the sonar screen out and they can see dozens and dozens of individual red dots crowded together, completely surrounding the little green ones. The cameras didn’t cut off, Dick realizes. They’re all being blocked.

“Are those ships?” Clark asks.

“A few might be,” the Lantern says, as the video cuts back to them. “We’re still in the process of cataloguing it all. But most of them are construction rigs and space stations. A total of fifty-seven habitations of different sizes. They were all hidden away in separate universes. The children called them pocket dimensions? As I said, we are still sorting it all out. But in essence, we have found an
enormous illegal manufacturing and smuggling ring populated almost entirely by slaves and run by a variety of individuals from illustrious families all across this sector of the galaxy. Their pocket dimension technology allowed them to operate completely in secret and to transport weapons, ships, and all manner of contraband through this sector of space without getting caught. That’s why my colleagues couldn’t find anything during their initial sweep. All of the evidence was folded away in a different dimension.”

“Wait,” Dick says. “So the kids uncovered all that and you still arrested them?”

“I didn’t. They turned themselves in to the local authorities as soon as all of the pockets...unfolded? Considering the circumstances, they’ll likely be issued a pardon. The news has already spread to the nearest five planets.” The Lantern touches their wrist again and a dozen different news reports pop up on the screen. There are videos of large groups of aliens—presumably the rescued trafficking victims—and what looks like an alien press conference already underway. But most of the videos show the kids. “The political leaders of this system are understandably embarrassed, but considering the full armada witnessed everything, it’s not a story that can be covered up. And I don’t think the government wants to deal with this sudden influx of refugees. The Lantern Corps will negotiate to get your children out of trouble in return for our assistance with the relocation efforts. That is the general plan. Which the children suggested. It has been...a very strange day.”

“Are they well?” Diana asks.

The Lantern makes a complicated facial expression that Dick thinks might be a wince. “For the most part. The two small ones sustained some injuries. I think both broke pieces of their internal skeletons. But the fast one has already recovered and was making a nuisance of itself just a little while ago. The last one—the red one?—will get its foot looked at as soon as its interrogation is over.”

“He’s injured,” Bruce says, his voice sharp, “and undergoing interrogation.”

The Lantern makes a small sound, halfway between a buzz and a hum. “It is more of a debriefing? We had to talk to all of them to figure out what was happening. When I left them, I don’t think any questions had been asked yet. The red one started talking as soon as it had the chance and was still going when I left. The biggest one is still with it, but I can put you in touch with the others if you’d like. They’re at the hospital now.”

“Please do,” Diana says, smiling. When the communications monitor cuts to gray—the standard waiting screen—she turns to look at her teammates. “It seems our intervention was unnecessary.”

“That was way too big of an operation for them to take on their own,” Wally says. “They’re lucky it went as well as it did, but I still think—”

The screen cuts on again and then Cassie Sandsmark is smiling at them, looking tired but excited.

“Diana! Hi, hello, please tell me you’ve already told my mom I’m alright.”

“I will call her as soon as we finish speaking,” Diana says. “It’s good to see you, Cassandra. And to hear that you and your teammates are well.”

“Is Impulse there?” Wally asks.

“That depends,” Cassie says, glancing off screen. “If you’re mad at him, then no. He’s definitely not here.”

“Green Lantern said that he was injured,” Wally says, more insistent. “I just need to see—”
“I was hurt, but I got better. Bye.” There’s a flash of brown hair and bright goggles over Cassie’s left shoulder and then it’s gone. One second later, he reappears, slowing down this time, and adds, “But my ship is toast. The armada completely obliterated it. Sent it up to the great junkyard in the sky. Which was completely unnecessary, because—”

“Sorry,” Cassie says to them, while forcibly shoving Bart off screen. “This is just a quick call to let you know we’re okay. We fully expect a whole boatload of lectures when we get back, but right now we’re just about ready to drop. You have no idea how complicated the last few days have been.”

“We’ve been worrying about you this entire time,” Clark says, as stern as Dick has ever heard him. “The least you can do is explain what happened. And why you chose to do this on your own.”

Cassie frowns. “If we needed help, we would have called you.”

“You’re apparently under arrest,” Wally points out. “And two of you were injured. It sounds like you got in way over your heads.”

“Getting arrested was an unfortunate but necessary part of the plan,” she says, her voice more serious now. “I understand why you might not approve of how we handled things, but we did what we thought was best and it worked out. Impulse and Red Robin sustained minor injuries, but that could happen on any mission. Out here or back on Earth.”

“On Earth you have backup,” Clark points out. “On Earth the Flash and I can be there to help you in seconds. Out there you’ve got no one.”

“We have each other,” Cassie says. Like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Kid,” Wally says, and Dick inexplicably hears Impulse’s voice in his head saying, Mistake! Mistake! “You and your little team are good at what you do. No one’s denying that. And we all understand wanting to save your friend, but you shouldn’t have tackled this alone. And the second you had Red Robin, you should have come home. Or called us. Or contacted the Green Lanterns. Or—”

“We went on our own,” Cassie says, cutting him off with an upraised hand, “because Red Robin asked us to. He’s our friend, yes, but he’s also our best tactician. He knew exactly who and what he needed to get himself free from Bezneetan. And once we knew something was going on at that mining facility—that something had to be going on because our knowledge and experience with Bezneetan led us to believe that he and his business partners couldn’t be amassing that much wealth by legal and ethical means—once we knew something was going on, we had to act and we had to do it quickly. We were in a unique position to hit them while they were almost guaranteed to underestimate us. They expected us to do exactly what you wanted us to do—grab Red Robin and get the hell out of there. I understand that you don’t like our way of doing things, but you can’t argue that we messed up. We didn’t. We pulled off an incredibly difficult mission with only minor injuries. No matter how you look at this, it’s a win.”

“It worked out this time,” Clark concedes. “But what about next time? I just don’t think you understand the risk that you’re putting your teammates in. If something had—”

Dick’s watching the screen, watching Cassie visibly rein in her temper—right up until she doesn’t. Her hand’s raised again, like she wants to interrupt, and then, too fast for his eyes to follow, it’s on the table in front of her. The cracking sound that follows is loud enough to make half the people in the room jump. Bruce, of course, doesn’t. And neither does Diana. If anything, she looks like she expected it.
“Hey, no,” Cassie says. “No way. You do not get to say that to me.”

“Cassandra,” Diana says, stepping forward to stand by Clark’s side.

Cassie goes on like she doesn’t even hear her. “You do not get to say that to any of us. We understand exactly what we did. You’re the ones who don’t seem to get it.” She stops, takes a deep breath, and—still angry, still fierce—says, “They took Red Robin. Our Robin. Who, I might remind you, is the only person on my ‘little team’ that I haven’t buried.”

Wally and Clark both flinch.

Cassie visibly takes another breath, still staring them down. “Look,” she says, “I understand that you’re upset and I understand why. But when it comes to completing a mission, we can’t afford to prioritize your fears and concerns over doing our job. I will admit that there are probably legitimate criticisms you could make about how we handled all of this. I’d be more than happy to hear your arguments some other time. If, for example, you want to argue about our plan, then fine. I’ll grab Red Robin and he’ll talk tactics at you until the name Sun Tzu makes you want to cry. If you object to the fact that we broke the law, I’ll get footage of the people we saved and you can tell me if their lives were worth breaking a few rules. If you’re mad about the potential political fallout, all I can say is that we did everything we could to mitigate that risk and that we’re ready to accept whatever consequences follow. Those are all conversations that we can have. But I will not—my team will not—argue about whether we should be making these decisions in the first place. We fully understand what this job entails. We have chosen this life over and over again, and we have always known the risks that come with it. We’re well past the apprenticeship phase of our training. We don’t need to be tested or judged or—”

She stops herself. Takes another deep breath and continues more slowly. “We will always accept advice. And criticism when it’s warranted. You can question our methods, our decisions, even our skills, but you do not get to question our right to be doing this. We have more than earned that minimum of respect.”

She pushes her hair back from her face and looks at each of them in turn. Dick understands, suddenly, why Tim has always been so confident about passing the reins to her. “So,” she says, “if you have a problem with any aspect of how we handled this, I am happy to argue you right into the ground when we get back to Earth. But until then, all I really want to hear from anyone is, ‘Good job saving all those people,’ or, ‘Hey, we’re really glad you’re all okay.’”

She sits back in her chair, posture a little less aggressive but still decidedly belligerent, and crosses her arms.

Diana is still smiling. “You and your team have done well,” she says, her voice gentle. “And we look forward to seeing you safely home soon.”

Cassie makes a face like she thinks she’s being mocked, but her shoulders relax a bit. “Thank you, Diana,” she says, shifting self-consciously in her seat. She suddenly looks less like an Amazonian warrior and more like an awkward, uncomfortable teenager. “And sorry. For going off like that. It really has been a hell of a week.”

“You’ll have to tell me all about your adventures when you return,” Diana says. “But in the meantime, I believe Batman would appreciate a word with his son.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course. Sorry, I know he wanted to—just give me a second.” She leans away from the camera and calls out, “Imp, are they back yet? Well, go check.”
There’s a *whoosh* of air that blows her hair up and over her face. She just sighs. Two seconds later, it’s blown back in the opposite direction.

“They’re still talking,” Bart says off screen, “but it looks less like an interrogation about the dimensional stuff and more like Rob lecturing them on their security protocols. He’s started drawing diagrams.”

“Oh my god,” Cassie says, “not the diagrams. That’s it. I’m gonna go rescue him from himself. Batman, I will have him call the cave as soon as we get back.”

Bart pops up behind her chair. “He has to get the foot double-checked first. I mean, I’m sure it’s fine, but the medical staff were really freaked out when SB set it, so they’ll probably want to X-ray it or something.”

Clark gapes at this. “You let *Superboy* set Red Robin’s broken bones?”

“Yeah, mine too. TTK, you know? He’s done it before. And it sort of had to be him, ‘cause the field medic who looked us over was an insect lady and she seemed kind of confused by the whole having-your-bones-on-the-inside concept. Man, I bet having an exoskeleton is so convenient. Anyway, Rob said he did a good job, so it’s totally fine. No need to worry.”

“You’re doing it again,” Cassie says.

“That was very reassuring,” Bart says. “How was any of that not reassuring?”

Cassie just rolls her eyes. “We’ll call you soon. Wonder Girl out.”

They go home. It takes some convincing, but Bruce is pretty much running on empty by now. Dick makes desperate eyes at Diana as soon as his back’s turned and with her help, he manages to bully Bruce back onto the transporter.

Stephanie and Damian are still wrapping up the night’s patrol, but Cass ambushes Bruce the moment he sets foot in the cave. Apparently she came back to the manor as soon as Oracle confirmed that they would be hearing from Tim.

She immediately begins stripping off Bruce’s gauntlets. “Alfred is waiting,” she tells them. “Your food is upstairs. Still warm. Go. Jason and I will wait for Tim.”

Jason’s at the computer, his feet kicked up next to the keyboard, which he knows Bruce hates. Dick wonders if he moved there to watch the transmission from Wonder Girl or if he’s been there all night, monitoring the comms so that Babs and Alfred can rest. He has his nose in a book and doesn’t look at them when they arrive. Just yells over his shoulder, “It’s lasagne. Don’t keep Alfie waiting.” Even from across the cave, Dick thinks he can see relief in the set of his shoulders and the curve of his spine.

Now that they’re home, now that Cass and Alfred can keep an eye on Bruce, all Dick wants to do is lie down in a pile of blankets and wait for his little brother to call. He gives Jason’s abandoned medical nook a single glance and then Cass is at his side, poking him in the ribs. “You too,” she says, gesturing toward the locker room where she’s banished Bruce.

They change into their civvies—no uniforms upstairs—and then sit down to eat in the kitchen. It’s silent, except for the sounds of Alfred cleaning up after the others. The news seems to have had the opposite effect on him. Where Bruce and Dick are just about ready to collapse with relief—although Dick suspects that Bruce is still wary and will be until they actually see Tim—Alfred
seems to have more energy now than he’s had all week. He’s bustling, which Dick’s pretty sure he hasn’t done since before Tim disappeared.

They’re still eating when a silent shadow comes barreling through the open doorway and throws itself at Bruce. It’s Cass. She wraps herself around him in a full body hug—which he returns automatically, his fork held out awkwardly to avoid getting food on her—and then she’s up and off again, smiling broadly at them. She’s in her civilian clothes, but there’s a black domino mask covering her eyes.

Alfred doesn’t even chide her for breaking the rules. He just sets down the dish he’s washing and says, softly, “I take it Master Tim has called?”

She bounces on the balls of her feet, still grinning, and says, “Come now. He’s tired, he will sleep soon. No dishes. Finish eating later.” And then she’s gone as quickly as she came.

They follow. Not actually running—he and Bruce don’t want to leave Alfred behind—but definitely hurrying. Cass is waiting for them in the elevator. Bruce is still tense, still worried, but she wraps herself around one of his arms, practically humming with happiness. And when Dick bumps against his shoulder and grins at him, Bruce almost smiles back.

When the elevator doors slide open, they can hear Tim’s voice amplified by the speakers, saying “—don’t actually mind the rubbery ones.”

Jason, just as loud even without the amplification, lets out a groan. “Red, that is disgusting. Quit it or I swear to fucking god I’m hanging up on you.”

“Oh, but texture-wise, which do you think would be worse, squishy or crunchy? Because this one? This one manages to be both.”

They pile out of the elevator just in time to see Tim hold up a green, iridescent beetle the size of a jawbreaker and then pop it directly into his mouth.

He’s wearing his domino mask and what looks like a long-sleeve black shirt. Sitting with his back pressed against a dark gray wall. He looks off somehow: much too pale, his hair messy and somehow different than Dick remembers it being. Exhaustion’s radiating from every angle of his body. And he’s eating bugs. And laughing a little at the gagging sounds that Jason’s making. And he’s okay.

Cass is already gliding forward to slip over the arm of the computer chair, half sitting on Jason’s lap. He catches at her waist and automatically steadies her even though she doesn’t need it.

“You’re back,” Tim says, sounding sleepy and pleased. He sticks his hand into an orange plastic-looking orb the size of a large popcorn bowl and then pops another bug—purple this time—into his mouth.

Bruce is rooted to the spot, just looking at Tim, finally, finally accepting that he’s okay. And Dick lets himself forget about Bruce for a moment.

“What are you doing?” he says, just a little too loud, a little too overexcited, and not caring at all.

There’s a pause and then Tim perks up. “Who’s that?” he asks, sounding a little hopeful. “Nightwing?”

Dick slaps on one of his spare domino masks, knowing it’ll be a little crooked, and then rushes forward to hip check the computer chair out of his way. Jay and Cass both screech out a protest,
and he has to raise his voice to say, “Red, baby brother, what are you doing?”

Without the chair, he has to crouch a bit to get himself at the right height for the camera. For a moment Tim doesn’t react at all—a time lag on the video, he realizes, at least a second, probably closer to two—and then Tim’s face splits into a grin and Dick knows that they’re both seeing each other for the first time in—in way too long.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Tim asks.

“Chewing and talking at the same time, you heathen,” Jason says.

“What are those?” Dick asks.

“Space bugs,” Tim says. “I have to eat them ’cause they’re apparently chock full of nutrients. At least, that’s what we think the doctor said? I don’t speak any of the languages here and Impulse’s translation skills have been pretty hit or miss so far.”

“Hey!” Somewhere off-screen Bart protests. Behind the camera, Dick guesses. The image shakes a little bit and Tim’s gaze seems to shift upward just a tad, though it’s hard to tell with his mask covering his eyes.

He looks tired and happy. His movements seem slower and a little sloppier than usual, but Dick thinks that might just be the time lag from the video. Then Tim yawns and goes to wipe at his eyes with his hand—and bumps into his mask. “Goddamnit,” he says.

“Language.” Alfred has a mask affixed to his face and is standing close enough to be heard, though he doesn’t venture into the line of sight of the camera. Considering the way Jay and Cass are eyeing the space now and whispering conspiratorially, Dick thinks this is a wise choice.

“Sorry, A,” Tim says, automatically.

“Where are you?” Dick asks. “And how are you? And—”

“Space hospital. Slightly under arrest, but not really. Security here is a joke and they’re not doing anything about Impulse popping in and out. I’ve got a couple of broken bones in my right foot, but that’s pretty much it.”

“Waitwaitwait,” Dick says. “Didn’t Impulse say that your medic was an insect lady?”

“Yeah,” Tim says. “Almost all of the staff here are insectoid in nature and, yes, that does raise some troubling questions re: the bugs that I am now consuming. But we are reasonably certain these space bugs are not the same species. So it’s hopefully not any different than human mammals eating, like, other mammals? It is definitely a little bit weird, but not cannibalism weird. We hope. I would have asked more questions but, again, language barrier. And I’m not allowed to sleep until I finish eating these, which is cruel and unreasonable and probably some kind of cultural misunderstanding. I think they want me to build a healing cocoon or something? Apparently walking around with broken structural supports in your body is not something their species does.”

The camera suddenly lifts an inch and then moves haphazardly forward as if someone is pushing it into Tim’s face. “Tell them what you have, Rob,” Bart says.

“I don’t have anything,” Tim says, sounding irritated. He’s looking past the camera now with a pinched expression on his face.

“What does he have?” Jason asks. He and Cass are edging into Dick’s space even though they
don’t need to be in front of the camera to see Tim.

“He has,” Bart says in a conspiratorial whisper, “space scurvy.”

“I do not,” Tim says. “I have, at worst, a mild nutritional deficiency.”

“And a broken foot.”

“Yes, thank you, Impulse. Put that down before you break it.”

The camera pulls back a foot and stops wobbling.

“How did you manage to get scurvy?” Jason asks. “You’ve only been gone a few days.”

“I don’t have scurvy,” Tim says, still sounding annoyed. “And it’s been a little bit longer than that for me. Did Wonder Girl not mention that part? No? Okay, so, there were these artificial pocket dimensions that these people were using for nefarious purposes—long story, don’t want to go into it right now—and Superboy and I popped into one of them for research purposes and because it was part of the plan—which, again, kind of complicated, don’t want to go over the whole thing now—and it turns out that there’s a pretty extreme time dilation effect? Which helps explain how they were getting so much done so quickly and making so much money and—but, anyway, it was kind of a Narnia situation. Out here we were only gone a little less than twelve hours. But we were inside of the pocket dimension for twenty-three days. Which, incidentally, is still not enough time to develop scurvy.”


“There was nothing edible in the pocket dimension except space paste,” Tim adds. “Which I had to eat for three weeks. High in protein, low in things like vitamins or any discernible flavor.”

“It did have a flavor,” Bart says. “SB brought some back and I tried it and it tasted like dried glue.”

Tim gives the camera a mournful look. “Do you have any idea of how much I was looking forward to eating real food? I had actual dreams about consuming vegetables. And now? This is what I get.” He pulls another bug from his orb and sighs. “Tell B that he can’t be mad at me. I’m already suffering enough.”

“Red Robin,” Bruce says. Two seconds later, Tim stiffens. Clearly startled, although Dick doesn’t think anyone who isn’t a Bat would mark it as that. From the outside it just looks like a sudden stillness in his shoulders and a seriousness in his face that wasn’t there before. The two-second delay and the size of the computer screen make it more obvious.

“Hi, B,” Tim says. His voice is still light, but there’s a tension in it now that wasn’t there before. He drops the bug back into his orb.

“I’m not angry,” Bruce says.

“Ohkay,” Tim answers.

“You sound angry,” Impulse says.

Tim’s carefully neutral expression shifts into a clear frown. “Could you not,” he says, glancing away from the camera, then back again. “Okay, so, just to catch you up.” And then he rattles off all the information he’s already given them. It takes Dick a moment to realize why he’s doing it. He doesn’t know when Bruce arrived. Still can’t see him because he’s standing beyond the sightline of
the camera. Bruce hasn’t got a spare domino mask to put on and his cowl is packed up for the night.

Alfred gives Bruce a meaningful stare that roughly translates to, *Don’t mess this up*, and then goes to retrieve another chair so that Dick doesn’t have to keep crouching on the ground.

Tim’s summary only takes about a minute to recount. It’s delivered the same way he gives most of his reports nowadays—serious and concise. The bare bones without any of the joking around he was doing just moments ago. Jason and Cass manage to reclaim their spot in front of the camera while Dick’s taking the spare chair from Alfred. Dick takes a moment to make eye contact with Bruce and tries to convey that the correct response to this is *obviously* to tell Tim that he’s glad to see him. Glad that he’s okay.

Bruce, of course, immediately asks, “What happened to Bezneetan?”

“His whereabouts are currently unknown.”

Jason makes a disbelieving sound. “You really let him get away?”

“He got away,” Tim says, frowning even more now. “We didn’t *let* it happen. It just...happened.”

“He wasn’t a priority,” Bruce says, an edge in his voice.

Tim either doesn’t notice or, more likely, is pretending not to. “Yeah, exactly. He’s a low-level scumbag with high charisma and the luck to be born into a family with lots of connections. But on his own he’s not really a threat. And, anyway, compared to crashing a trafficking ring that enslaves sentient beings, one homicidal lunatic bent on revenge isn’t exactly a priority.”

“Can you track him?”

“Possibly? But I doubt it. I have contacts out here, but not many and they don’t cover nearly enough ground—or space in this case. If I stayed up here and dedicated myself to the pursuit, then maybe I could track him down eventually. But I don’t think it’s worth the time and effort. He’s scared off for now.”

“You probably don’t have to go looking for him,” Bart suggests. “His whole revenge speech was kind of intense, so he’ll probably come after you again sometime or other.”

“That’d be way easier, yeah,” Tim agrees.

“You’re sure he’s not going to come after you now? Or anyone else?” Dick asks. “You said security’s not great, and video of the four of you is already being plastered all over that sector of the galaxy. *And* the Green Lantern mentioned that this operation you just exposed is connected to a lot of powerful families. You probably made a whole host of new enemies today. If they—”

Tim’s lips twitch up into a small smile. “*Their* security sucks. I’m good.”

“You’re injured,” Bruce says, voice thick with disapproval.

In response, Tim reaches forward and the screen blurs for a second. He’s turned the camera, Dick realizes, and now they’re seeing the other end of the bed he’s sitting on. Or, really, it looks more like a submarine bunk. To the left, the gray wall curves up to create a ceiling. To the right is open air.

Cassie is lying on her side, squished up against the wall just next to Tim. Her head is resting on her
folded arms in the space at the foot of the bed and her eyes are closed. Bart is perched right next to her, half in the bunk and half out, one leg curled up under him and the other dangling off the bed. His face is lit up by half a dozen brightly colored holographic screens that keep shuffling as he wiggles his fingers at them. “‘Sup,” he says, waving at the camera and then making an annoyed face when the screens all change color in response.

“Injuries and inadequate security aside, I think I’ll be fine,” Tim says, flipping the camera back to face him. “SB’s right here,” he adds, pointing at the ceiling. “He’s hiding away with a migraine right now—too much tactile telekinesis in one day—but he should be alright in a few hours.”

“How soon can you get out of there?” Dick asks.

“Well, that depends on the trial,” Tim says. “We’re meeting with a military tribunal tomorrow. If they decide that they’re really mad at us, we’ll probably get sentenced to immediate banishment from the entire sector, which means the Green Lanterns will be escorting us home right away. But if they aren’t really all that mad at us, we’ll probably still get sentenced to banishment, but we’ll only be banished from a smaller part of the sector. Apparently the legal equivalent to a slap on the wrist here is being forever exiled from a certain moon that everybody hates and nobody would want to go to anyway. It’s this whole weird thing.”

“Even if you only got a little bit banished,” Dick says, “wouldn’t you still be heading home tomorrow?”

Tim tries to rub at his eyes and grimaces when he hits his mask again. “No. Sorry. If they let us stay, we’re probably going to take a couple days to sort out a few things. It shouldn’t take long.”

Dick expects Bruce to protest, but Alfred is the one who clears his throat and says, “Is that wise?”

Tim is clearly flagging, because he just says, “Hm?” even though Alfred is clearly trying to give him some kind of meaningful hint.

“I only mean to point out that you have had a trying few weeks and will no doubt need some time to recover,” Alfred says. “I would hate for you to fall ill.”

“Oh,” Tim says. “Yeah, no, I’m good. Not so much as a scratchy throat.”

“The doctor gave him a bunch of antibiotics,” Impulse offers. “Space antibiotics. Or at least that’s probably what they said? It was either antibiotics or microscopic insect eggs that are going to slowly grow inside your body, sucking up all your nutrients until they get big enough to hatch and then—”

Jay makes another gagging sound, but Tim just says, “I’ve seen that movie—” at the same time Bruce says, “Antibiotics.”

“What?” Tim asks, even though Dick’s pretty sure he can hear them perfectly.

“Antibiotics,” Bruce says again.

“Yeah,” Tim says. There’s a beat of silence and then he adds, “A, there’s nothing to worry about. I brought extra with me. Not actually quite enough to cover this entire trip, so I have been off them for a little while, but—”

Alfred tsks.

“What, you were sick when you threw yourself into the arms of the alien hordes?” Jason says.
“That sounds dumb as fuck.” Cass swats him on the arm.

Tim says, “I wasn’t sick. They’re just a precaution.”

“For what?” Bruce says, voice flat in that way that means he’s upset.

Tim says, “Just so I don’t get sick.”

“Why,” Bruce asks slowly, “are you worried about getting sick?”

“It’s the asplenia,” Bart says. “Increased risk of infection and all that.” And Dick doesn’t even know what that is but he knows it’s bad because Tim doesn’t visibly react—not to frown or glare at Impulse or roll his eyes. His expression stays carefully blank.

“Asplenia,” Bruce repeats.

“The fuck is that?” Jason asks.

Tim’s gaze shifts slightly upward—looking at Bart, probably—and then he looks back at the camera and doesn’t say anything.

Alfred sighs.

Bruce says, “You lost your spleen.”

“Shit,” Bart says in small voice. “Okay, in my defense, I didn’t know that was a secret? Like, isn’t it public record or—”

Dick says, “You secretly lost your spleen?”

Tim frowns at the camera. “No.”

Bart says, “Um.”

Tim says, “It’s not like I misplaced it. I just don’t have one anymore. And it was never a secret. Alfred knows.”

Cass and Jason both turn to look at Alfred, Cass clearly confused and Jason outright incredulous. Alfred keeps his gaze fixed on the screen and ignores them.

Bruce says, “Red Robin,” in a stern voice, but Dick knows that’s not what he wants to say. That it’s Tim, his son, he wants to talk to right now.

And it’s Tim, not Red Robin, who answers, his shoulders slumping and his voice gone plaintive in a way it almost never does when he’s in uniform. “I am way too tired to have this conversation right now. This isn’t fair. I can’t even see you.” Bruce doesn’t move, but his hands twitch, and Dick wants suddenly, desperately, to find him a mask to wear, because it really isn’t fair. Trying to read Bruce when he’s upset and closed off is already hard enough when you’re actually in the same room as him. For Tim, who has only Bruce’s voice to go on, it must be damn near impossible.

But before he can do anything, Tim leans forward and tips over the camera. It lands sideways on the bed, facing out into the room. Not a room, Dick realizes. An open medical bay. There are rows and rows of medical bunks lining the opposite wall. A few are obviously occupied by large insectoid creatures, but most are covered up by some kind of dull brown carapace. The healing cocoons Tim mentioned.
Cass hisses, displeased. Bruce says, “Robin,” in the Batman voice, and Dick expects—something. For Tim to correct him. To remind Bruce that he hasn’t been Robin in nearly two years.

But Tim only says, “I really don’t want to do this right now.”

“How did you lose your spleen?” Bruce asks.

“It’s a long story.”

“Robin,” Bruce says again.

“A really long story.”

Jason glances over at Dick with both his eyebrows raised, like he expects him to know what’s going on. He looks even more surprised when Dick just shakes his head.

“Why wasn’t I informed?” Bruce asks. Which is a stupid way to say, Why didn’t you tell me?

But Tim clearly knows as much because he answers, “I couldn’t tell you when it happened. I mean that literally. I couldn’t. You were gone.”

“Gone where.”

“Gone.”

Bruce is silent for a long moment before he says, “You lost your spleen over a year ago. And never thought to mention it?”

“It never came up,” Tim says. Blatantly defensive now. “We were really busy when you came back, remember? There was a lot going on and it didn’t come up and it really doesn’t matter anyway.”

“You losing an internal organ doesn’t matter.”

“You can’t be mad at me about this,” Tim says. “This is so unfair.”

“I don’t understand,” Cass says.

There’s a moment of silence and then Tim sighs. “Impulse?” he says, sounding even more tired now.

“The spleen’s an internal organ,” Bart says. “Not super important like your heart or your lungs. It filters your blood and fights off bacterial infections and stuff like that. You can live without it, but it is part of your immune system, which means Rob’s is now compromised. Like an informant in a spy movie. Or the structural integrity of the Titanic after it hit that iceberg. Or—”

“Yes, my immune system is garbage. Thank you, Impulse.”

“Any time, dude.”

“But that’s basically it,” Tim says. “It has next to no impact on my ability to do my job. I mean, if someone decides to weaponize a bacterial infection, then yeah, I’d probably sit that one out. But that’s pretty much it? I don’t even have to worry about viruses, mostly. If the Clench passed through town again, you wouldn’t even need to bench me. Granted, I definitely don’t want that again, but—”
“Wait, what?” Bart says. “Are you saying you had the Clench?”


The camera finally moves away from the open medical bay. There’s a quick blur and then the screen’s filled with Bart’s incredulous face. “Did he actually have the plague or is he messing with me right now? Sometimes we can’t really tell.”

“It wasn’t the plague,” Tim says, still off-screen. “Just a plague.”

“Number one, what the fuck. And number two, what was that like?”

“Unpleasant. And don’t cuss in front of A.”

Bart rolls his eyes. “Sorry.”

“We’re getting off track,” Tim says. “The point is, I’m fine.”

Dick wants to argue with that assessment, but Bart beats him to the punch. “Pfft.” He’s looking away from the camera now, presumably at Tim. “Seriously? Fine? Are we going to drastically and violently expand the definition of that word or would you like to revise your answer?”

“I’m not getting into another argument about linguistic abuse with you,” Tim says. “What I mean by ‘fine’ is, yes, I feel terrible, but that’s because my foot’s broken and I haven’t slept in thirty-six hours. But in the context of the topic we are discussing, none of that is related to my immune system, which is fighting the good fight and doesn’t deserve all of this scrutiny.”

Bruce looks like he wants to refute this, but Alfred stops him with a hand on his shoulder. And at that moment—before either of them can say anything—they all hear the hidden garage doors engage, followed by the sound of the Batmobile tearing through the tunnel. It squeals to a stop so loudly that even Bart seems to hear it.

“You let the brat drive the car?” Jason says when Stephanie tumbles out of what is obviously the passenger side.

She hits the ground running. “Where is he? Is he here? Impulse, if you’re messing with us again, I swear—”

She hops up into the same chair as Cass and Jason, and Dick has to reach out and brace them so they don’t go spinning away from the screen.

Bart laughs and flips the camera, and then Tim’s on screen again, his hair looking rumpled like he must have been lying down while the camera was off him. He grins when he sees Steph. “Hey, there, Batgirl,” he says. “How’s Gotham?”

“Gotham’s fine, you jerk. How’s space?”

Damian approaches more slowly and, unlike Stephanie, seems to be paying attention to more than just Tim. He stops at his father’s side, clearly noticing that Bruce isn’t happy. Bruce acknowledges Damian’s presence with the barest of nods. His attention is mostly on Alfred. The two of them seem to be having some kind of conversation, although nothing’s being said and their expressions are both stiff and serious.

Dick catches Damian’s eye and signals the word wait, knowing Damian will interpret that to mean, I’ll explain later.
Damian nods, then looks back toward the screen and says, “Red Robin,” in a clipped tone.

“Sorry, what was that?” Tim says. “I thought I heard something, but I don’t see anything, so it must be my mistake.”

Dick grabs Damian and drags him toward the camera. “Just let him get a look at you,” he says. Damian glares, but doesn’t resist.

“Hey, brat,” Tim says.

Damian’s scowl deepens. “I’ve been told that your misadventures have ended in injury—” he starts to say, but then the camera moves back to Bart’s face again.

“Sorry, Red Robin is not accepting any more lectures at this time. Please try again later.”

“What, we’re already done with the reprimands?” Stephanie asks. “That’s not fair, I literally just got here.”

The camera turns to face Tim, who just sighs. “Is there anyone on Earth who’s not mad at me right now?”

“Me,” Cass says.

“You’re going way too easy on him,” Steph says, rolling her eyes. “Oooh, wait, did you tell him already?”

“Tell me what?” Tim asks.

Cass shifts so that she’s sitting more on Stephanie than Jason—who looks like he can’t decide if he’s annoyed or amused that his space has been so thoroughly invaded—and clasps her hands together in a serious pose. Solemnly, she says, “You cannot be Black Bat.”


“Dude, do you not remember?” Bart asks. “You said that you were stealing her mantle.”

“When?”

“Back when we were recording the just-in-case message.”

“I barely remember that,” Tim says.

Damian makes one of his *tt* sounds. “Have you sustained an injury to your head as well as your foot?”

“No, it was just weeks ago and I was nearly as tired then as I am now.”

“How tired are you now?” Bart asks.

“I feel like my face is gonna fall off,” Tim says.

“Your mask face or your face face?”

“My face face.”

“I’m sorry,” Stephanie says, “but did you say *weeks*?”

“It’s really not that long,” Bart says. “He and Superboy took a three-week vacation in the middle of our super important mission.”

“An accidental vacation,” Tim says. “On a manufacturing station in a starless void. Where we had to instigate a mutiny and overthrow the supervisors and figure out how pocket dimensions work and how to unfold all of them at once or else our plan wasn’t going to work. So it definitely counts as a work trip.”

“Yeah, but that took you, what, five days?” Bart complains. “Then you got to hang out with SB for over two weeks!”

“Are you forgetting about the space paste?” Tim asks. “Because I dream of the day I can finally forget about the space paste.”

“You cannot be Black Bat,” Cass says again.

Tim looks even more confused now. “Okay?”

Steph rolls her eyes. “Ask her why not, dipshit.”

“Why does she get to cuss and I don’t?” Impulse asks. “Hood too.”

“Cause I’m not the boss of them. And, okay, I feel like I am being set up here, but sure. Why can’t I be Black Bat?”

“Because you are not a bat,” Cass answers.

To Dick’s surprise, that visibly startles Damian and Jason.

“Okay. Wow,” Tim says. “Count me thoroughly rejected then.”

“Dang,” Bart whispers. “If this is what your family’s like when they’re not mad—”

“You are not a bat,” Cass says again, gentle but firm. “You know this already. But if you want, you can be my Blackbird instead.”

And that startles a smile out of him. After a moment it widens into a beam. “Hey, that is actually...not half bad. I’m probably not going to have to drop Red Robin just yet, barring absolute disaster at the trial tomorrow, but that’s definitely going to the top of the list. Sorry, by the way,” he adds, his gaze shifting over toward Dick and Damian. Dick thinks, absurdly, that Tim’s apologizing to him, until he adds, “For using the name and also nearly getting you captured and dismembered and all that.”

Damian looks confused and kind of pissed off again. Steph leans forward, looking mildly shocked, and says, “Holy shit, you really are tired.”

Tim isn’t looking at the camera anymore. They can hear mumbling in the background.

“Is that Wonder Girl?” Steph asks.

Tim’s still looking off-screen. “No, but I was—I am trying, but—oh my god, fine.”

He sticks a hand into his orb, grabs another bug—making sure to hold it up in front of the camera as he does it—and then pops it into his mouth.
Stephanie lets out a tiny, horrified shriek, and even Damian goes wide-eyed with surprise.

“That’s what I fucking said,” Jason says.

“What are you doing?” Stephanie asks.

“Eating space bugs. Doctor’s orders.”

Bart pipes up, “He has—”

“I do not have space scurvy.”

“Or a spleen, apparently,” Jason adds.

Stephanie does a double-take, glancing from Jason to Tim and then back again. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

Tim grimaces. “It’s a long story?”

“You lost your spleen in space?”

“No. I lost it ages ago. Pre-space adventure.”

“What do you mean ages ago—”

“Hera help me.” The camera flips away from Tim and lands on a very disgruntled Cassie Sandsmark. “We are way too tired and cranky to deal with this.”

“I’m not—” Tim starts to say.

“I am cranky enough for all of us. Also, yes you are, you are the crankiest ever. Eat your bugs, Red, before I make you.”

“There are still so many,” Tim says. “I think they’re multiplying. They’re breeding.”

“Do I look like I care?”

“You have to help.”

“No fucking way.”

“I’ll help!”

“Thanks, Impulse.”

There’s some shuffling off-screen, and then Wonder Girl gives the camera a disgusted look. “I bet other teams have glamorous space adventures. Not gross bug-hospital bullshit.” She sighs. “I’m going back to sleep now. We will be back tomorrow if we get kicked out of the whole system, or in a few days if they let us stick around. No arguments. This conversation is over. Say goodbye, Rob.”

The camera flips to Tim. Impulse is pressed up against his side, chewing noisily with his mouth open.

“Goodbye, Rob,” Tim says, and the camera cuts out.

There’s a beat of silence and then Alfred clears his throat. They all turn to look at him.
“I suppose you have some questions,” he says, his voice stiff.

“Alfie knew about Tim’s spleen,” Jason whispers to Stephanie.

“Shortly after his return to Gotham,” Alfred says, “Master Timothy informed me that he was updating his medical file. This update is accessible under the normal layers of encryption that protect all of your files. It simply states that he sustained an injury during his time abroad that necessitated the surgical removal of his spleen. The surgery did not take place at a hospital or surgical center, so there are no records that could be added to his master medical file. Nonetheless, it was professionally done and he has not yet suffered any severe adverse side effects. His treatment plan was already in place at this time and he merely wished to inform me about his new dietary restrictions and medication requirements. As part of his recovery, he’s meant to be taking broad-spectrum antibiotics daily for two full years. He passed the one-year mark several weeks ago. Additionally, he requested updates on the general health of the family as he’s currently more susceptible to illness. Even a mild bacterial infection could, in his compromised state, rapidly develop into a much more serious condition.”

When it’s clear Alfred’s finished speaking, Bruce says, “He didn’t tell you anything else. About how he was injured. Or who treated him.”

“I did not inquire. Much as I did not press when you, Master Bruce, went on your own ill-advised excursions and returned with a host of new injuries.”

“I didn’t lose any of my organs,” Bruce says.

“I’m very pleased to hear that,” Alfred answers.

Bruce sighs. Rubs at his face. Looks tired and human and still so much better than he did just a few hours ago. “I know he’s emancipated now,” Bruce says, “but I’m still his father. I should have been informed.”

“I quite understand,” Alfred says, “but I felt it was Master Timothy’s right to choose when and how he shared this information. As he chose to inform me, I thought it best not to jeopardise that.”

“Definitely.” Stephanie chimes in. When Bruce shoots her a betrayed look, she sits up straighter—difficult in her overcrowded chair—and says, “Think about it, Bruce. If Alfred’s the only person Tim tells about this kind of thing, what’s he gonna do the second Alfred starts running straight to you? He’d tell nobody, that’s what.” She gives Alfred a serious look and adds, “No snitching. Respect.”

“But he’s really alright?” Dick asks. “He’s not—this really isn’t a big deal?”

Some of Alfred’s stiffness eases. “It’s certainly not something I would wish on any one of you,” he says, “but Master Timothy is handling it admirably. There is an increased risk to his health, but in the face of the normal level of risk this lifestyle entails, it is, as far as he is concerned, hardly worth remarking upon. In the last year he has been diligent with his medication and diet, reduced his exposure to potential infections, and successfully integrated his condition into his civilian identity during last year’s shooting subterfuge.”

“Oh,” Dick says, as a few things start to click into place. “He made sure M’gann took the bullet to her abdomen.”

“Precisely.”

“So he protects our identities,” Dick says, “and he gets to update his civilian medical files without
raising suspicion or making up some wild story.”

“Two birds, one stone,” Steph says, sounding frustrated and fond all at once. “That’s our Tim. And if it’s in his civilian files, then he really wasn’t keeping it a secret, was he? He just wasn’t telling anyone.”

Jason looks unconvincing. “Isn’t that the definition of keeping a secret?”

“No. Or, at least, Tim could probably argue his way out of it being a secret. It doesn’t count if you aren’t actively hiding it, which he wasn’t. And it doesn’t sound like the kind of thing he’d keep to himself indefinitely. I bet dollars to dimes that he would have waited until he hit the two-year mark on those antibiotics and then just casually mentioned that he was done with that. And then you ask what the hell he’s talking about, and he’s like, ‘oh, you know, it’s been two years since I lost my spleen,’ and then you’re like, ‘what the fuck,’ and he just brushes it off and makes you feel like a complete idiot for being weird about it because obviously if you didn’t notice, then it’s not actually a big deal.”

“That was...basically what he tried to do earlier in the call,” Dick admits.

Steph rolls her eyes. “He’s so predictable sometimes. I mean, pretty much only in retrospect, but every time Tim does something weird or dumb, afterwards I’m always like, *yeah,* that sure was a Tim way to handle this. Don’t take it personally, B. Tim’s just...you know what he’s like.”

“Stupid,” Cass says. “I don’t like this kind of secret.”

“Me neither,” Dick agrees.

“His friends knew,” Jason says. He sounds like he’s edging back toward angry again. “He told *them.* He called *them*.”

“And they did a good job getting him back,” Babs points out, her voice issuing out of the overhead speakers. Dick hadn’t even realized she was still awake and listening in. “I don’t like it any more than you do, but when it comes to crazy, unpredictable situations, of course they’re the ones he’s going to call.”

“That’s her nice way of saying that they’ve never really screwed him over,” Stephanie says. “Which most of the people in this room, myself included, can’t exactly say.”

“He trusts them more than he trusts us.” Bruce says it slowly, like each word hurts.

“Different,” Cass says, shaking her head. “He knows they trust him. They follow him.”

“He can trust them to follow his lead,” Barbara says. “Tim didn’t call them because he thought we couldn’t or wouldn’t save him. We could have rescued him, but then what? He couldn’t have convinced us to follow him into a mission as complicated as that one based on nothing more than a hunch. Whereas Young Justice has been following his lead—with maximum fuss but minimal opposition—for *years.*”

She’s right, Dick realizes. Because Tim does offer up plans or suggestions when they’re prepping for a mission, but once they’re in the field he tends to defer to Bruce or Dick. And never bothers trying to lead Jason or Damian. He’ll still occasionally snap out instructions to Steph but it almost always ends in an argument. And he’s been better about it lately. Makes sure to ask rather than order her around.

The only person Dick can imagine Tim calling for help and knowing he’d get unconditional and
unquestioning support is Cass. That, he realizes, is why she wasn’t included in his away protocol. Because if he’d still been on Earth, Cass is the person he would have called to rescue him. To show up when he needed it, no questions asked, and follow his lead.

There was a time when he might have called Dick too. But that hasn’t happened since Bruce disappeared.

“She’s right,” Dick says. “I didn’t follow Tim’s lead when he was looking for you,” he tells Bruce, “and he’s never really forgiven me for that.”


“Ugh, he can be such a control freak,” Stephanie says. “But on this one he probably made the right call. Do I want to take part in crazy space adventures? Yeah, kind of. Am I at all qualified to take part in crazy space adventures? Hell no. Whereas it sounds like Young Justice did this sort of nonsense all the time.”

“The important thing,” Barbara says, “is that it worked out. He’s okay. And he’ll be back soon.”

Dick hopes that she’s right.

Bruce is still down in the cave when Dick finally gets everyone else settled in for the night. Stephanie’s staying with Cass—technically she has her own room set up just down the hallway, but she almost never uses it—and Damian’s showered, changed into his pajamas, and is drinking tea with Alfred in the kitchen. When Dick left them, the atmosphere was more tense than he would have liked—Damian’s being frostily polite in a way that makes it clear he’s furious about Alfred keeping secrets from them—but Dick’s too tired to sit and sort that out. Plus he’s pretty sure Bruce is the one he needs to worry about the most right now.

He settles down in an armchair in front of the grandfather clock that houses the cave’s hidden elevator. His comm is still in his ear—is almost never not there—and he only hesitates for a moment before he reaches up to turn it on and call Babs.

He tells her that Cass, Steph, Alfred and Damian are all accounted for. And she lets him know that she’s called Duke and updated him already. And that Bruce and Jason are still down in the cave. Jason’s hidden himself away in his corner, but Babs is pretty sure he’s only pretending to sleep. Bruce is still on the computer, reviewing every single report the Lanterns have compiled so far about the smuggling and trafficking ring they’re currently disassembling.

It’s completely unnecessary—Batman isn’t likely to be called in to help wrap up that investigation or assist in relocation efforts for the victims—but Babs seems to think it’s a good use of his time.

“He’s still pretty agitated,” she says. “If you want to talk to him, I’d wait until he comes up on his own. I think he needs a little more time to process all of this.”

“That makes two of us,” Dick says.

“Want me to keep you company while you wait?” Babs asks.

He should say no. He should tell her to get some sleep and let him keep an eye on things for the next few hours.

He should do that. But there’s a question that he can’t get out of his head, and he knows he won’t be able to rest until he gets an answer.
“Did you know?”

Babs doesn’t ask him what he means. She doesn’t say anything at all.

“Did you know about Tim’s spleen?” he asks.

There’s another beat of silence. Then her voice, softer than he expects it to be. “Only the last few days. I saw the updates in his medical files while I was going through his system. But before that—no. I didn’t know.”

“Were you going to tell us?”

“I was going to talk to Tim about it when he got back.”

“That’s not a yes or a no,” he points out.

She doesn’t answer.

He wants to ask her if there’s anything else in those files that the rest of them don’t know about. More life-threatening injuries Tim kept to himself. More unknown enemies hellbent on revenge. More secrets.

He wants to tell her how frustrated and tired he is. How infuriating it is to find out that they’ve all been keeping secrets. Tim. Alfred. Her. Especially her.

“Dick—” she says.

“Just—can you just give me a minute?”

She goes quiet. But he can still hear the sound of the open comm line in his ear. The subtle ambient noise that he’s grown so accustomed to that he barely ever notices it anymore.

The two of them have always been a team. Always been in this together. Even after they stopped dating, they stayed close. Reaffirmed, over and over again, that this thing they had between them was important.

They always tell the others that they’re the big brother and big sister of the group, but no one else seems to have caught on to the fact that their roles are reversed.

Privately, Dick teases her that “O” really stands for Orwell. And Barbara always tells him he has eldest daughter syndrome. And that he can’t actually manage everyone’s else’s emotional issues for them, no matter how much he wants to.

The difference between them, though, is that Barbara helps him with his big sister duties all the time. They exchange information about everyone on the team at least a couple of times a week. It’s part of the periodic gossiping, constant worrying and occasional meddling that comes with trying to take care of a big dysfunctional family.

Dick tries to help her with her role as the team’s officially sanctioned Big Brother as often as he can. He runs the comms sometimes. He brings her takeout from her favorite restaurants and helps her comb through hours and hours of surveillance videos, looking for the one little clue that will crack a case.

But he can never really fill in for her the way that she sometimes fills in for him. Barbara’s always occupied her own unique place on the team. A space that’s just a little bit separate from the rest of
them. She was never really one of the kids. Was never anyone’s sidekick. And that independence lends her an air of impartiality that the team sometimes desperately needs.

Because Oracle famously doesn’t take sides. She listens, she serves as a liaison, she occasionally lays down a judgment when they bring her a dispute or when an argument's getting out of hand. But it never feels personal. She always calls out all of them. She doesn't defer to Bruce just because he's decided he's in charge of the city. She doesn't talk down to the kids, no matter how young or inexperienced they are.

She’s built Oracle from scratch and somehow convinced them all to trust her. To give her an almost unprecedented level of access to their lives. She's in their comms, their camera feeds, their security systems, their phones and computers and personal files.

Even Jason's given her access to his systems. Or just decided it's not worth trying to keep her out.

And she makes it look easy, but he knows it's not. He knows finding and maintaining the right balance between so many different people with so many different agendas can't be easy. He knows that Bruce still gives her a hard time for working with the Red Hood and keeping Jason's secrets. Even though they all know that the second she starts reporting on his activities, their alliance will fall apart.

Dick’s pretty sure there's no one else who could pull it off. There's no one else the entire team could trust so completely. And while Barbara's more than earned that trust over the years, he knows that it's not something she can take for granted. It's something that has to be tended, nurtured, and constantly reinforced.

_The universe tends toward entropy_, as Babs is fond of pointing out. Without maintenance, all machines break down. And this team that they’ve all built together is no different. If they don’t take care of it, it won’t last.

Breaking something is always easier than fixing it. Easier than keeping it going. And Babs has been here, doing that work, keeping the team running, for years.

He still hates it, though. Hates that they can’t talk about everything anymore. Hates that there are things he can't help her with, no matter how much he wants to. Every secret feels like a barrier being built up between them. A wall that he can't scale, blocking him off from the people he loves.

But none of that is her fault. And it’s important to have someone who always knows what’s going on with the team. Even if that someone isn’t him.

It’s also unfair, he realizes, to be upset with her when she was in the dark about Tim’s secrets nearly as long as the rest of them were. She learned about the away protocol at the same time they did. And the rest of them found out about Tim’s spleen together, while he was right there in front of them, obviously alive.

She found out by herself, while Tim was lightyears away. When they didn’t even know if they’d ever see him again.

That thought burns away the worst of his anger and leaves him feeling tired and cold.

He’s failed so many people in his family in the last few days—in the last few years, really. But this, at least, is something he can do right.

"Have I ever told you,” he says slowly, “that you're the best of us?” He knows how he must sound: still tired, still hurt, still a little angry. But he forces the words out anyway, because he knows it’s
And he can hear the relief beneath her bravado when she says, “You’re not too shabby yourself, boy wonder.”

“We’re okay?” he asks. “You and me?” Just because he knows what she’ll say.

“Always, Dick. Always.”

It’s a promise they made after they broke up. When things really weren’t okay yet, but they needed to believe that they would be someday. Everything else might go to hell, but the two of them are always going to stick it out together. They’re always going to be okay.

“Heads up,” she says, her voice gentle in his ear. “B’s heading for the elevator right now.”

“Thanks, O.”

“Anytime, N.”

He doesn’t even have to cut off the comm line. She does that for him too.

Bruce, when he exits the elevator, still looks tense and miserable, but he’s clearly not surprised to find Dick waiting for him.

“Sit with me for a bit?” Dick asks, letting his own exhaustion filter into his voice. “Please?” Because if he makes this about Bruce, then Bruce will just brush him off or shut him out again. But if he thinks Dick needs him, he’ll make the time. And Dick does need him, he realizes abruptly. He needs to talk to someone about this.

“It’s my fault,” he blurs out, looking down at his hands. “Bruce, this is all my fault.”

“It’s not,” Bruce says, coming to stand next to Dick’s chair and letting one of his hands rest on Dick’s shoulder.

Dick doesn’t look up at him. “It is. When Tim came back to Gotham, I asked him about what happened while he was gone. He said that he’d explain, but he never did. And I didn’t press. I never asked again. I just—I was supposed to take care of him and I didn’t.”

“I’m the one who should have been asking those questions,” Bruce says.

“You couldn’t have known,” Dick points out. “You weren’t here. I was.”

“I wasn’t here,” Bruce agrees. “And being here is part of my job. I’m his father, I should have—” he breaks off then. Squeezes Dick’s shoulder and then lets go. Dick can hear the sound of him dragging another armchair closer and then sitting down in it.

“How do we fix this?” Bruce asks. It’s the kind of thing he never would have said before he disappeared. Since he returned, he’s been more open about his own uncertainty. He’s sought Dick out multiple times to discuss Damian’s progress, to ask tentative questions, even to seek reassurance when he’s worried about his relationship with his youngest son.

It’s strange, being equals in this odd way. Now that he’s had to help raise a kid himself, he feels like he knows Bruce so much better. Even understands and sympathizes with some of the mistakes Bruce made when the two of them were first figuring out how to be a family.

They’ve never really talked that way about Tim, though. From the beginning, Tim presented
himself as a partner, not a son or a sibling. Tim shared some of his struggles with Dick—especially those surrounding his secret identity—but for the most part he went out of his way to make sure that nobody worried about him. All the while he was worrying about everyone else.

Dick rubs at his eyes. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I didn’t even realize there was anything wrong.”

“Neither did I,” Bruce says quietly. “When I came back, you were all doing so well. I didn’t want to disrupt that.”

“I think if we asked him,” Dick says, “Tim would say that he is doing well. And that everything is fine. And he can take care of himself.”

“He shouldn’t have to take care of himself.”

“I know. That’s my fault. I shouldn’t have let him move out. I thought I was respecting his independence. I thought—” He can’t bring himself to say it. He’d thought that Damian needed him more.

Bruce seems to understand though. “You did well with Damian. Better than I would have done. That shouldn’t have been your responsibility. Neither is looking out for Tim.”

“They’re my brothers,” Dick says. “I’m supposed to take care of both of them. I should have known that Tim was—that losing you would—” His throat closes up before he can get any more words out.

When Bruce was newly gone and Dick gave the mantle to Damian, Tim outright said that he wasn’t okay. And Dick told him that he would be. Said the words, “You’ll be okay,” more than once. Because everything was falling apart and he’d felt so overwhelmed and he just wanted it to be true. Needed it to be true.

And he’s pretty sure that’s what damaged their relationship the most. Even more than giving Robin to Damian.

Dick used to be the person Tim talked to when he wasn’t alright. Now, every time Dick asks, Tim always says he’s fine, even when he’s clearly not. Because that’s the answer he thinks Dick wants. Not the truth.

And Dick’s always taken it at face value. Even when Tim’s answers didn’t add up or make sense.

He’d asked, after that last encounter with Ra’s al Ghul, how Tim knew that Dick would be there to catch him. And Tim looked him in the eye and said, “You’re my brother. You’ll always be there for me.”

And Dick wanted so badly to believe him. To believe that Tim’s planning was just so perfect that he could predict, down to the second, exactly when Dick would arrive.

But Dick remembers that fall. Remembers how close it was. How if he’d been a single minute later, his brother would be dead right now.

He’d had to believe Tim was telling the truth. The alternative was unthinkable.

“Dick,” Bruce says. Dick’s got his eyes closed now, but he can hear Bruce shifting in his chair and isn’t surprised when he feels a hand on his shoulder again. “Last year was difficult on all of you. You did your best. I know that. Tim knows it too.”
Dick doesn’t know if that’s true. He keeps thinking of the night the Tetrahedra attacked. How he’d been so focused on saving Damian that he hadn’t given Tim’s radio silence a second thought until it was too late. Until he was already gone.

And ever since, he keeps asking himself the same questions. Is that what Tim thinks he and Bruce would have wanted? To save Damian even if it cost them Tim?

But he can’t say that. Not to Bruce. Not now.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “This isn’t getting us anywhere,” he says, looking up at Bruce. “We can’t change what happened. But we can’t let things stay the way they are. Even if he says he’s okay—he’s not. Keeping those kinds of secrets—and that away protocol—” He shakes his head. He understands why Tim did it. Understands the practicality of it. He has a few messages tucked away in case he dies on the job. But the sheer scope of the protocol and the obsessiveness behind it—he’s pretty sure Babs is right. It was Tim’s attempt to make up for all the things he didn’t do while he was gone.

He went off on a crusade to save Bruce all by himself and succeeded. He managed to find the evidence he needed, apparently lost his spleen in the process, and somehow still feels guilty for not doing more?

It’s just like Tim to focus on the ways he thinks he’s failed instead of all the impossible things he’s accomplished.

“Tim’s always been good at hiding things,” Bruce says. “But we’ve made it too easy on him this last year.”

“Yeah,” Dick agrees. “We really have. Even if he was okay...we can’t just wait for something to go wrong. It shouldn’t take a crisis for us to check in on him. Tim doesn’t like to admit when he’s having a hard time. If we’re not around him enough—”

“We won’t be able to tell when he’s okay and when he’s not.” Bruce sighs and closes his eyes. After a moment, he says, very quietly. “He looked happy. In the video.”

“Yeah,” Dick says. “Yeah, he did.”

Chapter End Notes

Damian's death is mentioned briefly in this chapter, but does not line up with the storyline from the new-52 canon. I won't go into the details of that—it's so complicated that I've genuinely read summaries of it multiple times and still can't remember all that happens in it—but it's a story that I really didn't enjoy and that doesn't fit with the mostly-preboot canon that served as the foundation for this fic. In this fic, all you need to know is that Damian was killed during a dispute with the League of Assassins but *not* due to any plan of Talia's, so he was not killed by his own aged-up clone (this comic storyline was absolutely bonkers and *not in a fun way*). And resurrecting Damian didn't involve Darkseid or a space quest or the Chaos Shard. Bruce and Talia teamed up and saved their son using the Lazarus Pit. That's it.

Tim lost his spleen during his Red Robin run and it's literally never been mentioned in the comics since (although fandom has produced some pretty delightful stories about
The medical information in this fic is based on some minor research, but I definitely sacrificed some accuracy for the sake of the story. I'm pretty sure antibiotic prophylaxis for two years would be considered an out-dated mode of treatment nowadays (and might be more appropriate for someone a little younger than Tim is), but it worked for the story, so I immediately erased all conflicting research from my mind. Like you do.

Tim and Cass have teamed up a few times in canon and it's literally one of my favorite things in the world. I specifically kept her as Black Bat instead of Orphan partially because I just do not like that name for her, but also just so I could make the Blackbird joke. Which is not really a joke. I am genuinely emotional over the idea of the two of them being a badass brother-sister duo. And Tim being given a name by a member of his family, instead of having to take it first and getting permission later. I loved Dick choosing something meaningful and personal to express himself when he outgrew Robin and became Nightwing, but I think Tim would have really loved being given a name that explicitly ties him to another member of his family. Unfortunately, I don't think a Tim-and-Cass team up is likely in any of the current DC comic series (the two of them together would just be too powerful), but I may write fic about their adventures some day.

This is (probably) the longest chapter in this fic. The chapters that follow are, at least right now, still a bit long, but nowhere near as lengthy as this one.
Predictably, Drake’s homecoming is as complicated and inconvenient as every other aspect of his existence.

They’re not informed of his return until Friday afternoon. It’s a rare, blue-skied day in Gotham, and Damian is meant to be spending it with Richard. “Just the two of us,” Richard said when he proposed the excursion. “Like old times.”

Damian suspects that nostalgia is only one factor in this outing. While Richard is no doubt sincere about making up for his frequent absences and lack of attention in recent days, Damian is certain that his brother needs a distraction more than anything else right now. Richard spent the better part of a week worrying about Todd and Father, and now neither is available to be fussed over.

Todd left the manor the day before, citing his need to escape “all your fucking mother henning.” He ignored Alfred’s reasonable objections as well as Richard’s more emotion-based protests, ordered them to keep him informed about Drake’s status, and then stole the keys to Father’s Jaguar and drove off. Alfred took his departure in stride, but Richard has been sulking ever since.

Damian, for one, is glad to have the Batcave back. Todd taking up residence there was inconvenient and distracting. Whenever Damian approached him in the spirit of civility and attempted to establish the camaraderie that Richard clearly wants them to have, Todd pointedly ignored him. Whenever Damian left him alone and tried to train in peace, Todd suddenly found it intensely amusing to pester him half to death.

It was almost enough to make him miss Drake.

Almost.

But Drake continued to remain off-world, presumably gallivanting around the universe with his friends and sparing little thought for the people he left behind. He and his friends received official pardons two days ago, but chose to stay in that sector of space for “just a little bit longer.” Kyle Rayner was tasked with keeping an eye on them, though the assignment proved to be beyond his abilities. Both times Oracle reached out to him, all he could report was that his charges kept disappearing every time he turned his back on them. And whenever he asked them about their mysterious errands, he received only cryptic explanations of their activities. This entire situation, according to him, was Father’s fault for raising his son to be, as he put it, “an enigmatic ninja.”

Father has been brooding ever since his conversation with Drake. It’s a vast improvement over the strange, broken blankness from before, but at this point Damian thinks he’s taking it a bit too far. He can admit that some discomfort is reasonable. As the world’s greatest detective, it must be galling to learn that one of your protégés successfully conspired to keep secrets from you with the aid of your most trusted ally. Damian is still trying to come to terms with the scope of Alfred’s betrayal.

“It’s not that,” Richard told him the day before. “It’s not about Tim being able to keep it secret. It’s that he chose to. That he didn’t trust Bruce with the information.”

This is likely projection on Richard’s part. But Father does clearly intend to have words with Drake
when he returns. Most of Father’s time since the call has been devoted to working through Drake’s WE files and solving his cases. According to Stephanie, this is so that Drake won’t be able to use work as an excuse to avoid the uncomfortable conversation that’s waiting for him when he returns to Earth.

With Todd gone and Father locked away in his study, Damian was obviously the next person Richard would seek out. And while Damian feels that no apologies are needed—he understands why Richard’s energies were focused elsewhere this past week—he decides it might be best to inform Richard of this after their outing.

They spend some time at Robinson Park, eat lunch at one of Damian’s favorite restaurants, and then head over to the Gotham Art Museum, which Richard insists on calling “Gam” just to annoy him.

They’re only five minutes from the museum when Alfred calls.

Damian puts the phone on speaker and ignores the way Richard grips the steering wheel just a little too tight. Bracing himself for bad news.

“I apologize for interrupting your outing,” Alfred says, “but I thought you would wish to hear that your brother has returned to Gotham.”

"Tim’s back?" Richard says. The red light in front of them turns green, but Damian has to point this out before Richard pulls forward. "Right now? For real?"

"So it seems," Alfred answers. "We received a call from the Lantern Corps shortly after you left the manor."

"Alfred, that was hours ago."

"I did not wish to interrupt your day without concrete news," Alfred says, patiently. "The Lanterns simply informed us that Master Tim and his companions left the planetary system and were thought to be heading home, though this could not be confirmed."

“What do you mean? If the Lanterns aren’t escorting them, then how did they get back?”

"It seems that part of the business they wished to complete these last two days was the procurement of a replacement vehicle for Mr. Allen."

Richard groans. "They got Impulse another spaceship? How? Who let that happen?"

"Mr. Rayner was not entirely sure, but it was heavily implied that they won the vehicle in a game of some kind."

"They won a spaceship," Richard says, "by gambling?"

"I have been informed that it is entirely legal in that sector of the galaxy."

"So Tim is home? Right now?"

"He is at his apartment in the city," Alfred says smoothly. Reminding Richard that home, for Drake, isn’t the manor. "There is, however, another complication."

“Oh my god,” Richard says. “What now?"

"This one is benign in nature," Alfred assures them. “According to Miss Sandsmark, it is
something of a tradition to gather together in celebration whenever a member of their circle returns from a particularly strenuous misadventure—such as those involving time travel, other dimensions, or journeys away from Earth. In keeping with this tradition, several former members of Young Justice are currently visiting the city to spend time with our four recently returned heroes before they all have to, as she put it, ‘face the music.’ With this in mind, they’ve ensconced themselves in Master Timothy’s apartment and conspired to keep his presence on the planet a secret for the remainder of the weekend. Miss Gordon naturally took notice the moment they accessed his home. Although their subterfuge has failed, they are nevertheless determined to stay the course. They have assured me that Master Timothy will be returned to us on Monday morning. At which point he will be mentally and emotionally prepared for whatever dire punishment we have in store for him.”

“There’s an idea,” Damian says.

“Shush, Dami. What do you mean, Alfred?”

“Only that, based on our last conversation, Mr. Allen is now under the impression that we are all extremely displeased with Master Timothy. Master Bruce, especially so. And Mr. Allen has been making this fact widely known. Presumably, we’ll be throwing Timothy into the oubliette the moment we get our hands on him.”

“We don’t have an oubliette,” Damian points out. “Although perhaps that should change.”

They glide past the parking garage for the museum. Richard, as far as Damian can tell, is just driving in circles now. "So his friends have basically kidnapped him?” Richard says.

"They see it as a benevolent protective custody and have assured me that he'll be returned to us in a few days’ time.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“After an extensive negotiation, I was able to speak to him for a few brief moments before his phone was confiscated. He seemed to be in good spirits and was not planning to either help or hinder his friends in their efforts.”

"Does Bruce know?"

"He's been made aware.”

“And he’s not already on his way?"

“He intended to go as soon as he was notified. However, Miss Gordon has been monitoring the situation at Master Timothy’s apartment. As it’s currently filled with metahumans determined to protect their friend, at least temporarily, from his impending punishment, she thought it best to keep Master Bruce away, lest his presence inspire them to abscond with Timothy and stage their reunion elsewhere.”

“And Bruce listened to her?” Richard looks like he doesn’t know if he should be impressed or incredulous. “How’d she work that miracle?”

“You’ll have to ask her,” Alfred says. “In the meantime, she did inform Miss Cassandra and Miss Brown, who chose to mount their own rescue mission. Unfortunately, they've since defected to the other side.”

“Traitors,” Damian hisses.
“Quite,” Alfred says. “I thought perhaps you might try to convince his companions to relocate their gathering to the manor. It would allow them to spend time together without the need to hide their powers, and your father and I would greatly appreciate seeing Master Timothy sooner rather than later.”

Richard, at least, has the grace to give Damian an apologetic look before he answers. “Of course, Alfred. We’ll head over there now.” He waits for Damian to hang up the phone before he adds, “Sorry, kiddo. I’ll make it up to you.”

“I do not require your apologies,” Damian tells him. It sounds sulky and insincere even to his own ears, and the look Richard shoots him across the center console is a painful mixture of regret and disappointment. Damian slouches a little bit lower in his seat and looks out the window in silence.

In theory, he should be glad to hear that Drake has returned. He can admit that the team is stronger with Drake than without him. Damian can appreciate his professionalism, his attention to detail, and the sheer audacity required to pull off the mission that he and his friends just completed.

But now Drake is showing no consideration for the people who are meant to be his family. Even if Damian isn’t counted in their number, he knows that Drake cares for Father and Alfred and Richard. And yet he’s letting himself be hidden away from them?

Damian knows that this is at least partially his fault. If he hadn’t inspired Drake’s apparent aversion to the manor, he wouldn’t have a separate apartment to hide away in. But even taking that into account, Drake is being uncharacteristically selfish. His duty is clear. His family is worried about him. He should be reassuring them first and spending time with his friends second. He should be fulfilling the very role he apparently assigned himself years ago: keeping the team together.

The fact that he’s not doing so is disturbing. It bothers Damian in a way that’s hard to articulate. He keeps thinking that Drake’s continued distance must mean something, but he can never quite bring himself to follow that thought any further. To truly examine the suspicion that’s been nagging at him for days now.

He doesn’t want to think about that. He’d much rather go over all of Drake’s many flaws at length and point out all the ways that he’s being inconsiderate and infuriating.

But Richard still looks tired and ragged around the edges, so Damian bites it all back for his sake. Even if that means letting Richard mistake his restraint for the sulky silence of an immature brat.

When they pull up to Drake’s apartment, a familiar figure is standing out front with his hands in his pockets, taking a moment to look up at the converted theater. He gives them an awkward wave when he notices them parking the car.


“Yeah,” Duke says, frowning. “But I’m pretty sure you didn’t. Steph told me to come down here for food and mayhem and to absolutely not tell you or Bruce. On pain of being ostracized from the teen hero community forevermore.”

“Brown is a traitor,” Damian tells him. “And you should aspire to loftier company than hers.”

Duke just grins. “Glad to know you think so highly of me. But don’t make out like I brought you here. I’m pretty sure they aren’t going to let you in unless you sign a blood oath not to kidnap Tim.”
Richard sighs. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Damian’s fully prepared to force his way past whichever Titan tries to block their path, but when Duke rings the doorbell, it’s answered by a tall, blonde girl he doesn’t recognize.

“Hi, there,” she says. She doesn’t open the door the whole way. Just enough for her to lean against the door frame and give them all a skeptical look. There’s yelling coming from behind her and then a burst of laughter that sounds like Stephanie.

“Cissie,” Richard says, flashing one of his charming, Gotham’s-most-eligible-bachelor smiles. “So good to see you again.”

She raises an eyebrow at him and the side of her mouth quirks up into a smirk. “I don’t believe we’ve ever met. As ourselves, I mean. Dick Grayson, I presume?” She spares another glance for Duke and Damian. “And who are you two?”

“I’m Duke, and I did not invite them.”

Damian rolls his eyes. “Identify yourself,” he says, “and I will consider supplying my own introduction.”

“Definitely Damian,” she says, her smirk growing more pronounced.

“Man,” Duke says. “Don’t you recognize her?” When the girl looks surprised, he adds, “Cissie King-Jones, right? The Cissie King-Jones?”

“Well, I hope so. I’d hate to hear that someone else got saddled with a name like this one,” Cissie says.

“She’s an actress,” Duke says to Damian. “And a world-class athlete.” To Cissie, he adds, “My friend Riko saw Blood of the Crows in theaters like five times and would not shut up about the costume design. She’s going to murder me when she finds out.”

Cissie grins, clearly pleased by this transparent flattery. “Okay, you, I like. You’re the new guy, right? One of the—” She makes a strange flapping motion with one hand. Presumably it’s meant to represent a bat or perhaps a bird.

Duke glances at Richard, who nods. “Yeah,” he says. “That’s me. I didn’t realize you were part of the, you know—” he makes an equally absurd gesture that looks a bit like an airplane taking off.


Richard at least doesn’t resort to strange, barely comprehensible hand gestures. “Before she won gold in the Olympics,” he explains, “she used her archery skills on a very different sort of team.”

It clicks for Damian. “You’re Arrowette,” he says. He did his research after Drake mentioned the name, but found only a few old news articles. And even those were suspiciously hard to come by. He suspects that Drake cleaned up her digital trail at some point in the last few years.

“Formerly, yeah,” she says. She sizes them up. “Okay, Duke’s already been vouched for, so I’m letting him in.”

She steps aside and waves him through. He maintains his composure right up until she turns her back on him. Then he gives Richard a wide-eyed look and mouths, Holy shit, while pointing at her.
Richard ignores him. “So what’s it going to take to get our own invitation?” he asks.

“Not a lot,” she says. “You two just have to promise not to take off with Tim. I didn’t fly here all the way from LA just for you to run off and hide him in a cave or a boardroom or something. I do not recommend trying that, by the way. I know this is your city and all, but there’s a helluva lot of firepower in there right now.” She gestures over her shoulder. “And they’re more than willing to put up a fight.”

“I don’t know what Bart has been telling you, but Tim isn’t in trouble. We’re just here to check on him,” Richard says, still showing off his brightest trust-me-I’m-handsome smile. “Maybe try to negotiate visitation rights if you’re up for it.”

She rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling now too. “All right, fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Damian hasn’t spent much time in Drake’s apartment, but he’s fairly certain it doesn’t usually look like the site of a natural disaster. Half the furniture has been pushed up against the walls—an odd choice when the apartment is already so spacious—and there are a truly bizarre number of handwritten posters hastily taped to various walls. The one closest to Damian is crooked and torn; it reads **WHY KEYSTONE IS BETTER THAN GOTHAM AND METROPOLIS, AN INCOMPLETE LIST** in huge gold letters at the top. The rest of the poster is filled with red writing that’s mostly illegible because other people have written on top of it in black and blue.

The living room is filled with teens. Conner Kent and Cassie Sandsmark are lying on their stomachs on the carpet surrounded by textbooks and notebooks. Stephanie is sprawled out on the couch, holding a plate covered in food and talking excitedly to Duke. Damian can see a croissant, croquetas, Chinese dumplings, takoyaki, and more all piled up together.

Drake is at the center of it all, sitting on the floor with his back against the couch and his legs stretched out beneath the coffee table. He’s wearing tinted safety goggles and is carefully soldering something inside of an odd oblong device that Damian doesn’t recognize. His hair is too long and much too messy—nothing at all like the Tim Wayne persona he generally adopts in public—and he’s dressed more casually than Damian’s ever seen him. Jeans and a worn-out Gotham Knights t-shirt. Cass is curled up at his side, her head on his shoulder, her eyes protected by what look like extremely expensive sunglasses. On his other side is another blonde girl that Damian doesn’t recognize. Unlike Cissie, who’s lean with muscle and has the sharp-eyed look of an archer, this one doesn’t seem the least bit lethal. She’s soft and small, sitting with her legs crossed, pretending to read a book while sneaking glances up at Drake.

Cissie doesn’t even get a chance to announce them. The door’s barely shut when Bart Allen materializes in front of them, holding what looks like a family-size bag of potato chips. The label, Damian notices, is in Chinese.

Bart gives them an exaggerated look of alarm and then shouts, “The cops are here! **Everybody scatter!**” before disappearing in a spray of chips that manages to hit most of the occupants of the room.

“Former cop, singular,” Drake says, barely glancing up from his device. “Dick, gimme one more second with this.”

Cassie irritably brushes some chips from her hair. “Bart, stop trashing Tim’s apartment.”

“You literally put a hole in his wall, Cassie,” Conner points out.

“That wasn’t my fault! I didn’t expect these two to ninja in here,” she gestures at Cass and
Stephanie and then adds, “At least you three came to the front door like normal people. Thanks for that, by the way. We’re still not gonna let you steal Tim, but I appreciate some common courtesy.”

“This is Gotham,” Stephanie says. “Breaking into people’s houses is, like, the neighborly thing to do.”

“You guys aren’t really here to steal Tim, are you?” the blonde girl on the ground asks.

“They are.” Bart reappears on the couch behind her and whispers loudly in her ear, “They’re gonna throw him into bat-jail.”

“Do we have a bat-jail?” Duke asks. When Damian gives him an unimpressed look, he adds, “What? I didn’t think there’d be a bat-cow either? At this point I have to ask.”

“Nobody’s getting locked up,” Richard says.

“But we do have a bat-jail, don’t we?”

“I think it’s called a containment chamber, technically,” Stephanie says.

“...and there we go,” Drake says, setting down the soldering iron and pulling up his goggles. They leave a prominent red imprint on his face. “Bart, try again.”

The speedster rematerializes on the other side of the coffee table and fiddles with the machine. A moment later a gray holographic square appears above it, hovering in the air. Bart whips out his phone, presses a few buttons and then lets out a cheer when the floating screen morphs. It takes on the shape of a colorful upright rectangle that quickly resolves into a row of icons overlaid on a picture of a big group of smiling people. Presumably, the screen of Bart’s phone.

“Yessss. Connectivity unlocked,” Bart says.

Drake grins. “Okay,” he says, gesturing to Richard. “I’m ready to be rescued.”

“Ha,” Cassie says, glancing up from her book. “Like they could.”

“No rescuing,” Stephanie says.

Richard raises his eyebrows. “I was under the impression that you didn’t want to be rescued.”

“He doesn’t. Don’t listen to anything he’s saying right now,” Bart says. “His mouth speaks nothing but lies.”

“My foot deserves freedom,” Drake says, looking at his friends. “And if you guys aren’t going to liberate it from its shiny alien prison, then I’m going to find someone who will. Cassie, could you —”

Cassie sighs and reaches over to shove aside the coffee table with her fingertip. Underneath it, Drake’s right foot is covered in what looks like transparent green glass.

“Um, dude,” Duke says. “What the hell.”

“Alien cast thing,” Drake answers. “Which my so-called friends will not help me remove.”

“We tried,” Conner points out. “Plus, it’s a cast. It’s for your own good or something.”
“I can’t move my toes and it’s heavy as hell,” Drake says. “I think it might also be sucking out my life force? Dick—please—I know you’re mad, but—”

Dick sighs. “Tim, nobody’s mad at you.”

“The kid looks mad,” Cissie says, eyeing Damian with an amused expression on her face.

“He always looks like that,” Bart tells her.

“Bruce is definitely mad,” Stephanie says. “And Jason. And I’m gonna be mad again once I finish this plate.”

“Bart,” Drake says, his voice gone mock-serious. “Your mission for the rest of the day is to keep that plate full.”

“Nooo,” Stephanie says. “I might actually die if I keep eating. Oh, but we have to do Damian. Dami, come here.”

Damian’s hung back so far, his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. “I don’t fraternize with traitors,” he tells her.

“Just name a food,” she says. “Something you can’t get here in Gotham. Like, something from abroad?”

“I don’t see the point of this,” he says.

“Just do it,” Drake says. “Do it and I will put up less resistance during my rescue.”

“You are not getting rescued, Tim, and that’s final.” Cassie gives Richard a dark look. “Do not get any bright ideas.”

“You should say a food,” Cass tells Damian. She’s still cuddled up to Drake, smiling beatifically from behind her designer sunglasses.

“Just name a dessert,” Stephanie says. “I always have more room for dessert. What was that thing we had that one time at the Middle Eastern place? The cheese thing you said they did it all wrong.”

Damian huffs, then says, “Kanafeh.”

“Ooooh,” Bart says. “That’s a good one. I think I had that in Lebanon once?” He disappears and then reappears less than a second later. “Hey, Tim, where’s—”

“There are Lebanese pounds in the safety deposit box on 23rd Street,” Drake says.

“Cool thanks beright back.”

Duke looks at all of them for a moment and then asks, “Is he doing a food run to the Middle East right now?”

“We were in space for a week—” Cassie says.

“A month,” Drake and Conner say at the same time.

“—so we’re being a little indulgent.”

“I’m back!” Bart declares, as if anyone could miss the burst of wind that accompanies his return.
His hands are empty, but sitting on the table is a cheese-covered pastry on a plate.

Damian folds his arms and glares at them all. Unlike Stephanie, he will *not* be bought with such transparent bribery.

“Are you serious about trying to escape if we don’t get that off your foot?” Cassie asks.

“I can’t move my toes,” Drake says again.

“But what if it *can’t* be removed?” Bart asks. “Maybe it’s permanent. Or maybe you’re supposed to reabsorb it like stitches.”

“It’s too big for that,” Conner says. “Also Tim isn’t an alien bug person.”

“We should just glue on a base and some retractable wheels,” Bart says. “Your foot will be stuck forever, but you’ll have permanent heelies. So, really, I would count that as a win.”

“Why don’t you just pull it off?” Duke asks.

“We can’t. It’s stuck. And really, really hard.” Bart blurs and then there’s a loud mechanical whirring sound. He’s pressing a cordless drill against the green carapace. “See, look at this thing.” He waves the tool at them. The drill bit is clearly damaged beyond repair.

“That’s three you’ve destroyed now,” Drake says. “Thanks for that.”

“There’s only one thing we haven’t tried,” Cassie says. She gives Conner an annoyed look. “Don’t get smug about this, okay?”

Conner grins. “Where are we doing this?”

“What if it explodes?” Bart asks. “That one time you used your TTK on those weird crystals and they exploded.”

“It’s a medical device,” Conner says. “It won’t explode.”

“I am willing to take that risk,” Drake tells them. “I’m really not kidding, this thing is terrible.”

“We should probably not do it here,” Cassie says. “Down to the Nest? Just the four of us. The rest of you stay put.” She gives Richard and Damian a stern look. “Stephanie, you’re in charge of convincing them not to steal Tim once his foot’s free. Conner, secure Tim.”

“I’m not resisting,” Drake says, but he’s already being physically picked up and carted off.

Once they’re gone, Richard surveys the room. “Okay,” he says, looking at Stephanie. “Can you explain...all of this?” He gestures at the wreckage of materials scattered around the room.

“It’s pretty simple,” Stephanie says. “They found out about Tim’s away protocol. That means that he’s totally free for once. All of his responsibilities—Red Robin and WE—are being covered right now. So everyone’s trying to get all of their own shit done so that they can just hang out tomorrow and Sunday. The school stuff is all Cassie and Conner. They’re both taking summer classes and have a week’s worth of makeup work to do. They figure if they come home three days later than strictly necessary, it might earn them some leniency if they can show they already took care of school stuff.”

“My schedule’s clear,” Cissie says. “I’m taking some time off before I try out college. And I don’t start shooting on my next project for another month.”
“Tim’s helping me with my photography,” the blonde girl says. “I’m Greta, by the way,” she adds. “Are you really Tim’s brothers?”

“Adopted,” Damian says. He eyes the kanafeh, but doesn’t reach for it.

“Are you, you know—” Duke makes another stupid gesture. Greta just stares at him.

“He’s asking if you’re a hero,” Cissie says.

“Oh! No, not at all,” Greta answers, looking flustered. “I used to—I mean I was on the team before, but I—”

“It’s kind of complicated,” Cissie says.

“Tim’s toes are free!” Bart announces, appearing in front of them. To Richard, he adds, “He also says you should come down and talk to him real quick. You know, bat-business or whatever. Cassie says hell no to that, but I’m pretty sure he’s going to talk her down.”

Drake clearly wants to talk to Richard alone, but Damian follows him down anyway. If Drake wanted privacy, he shouldn't have invited half the superhero community to his apartment in the first place.

“—so serious right now,” Cassie is saying when the two of them reach the Nest. “This is a one-time thing, okay? Absolutely no more working after this. We are nearly finished and then nobody is doing anything responsible for the rest of the weekend on pain of excommunication.”

Drake is leaning against a desk, all of his weight on his left foot. His right foot’s free and there’s no evidence of the green cast. Presumably he's secreted it away for testing of some kind. “I get it,” he says to Cassie. “Scout’s honor.”

“That’s my line,” Conner says.

Cassie whirls on them. “You’ve got ten minutes,” she says. “And if you take off with him, I’m flying straight to the manor and raising hell. Don’t think that I won’t.”

Conner puts a hand on her shoulder and starts steering her back toward the elevator. Drake shoots him a grateful look when Cassie’s back is turned and Conner just grins in response.

“So,” Drake says.

“Excommunication?” Richard asks.

Drake grins. “Literally communicating with your exes. As in, your phone gets stolen and someone—usually Cissie, she’s the most vicious—sends extremely embarrassing texts to every person you’ve ever dated.”

Richard whistles. “Harsh.”

“Sorry about all the—” Drake waves his hand at the apartment above. “They mean well and I know everybody’s already mad enough, but I figured—”

“Tim, I’m not—okay, I am mad,” Richard says. And that surprises Damian, because he knows there’s been anger mixed in with Richard’s fear and worry, but he’s kept it under control better than Jason or Stephanie or even Father. Damian didn’t expect him to outright admit it. “And I definitely want to talk about what you did and why it was stupid and unnecessary and, again,
really, really stupid. But I’m also just glad to see you and if you don’t let me hug you right this second, I might die.”

Drake laughs and lets himself be pulled into one of Richard’s bear hugs. “Watch the foot. It’s halfway healed—I think that cast thing was speeding up the process—but I’ve still got to find a brace for it before we go anywhere.”

“Speaking of going somewhere,” Richard says. “I know you want to spend time with your friends. I get that. But you can’t seriously be considering just...hiding from us all weekend?”

“I know. That definitely wasn’t my idea,” Drake says, pulling himself away from the hug, his weight still carefully balanced on one leg. “But they’re only going to be here for a couple of days. And we won’t make any trouble. And the no-metas rule doesn’t really hold any water now that Duke’s on the team. And—”

“Tim, it’s not about that,” Richard says, his voice serious now, his hands resting on Drake’s shoulders. “I don’t think you realize how much you scared us. Bruce would be here right now if Babs hadn’t convinced him that your friends would kidnap you again if he showed up. And Alfred’s only hanging back because he expects me to convince you to come home. To the manor, I mean. They just want to see you and make sure you’re alright. And I’m supposed to tell you that your friends can come too. They can stay the whole weekend if they want.”

Drake gives this suggestion an incredulous look. “That,” he says, “is a terrible idea. Have you met my friends? The people upstairs currently trashing my apartment? You want to let them loose on the Wayne family ancestral home for a full weekend? Damian, back me up here. You’ve seen what they’re like at the Tower.”

Damian feels his face contort into a scowl. He’s trying to remain neutral, because to do otherwise would jeopardize their mission. But convincing Drake to come back to the manor should be easy. It shouldn’t even require convincing. Drake’s duty here is clear. Father wants to see him, Alfred wants to see him, even Todd wanted to see him.

And Richard—Richard wants what they have upstairs in the apartment. A reunion, a celebration, a happiness at just being together. Drake’s relaxed posture and easy smiles. Already he’s drawing back from them, becoming less bright, less animated.

“He used to be like that all the time,” Richard told him after they watched the recorded message of Drake and his friends readying themselves for battle. “Not all the time,” Richard amended after a moment’s thought. “He was always more serious with Bruce. But with me, he was—he was like that. A little.”

They used to be close. Before Damian. And Damian thinks that perhaps people can be forgiven for changing—it’s the way of things, and he is changing, so he knows how hard it can be—but he doesn’t like that Drake’s change is so selective. That he’s apparently still giving the best of himself to these other people and not to Father and Richard. Not to the people who love him the most.

And they do love him. Damian can see that now in a way he couldn’t before. In the last few days he has watched them both react to Drake—to his disappearance, to his manipulations and omissions, his convoluted away protocol, his renegade mission, his secrets—and it has been clear every step of the way that they love him. That all of the other emotions they’re experiencing—fear, frustration, anger, anxiety, regret—all spring from that same source.

They are the same way with Todd. Alfred and Richard are more obvious in their affection, though they both express it carefully. But even Father makes it clear as well. Even in the midst of his
search for Drake, he stopped to ask Richard about Todd every single time they spoke. To see how he was doing. If he was still in the cave. If he seemed alright. He didn’t approach Todd himself—worried, perhaps, about scaring him off—but he made his concern clear. And he was relieved every time Todd was still there, still in the cave, still on the mend. Right up until he wasn’t.

It would have been so easy for Drake to come back immediately. Before Todd left the cave. Before Father suffered yet another disappointment. Damian would expect as much from Todd, but Drake is meant to be smarter than this. And Drake is meant to care about the welfare of his team.

Damian has been doing his best, but it’s been difficult. He’s a good Robin. The best. He knows that. He can do the work—the crime-fighting, the mystery-solving, even the smaller bits of maintenance like taking care of the Batmobile and cleaning weapons at the end of the night—but he cannot figure out how to be reassuring. How to put his father at ease, how to convince Todd to stay, how to banish the tension that keeps creeping up into Richard’s shoulders. Drake, apparently, was good at this once. Drake once made Father’s mental health his priority. Drake didn’t hold the team together by himself—no one could do that—but he worked at repairing those smaller cracks in their foundation as best he could, with visible results. Damian doesn’t know how to do any of this. And it’s frustrating. And it would be so easy for Drake to just come back. Reassure Father and Alfred and Richard. Reestablish his rapport with Red Hood. Make everything work the way it’s supposed to. Instead, he wants to shirk his responsibilities to spend time with his friends? After all he’s put them through?

Damian is trying, but Drake’s obstinace is really so unbearable that he can’t keep himself from sneering. “If you’re really so afraid of seeing Father, then perhaps you should keep hiding behind your friends.”

“So Bruce is mad,” Drake says, ignoring the insult.

“He’s worried,” Richard says.

“I already told him—”

“It’d be easier to trust your word if you’d stop hiding things,” Richard snaps, his frustration finally bleeding into his voice.

And that’s a mistake. Because Drake doesn’t care if Damian insults him, but Richard berating him is a completely different matter. He bristles up instantly. Richard’s face is already awash with regret. And this is Damian’s fault, because he couldn’t keep his temper and—

“Damn,” says a new voice. “Is this what passes for a warm welcome in Gotham?”

Damian’s turning on his heel, a knife already in hand, to face the intruder. It’s a dark-skinned girl with very long hair, grinning at them from only a few feet away with a duffel bag slung over her shoulder.

“Sorry, ninja-kid,” she says, holding up her free hand. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

Drake is grinning ear to ear. “Anita,” he says, “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

She frowns. “You weren’t supposed to know I was coming.”

“Cissie kept checking her phone. For an actress, she’s not exactly subtle.”

The girl laughs. “Well, that’s what we get for trying to surprise a detective. Come here, cosmonaut.” She drops the bag and pulls him into a hug nearly as tight as the one Richard just gave
him. Tight enough and long enough that Richard catches Damian’s eye and raises an eyebrow at him. “How was space?” she asks once they’ve pulled apart.

“Same old, same old. How’s Louisiana?”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, you know, non-stop excitement. This the new Robin?”

“Yeah,” Drake says. “Damian Wayne, meet Anita Fite. Anita, Damian. And you already know Dick.” If Drake’s still angry with them, he’s hiding it well. “Did anyone else besides Cissie know you were coming?”

“Nah, mon, we were trying to surprise you. And you know the rest of them can’t keep a secret.”

“Oh man. They’re gonna freak out. We literally just got Bart kind of calmed down.” When she gives him a confused look, he adds, “You’re the last one here.”

“So? What’s that got to do with anything?”

Tim just shakes his head and loops an arm around her shoulders. “Help me get back up there. My foot’s kind of broken.”

He drags her to the elevator, waving for Richard and Damian to follow.

Richard looks like he can’t decide if he’s upset or relieved that their conversation’s been cut short. Damian would be glad the argument stopped before it could really get started, but he has a sinking feeling that they’ve just lost whatever small chance they had of convincing Drake to return to the manor.

Father will be disappointed.

Once they’re inside the elevator, Damian crosses his arms and asks her, “How were you able to get inside the Nest without being detected? I know where all the entrances are and you didn’t use any of them.”

“Maybe you think you know all of them,” Drake says.

“I’ve just got special talents, that’s all,” Anita answers. She and Drake share a smug look.

“Teleportation,” Richard says.

“Hey, now, don’t give all my tricks away.”

The doors to the elevator start to slide apart, but Drake hops forward, disentangling himself from Anita, and slaps the emergency stop before they’ve opened more than a foot. “Guys,” he says, blocking the opening and leaning out, “pop quiz: what’s the best Young Justice Fite?”

Richard snorts. Anita just rolls her eyes.

Damian can hear Drake’s friends calling out confused suggestions—something about a fight in Zandia and a battle involving Darkseid—but Drake interrupts them to say, “No, wrong, you are all so very wrong right now.” He turns, grabs hold of Anita, and shoves her out of the elevator.

“Brace me,” he says, turning to put his back against Anita’s and holding his hands out toward Richard at the same time.

Someone—possibly Cassie—actually screams. Richard has just enough time to catch Drake’s
outstretched hands and brace him before a tumult of teens comes crashing into Anita and nearly topples both her and Drake back into the elevator.

What follows is a lot of yelling and laughing and much more fuss than Damian thinks the occasion warrants. Anita seems to agree.

“Y’all have lost your damn minds,” she says after both Cassie and Conner have taken turns picking her clean off her feet and swinging her around in circles like a ragdoll. “I’m not the one who ran off to space for a week!”

Bart keeps disappearing and reappearing in different spots, clearly unable to contain himself.

“Anita, we see you even less than we see Tim!”

“Hey,” Drake says.

“It’s true!”

“Bart, I just saw you a week and a half ago, mon.”

“But now everyone’s here! Oh my god, we need to go see Reddy and Traya. We need to call Ray! And we should definitely torment Snapper. This is gonna be the best weekend ever.”

“Not so fast,” Cassie says. “Conner and I are still finishing up. And weren’t you trying to track down some stolen lab equipment or something?”

“Uuuuugh,” Bart groans. “We can do that later!”

“But we won’t,” Cassie says. “Once this train derails, that’s gonna be it.”

“We’re nearly done,” Drake says. “Bart, I already sent you a list of potential hideouts for the lab we’re looking for. Based on the most likely smuggling routes and areas where large-scale construction could take place without drawing too much attention—”

There’s a gust of air and Bart is gone. Drake sighs. “I don’t know why I even try.”

“Habit,” Cassie says. She looks at Anita. “You have anything we can help you with? We’re pooling our resources and knocking out a bunch of stuff. Big and small.”

“Hell no,” Anita says. “I am officially on vacation right now. If I look like I’m about to accidentally do something responsible, you’re morally obligated to stop me.”

There’s another gust of air and then Impulse is standing in front of them in uniform. “Okay, good news: I found it!” he says. “Bad news: I tripped an alarm and now there are robot spiders everywhere?”

“Oh my god,” Cassie says, rolling her eyes. “There it is. Our train has derailed.”

“Oh my god,” Anita says. “I haven’t been on a mission in literal years. This really is the best weekend ever.”

Conner’s grinning. “You in? Did you bring your—”

“Of course,” she says, already diving for her bag.

“Impulse,” Drake says, “can we get visuals on—yes, there we go.”
He must have taken cameras from the Nest, because when Bart vanishes again, the holoscreen floating above the coffee table morphs from his phone’s lock screen to multiple views of a mountainside facility that’s now being swarmed by shiny metallic creatures with far too many legs.

Drake frowns at the image. “Well, that’s not good. Superboy, Wonder Girl, I’m sending you the coordinates now.”

“Already gone,” Conner says, grabbing hold of Cassie’s hand.

“Leave through the Nest,” Drake reminds them.

“Yeah, yeah, we know,” Cassie says. “Um, anybody else want to—”

Cissie crosses her arms. “Oh, do not go there.”

“Just checking! I didn’t mean—”

Conner rolls his eyes and drags her off.

“Um,” Richard says, “do you guys need any help or—whoa, wait a second there.”

Damian turns to look and gets a glimpse of Anita standing over her open duffel bag—she’s got her back toward them and is in the process of pulling her shirt up and over her head—and then Richard’s hand is clamped over his eyes.

“Is she doing what I think she’s doing?” Drake asks, sounding mildly exasperated.

Cissie sighs. “Yeah.”

“Anita,” Greta whispers. “There are strangers here.”

“Also a literal child,” Cissie says.

“Don’t wanna see, don’t look!”

Damian has no interest in voyeurism, but he objects on principle to being treated this way. By the time he’s pried Richard’s fingers away from his face, the girl on the other side of the room has donned her mask and armor and is holding what looks like an escrima stick. Duke’s staring at her, looking more than a little intimidated. Stephanie just looks kind of impressed.

Anita pulls the escrima stick apart—it’s actually two blades, Damian realizes—and then starts chanting, “This is the best, this is the best.”

Drake’s still looking at the screen where Superboy and Wonder Girl are engaged in battle, but he’s smiling now and holding up something small and gray. “If you’re going into the field, you’ll need a comm.”

“I still have my old one,” she says.

“This one’s been upgraded.”

She takes the device, pops it into her ear, and then sighs. “Ahh, the sweet sound of battle. Get me over there now, Rob, before SB and WG wreck everything.”

“Impulse, Empress is ready for pick up.”
“Yessss,” Impulse reappears, sweeping her up into his arms and laughing when she lets out a war whoop. Then they’re gone from the room. When Damian looks back at the holographic monitors, she’s already swinging her blades through a few of the metallic creatures.

“Um, so that was—” Duke starts to say.

“Anita just gets excited,” Cissie says. “She’s been semi-retired for a while because of some family stuff, but she’s always missed it.” She shrugs. “Some people are made for the game, others aren’t.”

Drake is ignoring them all, sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table and calmly issuing orders into his comm. Cass is watching with interest, and the small blonde—Greta—is leaning into Drake’s space and making concerned faces at the screens.

Damian has to admit that Drake and his teammates have a rapport that’s almost enviable. Gotham’s vigilantes are clearly superior, but he can see why Drake might prefer this. Being at the center of things instead of the periphery. Their way of doing things seems more chaotic than cohesive, but Drake is utterly unflappable in the face of his friends’ antics and his team seems to follow his lead without a second thought.

Damian feels the sinking sensation in his chest return. Because Drake called them that during the video message he sent to Father. He called them my team. He said there was no one in the world he trusted more. At the time, Damian thought that was likely hyperbole. An attempt to reassure Father that all would be well. But now he’s not so sure.

“How exactly did this happen?” Duke asks Cissie, gesturing at the other teens. “I know the story of the Titans—everybody does—but I’ve never really heard of Young Justice.”

“Oh god, that’s a good thing,” Cissie says. “We got a lot of bad press during our run. And we were never officially sanctioned the way the Titans were. It was more of a club than a team? The boys met up first and then things just sort of snowballed.”

“How’d you join?” Duke asks. Damian finds the multitude of questions suspicious. Richard has tried to foist unwanted dating advice on him numerous times—“You’ll appreciate this in a few years, Dami,”—and he often reiterated that potential romantic partners like when you ask them questions and show interest in their answers.

“Oh, well, I knew Impulse first. He and the others helped me out when I got into some trouble early on. It’s kind of embarrassing, but I got hit by one of my own arrows. By Greta’s brother. Who was a supervillain at the time. Wow,” she adds. “I literally never have to explain this kind of thing, so I sometimes forget how crazy it all was.”

Duke looks taken aback. “Okaaaay. Then is that how she—”

“Oh, the boys busted Greta out of a secret government facility where she was being held against her will because of her powers, which she got because her brother murdered her to get his own powers.”

“Oh,” Duke says.

“Yeah, maybe don’t bring that part up to her.” Cissie says, keeping her voice down. “She’s still pretty sensitive about the fratricide. And she hasn’t got powers anymore. Which is a good thing. It’s, you know—”

“Complicated?” Duke offers.
“Always,” Cissie answers.

Drake’s pulling himself up off the floor and saying, “—and bring a tarp first, okay?”

There’s a *whoosh*, and then the books and poster materials scattered across the floor have been pushed aside and a large tarp covered in broken bits of machinery—pieces of the robot spiders—is spread out on the floor of Drake’s apartment instead.

Impulse is standing next to it, grinning.

The two of them start pulling the machinery apart and organizing the pieces. Damian tries to follow their conversation but they’re both talking quickly and half of what they say seems to be some sort of shorthand. Damian spends a few minutes trying to figure out why certain parts are gizmos and others are gadgets—based on their conversation, the two of them seem to think there’s an obvious and significant difference—but they clearly have some kind of personal taxonomy that they’re using.

Damian’s not the only one keeping an eye on them. Most of the others are still gathered around the holoscreens, watching the battle unfold, but Richard’s eyes stay on the two boys digging through the mechanical guts of the robot. He looks like he wants to help, but it’s clear that they don’t need any assistance. Any attempted interference would only slow them down. And Drake, perhaps purposefully, is sitting with his back toward them now.

It’s an odd sight. Richard, standing apart from a group instead of in the middle of it, hesitating instead of taking action. Damian knows that he and Father have both felt off-kilter ever since the video message from Drake. The one where he declared himself an unnecessary part of the team and made it clear that he found the idea of a resurrection distasteful.

Damian does not like to think about his own death very often. It was in some ways less traumatic than the breaking of his spine and the temporary paralysis that followed. But just as that led to the installation of a remote monitor in his brain, his dip in the Lazarus Pit feels like it’s left something else inside him. A taint, perhaps, that will spread throughout him. Or another ticking time bomb that will go off when he least expects it. But still. He is glad to be back. Glad to know that Father and Mother would both go to such great lengths to save him even after he failed them so miserably.

Drake explicitly rejected the possibility of undergoing the same process. He doesn’t want to stay with them no matter the cost.

Now that he’s no longer in mortal danger, Father and the others seem to worry only about his mental and emotional state. Damian is worried about his *plans*. Because there is always a wider plan at work with Drake. And when Damian steps back and looks at all of his recent actions, he thinks he’s beginning to see the outline of it.

Drake claiming he’s not needed isn’t a reflection of reality or a true and clear-sighted evaluation of his importance to the team. It’s a decision that he is making. It’s an abdication of responsibility. An infuriating deflection. A *shirking off*.

Because Drake is leaving the team. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but he is planning to abandon them all. His statements in that video message combined with his overly elaborate away protocol are more than enough evidence to make his intentions clear.

He’s in the process of slowly but painstakingly extricating himself from the team. He’s been working independently as often as he can so that they’ll all grow accustomed to his absence. He’s taken on a great deal of additional work in the last year because he wants to clean up as much of
Gotham as possible before leaving. And he set up his away protocol so that he can simply adjust
the parameters of the system when he feels the time is right, divide up what tasks still remain, and
then be on his way.

Or maybe he doesn’t have a specific time in mind yet. Maybe, coward that he is, he’s just waiting
for an opportunity to present itself. He suggested as much to his friends when he spoke about
dropping the mantle of Red Robin and returning to Earth in disguise. Taking up a new name
unconnected to Gotham. Working elsewhere for a time in the same way Cassandra once worked in
Hong Kong.

Except Cass always wanted to come back. To be in Gotham. To be a Bat.

And Drake does not. That is why he’s been acting so strangely. Maintaining his distance, staying
off-planet longer than necessary, allowing his friends to keep him away from the manor.

He doesn’t want to come back. He wants to break away and become another Todd. And perhaps
even take Todd with him when he goes elsewhere.

This revelation is infuriating on multiple levels. There was a time when Damian would have
welcomed Drake’s departure. So, naturally, Drake’s somehow contrived to wait just long enough
for Damian to realize that he—to start to admit that Drake is—

Damian’s just gotten used to him is all. He doesn’t want to adjust to a life that doesn’t include him.
And the others will be even worse off. If Father took Drake’s temporary absence this badly,
Damian shudders to think of what a more permanent absence would do to him. Had Drake cut ties
with them all sooner—back when Father was still missing or shortly after his return—Damian
might have understood it. Looking back, he can admit that he would have taken losing the mantle
in such a fashion just as badly as Drake had. He still believes that it is up to Batman to choose his
Robin and that Richard, as the original bearer, had the right to make that call.

But it must have been galling. Now, occasionally, when Damian makes a mistake or slips up in the
field, a part of him worries. What if someone else comes along and Father decides—or Richard
tells him to—

Absurd. Just based on skill alone, Damian’s position is safe. But still. He imagines it was
unpleasant.

But if he were to lose his place and find his new position untenable, he would not drag it out in this
manner. He would make a clean break of it. For the sake of the family, if nothing else. The fact
that Drake is moving at a glacial pace and has been leading them all on for the better part of a year
is beyond provoking.

Damian wouldn’t have believed it a few months ago. Or even a week ago. But Drake’s act during
their encounter with the Tetrahedra proves that he’s more skilled at deception and manipulation
than any of them ever realized. He fooled them all then, and he’s trying to fool them now. Playing
at reconciliation while he continues to plan his departure.

It’s unacceptable. Something clearly needs to be done, but Damian doesn’t know what. He can’t
talk sense into Drake. Anything he says will be met with outright suspicion. And it’s possible that
Drake will move up his timetable if he realizes that someone’s caught on to him. If Damian says or
does the wrong thing, he might uproot himself more quickly and leave the city earlier than he
planned. Drake hates confrontation. He’ll disappear in the dead of night before he explains himself
to anyone.
In any other situation, Damian would bring this kind of problem to Richard or to Father. But in this case, he can’t. It’s highly unlikely that they’ll take him seriously since his relationship with Drake is already so fraught. And if they do accept his conclusions, they’re both the type that would confront Drake about this immediately. And confrontations in this family almost always end in disaster. Todd is proof enough of that.

Damian’s going to have to figure this out without their help. He’s going to have to solve the problem of Drake’s impending departure without either of them finding out and making things worse than they already are.

He’s still trying to figure out what he should do and who, if anyone, he should tell, when Impulse lets out a triumphant crowing sound and throws his hands in the air. Drake, oblivious to the fact that his deceit has been uncovered, is grinning and looking smug as he sets down a keyboard. They’ve apparently succeeded in hacking the robot spider’s systems. Once that’s done, the fight’s effectively over. The swarm on-screen falls to pieces, and two of the fighting figures—Superboy and Wonder Girl—meet mid-air to high-five. Empress just looks a little annoyed. Or maybe disappointed.

“Well,” Drake says, looking down at the machine oil now staining his clothes. “Goodbye, last pair of jeans without blood or grease stains. I will remember you fondly.”

“Just steal someone else’s,” Bart says. He’s already switched out of his uniform and back into his civilian attire. “All our bags are in the back.”

“Cis, do you mind—” Drake gestures vaguely at the holoscreens.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says. “I’ll make sure this mess gets cleaned up.” She touches one of her ears—she’s been wearing a comm this entire time, Damian realizes—and starts coordinating with the others.

Drake limps off and returns moments later wearing a pair of black jeans and a large black medical brace on his right foot. “Are those mine?” Cissie asks, gesturing at the jeans.

“They were in Cassie’s bag?” Drake says. When Steph gives him an incredulous look, he says, “What? Conner’s clothes are too big and Bart’s are too small. Plus Cassie steals my stuff all the time.”

“On the clothes stealing front, Cassie is far from the worst offender,” Cissie says. “That would be —”

“We are back and we have a plan,” Cassie announces as she, Conner and Anita emerge from the Nest’s hidden elevator. “Obviously, we have to go visit Reddy and Traya, but then we’re going to Metropolis for the rest of the day. No Bats allowed.” When Stephanie and Duke both start to protest, she holds up a hand. “Sorry, guys, but we need at least a few hours for just us. No arguing. But then tomorrow we’re moving this party over to the manor for the rest of the weekend. That good with you all?”

“We’re doing what now?” Cissie says.

Anita grins. “Bruce Wayne invited us over to his house,” she says, “and there’s no way I’m missing out on that.”

Richard looks surprised and pleased.

Drake still looks skeptical. “Do I get a say?” he asks.
“You can say whatever you want,” Cassie tells him. “But we’ve already voted. Anita and Conner, go get changed—not here—and then we should be ready to head out.”

“Oh my god,” Cissie says, rolling her eyes. “Are you serious right now?”

“She thinks she’s ready,” Drake says. The two of them share a look.

“What?” Cassie asks.

“Cassie, sweetheart,” Cissie says. “You are still dressed as Wonder Girl. You wore this exact outfit on TV while fighting that minotaur two weeks ago. Tim Wayne is not gonna hang out with you like this. I am also not gonna hang out with you like this. We are gonna be low-key this weekend. We are not gonna draw attention to ourselves. Capiche?”

Cassie looks down at the civilian clothes that serve as her uniform and groans. “Ugh, why do you guys have to be public figures anyway?”

Cissie rolls her eyes. “Quit whining.”

“Tim, are those my jeans?”

“Maybe?” Drake says.

“I’m pretty sure you stole those from me,” Cissie points out.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Also, Tim, I’m borrowing your bomber jacket.” Cassie pulls off her hoodie and throws it at him. “You can use this.”

“Yeah, sure,” Drake says. He pulls on the hoodie—it fits him just as well as the jeans did—and then says, “Okay, wow, this is super comfy. I’m not giving it back. It’s mine now.”

“If Tim gets your hoodie, can I borrow your skirt?” Bart asks. “Not the one you’re wearing. I want the one with the stars.”

“Yeah, sure, it’s in my bag,” she says. “Come on, people, let’s go.” She starts herding Anita and Conner back towards the bedrooms, with Cissie following on her heels.

Bart disappears and then reappears. He’s now wearing the aforementioned skirt along with garish, multicolored sneakers, a purple Keystone City Salamanders tank top, and a pair of very familiar sunglasses. On the other side of the room, Cass touches her own face and then looks annoyed.

“You really gonna wear that outside?” Duke asks.

“Yeah, dude,” Bart says. “Here’s the thing about society’s arbitrary, restrictive, and gender-obsessed clothing rules.” He blurs and then there’s a giant poster on the wall behind him. It’s an almost photo-realistic drawing of himself striking a pose in the exact same outfit, and the words “IN THE FUTURE NOBODY GIVES A FUCK” are written in glitter along the top and bottom.

“Cool,” Duke says. “I just meant that Cissie said you guys weren’t supposed to draw attention to yourselves? And you are a little noticeable right now.”

“We’re not supposed to risk blowing our secret identities,” Bart says. “Everything else is fair game. Besides, as long as we’re not blatantly wearing our uniforms in public, nobody’s gonna pay that much attention to us.”

“Cissie’ll probably get recognized,” Drake says. “As long as I’m out of a suit, I’m pretty much
invisible.” He pauses to look at the poster and then sighs. “The glitter infestation continues.”

“I cleaned up last time,” Bart reminds him.

“Glitter’s like crime,” Drake says. “No matter how much you clean up, there’s always more.”

“Bad news,” Conner announces, walking into the room in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt that says, *Ashes on Sunday*.

“Let me guess,” Drake says. “The girls are gonna be a while.”

“Yep.”

“Conner, what do you think about my outfit?” Bart asks, flinging his arms out wide and spinning.

“A-plus for adorable,” Conner says. “But didn’t we decide as a group that wearing shades indoors was kind of a douche move?”

“Conner Kent, you absolute *peasant*,” Bart says. “These shades aren’t douchey. They’re *Gucci*.”


Conner sighs. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“You guys are really gonna ditch us?” Stephanie asks.

“Temporarily,” Conner says. “Don’t worry, we’ll bring your bird back in one piece. Probably.”

“Dick, I think I’m changing my mind,” Drake says. “I think I need to go back to the manor immediately. I think—”

“Nope, no, stop that,” Bart says. “Don’t make Cassie fight your family.”

“Why is Cassie the one fighting?” Conner asks. “I’m literally right here.”

Richard’s smiling a little bit. It’s a hesitant smile, but it grows brighter when Drake grins back at him.

It makes Damian feel a little bit sick. Because Richard looks so very *hopeful*, and Drake’s encouraging that hope. Continuing to manipulate them all.

“I don’t think I want to fight Wonder Girl,” Richard says. “But if you guys can keep us updated, that would be great. And Alfred will have the manor ready for you tomorrow.”

“Such a bad idea,” Drake says. “Such a terrible, horrible idea.” But he doesn’t look upset. If anything, he looks amused.

And something about his demeanor makes Damian feel fractionally less frantic. It could still be an act, but he’s almost certain that some of it must be real. Because he knows that Drake *does* care about Richard and Father and the rest of the team, himself excluded. Maybe not enough to stay with them, but enough to worry about what will happen to them when he leaves. Damian will have to use that. He’ll have to figure out if somewhere beneath all of his machinations some small part of Drake might still want to stay. Might be open to being convinced, if Damian can just figure out how to do that.

“Oh,” Stephanie says. “Oh, I’m brilliant. I’ve just had a *brilliant* idea.”
The amusement drops off Drake’s face.

“Whatever it is, you still can’t come with us,” Conner says. “Cassie’s not gonna be swayed.”

“She’s unswayable,” Bart agrees.

“That’s fine,” Stephanie says. She’s grinning as she pulls out her phone.

“Steph,” Drake says, a warning in his tone.

She ignores him. “Hi, Babs,” she says. “I need you to set up something for me.”

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who’s curious, here’s a quick breakdown of my very vague timeline for this fic:

During the year that Bruce was gone and Conner and Bart were both dead, Tim dropped out of high school, Cissie and Greta both graduated high school, and Cassie didn’t complete her senior year (partially due to her superhero career and partially due to the fallout from losing two of her best friends). I have Anita being just a little bit younger than the rest of them, so she's a junior at this time.

Bart and Conner come back in late summer/early autumn. Bruce comes back a couple of months later in late autumn. This fic takes place the summer after. Tim is still not attending school. Bart took a year off to recover from his death (more on this later in the fic). Conner took off the fall semester to "recover" from his "injury" (because you can't just come back from the dead without a cover story). So he returned to school in January and is set to graduate in December. He's taking make-up classes over the summer to make sure he really can graduate this year. Cissie's focusing on her acting career and may or may not try out college in a few years. Greta completed her first year at Gateway University. Cassie completed her senior year but hasn't yet figured out where she wants to go to university, so she's spending the summer knocking out some prerequisites at a local college in San Francisco and plans to study part-time in order to better balance her academic activities with her heroic ones.

Cissie's movie Blood of the Crows is a fake film I made up for this fic.

The Keystone City Salamanders are a fictional baseball team mentioned in some issue of The Flash. And Bart's amazing fashion sense was inspired by the artist sixspence on tumblr. You should 100% go look at their art right this second.

Ashes on Sunday was Dinah Lance's band before she formed Black Canary.

Damian mentions getting his spine broken, being temporarily paralyzed, and having a remote monitor connected to his brain (which his mother eventually uses to control his actions). All of that happened in the pre-52 canon. This poor kid has been through a lot.

Lastly, I wanted to say thank you to everyone who left comments this past week. This chapter got a wee bit delayed because I was in a very minor automotive accident over
the weekend. Nothing serious, but dealing with that ate up a lot of my free time and was pretty stressful. Having a little pool of positivity to dive into any time I needed a break was an absolute life-saver and made a huge difference during a difficult few days. So, again, thanks so very much for brightening up a very dreary week.
By the time Jason notices the group chat, there are already dozens of messages on it.

He’s lying on the pull-out couch in one of his shittier safe houses, eating handfuls of cereal straight from the box, when he checks his phone. For a moment he thinks he must have somehow grabbed someone else’s cell by mistake, but when he looks at his contacts and call history, everything’s just as it should be. With the exception of the messages that won’t stop popping up.

He’s somehow been added to a group chat on an app that he doesn’t even recognize and is certain he never downloaded. Which means Oracle’s likely the culprit.

The chat is titled, "Tim's still alive!" He originally reads that as celebratory, but as he scrolls through the messages, it quickly becomes obvious that it’s actually supposed to be an ongoing chain of evidence about Tim’s continued well-being. Half the chat is just bad candids of Tim either trying to dodge the camera or glaring directly at the photographer. In pretty much all of them, he looks rumpled and annoyed. Someone called "sprite"—who Jason guesses must be Impulse—is particularly good at getting pictures of Tim mid-blink, looking like a complete doofus.

Everyone in the chat—and it seems like half of Gotham’s vigilante population has been added—has weird names that Jason assumes are inside jokes. His account is listed as “redrumhoodlum” which he thinks is funny in a sick sort of way. He experiments with trying to change it, but can’t figure out how.

Alfred explained most of the situation to him a few hours earlier. He called at a prearranged time, and Jason answered. It was a small compromise they’d worked out. Jason would pick up for Alfred and let him know that all was well, and Alfred wouldn’t pass along anything Jason said to the rest of the Bats. He figures he can trust Alfie with that much. He’d always assumed that Alfred’s first loyalty was to Bruce and always would be, but if he could keep mum about Tim’s spleen for more than a year, he could probably be trusted to keep quiet about talking to Jason.

He still feels like shit, but he can honestly say that he’s on the mend already. He just has to take it easy until his head and leg are a little bit better.

The first day back was strange. He expected to enjoy the quiet, the alone time, being away from the stress of everyone else. Instead he still felt jittery and strange and hollowed out. The feeling when you’ve just finished a book and don’t quite know what to do with yourself now that you’re back in the real world again.

The phone call with Alfred was a welcome break, although he still meant to keep it brief. Just a quick status update, nothing more. Alfie would ask after him, he’d reassure the old man that he was feeling just dandy, and that would be the end of it.

But Alfred, as it turned out, had news. Tim was not only back in town, safe and sound, but also apparently being held captive by his well-meaning but misguided friends.

“Frickety frack,” Jason said, still in the habit of self-censoring for Alfred’s sake, “I bet Bruce loves that.” Honestly, though, it was Bruce’s own damn fault for being so pissed off during that video call.
Alfred just sighed into the phone and then proceeded to give him a status update on just about every damn vigilante in the city. He talked about Babs and her amusement over Tim’s friends’ clumsy attempts to bypass the Nest’s security systems, Tim’s apparent willingness to let them make fools of themselves, the girls’ failed rescue attempt, and the fact that Duke was likely on his way to join them. He wrapped it all up by mentioning that Dick and Damian were in the city and that he’d be calling them next.

That surprised Jason. He’d have thought Dick would be at the top of the list. Or at least definitely ahead of Jason. But he and Alfred had already agreed on a specific time, and Alfred’s nothing if not punctual.

Overall, the conversation was kind of soothing in its familiarity. After Alfred completed his full report and Jason assured him more than once that he was doing just fine, thank you very much, they agreed on another call in a few days’ time. Jason even set an alarm on his phone so he wouldn’t forget.

An hour or so later, the messaging started.

Jason assumed that Dick would swing in and drag Tim away from his friends pretty quickly. And if not Dick, then definitely Bruce. But based on the pictures and the chat itself, they’ve obviously worked out some kind of compromise, because Tim spends Friday night running around Metropolis with his friends. There are a few photos of the girls and Duke in Tim’s apartment, but none of them in Metropolis, which Jason gathers has been declared a Bat-free zone, at least temporarily. This, of course, doesn’t stop any of the Bats from making fun of the increasingly bad photos of Tim that keep getting posted.

The constant messaging is weird and kind of annoying, but it’s also exactly the sort of mindless distraction that he needs right now. So he keeps checking the chat periodically, but doesn’t comment himself until they get to the Super Store.

He’s heard of the place—a warehouse-sized store that sells every kind of hero merchandise, no matter how obscure—but he’s never actually been there or thought about visiting. Apparently Tim and his friends make the trip at least once a year. There’s some extensive roasting of “S.B.O.G.” and “wondersaurus,” who both regularly wear their own merchandise rather than investing in an actual uniform. One of the perks of being invulnerable.

After that, it’s mostly just silly photos. Impulse all decked out in Green Lantern gear, looking like a goddamn leprechaun. Three girls Jason doesn’t recognize all making faces and wearing Green Arrow, Black Canary, and Red Tornado gear. Duke and Stephanie both make requests: “d.lux” wants some Signal swag, whereas “spoilsport” asks for a Spoiler sweatshirt. Jason would have thought she’d go for Robin or Batgirl, but apparently the allure of that eggplant hoodie was too much for her to resist.

He has to comment when he sees the photo of Tim and Cassie. For once, it’s a decent picture—Tim’s grinning at the camera instead of trying to hide from it—and they’re in the Wonder Woman section of the store. Cassie’s wearing a Gotham-style domino mask and sneering at the camera, while Tim’s got on some kind of faux-Amazonian tiara and the same Wonder Girl hoodie he’s been wearing all day. And behind them is an old-school Wonder Woman t-shirt hanging on a rack. Jason recognizes it instantly. It was a big seller when he was a kid. Before he met Bruce. Back when superheroes and vigilantes were like celebrities to him—people you only ever saw on TV and never expected to meet in real life.

He’s typing out a message before he has time to second-guess it.
redrumhoodlum: Tim. Get me that shirt. The WW over your left shoulder in that last pic. I NEED IT.

(bird)brain: ask me nicely and maybe I will

redrumhoodlum: You fucking owe me for that shit you pulled last week. I will accept that shirt as compensation.

sprite: Um, excuse you, didn’t you literally try to kill him that one time? I think maybe YOU owe HIM.

(bird)brain: back off, bart. everybody tries to kill me. it’s like a rite of passage.

fitesong: Tim is kind of a murder magnet.

(bird)brain: it’s my charming personality. and i’m an “attempted” murder magnet. totally different.

sprite: You are pretty much unmurderable.

AngryBird: Drake has proven himself to be surprisingly resilient.

(bird)brain: um, thanks, i guess???

sprite: He’s right, you’re beating a bunch of us on the longevity front right now.

S.B.O.G.: yep, totally Most Likely to Outlive Us All.

(bird)brain: god i hope not

sprite: :( 

(bird)brain: that is the Nightmare Scenario, conner

S.B.O.G.: TIM

(bird)brain: you guys started it

S.B.O.G.: IT WAS A JOKE

wondersaurus: At least Jason has good taste in heroes (we’re getting you the shirt for sure) [smile emoji] [Wonder Woman emoji]

He stays off his phone after that. Reads a few of the messages as they pop onto his screen, but doesn’t open up any of them again.

He spends the rest of the night torrenting BBC procedurals and eventually falls asleep to the sound of elderly English detectives bickering with one another.

Saturday morning he wakes up earlier than usual. The chat, when he checks it, is not only hundreds of messages longer but also in the middle of a full-blown panic.

sprite: WE LOST TIM. I REPEAT, WE LOST TIM.
spoilsport: wtf do you mean you lost him?

scissors: He was here just a minute ago

S.B.O.G.: he probably got kidnapped AGAIN

classified: Don’t joke about that! His dad’s in this chat.

wondersaurus: WHO ADDED HIS DAD TO THE FUCKING CHAT?

acroBAT: Did you really lose him?

metatron: He’s fine, everyone. Calm down.

(bird)brain: wtf i have been gone less than five minutes

sprite: HE LIVES [fireworks emoji] [praying hands emoji]

classified: Where are you?? We were worried. :( 

(bird)brain: i went outside for some fresh air


fitesong: Prove you’re really Tim.

The next message is just a selfie of Tim giving the camera the middle finger. He’s chosen his angle carefully—there are no street signs or storefronts in the background—but Jason’s pretty sure he recognizes the neighborhood.

spoilsport: tim!!!! hdu, alfred is in this chat!!

(bird)brain: sorry alfred!

Alfred: Apology accepted.

scissors: Where are you?

(bird)brain: not in an apartment full of loud extroverts? enjoying the peace and quiet of a saturday morning?

sprite: come baaaack.

redrumhoodlum: He’s at the coffee shop on the corner of Broderick and Gleason.

(bird)brain: TRAITOR.

fitesong: Wait there, we’re heading over.

(bird)brain: i just want coffee and quiet. FIVE MINUTES.

scissors: You hung out in a void for like three weeks, you big introverted baby. You can chill out on Monday.
(bird)brain: okay. sure thing. i’m just gonna wait right here.

wondersaurus: DON’T YOU DARE GO ON THE RUN.

(bird)brain: you’ll never catch me. this is my city.

wondersaurus: timothy!!!

wondersaurus: not everything is an opportunity for a training exercise!

(bird)brain: it is if you do it right

(bird)brain: also, no powers

sprite: :(  

S.B.O.G: yeah, yeah, we know. gotham rules

(bird)brain: metropolis sucks

spoilsport: metropolis sucks!!!

(bird)brain: eyyyyy

(bird)brain: cass if you’re with steph, you need to high five her RIGHT NOW.

batcass: [high-five emoji] [heart emoji]  

They don’t find him at the coffee shop. By the time they get there, he’s already gone. When they blow up the chat again, he just sends them another selfie. This one from an alleyway a couple of blocks farther east.

Batdad: Should you be running on a broken foot.

Jason rolls his eyes. Trust Bruce’s only message to be a reprimand.

(bird)brain: i’ve got crutches. and i’m not running

(bird)brain: it’s really more of a leisurely stroll

(bird)brain: my friends are just REALLY SLOW

sprite: :(  :(  :(  :(  :(  

It takes them 23 minutes and 8 photos to catch him. The kid moves pretty fast despite his broken foot. Once they’ve finally caught up to him and posted celebratory photos as evidence—none of which, Jason notices, actually feature any crutches—there’s a long logistical discussion about meeting up for brunch somewhere in the city. Steph, Cass and Duke all volunteer to come and help “escort” Tim back to the manor.

spoilsport: since you guys apparently can’t keep track of him.

wondersaurus: shut up, you’re all freaking ninja

Jason’s contemplating his own breakfast options—either more dry cereal or eating peanut butter
straight from the jar—when the phone starts ringing.

It’s Stephanie.

“You gotta come to brunch,” she says. “It’s, like, right around the corner from you. Babs said so.”

“Babs should stop spying on people,” Jason says.

“If you don’t come, you aren’t getting that t-shirt. We’ll burn it. We’ll tear it up into strips and use it to create ugly ’80s headbands. It’ll be terrible.”

“I already ate,” Jason lies.

There’s a shuffling sound and then Cass says, “You should come. Please.”

He wants to say no. He’s tired, and he’s spent too much time with Bats this week already, and he knows from all the photos that Tim is fine. No need to confirm it face to face.

But Cass is the person Tim always calls when he and Jason need back up, and she always shows up and kicks ass and never asks for anything in return.

She hung out with him a lot this past week. Just sat around his corner of the cave, playing on her phone and rearranging her absurdly large stuffed animal collection. She’s definitely one of the weirder kids Bruce has picked up in the last few years, but he’s pretty sure she thinks he’s the odd one. She asked him a few times about the books he was reading and was surprised when he could tell her the entire plot of each of them, start to finish. He’d had to explain that he’d read them all before.

“You already know what happens?” she’d asked, staring at him with obvious incredulity. “Why read it again?”

He tried to shrug it off, but she’d been persistent about asking and eventually he’d given in. He explained that sometimes you can just enjoy something more than once— “Kind of like listening to a song again?”—and sometimes you read something a second time and it’s just a completely different experience. You notice things you didn’t the first time around, or else you notice the same things but feel differently about them now.

“You already know what happens?” she’d asked, staring at him with obvious incredulity. “Why read it again?”

“The book is the same,” Cass pointed out.

“Well, yeah. But you’re different,” he told her. “So you read it differently.”

She’d sat and thought about it for a while—long enough that he’d gone back to reading and pretty much forgot she was there—and then she’d just said, “Thank you,” and wandered off before he could figure out just what she was thanking him for.

None of that actually means anything. It’s not a real reason to drag himself outside and join the absolute circus that’s probably taking place at the diner right now. But, to be honest, after getting spoiled by Alfred for a week, he’s kind of craving real food again. And if there are a lot of Bats there already, Tim’s friends might not be completely unbearable.

“If you don’t bring that t-shirt,” he says into his phone, “I’m bailing immediately.”

It’s a short walk, but he takes it slowly. Partially for the sake of his leg and partially because he’s not exactly looking forward to spending time with a bunch of rowdy kids who probably hate his guts.
He’s glad Tim’s okay. Glad that he has people as fiercely protective of him as his friends apparently are. But he still can’t think about everything that’s happened without getting pissed off. He keeps remembering the image of Tim in his old Robin suit, swinging through the darkness, alone. After all that bullshit about family-togetherness that he used to push on Jason all the time?

Granted, the kid’s backed off in recent months. He’s been decent enough to work with. Consistently professional, whereas Dick and Bruce are still weird and guilt-ridden and always trying to not-so-subtly hint that Alfred misses him and that he should stop by the manor more often and so on and so forth.

Tim, he’d figured, understood the job better than they did. He knew that working together wasn’t about family. Tim was sensible.

He’d thought as much, right up until the kid threw himself into the hands of the Tetrahedra based on nothing more than the hope that his friends would be able to save him. It worked out this time, but it was still just about the stupidest thing he’s ever seen Tim do. And considering how many times Tim threw himself into the Red Hood’s path back when Jason was still thinking about killing the kid, that’s really saying something.

And no team is always there when you need them. Nobody’s always, always there. Jason learned that the hard way.

But that night with the Tetrahedra, they were already there. Already fighting for Damian. Running up the clock, waiting for someone in the Justice League to take notice. And the Tetrahedra might have a terrifying reputation, but Jason’s pretty fucking sure they couldn’t have won against Wonder Woman or Superman or whichever other Leaguers would have been called in for an extraterrestrial threat. That was the whole point of their communications blockade.

Tim didn’t have to go to space. He fucking chose to. And Jason gets why he did it now. Tim’s a detective first and foremost, and figuring out what the fuck was going on with Bezneetan would have been his top priority after protecting the city. Jason gets that.

But the damn kid didn’t need to go it alone. And didn’t need to fucking lie to them all to do it.

Jason knows that trust isn’t an all-or-nothing kind of thing. There are degrees and categories and specific scenarios that all factor into what you tell someone and what you don’t. There are people Jason would trust to have his back in a fight but not to keep a secret for him. And vice versa.

But he still can’t believe the kid sent him off after Damian—let him think the damned brat was in imminent danger—all while Tim was scrambling to hand himself over instead.

And then to cap it all off by activating his away protocol? That’s proof positive that the kid’s starting to lose it.

Jason can’t quite pin down why the stupid thing makes him feel so angry and raw and honestly kind of freaked out. It’s not just Tim’s apparent willingness to go down in the line of duty. There’s something deeply perverse about how nice and tidy he’s trying to make his eventual demise. And his apparent conviction that if he prepares enough for it, everything he sets into motion will just continue on after he’s gone.

Jason’s not exactly the poster child for healthy coping mechanisms, but he’s pretty fucking sure that evaluating every task in your life and deciding who to assign it to if you die unexpectedly is not a healthy way to live. And he shouldn’t give a fuck—this isn’t exactly a profession that prioritizes mental health—but he can’t get over the nagging feeling that it’s his fault. Not just for
dying, but for coming back the way he did.

He asked Dick about that. About why Tim was so fucking specific in that video message about not wanting to be brought back from the dead when half his team’s been resurrected in the last couple of years. And Dick claimed that Tim’s aversion to the Lazarus Pit had something to do with his feud with Ra’s al Ghul as well as an encounter with the Black Lanterns that Dick emphatically did not want to talk about. But Jason’s pretty sure he’s the real reason. Because Damian might have come back no more homicidal than he was when he went in, but Jason—Jason’s not the person he was before he died. So he’s pretty sure it’s his fault. For being the way he is. For going after the kid who replaced him and nearly slicing his neck open, because he was pissed and half-mad from the pit and—

None of it should matter. But Tim’s kept coming back to help him. Hasn’t held a grudge even though he really fucking should. And Jason maybe owes him a little bit for that.

When he makes it to the diner, finding everyone is easy. The kids have been relegated to three pushed-together tables in a back corner, and multiple members of the waitstaff are eyeing the group like they’re afraid a food fight’s going to break out any second.

Tim, predictably, is sitting with his back to a corner in a spot that gives him the best view of the rest of the diner. He notices Jason first and waves him over.

“You know this is part of their plot, right?” he says, motioning toward the other side of the table where Steph and Cass are both smiling—Steph triumphantly, Cass with more muted pleasure. The expressions on the rest of the table range from curious (the girls Jason only recognizes from the chat) to subtly hostile (Impulse and Superboy in their civvies). The only out-of-towner who smiles at him is Wonder Girl, so she’s probably gonna have to be his favorite from now on. “They’re conspiring to drag you back to the manor once you’re in a food-induced coma.”

“They’re not staying with you?” Jason asks.

“We’re all going to the manor after this,” Tim says.

Jason looks up and down the table. “All of you?”

Tim sighs. “Yes. All of us. This was not my idea. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s going to end in disaster. I am pretty sure they—” he motions at the girls again, “—are going to try to tempt you into coming with us just so you can watch the trainwreck unfold. You don’t have to. In fact, I advise against it and would not be going myself if I had any choice.”

“Tim, stop trying to scare him off,” Steph says. “Come here, Jay, we have your shirt.”

He could just grab it and go. But the girls are shuffling chairs around to make room for one more and it’s not like he even has to order anything. The table’s already loaded down with food and everyone seems to be grabbing whatever they want. Plus, the spot they’re opening up for him is between Cass and Duke, so at least he’ll be in the sane section.

Duke’s thinking along the same lines. When Jason pulls up a chair beside him, the kid takes another look at the chaos unfolding around them and then says, “I can’t believe I used to think you guys were the craziest team around.”

A sharp-eyed blonde girl on the other side of the table snorts. “Says the walking traffic light.” She looks weirdly familiar, but Jason can’t quite put his finger on why that is.

Duke gives him a quick rundown on the new additions while Jason works his way through a
Belgian waffle and his first cup of coffee. Cissie King-Jones, retired archer and active actress. Anita Fite, who has some kind of meta-ability or maybe magic, Duke hasn’t figured out which. Semi-retired. And Greta Hayes, who—Duke whispers this last part—might have been some kind of eldritch horror in a past life and is now definitely retired.

Jason can’t tell if Duke’s messing with him right now. The kid has been pretty chill the few times they’ve interacted in the field, but for all he knows Duke could be some kind of crazy practical joker when he’s not on duty. Jason just keeps his expression neutral, eats his food, and does his best to ignore Stephanie’s increasingly transparent conversational gambits.

It’s not too bad. After some initial side-eyeing, the kids go back to enthusiastically eating and arguing among themselves. Tim looks a little more ragged that he did in the pictures from yesterday. Like he wore himself out during his earlier escape. Or like he’s just tired from surviving a crazy space adventure and the company of a bunch of over-excited teens with superpowers.

And they really are just kids. Even Sandsmark, who impressed the hell out of him with her dressing down of the Justice League, looks like a silly, excitable teenager. She’s talking animatedly to the other girls and hasn’t noticed that her hair is just long enough to drag through the food on her plate when she leans forward too far. At the other end of the table, the boys are having a long and heated argument about video game systems. Or maybe different video game companies? He can’t really follow.

The whole set-up gives Jason a weird, not quite nostalgic feeling. Reminds him of school, a little. Eating lunch at the cafeteria. Talking about anything just to pass the time.

He doesn’t miss being a kid, exactly. He never really was one. Not the way his classmates were. Carefree and coddled and completely unprepared for all the shit life can throw at you. But he does miss school sometimes. Not the rules and the schedules and all the conformist bullshit. But the talking and arguing and reading and **thinking**. That part he always liked.

He mostly lets their chatter wash over him, not quite sure why he’s here but not yet willing to get up and go, when Anita turns to Duke and says, “So. How’d you end up in the game?”

“The game?” Duke asks.

“Yeah, you know. The thing we all have in common?” She gestures at the table full of heroes and vigilantes. “Why, what do you call it? When you’re out of uniform, I mean.”

“I don’t know? Nothing? I don’t really talk about it when I’m not, you know, on the job.”

“That sucks,” Cissie says. “I’d have gone crazy if I couldn’t talk about that kind of thing. Back when I was still in it, I mean.”

“‘The game’ seems like it’s sort of—I don’t know.” Steph tugs at her hair, searching for a word, and then just makes a face. “It just seems like the kind of thing Bruce would hate. Like it’d be disrespectful or not serious enough or something.”

“Oh, he definitely hates it,” Tim says. “But I convinced him that it was more responsible to have a code word, even one he hates, rather than just talking openly about everything in public.”

“Plus it’s the only word we could all agree on,” Conner says.

“What were the alternatives?” Anita asks. “This was before I joined up, I think.”

“That’s not too bad,” Steph says.

Conner snorts. “It makes it sound like we all have the same fetish.”

“Calling it ‘the business’ makes us sound like we’re trying to break into show business. Or working for the mob,” Cassie adds.

“Whereas ‘the game’ just makes us sound like we’re really into sports,” Cissie says. When half the table stops what they’re doing to stare at her with incredulity, she frowns right back at them and says, “What?”

“Cissie,” Tim says slowly. “We don’t sound like athletes when we talk about the game.”

“We sound like nerds,” Conner tells her. “Gamer nerds.”

“No,” Cissie says, sounding mildly horrified. “No, we absolutely do not.”

“We sound like we’re all addicted to MMOs,” Tim says. “Think about it. ‘Oh, I’m not getting much sleep because of the game. My grades are dropping because of the game. This is my friend, we met through a game.’”

“To be fair,” Jason feels the need to point out, “you guys apparently are gamer nerds.”

“Whereas I am an Olympic athlete,” Cissie says, folding her arms.

“And so humble too,” Cassie says, grinning and bumping shoulders with her.

“How’d that happen?” Duke asks. “Leaving the game, I mean.”

“Oh god, that’s an ugly story,” Cissie says.

“It wasn’t that bad—”

“Yes, it was,” Cissie says, cutting Conner off. Turning back to Duke, she adds, “Let’s just say I am not temperamentally suited to the game. So I stopped. Packed up my uniform, gave it all up, quit the team—tried to quit the team, at any rate.”

“You can quit the team,” Bart says.

“But the team doesn’t quit you.” Cissie rolls her eyes. “Nobody told me I was signing a lifetime contract.”

“Should have read the fine print,” Tim says. Jason gets the sense that he’s missing something. Not just an inside joke, but something bigger that they’re all skirting around.

“Anyway, my mom’s the one who convinced me to try out for the Olympics. And after that, I had an agent and one thing sort of led to the other. To be honest, it’s been really nice? I know you guys do a lot of good and I’m glad you’re out there doing your thing, but for me? It just didn’t work.”

“You’re inspiring the masses now,” Bart says. “Equally important.”

“Blood of the Crows was not what I would call inspiring,” Tim says.

Cissie rolls her eyes again. “Oh my god, Tim. Are you seriously still mad about—”

“No fighting,” Cassie says. She somehow manages to look and sound authoritative even though
She’s in the middle of using paper napkins to clean whipped cream off a sizable chunk of her hair. “Also, Cissie, you’re not even completely out of the game. You’ve helped us out a few times.”

“As support,” Cissie says. “I don’t fight anymore.”

“If you’re not fighting—” Steph starts to say.

“I have some medical training.”

“And she’s good for undercover work,” Tim adds. “She’s the one who helped me plant that camera in the Iceberg Lounge last year.”

“That was you?” Jason says. He remembers this vaguely. There’d been some rumbles in the criminal underground about a new player in town. Someone with Gotham connections who knew how to plant a bug in the middle of one of the city’s hottest dens of iniquity without letting her face get caught on a single damn camera. But nothing had ever come of it. “You were the Brunette in the—”

“In the totally inappropriate-for-my-age dress? Yeah.” She looks a little smug. “That one was super easy. I don’t know why Tim spent so much time on the facial prosthetics when no one was looking up there.”

“It pays to practice,” Tim says. “And you’re already a public figure. No need to risk you getting recognized.”

Stephanie whistles, long and low. “The Iceberg Lounge is no joke. If you’re retired—”

Cissie waves away her concern. “I can still defend myself. And I had Tim backing me up. Besides, my motivation for helping was one hundred percent selfish. I was in town for, like, a day, and Tim wasn’t going to hang out with me until he finished that stupid mission.”

“I do appreciate your help,” Tim says. “It’s not every day I get to run an undercover op with someone who actually knows what they’re doing.”

“If that’s a dig at me,” Cassie starts to say, “I want it on record that I—”

“No fighting,” Cissie says, giving her a faux-serene smile. “And any time, Tim. You’ve done the same for me more than once.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think my undercover missions are ever quite that...skeevy,” he says.

“Um, are you forgetting that thing last October?” she asks. Beside her, the other blonde—Greta—turns an unhappy pink color. “Remember the thing with the—”

“Oh god,” Tim says. “Cissie, why would you—I had almost fully suppressed that memory, Cissie. I was almost free.”

Cissie just laughs while Greta ducks her head, obviously embarrassed.

“Okay, I don’t know this story,” Cassie says. “What—”

“Conversational veto,” Tim says, firmly.

“But—”

“Veto.”
“Ugh, fine, be a secretive bastard,” Cassie says. “Just tell me how embarrassing this story is so I
know how much time I should dedicate to prying it out of Greta. Like, on a scale of one to ten, with
one being not really that embarrassing and ten being like that time you—”

“Cassie,” Tim says. “Are you sure you want to break out embarrassing stories? Is that really a
thing you want to do? Because if so, I can think of a few things that I would like to share with—”

“No, nope, backing off,” Cassie says.

“Smart.” Tim catches Jason and Duke staring at him and just sighs. “Ignore everything they just
said. There are no embarrassing stories. I have never made a single mistake in my entire life. My
record is clean.”

“Really,” Jason says.

“As far as everyone at this table is concerned,” Tim says, giving all of his friends a stern look,
“yes. If you guys get me into any more trouble this weekend—”

“You’re not in trouble, Tim,” Stephanie says.

“Uh huh,” Tim says. “Right. And nobody is going to tell any stories about things that I might or
might not have done that would in any way jeopardize that status, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all on our best behavior,” Bart says.

“Oh man,” Duke says, voice pitched low enough that only Jason hears him. “This weekend is
gonna be *insane*.”

When they all finally pile out of the diner, Stephanie doesn’t actually order Jason to stay put while
she runs off to get the car, but she does give him a very stern look. And Cass wraps both her arms
around one of his, although he can’t quite tell if her intent is to hold him in place or just to help him
balance while he stretches his stiff, still-healing leg.

It’s a weird feeling. He doesn’t touch other people very often anymore, unless you count his fist
meeting someone else’s face. And even when he’s not fighting, other people always give him
plenty of space. He’s a big guy and he tends to project some very obvious fuck-off vibes when he’s
in public. But these new kids don’t seem to get that.

Duke elbows or nudges Jason whenever he wants his attention. Damian, the little brat, gets right up
in Jason’s personal space with all the entitlement of a tyrannical little prince. He literally slapped
Jason’s hand when he tried to steal the brat’s post-workout snacks. And he tried to physically shove
Jason toward his little medical nook every time Alfred hinted that he should perhaps spend less
time on his injured leg. Actually, the squirt regularly tries to manhandle him despite being a quarter
of his size. The last time he pushed his way past Jason, Steph had been down in the cave, watching,
and immediately texted them both a gif of a tiny kitten trying to push a fully grown mastiff.

Jason laughed so hard it kind of hurt. Damian had *not* been amused.

Stephanie’s less consistent. She straight up jumped into his chair the other day during their video
call, but he’s pretty sure that was fueled mostly by her own relief at seeing Tim alive and well.
And she wouldn’t have done it if Cass hadn’t already been there. But most of the time, she doesn’t
get too close to him. Probably because she still remembers what he did to Tim. But if she *is* still
wary of him, it never manifests as anything other than a bit of distance that he doesn’t see when
she’s around other people. And he’s seen Stephanie Brown invade Bruce’s personal space.
She does occasionally force Jason to high-five her in the field. She’s pretty damn persistent when it comes to that.

Still, none of that is quite like having Cass leaning most of her weight on his arm and just...staying there. Cass clearly isn’t afraid of him, which makes sense now that he thinks about it. She’s faster than he is and more skilled at hand-to-hand combat. Plus he’s pretty sure she could read the violence in him before it moved from thought to action.

Sometimes, when he’s really angry, it feels like the action is the only thing there is. No intent. No thought. Just movement. And sometimes, after, regret. But he knows that’s not how it works. He’s not a puppet. Everything he does, everything he’s ever done, is his to own.

“Why do you two even care where I go?” he asks her. A few feet away, Tim’s friends are arguing about who’s getting the car. Or, rather, it sounds like they’re arguing over whether they can use their powers to go get the car. After a moment, Conner and Bart both peel off from the group and begin making their way—slowly—toward a parking garage a few blocks away.

Cass makes a thoughtful sound to show that she’s not just ignoring his question. He expects her to say that they’re doing it for Alfred’s sake or for Bruce or just to one-up Dick since all his wheedling and pleading and earnest puppy-dog eyes couldn’t convince Jason to stay. But instead she just hums against his arm and says, “It’s nice to have you around.”

He doesn’t know what to say to that.

“Ooooh, Anita, they’re getting so big!”

Anita and Tim are leaning against each other while the others crowd around Anita’s phone, looking at pictures of something. Kids or kittens or something equally cute to judge by all the coos and awws. Cassie and Greta are especially effusive.

“Yeah,” Anita says, her tone much less enamored than everyone else’s. “They grow out of their damned clothes every two weeks. The ones they don’t totally wreck. Oshi keeps climbing trees and Don damn near drowned himself in the swamp the other day. These two. I swear I was never this much trouble when I was little.”

Cissie laughs. “I bet you were.”

“What’s even worse,” Anita says, ignoring her, “is that people are starting to kind of recognize them? Like, old friends of theirs have stopped by once or twice and they all keep making these little comments and it’s really weird?” She sighs. “Keeping the same names was maybe a big ole mistake. Not a lot I can do about it now though.”

Jason’s trying to figure out what that’s supposed to mean—and how the hell little kids can have old friends—when Tim grimaces and says, “Wow. And here I thought people bringing up my dead parents was awkward.”

Behind him, Cassie flinches and Cissie and Greta exchange a glance. But Anita only groans and says, “Ah, mon, they still doing that shit?”

“Eh, occasionally,” Tim says. “Another one had a go at me at last month’s fundraiser. He had a whole spiel prepared and everything.”

“Total bullshit?” Anita asks.

“Of course,” Tim says, rolling his eyes. “It wasn’t even a little bit believable either. Like, this guy
mentioned spending Hanukkah with our family? We literally never hosted that kind of thing at our house. I swear, it’s like he googled my parents, read a couple interviews, and then just dropped in as many details as he could remember. It was clumsy as hell.”

“Dude,” Duke says. “Are people trying to scam you or something?”

Tim shrugs. “Sort of? It’s just this dumb thing that keeps happening.”

“Basically,” Cissie says, arms crossed and expression scornful, “a whole bunch of people came out of the woodwork as soon as Tim got control of Bruce’s WE shares.”

“Yeah, turns out my parents were really popular,” Tim says, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans, bitterness beginning to creep into his voice. “They had tons of really close friends who are now super concerned about my well-being. They all just happened to be out of town during the funerals. All three of them.”

“What the fuck,” Jason says. “This happens to you regularly?”

Tim just gives him a blank look and then says, “I’m a teenager with three dead parents and a failed adoption under my belt who also has access to millions of dollars in shares and tons of proprietary information about the inner workings of a multimillion dollar company. It’d be weird if I wasn’t a target.”

Jason only notices the way that Cass goes still at the words failed adoption because she’s still literally wrapped around his arm.

“What did you do?” Anita asks.

“When?”

“When the latest asshole rolled out his bullshit.”

“Nothing,” Tim says. “I was very attentive and gracious. The corporate world is full of sharks, you see, and I am but an innocent child in need of guidance. I’m chum.”

Cissie snorts. “I’m guessing they end up revealing a lot more than you do.”

Tim scoffs. “Like I need their intel. I already know all the corporate espionage that goes on in this city.”

“I can’t believe people try to trick you,” Greta says.

“They don’t know he’s a detective,” Cissie points out. “Although you’d think more people would pick up on the whole smartest-person-in-the-room vibe. Even if you are a slacker high-school dropout.”

She says the last part fondly, elbowing Tim in the ribs, and he just grins back at her.

“So,” Duke says. “People regularly try to scam you into dropping corporate secrets or whatever, and you just let it slide?”

“Yeah? What else would I do?”

“Um, I vote punch them in the face?” Anita says. “That’s always a good option.”

Tim just rolls his eyes. “What would that accomplish? Besides cementing my reputation as an
emotionally unstable teenager who definitely shouldn’t be taken seriously in a professional context?”

“It would feel damn good, though, yeah?”

“For like two seconds,” Tim says. “And then there are these little things I like to call consequences. Also, again, it wouldn’t accomplish anything.”

This time Cissie’s the one who’s rolling her eyes. “Okay, boy genius, what would make you feel better? In a hypothetical reality where we took things like that into account instead of being utilitarian losers.”


Tim looks like he’s struggling not to smile. “I mean, you’re not wrong,” he concedes.

“You should ruin them financially,” Anita says. “Just, like, totally crush them.”

“I’m not using WE to destroy people who annoy me,” Tim says. “But I guess if they’re going to be the kind of assholes who would prey on emotionally damaged orphans, I could probably use that against them. And taking their money is the only thing they’d actually care about.”

“Um, if you’re suggesting a heist, I am so into this,” Cissie says. “I am so in.”

“No heist,” Tim says. “Although if I ever do need to heist something, you are definitely on the team. I might start a charity or something instead. Like a memorial thing?”

“Ooooh,” Cissie says. “And then ruthlessly manipulate and/or bully all these assholes into donating?”

“It’s not bullying if I do it,” Tim says. “I am, according to them, still just a kid. So I could not possibly bully them. Also, yeah, donating, being on the board, attending functions—there is actually a lot that goes into charity work and I could probably rope them into all of it.”

“What would it be a charity for?” Cassie asks.

Tim hums. “Good question. My dad wasn’t really into any specific causes? And Bruce has got a lot of the infrastructure and education stuff in Gotham covered. And it’ll be more effective if it’s something concrete. These kinds of people...they aren’t going to donate much to end homelessness. Or even to build a shelter. They’ll want something visually impressive that they can brag about.”

He’s not looking at them anymore. He has his thinking face on. It’s the same expression he makes right before he offers the solution to a case or the beginning of a plan. “Dana always wanted more parks in the city,” he says slowly. “That’s a decent kind of memorial, right? And Poison Ivy’s been on good behavior for a while now—she’s due to get out of Arkham in a few months—but I don’t think that’ll last unless we give her something to do. So maybe I can rope her in too. Let her help with the design.”

“That sounds like it could backfire spectacularly,” Duke says.

“Well, yeah, if we give her free rein. But if she’s only doing the design work and not the actual installation, I should be able to catch any nasty surprises she tries to sneak in. Plus, it might make her feel a little more invested in the city? So if she goes on another crime spree, at least she’ll be less likely to level everything. I dunno, it’s worth trying.” He pulls his phone out and starts typing rapidly. “The Jack and Dana Drake Foundation has kind of a nice ring to it,” he says.
“What about your mom?” Greta asks. To Duke, she adds, “Dana was his stepmom.”

“He already did one for her,” Cassie answers. “It was an endowment for the archeology department at MetU.”

“Not Gotham?” Cissie says. “I didn’t know Tim was allowed to do things for cities that aren’t Gotham.”

“Ha ha,” Tim says, still not looking up from his phone. “The MetU program was better suited to my needs.”

Anita grins. “He means they’re more easily influenced.”

“‘Influenced’ is a strong word,” Tim says. “But they do give donors more access to dig sites. Donors and their consultants.” He looks up long enough to flash Anita a bright smile.

“I got some special insight into all things magical and mystical,” Anita explains when Duke shoots her a puzzled look. “So Tim flies me out whenever the MetU team finds a potentially dangerous and/or cursed artifact that needs a good looking into. It’s not as exciting as hitting the streets the way I used to, but I have two little ones at home that I’m helping look after, so regular field work is out of the question. At least until they’re old enough to go to school. God, I cannot wait for them to start school.”

“Tim, quit doing paperwork.” Cassie says, reaching over his shoulder and trying to grab his phone. He pivots and dodges, leaning on Anita to keep his weight off the foot that’s still trapped in a medical brace.

“This isn’t working,” he says. “This is an extracurricular project that you encouraged me to start—”

“I didn’t mean right this second.”

“—and I just need to make one quick phone call to one of my lawyers. They can submit the paperwork on Monday and if we start applying to City Hall for the proper permits early enough—”

“Oh my god, one phone call, Tim. Just the one.”

He grins at her and then extricates himself from Anita and hobbles a few feet away, already pressing his phone to his ear.

“Is he always like this?” Duke asks.

“What, a complete weirdo and overly intense about everything? Yes,” Cassie says. “Yes, Tim has literally always been like this. He’s just really good at hiding it most of the time.”

“He said he wasn’t adopted anymore,” Cass says, her voice tight. “That’s not true.”

“Well, he got emancipated, right?” Anita says. “That was kind of like undoing the adoption.”

Cass frowns. “No. That’s different.”

“Dick told me that was just so he could take care of WE stuff,” Duke says. “Because of the whole thing with Hush wrecking the company? It sounds like Bruce wasn’t even around to unadopt him or whatever.”

“Well, yeah,” Cassie says. “We all know that. But we’re talking about Tim’s public persona. And
from the perspective of the public? Bruce Wayne adopted another kid and then a year later they both started acting weird and erratic. Tim straight up dropped off the map for a bit and quit school, and Hush’s version of Bruce kept throwing money away and seemed off in a way that a lot of people put down to stress. And then Tim comes back from his little soul-searching trip and immediately emancipates himself and moves out of the manor? And gets engaged for like two seconds to an older woman?” Cassie shrugs. “It looks like they had a falling out, is all. That’s part of the reason these assholes keep bothering him. If he was still Bruce Wayne’s kid, they wouldn’t dare.”

Beside her, Cissie rolls her eyes and sighs. “Yeah, that’s our Tim. The kid so unmanageable that Bruce Wayne, famed collector of strays, couldn’t deal with him.”

“That’s not true,” Cass says, her tone more agitated.

“I know,” Cissie says, holding up her hands. “It’s just a story.”

“It’s not a nice story,” Cass says.

“Do you guys even have nice stories in Gotham?” Anita asks. “Like, is that even allowed?”

Cass frowns like she wants to answer, but at that moment Stephanie pulls up in Bruce’s Bentley—which Jason knows she doesn’t have permission to drive—and grins at them. “Good job, Cass,” she says. “Jason, are you gonna be a complete loser all weekend, or are you gonna come watch all of Tim’s friends drive Bruce slowly insane? Because I vote for the latter.”

“We’re not gonna drive him crazy,” Bart says, his head popping up right behind her. When Steph practically jumps out of her skin and almost punches him, he just dodges and then grins at her. “Tim made us promise.”

“Bart,” Cassie hisses, frowning. “No powers in Gotham.”

“No getting caught using powers in Gotham,” Bart replies, climbing out of the backseat of the car. “I was careful! No continuity errors or anything! Also, Conner is almost back with the car, but it was taking forever and I got bored and is Tim working right now? Tim. Tim, quit it.”

“I’m almost done,” Tim says.

“What’s he doing?” Steph asks.

“Starting a nonprofit,” Cassie says. “For the purposes of fleecing his dead dad’s fake friends and funneling their money into charitable works that will double as supervillain rehabilitation projects. It’s a perfect blend of sincere civic duty and deep-seated spite being harnessed for the good of the city. With the added masochism of probably being a years-long project that will require him to interact with people he hates.”

Steph’s staring at her, but she doesn’t look all that surprised by this description. Bart just grins. “Ah, classic Tim.”

“Don’t act like I’m the weird one here,” Tim says, hobbling back toward them and shoving his phone into his pocket. “Because I’m definitely not.”

“Sure thing, Tim,” Cissie says, patting him on the shoulder. “You just keep telling yourself that, buddy.”

Cass abandons Jason to go to Tim. She wraps her arms around one of his and then says, very
seriously, “You’re my brother.”

“And you’re my sister,” Tim replies, sounding bemused. “Are we just stating facts or are you about to ask me for something?”

She grins and leans her head against his shoulder. “I never ask,” she points out. “I just take.” Tim makes a show of rolling his eyes, but he’s smiling now too.

“Looks like our ride’s here,” Cassie says, grinning and pointing to where Conner’s rounding the corner in a black SUV that looks like it should be full of Secret Service agents.

“Shotgun,” Tim says. He hangs back for a minute while the others scramble for seats in the back. There’s no way they can legally all fit in there, but the windows are so darkly tinted that Jason figures they’ll get away with it. “You should come,” he says, looking at Jason.

“Why?” Jason asks, caught off guard by the question because he’s still trying to process the idea that Tim is considered Bruce’s difficult child.

“Because maybe it will surprise everyone so much they’ll forget about being mad at me?” Tim suggests.

Jason snorts. “Fat chance. Also, no fucking way am I going with you.” He gestures at the SUV crammed full of kids—most of whom are now making disappointed faces and rude gestures at him through the open car door—and then jerks a thumb over his shoulder toward the Bentley. “I’ve already got a ride.”

Behind him, Steph lets out a triumphant “Fuck yes!” Cass gives him a bright grin, then lets go of Tim’s arm and moves toward the front of the Bentley.

“Shotgun,” Duke says just before she reaches the front passenger-side door. When she makes an annoyed face at him, he just shrugs and says, “I’m not driving in the clown car either.”

“A wise decision,” Tim says, solemnly. But he looks like he’s fighting down a grin as he gets into the passenger seat of the SUV.

“What made you change your mind?” Steph asks Jason once he and Cass are settled in the backseat.

“The chaos,” Duke suggests. “The sheer unmitigated chaos that is about to consume the mansion.”

Jason’s not entirely sure himself. Not for Tim. He owes the kid, yeah, but not enough to throw himself back into the clutches of Alfred and Dick. Not to mention Bruce. And he’s not going just to see Tim’s friends go wild. He can watch all of that in the group chat if he wants to.

Beside him, Cass is stretched out across two-thirds of the backseat despite the fact that Jason is more than twice her size. She looks comfortable and content in a way that he’s never really seen on her before.

He’s starting to realize that Tim’s not the only person he doesn’t know all that well. He knows Black Bat a little, but Cassandra Wayne’s a different character altogether. Sweeter and more affectionate but also a bit of a brat when she wants to be. He has a pretty good grasp of Stephanie’s personality and her sense of humor, but he doesn’t actually know that much about her. He’d never heard about her brief stint as Robin or her fake death until he asked Dick about it a few days ago.

And Duke, as far as he can tell, is a pretty good kid who’s doing his best to keep his head above water and is mostly succeeding. He can understand why Bruce broke the no-metas rule for him.
The kid’s charismatic and obviously cares about the people around him.

He must be taking too long to answer, because Stephanie glances at him in the rear-view mirror and then says, “Whatever. Just be sure to tell Alfred that I’m the one that persuaded you. I could use the brownie points. And I will totally split the proceeds with you.”

“Are the brownie points literal?” Duke asks.

“Only if you play your cards right,” Stephanie answers.

“When I leave, I’ll be sure to let them know that it was all your fault,” Jason tells her. He expects the annoyed huff she makes. And the snickering from Duke. And when Stephanie orders Cass to punch him, he knows the blow will be a mild tap delivered with a mischievous smile.

He doesn’t know them all that well yet, but he thinks he’s starting to figure them out.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone was wondering, Barbara is not responsible for all of the weird and silly names in the group chat. The users were originally able to change their own names to whatever they wanted, but Bart immediately figured out how to mess with them and then just kept changing them over and over. It got confusing enough that Barbara just put a lock on everything and froze all the account names.

Here's a quick rundown of all the names:

sprite = Bart. "sprite" is a synonym for "imp" aka Impulse and is also one of the only sodas Bart was allowed to drink for a long time because it's caffeine-free and everyone agreed that this child was already hyper enough.

(bird)brain = Tim, because he is the brain of the group and also a bird. Never actually bird-brained, but Bart's not gonna let the facts get in the way of a good(?) joke.

wondersaurus = Cassie Sandsmark, because she is both wonderous, and also stronger than a dinosaur (they know this because she had to punch one once).

S.B.O.G. = Conner Kent. Originally O.G.S.B., pronounced oh-gee-ess-bee, because he's the OG Superboy. Not to be confused with Jon Kent aka the New Edition. Jon has never caught on that this was originally meant as an insult because "N.E.S.B." is pronounced "en-ee-ess-bee" aka "any Superboy." But Conner went from being jealous/resentful of Jon (when he didn't know him) to absolutely adoring the kid (within five minutes of meeting him), so now he just unironically refers to Jon as the New Edition and will never, ever admit that it was anything other than positive. But that is a digression. Bart changed it to S.B.O.G. so that he can call Conner bogboy.

redrumhoodlum = Jason. "redrum" is "murder" spelled backwards. Bart is not currently a fan of the Red Hood, but he does love silly wordplay.

AngryBird = Damian. Because he looks like that angry red bird from the video game.

acroBAT = Dick. I am not the first to make this pun and I will not be the last.
metatron = Babs. "Metatron" is the Voice of God according to the scholarly text *Dogma* (aka that one Kevin Smith film).


batcass = Cass. Because Cass is a badass.

classified = Greta. Because her hero name was Secret.

fitesong = Anita. Because her name is a pun already (Anita Fite = I need a fight) and because she's canonically a good singer/musician.

scissors = Cissie. She thinks it's a crude sexual pun, and Bart is kind of in agony about not being allowed to correct her or explain the truth, because the entire YJ team has a long-running betting pool on when Cissie will realize that the reason she never wins rock-paper-scissors is because she *always chooses scissors*.

batdad = Bruce. Because that's just who he is.

d.lux = Duke. Originally "duxlux" because "dux" is Latin for leader and the origin of the word "duke"; and "lux" is Latin for "light." And what is the bat signal if not a guiding light? (I have...a lot of feelings about Duke.) But then Bart changed it to d.lux aka deluxe, because Duke is the deluxe version of a Gotham vigilante. Does all the stuff a normal vigilante does (or will! someday!) with the added bonus of having kickass powers.

Alfred doesn't get a weird name because Bart respects him too much (because Alfred feeds him every time he visits the manor and Bart's not gonna risk a good thing).

A quick note about Duke: I'm drawing on parts of the comic *Batman and the Signal*, where Duke is living with his Cousin Jay (who I never name in this fic because we already have two Casses; no need for two Jays too) and working with the Batfam secretly. However, in that comic he also has two civilian friends who know about his work as Signal and help him out. In this story, those friends still exist but they *do not* know about Duke's extracurricular activities. In general, I'm ignoring a lot of Duke's past storylines because it's just waaaay too difficult and complicated to incorporate the *We Are Robin* arc as well as his other storylines into the primarily preboot backstory that I used as the foundation for this fic.

If you're wondering why Tim does not like *Blood of the Crows* or what happened during his skeevy undercover op back in October, those will both come up later in this fic.

Anita's parents will be explained a little in a later chapter, but basically they both got murdered and then reincarnated as babies. You know, normal comic book stuff.

Also, yeah, Tim should probably not be hobbling around on his broken foot without his crutches. But you actually *can* safely walk on a foot with broken bones if you're wearing the right kind of brace or medical boot. This depends on which bones are broken (your foot has...so many). But still! Probably safer not to.
It’s a beautiful day in Bristol. A bright, sunny Saturday that reminds Dick of summers in the circus: blue skies, puffy cotton-candy clouds, and big, happy crowds of people excited to see something new. The kind of day that’s meant to be spent outside.

Dick spends most of the morning in the cave. He reorganizes the medical bay first. It’s been in disarray ever since Jason left, although Dick’s pretty sure Cass is to blame for a lot of the disorder. Once that’s taken care of, he repairs some of the training dummies before reluctantly moving on to the inventory. That’s a task he usually leaves to just about anyone else because it’s the absolute height of mind-numbing tedium.

He wants to go outside or upstairs or pretty much anywhere with a bit of sunlight, but he told everyone at breakfast that he’d be down here. So he’s staying put until Tim and his friends arrive. Just in case Damian decides he wants to come find him and talk.

He’s been off ever since they left Tim’s apartment the day before. Quiet and broody during the drive back to the manor. Distant and taciturn during a busy Friday night patrol. Nearly monosyllabic at breakfast that morning. He ate in a rush and then announced that he was taking Titus for a walk before Dick and Bruce were more than halfway done with their food. When Dick offered to go with him, Damian firmly declined.

So Dick made sure to mention, loudly, that he’d be in the cave all morning. He’d rather seek Damian out directly and talk through whatever’s bothering him, but that usually only goes well when Dick already has some idea of what’s wrong. Right now he’s kind of clueless.

He knows it’s not about skipping the museum or ending yesterday’s outing early. Damian was a bit sulky before they got to Tim’s apartment, but he’s been absolutely stoic since they left.

Dick knows that Damian’s been upset with Tim this entire time—ever since they all realized that Tim handed himself over to the Tetrahedra—but he’s held himself in check surprisingly well over the course of the last week.

At least, Dick thought he was doing alright in spite of everything that was happening. But maybe he just hasn’t been around Damian enough to realize that he wasn’t.

Normally, figuring out what’s bothering Damian doesn’t require much detective work. Most of the time, Damian spontaneously announces his dissatisfaction with the world without prompting. And even when he’s trying to imitate Bruce and lock up all his unruly emotions, he’s still surprisingly easy to read. But he’s been strangely withdrawn in the last day. He’s barely even participated in the group chat.

He’s commented a few times—mostly to disparage Stephanie and Duke for their apparent lack of taste in merchandise—but he’s been weirdly quiet towards Tim. Even when everyone else in the chat was making fun of him nonstop, Damian’s few interactions with Tim have been uncharacteristically mild.

Dick hadn’t initially thought much of Stephanie’s “brilliant idea,” but he has to admit that it’s been a lot more fun than he expected. He’s pretty sure there are more candidos of Tim from the last
twelve hours than the last twelve months, not counting the paparazzi photos of Tim Wayne that periodically appear in the papers. And none of those photos look anything like the messy, relaxed kid rolling his eyes in every other picture in the group chat.

Alfred’s made it clear on numerous occasions that he considers modern etiquette surrounding mobile phones to be absolutely abysmal, but even he has been careful to keep his close at hand. Dick’s caught him smiling at the screen more times than he can count.

Eventually Dick has to put his phone on silent so that he can actually get some work done on the inventory. But he keeps an ear out for Damian. He’s still waiting, still hopeful, when he finally hears the little ping of the proximity alert that goes off any time someone passes through the faraway front gate of the manor.

He takes his time putting things away. Even when he’s heading up in the elevator, he half expects to run into Damian going in the other direction. Retreating to the cave to avoid Tim and his friends the same way he’s been avoiding everyone else in the last day.

The second he hits the ground level of the manor, he can already hear laughter and shouting and then shushing followed by more laughter. He follows the sound and finds the front hall full of kids. Not just Tim and his friends, but also Jason and Duke and the girls. Even Damian’s there, standing off to the side and watching with a disdainful expression as Tim solemnly presents Alfred with a very large and very cute plush bat. Probably a purchase from the Super Store that they somehow managed to keep out of the group chat as a surprise.

Alfred’s smiling as he accepts the offered gift and says something that draws a scowl out of Damian but makes Tim and Jason both grin.

And Jason….he looks good. There’s still bruising on his face and he’s favoring his injured leg, but he’s relaxed in a way that Dick hasn’t seen since before his death. He’s got the same crooked, cocky grin as the little tire-thief Dick met years and years ago. And he’s here, upstairs, in the manor. A place they haven’t been able to get him to set foot in even once since he came back.

It gives him a weird pang in his chest. He knew Tim and Jason were getting closer and working together more, but he never really expected them to click in any significant way.

He used to be a big brother to both of them, though never at the same time. Jason, before his death. Tim, before Damian. Back when they were Robin. But Red Hood and Red Robin—they’ve made it pretty clear they don’t need or want that anymore. And now he’s not sure he knows either of them as well as they seem to know each other.

It almost makes him want to hang back, because right now they both look happy and he doesn’t want to ruin that. With Jason there’s always the chance of an argument breaking out, and Dick can’t even seem to have a conversation with Tim nowadays without something going wrong.

He’s not the only one. The door to Bruce’s study is open and Dick’s pretty sure he’s there, lurking in the doorway, hesitating in his own house.

Dick doesn’t blame him. This particular pack of kids would be overwhelming in any setting. Doubly so when they’re apparently convinced that Bruce is some kind of boogeyman that’s going to steal Tim away from them. And Bruce hasn’t managed to have a civil conversation with Jason even once in the time since he came back. Dick is pretty sure that the only reason they didn’t get into an explosive argument this past week was because Bruce was too preoccupied with finding Tim, and Jason was too weirded out by how emotionally shut down Bruce gets when he’s anxious.
And after that disastrous video call, there’s no telling how Tim’s going to react to Bruce either.

Dick knows Bruce has gotten lectured a lot in the last couple of days, by Barbara and Alfred, about what went wrong in that call and about how he’s supposed to greet his prodigal son. Dick’s reasonably sure that Bruce knows what not to do at this point, but none of that’s going to help if Tim’s still upset with him.

Dick’s trying to figure out what to do—he’d like to give Bruce some encouragement, but he doesn’t want Tim to feel like he’s being ganged up on—when the problem solves itself. Tim catches sight of Bruce, immediately breaks off from the group, and makes a beeline toward him.

Bruce steps out of the doorway, looking stiff and awkward and more than a little relieved.

“Okay, I know I’m in trouble for all the space stuff,” Tim says.

Bruce frowns and looks like he’s tired of repeating this already. “You’re not in trouble, Tim.”

“Right, sure. But I just want it on record that I did not think this was a good idea.” He gestures back at the chaos behind him. “You did this. You invited this into your home.”

“Your friends have promised to behave.”

“Yeah, but ‘behave’ is such an ambiguous word.”

Dick could kiss the kid. Instead, he risks ruffling Tim’s hair as he passes by them both. And he can’t stop himself from grinning when Tim slaps his hand away. When Tim’s upset or angry, he always draws back or pulls away. Returning contact means they’re okay. At least for now.

He knows that Bruce has been given some pretty explicit instructions about not interrogating Tim. Especially while his friends are here. Dick’s pretty sure that Bruce wants to talk to Tim about everything immediately, but the only Barbara-and-Alfred-approved topic of conversation on Bruce’s long list of concerns is telling Tim not to jump straight back into Wayne Enterprises right away.

Tam’s apparently already rescheduled a week’s worth of missed meetings for Monday and Tuesday. And even a call from Bruce himself wasn’t enough to convince her to cancel them without Tim’s approval.

Dick doesn’t think Bruce is actually going to be able to talk Tim into taking some time off, but it’s probably still worth trying.

The rest of the group is beginning to break apart. Conner’s loaded down with everyone's bags and is following Alfred up the stairs toward the second-floor bedrooms. The new girls are looking around the manor, clearly impressed. Dick tries to head for the Gotham contingent—Duke, Stephanie, Cass and Jason seem to be sticking together, with Damian hovering nearby—but Cassie Sandsmark steps in front of him with her hands on her hips and a stormy expression on her face.

“What’s going on?” she asks, gesturing toward the study where Bruce and Tim have retreated. Bruce has his hand on Tim’s shoulder now and they both look pretty serious.

“Nothing,” Dick says, trying to keep his tone light even though the sight of the two of them, now somber and unsmiling, makes him a little anxious. “I think Bruce just wanted to talk to Tim about WE. And how he doesn’t need to—”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” she snaps.
Bart pops up beside her, “What?”

“He’s working.” She points an accusatory finger toward Bruce and Tim.


Anita rolls her eyes and crosses her arms. “Told you so.”

“What do we do?” Bart asks.

Cissie shrugs. “I don’t think there is anything we can do. I mean, it’s his house.”

“Listen,” Dick starts to say, but Cassie cuts him off with a raised hand. The others are drifting over now too, obviously curious. When Jason catches Dick’s gaze and raises an eyebrow at him, Dick can only shrug a little helplessly in response.

“I will take care of it,” Cassie says to her friends, taking a deep breath. “I am the team leader and I will take care of it.” She squares her shoulders—a little like Donna used to do before heading into battle—and then starts marching over.

“Oh my god,” Greta whispers. “Is she gonna fight Batman?”

Anita shakes her head. “There’s no way.”

“I bet she could take him,” Bart says. When Damian gives him a disgruntled look, he adds, “Dude, she’s Wonder Girl. You know what her weakness is? Her kryptonite? No? That’s because she doesn’t have one.”

Tim and Bruce break off talking when Cassie gets close. Her back is to the rest of them now, but her voice is bright and loud as she says, “I’m so sorry, Mr. Wayne. I just need to borrow this.” Then she grabs Tim’s wrist, leans forward and—in one smooth motion—pulls him into a fireman’s carry. Straightening up, she says in the same chipper voice, “Just borrowing! You can have him back later!” and turns away with a sunny expression on her face. Tim, slung over her shoulders, looks exasperated. Bruce just looks bewildered.

There’s a moment of stunned silence. Then Bart screams, “CONNER,” and the other teen reappears, sans bags, in a burst of displaced air.

“What is it? What’s happening?” He looks ready for a fight right up until he catches sight of Cassie and Tim. Then his face goes slack with shock.

“Cassie got the drop on Tim!” Bart yells, suddenly ecstatic.

“How?”

“He was with his dad. He let his guard down. He thought he was safe.”

“How?” Tim is saying. “Cassie, this is completely unnecessary. Just put me down and we can talk about this.”

“We already talked, Tim. We made an agreement. No working all weekend. And you’ve broken that agreement. So now there have to be consequences.” She brushes past them, clearly walking with a purpose, and her friends trail behind her, still looking a little bit awestruck.

“I told you this was gonna be great,” Steph says, leaning against Jason and dragging him after them. “I told you so.”
“This is just like when Britney wore that snake,” Cissie says, holding up her phone. “I-con-ic.”

“Should she be carrying him like that?” Duke asks, keeping his voice low. “Isn’t he still hurt?”


“Injured—”

And then they’re all heading through the solarium and out into the sunshine. Only then does Cassie’s destination become obvious: the pool.

“Oh my god,” Stephanie says. “She’s not gonna—there’s no way—”

Cassie shifts her grip and then lifts Tim above her head like he weighs nothing. Bart gasps in delight.

“Wait, wait, Cassie, my phone—”

“I know it’s waterproof, Tim,” she says, utterly scornful, right before she tosses him in.

Dick has seen championship-winning goals that were less riotously celebrated. Tim’s friends all cheer. Jason’s laughing so hard Cass has to help Steph hold him up. Bruce looks extremely alarmed. Like he finally understands why Tim kept warning them about letting all of his friends into the house. Damian and Duke both look like they don’t know what to think.

Tim, meanwhile, does not resurface. Dick can see him moving near the bottom of the pool but even after the celebrations have ended, he stays down there.

It’s been nearly two minutes.

“Is he okay?” Greta asks. “How heavy is that brace he’s wearing?”

“He’s doing it on purpose,” Anita says. “You know he can hold his breath for a crazy long time.”

Cassie’s still standing at the edge of the pool, her hands on her hips. “He’s just sulking,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Or scheming.”

Beside Dick, Conner’s phone buzzes.

“Hey,” Bart says, peering over the edge of the pool, “it looks like he’s on his—”

There’s a blur of color followed by a splash that manages to hit nearly all of them, and then Cassie’s hovering above the pool, looking smug. Dick’s got years of experience trying to parse the faster-than-human actions of his superpowered teammates, so he’s reasonably sure that she just dodged an attack from Conner, used his own momentum against him, and sent him straight into the pool.

Tim’s head pops up out of the water immediately, looking annoyed.

“That was a pathetic attempt at revenge,” Cassie tells him.

“Eh,” Tim says, “it was worth a try.” He swims over to the edge but doesn’t pull himself up. Just waits a moment, then rises straight up out of the water—Conner’s giving him a boost, Dick realizes—and steps out of the pool like he’s just taken an escalator up from Atlantis.

Conner follows right behind him, floating in the air and dripping water. “You know whose phone
isn’t waterproof, Cassie? Mine.”

She just shrugs. “You did this to yourself, Conner. You should know better by now.”

“I can’t believe Cassie got you,” Bart says, appearing right next to Tim. “In Gotham. On your home turf. With your entire family—”

“Yes, yes, add it to the annals,” Tim says, rolling his eyes. To Cassie, he adds, “It’s almost like I asked you all to be on your best behavior and then, foolishly, fatally, believed you when you said you would. Also, that was totally unnecessary. We weren’t working. Talking isn’t—”

Cassie crosses her arms. “Tim, don’t make me throw you in there again.”

“Um, you can throw me in,” Anita says. “I mean, if Mr. Wayne doesn’t mind.”

“Pool party!” Bart blurs into a pair of swim trunks and immediately bellyflops into the water.

Tim sighs. “Okay, I know this is private property, but public rules apply to the pool.”

“What does that mean?” Steph asks Cissie.

“That’s Tim’s way of saying, ‘Please, don’t get naked in front of my dad.’”


“No, we do not,” Tim says. “But several people on this team have exhibitionist tendencies—”

Cissie snorts out loud at this, but Tim ignores her, “—so it always pays to be explicit. In your instructions. Not in the sense of—you know what, never mind, I’m going to stop talking now. Anita, before you ask, underwear doesn’t count as clothes.”

“But it’s just like a bathing suit!”

“Bart, will you please go get everyone’s things?”

“Done!” A pile of swimsuits and swimming trunks appears on one of the deck chairs. Then there’s another loud splash as Bart disappears back into the pool. Alfred, just exiting the house, stops short just in time to avoid the spray of water that follows. He looks extremely unimpressed when he takes in the scene in front of him.

Tim looks down at his own sopping wet clothes and sighs. He toes off the sneaker on his uninjured foot and then starts to pull his t-shirt up over his head.

Cissie lets out a small gasp. “Tim, oh my god.”

Tim pauses, his arms still caught in his wet shirt. “What?”

“What do you mean what?” She waves at his bare chest. “You are literally painful to look at.”

She must mean the scars, Dick realizes. Like all of Gotham’s vigilantes, Tim’s body is littered with them. Arms, neck, chest, abdomen. It’s the kind of thing that Dick almost doesn’t notice anymore. But half of Tim’s friends are civilians now, and the other half are either invulnerable or have an extreme healing factor. To them, Tim’s scars must be horrifying.

And now that he’s looking—really looking—he can tell that Tim’s worse off now than he was a
couple of years ago. He can even pick out what must be the splenectomy scar. Large and messy, just under Tim’s rib cage on the left side. It makes him feel sick. Some stranger opening up his bleeding brother and reaching inside to take out one of his organs—

Tim looks down at himself and then rolls his eyes. “I was in space,” he says, clearly annoyed. Which...makes no sense. Dick’s pretty sure all his scars predate this latest misadventure.

“Nah, mon,” Anita says, shading her eyes with one hand. “She’s right. You ought to trade aliases with Duke here, because you are blinding me right now.”

“Space,” Tim says again, letting his shirt drop to the ground and gesturing with arms that Dick has to admit are pretty pale right now. “Pocket universe. Weeks. Void. No sun.”

Bart reappears by his side, wearing an enormous neon yellow safety vest complete with shiny safety strips. “Quick, guys, who’s more reflective right now?”

Tim stares off into the middle distance, wearing a pinched expression. “Do you remember,” he says slowly, “when you guys used to be nice to me?”

Cissie snort-laughs. “No?”

Tim sighs. “Me neither.”

“I do think some sunscreen is in order,” Alfred says gently.

“I’ll grab it,” Conner offers. “Don’t worry, buddy. The only thing roasting you this weekend is us.”

Tim just glares as Conner grins and ducks inside. He doesn’t change expression when Bart backflips out of the safety jacket and straight back into the water. And he only looks more annoyed when Cassie floats down to the pool’s edge and slings an arm over his shoulders. “Don’t look so glum, Nosferatu,” she tells him. “You’ve got sunlight and real person food now. What more could you ask for?”

“New friends,” Tim deadpans.

“You love us,” she says.

He rolls his eyes again. Then he looks at her, his expression suddenly serious, and says, “That reminds me. I need to tell you something.”

She instantly looks suspicious. “Okay?”

He leans in closer, one arm coming up over her shoulders and the other hand cupping her ear as he whispers something to her.

Her eyes bug out. “You did what—”

She doesn’t get to finish the sentence. Tim twists, hooking one of his legs around one of hers, and throws himself—and her—straight into the pool.

Bart’s head pops up over the waterline immediately and he screams, “CONNER, TIM JUST GOT CASSIE.”

“How the fuck?” Conner says, reappearing with sunscreen in hand. “How did I miss this again?”

Tim and Cassie emerge at the same time. She looks like she’s about to strangle him. “Okay, do not
make me go get Diana’s lasso. Was that true or were you just fucking with me?”

Tim grins and then ducks under the water. “Ugh,” she says before following him. Dick can kind of see them both making hand motions, though it’s hard to tell if it’s sign language, a modified version of the signals they use in the field, or just plain gesticulating. After a moment, there’s a burst of bubbles from Cassie and then one from Tim.

Bart’s still treading water. “Okay, I have no idea what they’re saying, but I’m pretty sure Cassie is screaming? And Tim is laughing at her.”

The two of them come up for air at the same time. “You secretive son of a bitch,” Cassie says as soon as she’s caught her breath. “I cannot even believe—I cannot even fathom—quit grinning like that.” When Tim doesn’t stop, she just sighs and flies them both up and out of the water.

“What was that about?” Cissie asks.

“Nothing,” Tim says breezily as Cassie sets him down.


Conner groans. “You can’t just call it a leadership conference every time you talk about something privately.”

“Yes we can,” Tim says at the same time that Cassie shakes her head and says, “Sorry, Conner, you just wouldn’t get it.”

“How did he dunk you?” Conner asks. “I can’t even dunk you.”

“He used his broken foot against me,” Cassie answers. “I didn’t want to break him even more.”

“Your concern for my well-being is both admirable and exploitable,” Tim says.

Bruce looks like he very much wants to say something about Tim being reckless, but Dick makes catches his eye and frowns. Bruce grimaces like he’s been caught out and stays silent.

There’s a lull in the chaos as most of the kids disappear inside the house to get changed. Damian and Jason both stay behind. And Bart just runs back and forth across the water, trying to figure how slow he can go without falling in.

Jason’s sitting down on a deck chair in the sun, chatting with Alfred. He looks more relaxed that Dick’s seen him in ages, but he’s also ignoring Bruce completely. Hasn’t even looked at him once since he arrived.

Jason’s really not the silent treatment type. His usual modus operandi involves temper tantrums of epic proportions. But he didn’t pick any fights this past week. Or, at least, not with Bruce. Instead, he mostly tried to drive Damian up the wall, although Dami showed surprising restraint in response.

But Bruce...Jason mostly steered clear of him after he stopped talking. He seemed downright spooked by the whole situation. With the two of them, emotions—both good and bad—always run high. Dick remembers being jealous, back when Jason was Robin, because of how happy the two of them could be together. How easily they could enjoy each other’s company.

Dick knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he is loved. But it took him and Bruce a while to get there. Bruce wasn’t as easily affectionate or demonstrative as the Grayson family. Most of the time
Dick had to initiate hugs. Do the work of figuring out what their boundaries were and how hard he was allowed to push past them. He’d felt, a lot of the time, like he was far too needy a kid for someone like Bruce Wayne.

By the time Jason showed up, Bruce was better. He knew how to show affection to this prickly, prideful kid who so clearly needed it and would never, ever ask for it. Dick had felt envious of the two of them but also kind of proud at the same time.

But that same vulnerability and emotional honesty that Bruce and Jason cultivated is like an open wound between them now. One they can’t help but aggravate every time they interact.

In this last week Jason didn’t get any of that. No real reactions, good or bad. And it clearly freaked him out.

Even after Tim was confirmed safe and Bruce started acting like a person again, Jason ignored him almost entirely. And he’s apparently dead set on continuing to do so. It’s almost reassuring in its childishness. And absolutely preferable to the flare up of temper that Dick keeps waiting for.

Bruce looks like he’s considering saying something to him, which Dick thinks might actually be a good idea—they can’t just ignore each other all weekend and Jason actually seems to be in a good mood for once—but then the kids come tumbling back out again and things get way too chaotic for a personal conversation of any kind to take place.

Bart and Conner end up “helping” Tim by slathering him with an absurd amount of sunscreen, which annoys him so much he retreats to a deck chair next to Jay. He spends the next ten minutes lying in the sun with one arm flung over his eyes, loudly announcing “I can’t hear you, I am asleep,” over and over again every time his friends try to get him to join them in the pool. This absolutely fails to deter them.

Eventually, though, Alfred lures him back into the solarium with the promise of cookies and tea. And Greta goes trailing after him.

Dick’s not the only one who notices.

“So, are the two of them a thing?” Duke asks Stephanie. They’ve both borrowed swimsuits but haven’t jumped into the water yet. Probably because Tim’s friends are in the middle of a very aggressive game of chicken that honestly looks kind of painful. Even Cass has chosen to stay on one of the deck chairs and just watch.

“What, Greta and Tim? No. No way.” Stephanie rolls her eyes. “I mean, Greta’s always been into Tim—like, unhealthily so, back in their YJ days—but it’s not actually a thing and never has been.”

“You sure about that?” Duke asks. “They were holding hands earlier while you were getting the car.”

This is news to Dick. But Steph just shakes her head. “They all do that with Greta. If you watch them for the rest of the weekend, you will catch literally every single one of them holding her hand at some point. It’s just one of their things. It took her awhile to adjust to being corporeal again, and at some point they all took up the hand-holding to help ease her back into things? Honestly, they never had a ton of boundaries to begin with—when Impulse is on your team, those break down pretty quickly—but after Greta got her body back, they pretty much disappeared. Like, I am pretty sure cuddle puddles are a semi-regular thing.”

“Cuddle puddles,” Damian says, sounding mortified by the idea.
“What do you mean by corporeal?” Jason asks.

“She used to be a dead mist monster,” Steph says. “But then Darkseid brought her back to life.”

Jason tries to process this for a moment. Then just shakes his head. “What. The. Fuck.”

“Yeah, she was his apprentice for a bit. And then he brought her back to life to punish her for not killing all her friends. She was gonna, because she was kind of psycho, but Tim talked her down. It was this whole thing.”

“So they really don’t do normal adventures,” Duke says, staring at the pool. The game of chicken’s somehow morphed into Cissie and Anita throwing each other into the water with different grappling attacks—Anita’s flying scissor takedown is especially impressive—while the others rate their moves. Bart’s scrawling their scores on a whiteboard.

“Nope,” Steph says.

Bruce has retreated inside, away from all the noise, and is hovering near Tim and Greta, looking like he wants to join their conversation but can’t quite bring himself to do it.

If Jason and Bruce tend to express too much emotion at each other, Bruce and Tim have always had the opposite problem. They started off as partners, first and foremost, and spent way too long pretending that their relationship was purely professional.

Dick remembers having Bruce for a dad and wishing that he could convince Bruce to see him as a partner. An equal. He knows that he sometimes took Bruce’s awkwardly expressed affection for granted back then, because he’d been at that age when it felt like earning Bruce’s respect was more important.

He can’t imagine having the opposite. Being Bruce’s Robin, but not his son. They’ve all long since come to understand that Tim is a part of the family, but sometimes that old distance seems to reassert itself.

Dick heads inside to forcibly drag Bruce into the conversation, but the moment he steps across the threshold, the sunlight streaming into the solarium takes on a soft, diffuse, aquarium glow. Behind him, Cassie and Anita start cheering.

Tim doesn’t even turn to look outside. He just sighs and says, “Conner picked up the pool, didn’t he?”

Sure enough, when Dick looks back over his shoulder, Conner’s floating just above where the pool water should be, his hands raised above his head, holding a rectangle of water. Bart appears to be swimming in it. He waves at them.

“Excuse my French,” Duke says, leaning around Dick to look inside at Tim, “but what the hell.”

“Tactile telekinesis,” Tim and Greta say at the same time.

“You agreed to this, Bruce,” Tim says again. Outside, Anita and Cissie are both climbing up the side of the house while Cassie cheers them on. A moment later they hear two splashes as the girls jump from the roof into the water below.

It goes fine for about fifteen minutes. The kids outside end up trying to teach Stephanie and Cass a convoluted version of tag with rules so complex Dick suspects they’re being made up on the spot. Duke’s apparently skeptical enough that he’s waiting and watching before he joins in. Bruce, after
a stern look from Alfred, goes outside to keep an eye on all of them.

Dick had planned to pull Tim aside at some point to talk to him privately, but he’s starting to realize that Tim’s friends don’t have any intention of leaving him alone. Cassie keeps glancing back into the house periodically, like she’s making sure Tim’s still there and still not working.

Dick’s pretty sure any one-on-one talks he tries to have with Tim this weekend are going to get interrupted before they even begin. And on Monday morning Tim will probably retreat to Wayne Enterprises and then to his apartment. With his foot still healing, he won’t be on the streets as Red Robin for a while. And that’s pretty much the only time Dick sees Tim nowadays.

He’ll have to talk to Tim at some point—even with his friends constantly elbowing in—and extract a promise to spend some time together once the weekend is over. Even if it’s just dinner or lunch or —just as long as they do *something* together.

Now, though, doesn’t seem like the right time to bring that up. Tim’s sitting shoulder to shoulder with Greta, talking animatedly to her about a photography class she’s signed up for, and Dick doesn’t have the heart to interrupt them just yet. Instead he steals some cookies and uses them to try to lure Damian and Jason inside.

Damian comes willingly, although he’s clearly keeping an eye on the game outside and trying to figure out the rules. Duke follows right behind him. Jason just waves a middle finger at Dick and stays in his chair.

Dick’s only half paying attention when Bart sticks his head out of the water and shouts, “Spin-cycle!”

“Absolutely not.”

Dick flinches, dropping his snack, and Damian jerks himself into a defensive posture. Because Tim’s voice just dropped at least an octave. Even Conner reacts. He’s managed to hold the pool water together in a roughly spherical shape for nearly a quarter of an hour despite a flurry of distractions and occasional outright attacks from his friends. But for a split second the sphere wobbles, sprinkling water on the ground below, before his concentration snaps back into place.

By then Tim’s already up and across the room, barely slowed down by his limp, and is standing in the doorway.

“But Tiiiiim,” Bart is saying, still swimming with his head sticking out of the globe.

“No spin-cycle,” Tim says.


Only Greta looks entirely unruffled. “What was that?” Duke asks her.

“What?” Greta asks. “Oh, spin-cycle is a game. It’s when Conner makes the water spin really, really fast and then you jump in and—”

“No, I mean the voice thing.”

“That’s just Tim’s Bat-voice. Don’t you all do that?” she asks, looking genuinely confused. “We always thought you all got special scary vocal training or something.”

Outside Bart is still wheedling and Tim’s just standing with his back to the house and his arms
crossed. “Okay, but what if we’re really careful?” Bart says. When Tim doesn’t reply, he adds, “Okay, I know we agreed that there would be no wanton property damage while on manor grounds and that spin-cycle usually results in, like, *minor* destruction but—” Tim must make a face, because Bart cuts himself off and says, “Okay, so I know we’re absolutely not supposed to break anything and we have never actually done a spin-cycle without breaking something but—”

“Is—is Impulse lecturing himself?” Dick asks.

“Yeah,” Greta says. “Tim got tired of going over the same arguments over and over again, especially since Bart has a photographic memory. So now he just sort of stares him down while Bart argues with himself.”

Conner’s apparently decided to join the fray. “What if we only do half-speed?”

Tim doesn’t answer.

“And we move away from the house. There’s got to be somewhere on this property where we can’t really wreck anything.”

Tim’s shoulders relax a tiny bit. “Maybe out on the old tracks,” he says. “It’s where we learn defensive driving, so it *is* already pretty torn up.”

“But then we can’t jump off the roof,” Bart points out. Tim must give him another look because he immediately adds, “But, okay, if we’re close enough to jump off the roof, we are close enough to hit the building. Right.”

“Cassie can give you guys a boost up,” Conner says. He gives Tim a hopeful look.

“Ground rules,” Tim says. “Only one person at a time. And we’re gonna need a catcher.”

“I got ‘em,” Cassie says. “At half-speed, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I agree to your terms,” Conner says.

Bart rolls his eyes. “Booooooring.”

The water twists until it’s donut-shaped and Bart drops out. Cassie, true to her word, catches him before he hits the ground.

Tim turns around. “I gotta go supervise this, Greta. Otherwise the cave’s gonna end up with a skylight. Cassie, gimme a lift.” Cassie dumps Bart, grabs Tim by the arm, and lifts him clear off the ground.

Most of them end up following. Even Damian trails after Tim’s friends, clearly curious.

It ends up being just Dick, Jason, Alfred, and Bruce left by the pool. It’s the perfect opportunity for Bruce and Jason to talk, so of course Bruce immediately vanishes back into the house.

Alfred looks like only a lifetime of propriety is keeping him from rolling his eyes. Jason just looks confused and kind of annoyed. “What’s up with him?” he asks Dick. Like he hasn’t been ignoring Bruce as hard as possible ever since he got here. But Dick’s smart enough not to point that out.

“I’m pretty sure he’s avoiding you,” he says, “because if he pisses you off and you leave, Alfred might actually disown him.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Alfred says.
Jason just rolls his eyes. “Frickin’ typical.”

“Are you gonna camp out downstairs again?” Dick asks.

“Nah,” Jason says. “I’m not here for long. Just wanted to see the kids trash this place for a bit.”

As if to punctuate his words, they hear a distant crash followed by cheering. Alfred sighs.

The game is apparently as intense and destructive as promised. By the time the kids start trickling back toward the pool, they’re all covered in mud and sporting a few new bruises. And also grinning like maniacs. All of them except for Damian, who apparently didn’t participate.

Alfred’s gone inside to make preparations for dinner—or just to check on Bruce—but Damian very pointedly stations himself in the doorway to the house, physically blocking anyone from going inside while they’re still spattered with mud.

“Where are the others?” Dick asks him while the rest of them are hosing each other off. He’s done a quick headcount and come up with four missing: Tim, Conner, Bart, and Cassie.

“They’re attempting to repair the damage they’ve done to the grounds,” Damian says.

“It’s not that bad.” Stephanie says, squeezing onto a deck chair beside Anita, Cissie, and Greta. “It’s just...a really bumpy track now. Also you should have tried it, Dami. It was pretty fun. And almost like training. If you ever plan on fighting a hurricane instead of a bunch of goons.”

Damian sneers. “If this is how Drake trains his teams, no wonder they continually sustain injuries.”

Stephanie just rolls her eyes, but beside her Anita’s expression is thunderous. “Okay, enough of this bullshit,” she says. “You,” she snaps, pointing a finger at Damian and then at one of the deck chairs, "sit down and shut up." And to Dick’s complete shock, Damian does. He looks even more surprised than Dick feels.

“Anita,” Greta says, sounding horrified.

“Hey, nonono, don’t.” Cissie looks like she’s going to hit the other girl, but Anita just glares right back at her. “You cannot magic people at Tim's dad's house! And you definitely cannot magic the kid. The kid is explicitly off limits.”

“The fuck is going on—” Jason starts to say. He moves like he’s going to stand up, and Dick feels a split second of panic at the idea that a fight’s about to break out. But Cass grabs hold of Jason’s arm and forcibly pulls him back down into his chair. Right behind them, Duke catches Dick’s gaze, clearly looking for orders. Dick signs a quick hold at him, hoping that Cissie’s about to stop whatever’s happening. Steph, at least, looks annoyed but not alarmed, and she’s the one with the most experience here.

Anita just rolls her eyes at Cissie and says, "Two seconds. Listen, brat, you can talk shit to Tim as much as you want. He's gotten pretty zen about it, he lets that kind of thing roll right off him nowadays. But me? I don't like it. And I'm a guest in this house, so you're gonna show me some respect by not talking shit about my friend in front of me. Okay? You're free."

Damian springs up out of his chair and practically scuttles away from her.

"What was that?" Jason demands. He doesn’t move to get up again, but he looks just about as pissed off as Dick’s ever seen him.
"I'm Empress," Anita says. "Which means when I tell people to do something, they do it."

"No magic in Tim's dad's house," Cissie says again. "They literally just started letting metas into the city. You wanna get magic users banned next?"

“You ensorcelled me,” Damian spits out, glaring at Anita. He’s managed to put more than one deck chair between them and looks like he’s seconds away from pulling a batarang out of his hoodie.


Cissie rolls her eyes. “God, could you just not. I’m gonna tell Tim. Swear to god I will.”

Anita scoffs. “Go ahead and tell him. I don’t care.”

Greta makes a small pained noise. “He’s gonna be so mad at us,” she says. “He’s gonna be so, so mad.”

Cissie frowns. “Anita, he’s already stressed out enough without us getting into an actual fight with his family. Which is what’s gonna happen if his dad finds out that you’re doing your little Jedi mind trick on his brothers!” She looks over at the rest of them and grimaces. “Look, we’re really sorry—”

“I’m genuinely not,” Anita says.

Cissie elbows her hard and keeps going, “—and she won’t do it again and please don’t tell Tim or your dad, okay?”

“Pull that shit again and Bruce isn’t the one you’re gonna have to worry about,” Jason growls.

Damian looks extremely offended by this. “I do not require assistance from Drake or Father or you,” he says, taking a moment to glare at Jason before turning back toward Anita. “You caught me unawares,” he tells her. “It won’t happen again.”

“Whatever,” she answers. “It’s harder to make it work when people know it’s coming anyway.”

Damian’s scowl grows even more pronounced. "Then you’ve wasted your little trick," he says, his voice haughtier now than it’s been in ages, “on an argument that’s both illogical and hypocritical.”

“Yeah? How do you figure?” Anita asks, looking much calmer now that she's had her say.

"You—all of you—insult Drake on a continual basis. So how can you object when I do the same?"

"That's different," Anita says, scowling right back at him now.

Cissie interjects. "We're Tim's friends and we love him. So we're allowed to give him a hard time. Like, we do it affectionately? You actually kind of hate him, so it's different and not fun when you do it."

"Everyone knows that," Anita snaps.

“Anita, chill. I’m pretty sure they didn’t go over social norms in baby assassin school,”

“I don’t hate him,” Damian says. “I mistook him for an obstacle and tried to eliminate him. That’s different.”
Anita rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I’m gonna call bullshit on that one, kiddo. The way I heard it, you talked a lot of shit about Tim when you joined up with the Titans. You wouldn’t do that over a mere ‘obstacle.’”

“Anita, seriously. Chill out for two seconds and let me handle this, okay?” Cissie crosses her arms and gives her a quelling look. After a moment, Anita puts up her hands.

“Okay, okay,” she says. “The stage is yours.”

“Thank you.” Cissie turns back to Damian. “Look, we’re gonna do a compliment sandwich, okay?”

“Oh god,” Anita mutters.

Cissie ignores her. “Tim says you’re doing a really good job, like, deprogramming yourself and getting away from all that toxic League of Assassins bullshit you were raised with. Which is pretty damn impressive in and of itself. But that kind of thing takes years. So it makes sense that you’re still gonna fuck up sometimes. And that’s what you’re doing right now. I mean, if you wanna insult Tim to his face? Fine. Go for it. He’s the forgiving type. But don’t talk shit about him in front of his friends, okay? He might put up with it, but we won’t. We’ve all known Tim a hell of a lot longer than you have. We have opinions of him already—opinions based on years of experience—so you mouthing off isn’t gonna make him look bad, it’s just gonna make you look bad.” She pauses, clearly trying to think of something, and then says, “I’ve also heard you’re really good at art? So congrats on that.”


Damian looks like he doesn’t know how to take any of this. He hasn’t pulled his hood up over his head—his usual defensive posture—but he has his hands buried in his pockets and his shoulders are beginning to hunch up. Everyone else, even Jason, is staying quiet and watching with wary expressions on their faces, but Dick can see the tension in their body language slowly starting to ease.

“Actually,” Cissie adds. “Now that I think about it, the same goes for Tim. You can insult him all day long, but don’t talk shit about his friends. Like, stop calling Conner ‘the clone.’ It’s dehumanizing and makes it sound like you don’t think he’s a person. Tim will put up with a lot of bullshit when it’s only directed at himself, but he doesn’t stand by when people mess with his friends. The Justice League tried to force Cassie off the Teen Titans one time and Tim straight up fought your dad over it.”

“I find that highly unlikely,” Damian says.

“Ask the Titans. Tim’s loyal to a fault and Batman usually comes first, but when he’s wrong, Tim fucking well tells him so.”

Damian looks annoyed. “Drake calls Conner cloneboy,” he points out after a moment.

“Again,” Cissie says, “Tim and Conner are best friends. When Tim says it, it’s a term of endearment and an affirmation that Conner’s origins don’t change the way Tim sees him. That’s different from the way you use it.”

Damian stares at her for another long moment. Then says, “I see. I will take this into consideration.”

“God,” Anita says, “You’re almost as weird as Tim.”
“Almost?” Duke says.

She laughs. “Yeah, you must not know our boy very well.”


“Hey are there any more snacks left?” Bart appears next to them, already cleaned up and wearing dry clothes. Cassie floats down beside him a moment later, still muddy and grinning.

“We mostly smoothed it out,” she says, moving toward the hose to rinse off. “It’s not, you know, noticeably terrible anymore.”

“Where are the others?” Greta asks.

“Conner’s finishing up with his TTK,” Bart says. “Tim’s just kind of staring into the distance, despairingly, like a dust bowl farmer watching his land blow away beneath his feet.”

“You just read *The Grapes of Wrath*, didn’t you?” Cissie says.

“Don’t make fun of me. This weekend is about Tim. And making fun of him.”

“We were just talking about what a weirdo he is,” Anita says. Completely skipping over the fight she almost instigated. “Like, it sounds like Duke’s new enough that he hasn’t really encountered cryptid Tim yet.”

“Oh man, you’ve never seen him go full feral? You’re missing out,” Bart says.

“Feral,” Jason says. “Are we talking about the same person?”

“You probably only know work-Tim,” Bart says. “Work-Tim is very conscientious. Meticulous. Orderly and organized. Tim when he is not working? *Total mess.*”

Cissie’s nodding. “You know how people who spend too much time by themselves develop bizarre habits and idiosyncrasies? Tim spent way too much time alone when he was a kid and is an absolute weirdo because of it. He’s self-aware enough not to break out all the eccentricities in front of other people. But once he starts to relax, it’s actually mildly horrifying.”

“Agreed,” Anita says. “I love him, but Tim is an absolute goblin.”

Damian looks like he doesn’t really believe them, while Jason looks more than a little intrigued. Dick would like to defend his brother, but he remembers Tim’s childhood bedroom. Absolute disaster.

Cassie seems to be thinking along the same lines. “If you ever get a chance to visit Titans Tower, take a look at his room. It’s like stepping into a junkyard. A very high-tech, very expensive post-apocalyptic junkyard. I mean, I am all about innovation or whatever, and I get that he loves his gadgets, but nobody needs that many soldering irons in their bedroom. *Nobody.*”

“Okay, wait,” Duke says. “I’ve been to his Nest and it’s nothing like what you’re describing.”

“Well, yeah, that’s Red Robin’s space. And Red Robin isn’t messy. And Tim’s apartment’s mostly decent because it’s a Tim Wayne space. And Tim Wayne isn’t messy. They are both places he might reasonably have to entertain guests or colleagues or whatever. Whereas the only people who are ever gonna see his room at the Tower are himself and God, because the rest of us won’t even venture into that safety hazard anymore.”
“Conner does,” Bart points out.

“Conner has more courage than sense,” Cassie says. She seems to notice the skepticism on some of their faces, because she adds, “One time Tim slept on the couch in the living room for three weekends in a row because his bed was so full of motor parts that he couldn’t find room to lie down anymore.”

“I genuinely can’t tell if you’re messing with me or not,” Duke says.

“You weren’t there for the video call we made to the cave, were you?” Cassie says.

Duke shifts, suddenly looking uncomfortable. "No. I missed that one."

“Well, if you’d been there, you would have had the dubious pleasure of watching Tim eat a bunch of gross space bugs.”

Jason frowns. "Ugh, can we not talk about that? That was disgusting."

"Oh man, the food thing’s great," Bart says. Most of his friends are making pained faces, like they do not agree, but he keeps going. "It's really too bad you didn't show up until after Tim lost his spleen,” Bart says to Duke. “He has to be really careful with his diet and nutrition now. But in the old days, you could challenge him to eat weird and disgusting things and he would take you up on it every time. He has the most desensitized taste buds of anyone I have ever met in my life. If it counts as a food, he will eat it. He has no fear.”

"God, I forgot we used to do that," Cassie says. "We were so young and dumb and full of hubris. Why did we keep challenging him? Why did we do that to ourselves?"

“You’re gonna have to explain this one,” Duke says.

“Okay, so, basically, Tim got to eat whatever he wanted when he was a kid?” Bart says. “Like, he got his first credit card when he was seven and used it to order stuff online. Which is honestly way too much power for a small child to have. Especially a kid as curious as Tim. So he ate a lot of weird stuff because he was bored all the time? Like, you know those chili peppers that are so hot they can make you pass out and occasionally cause brain swelling? He ate one when he was eight.”

“Oh shit,” Duke says.

"Yeah, he refers to that as his first brush with death.”

“It’s too bad he got stabbed in the spleen instead of the stomach,” Anita says. “The knife would have bounced right off.”

Dick wants to ask about that, because he still doesn't know how lost Tim lost his spleen—had no idea it involved being stabbed—but Bart keeps going. “Yeah, absolutely. See, Tim's stubborn as hell, so if he bought a weird and terrible-tasting thing, no matter how weird and terrible-tasting it was, he still ate it. So now you basically can’t find anything that counts as food that he won’t eat. Believe me. We’ve tried.”

“This actually explains so much about his pizza preferences,” Stephanie says. “What’s the nastiest thing you’ve seen him eat?”

“Probably the condiment shake?” Cassie says. “It was like a suicide, but instead of combining different drinks, it was just a shake made entirely of condiments. Mayo, three different kinds of ketchup, mustard, honey mustard, ranch dressing, thousand island dressing, sriracha, hot sauce,
barbeque sauce...probably some other things I’m forgetting.”

“Tim drank this?” Stephanie says, sounding half horrified and half delighted.

“He tasted it, made a face, and told us we forgot about soy sauce. Which he added. And then he chugged half the glass in one go and shamed the rest of us into trying it because he’s a terrible person. And we did. And it was a horrible, horrible mistake.” Cassie shakes her head. “That kind of thing actually happened...way too many times. Why did we keep playing that dumb game?”

“Machoism?” Cissie suggests.

“How’d he get a credit card when he was a kid?” Duke asks. “My parents would never have trusted me with that kind of thing.”

“Oh, they totally didn’t know,” Cissie says. “I’m pretty sure he hacked their bank accounts and hid all the evidence. They were never around when he was a kid, so they had no idea about pretty much any of the stuff he got up to when he was little.”

Duke frowns. “If they weren’t around, then who was watching him?”

“He had a bunch of different nannies,” Cissie says, shrugging. “They pretty much raised him, but it sounds like they were kind of useless? He was running circles around most of them by the time he was five. And none of them were around long enough to realize they were dealing with a genius weirdo wunderkind. Like, he would just spend a week or so establishing that he was a responsible, respectful, apparently obedient kid. Then they’d pretty much leave him alone and he could get away with almost anything.”

“Huh,” Duke says. “That actually explains a lot. I always wondered how he managed to run around Gotham chasing Batman and Robin when he was still just a kid.”

“Yeeeeeeah, Tim got up to a lot of crazy stuff when he was little,” Bart says. “He has some really wild stories from back then.”

“Small, sneaky, and utterly unsupervised,” Cissie says. “The Tim Drake story. Thank god, though. All it would have taken was one halfway competent adult to torpedo his entire vigilante career. And then half of us might have never even met.”

“Yeah,” Anita says, looking at Duke, “Tim had it way easier than you.”

Duke looks surprised. “Sorry, what?”

“Your cousin,” Bart says. “He’s super strict, right?”

“Yeah,” Duke answers, slowly. “But you do you all know that?”

“Tim told us. Duh,” Bart says. “You joining the team was big news. A meta! In Gotham! That’s so cool! Also, we might have interrogated him a little bit on account of the whole new-people-sometimes-try-to-murder-Tim thing. So we were super relieved when you broke that trend. And Tim says you’re totally killing it at the whole juggling a secret identity thing too, so that’s also a __ —”

“Wait what?” Duke says, looking completely bewildered now. “Tim said that?”

“Uh, yeah?”
“You sure you didn’t mishear him?” Duke asks. “‘Cause I’m pretty sure he thinks I suck at the secret identity thing.”

“Oh shit,” Cassie says. “Did something happen?”

Bart actually goes completely still for a moment, looking absolutely horrified. “Does somebody know? Is it your cousin? Oh fuck, does Tim know that someone knows? Does Batman?”

“No! No, no, no,” Duke says, holding up his hands. “Nobody knows. I swear.”

And Dick doesn’t miss the fact that everyone relaxes at that. Gothamites and the out-of-towners alike.

“But what's the problem?” Bart asks. "The whole secret identity problem is usually a pretty binary thing. Either people know or they don't know. If they don't know, then you're good.”

Duke frowns. “It’s kind of more complicated than that. My cousin doesn't know, but he's still pretty suspicious about what I get up to when I’m not at home. So I have to spend a lot of time making sure he doesn't figure out what’s going on. And that means I miss out on a lot of training sessions and on patrol sometimes and—” his voice starts to pick up some speed, “—I'm not good enough to really help out yet, so I can't afford to keep skipping out on things and I know that—”

“Whoa,” Dick says, cutting him off. "Duke. Listen. You're doing fine. The only reason you don’t get to go on some of our missions is because you’re still really new. And training takes a while. That’s all you need right now. More time.”

“Richard’s correct,” Damian says. “With your background and lack of experience, you can’t possibly expect to match the rest of us in terms of skill for at least—”

“Shush, kiddo,” Dick says, trying to keep his voice gentle. “You were literally raised for this. It’s not fair to compare—”

Damian outright glares at him. “I’m trying to agree with you—”

“Listen,” Cassie says, cutting them both off. Her voice has taken the same serious tone she used on the video call with the Justice League. “I don’t know exactly how you Bats do things, but I’ve worked with a lot of young heroes, so I can tell you that everyone comes to the game with different levels of experience. And everyone learns at a different pace. That's totally normal. But the worst thing you can do is push yourself too far, too soon. That's how you get yourself—or your teammates—killed.”

Duke shrugs and puts his hands into the pockets of his swimming trunks. It’s a pose Dick recognizes. Feigned nonchalance covering up nervousness. “The less I do now,” he says, “the longer it'll take for me to get better. I’ve talked to Bruce about how long it took Tim and Jason to get up to speed and—”

“That's different,” Jason says. “I got put into bat bootcamp, like, 24/7. I lived here. You have to sneak around all the fucking time. It’s not comparable.”

“And Tim lived next door,” Cissie points out. “With no adults actually paying any attention to what he was doing. So it was easy for him.”

“Easier,” Cassie corrects. “It was still pretty difficult.”

Duke looks doubtful. “I just feel like I’m not making as much progress as I’m supposed to be.”
Cassie just shakes her head. “Any progress is good progress. And none of the work you put into training is gonna mean anything if you get caught.”

“Yeah, keeping the secret is priority numero uno,” Bart says. “I’m not even a Bat and I know that. And, I mean, your cousin actually tries to keep track of you, right? Which makes the whole superhero thing a hell of a lot harder. None of the rest of us had to deal with that. We all had parents or guardians who already knew. I mean, Anita tried to keep it a secret from her dad, but—”

“He knew the whole damn time,” Anita says, looking a little chagrined. “He even introduced me to Young Justice on purpose so I’d have people who’d look out for me. Without actually telling me that he knew. He was—” she breaks off for a moment, then shakes her head and grins. “He was kind of crazy. But the right kind, you know? He knew better than to try to stop me. But most parents wouldn’t do that. And my situation was different from yours and Tim’s. If you fuck up, you’re not just exposing yourself. You’re exposing your whole team. And that’s, like, a huge amount of responsibility.”

“Yeah, dude,” Bart says. “You can’t compare yourself to everyone else when you’re the only one who’s playing on expert mode. Tim had a way easier time with the whole keeping-his-family-in-the-dark thing and it still stressed him out in a major way. So he one hundred percent understands why you don’t get to do as much as everyone else. And he’s super relieved that you’re being so responsible about it.”

“Where’d you get the idea that he thought you were doing a bad job?” Stephanie asks, looking concerned. “Did he say something?”

“Yeah,” Duke says. “Early on he gave me this whole speech about how important it was that I never, ever let my cousin know. He went through this long list of consequences that would follow and also all the potential ways I could slip up and getouted and—I mean, I sort of thought he was telling me not to fuck up or I’d screw up everything for everyone.”

“Well, yeah,” Bart says. “That’s kind of how it works.”

“But he just told you to be careful?” Stephanie asks. “He never actually said, ‘I don’t think you’re cut out for this,’ or straight up told you to quit?”

“No?” Duke says.

“Then you’re fine,” Stephanie tells him. “Tim told me to quit loads of times and—”

“He did what?”

“He told me to quit. More than once. Obviously, I did not listen to him,” Stephanie says. “Because fuck that. But he definitely tried to convince me that I wasn’t good enough to do this. So if you’re not sure if he thinks you’re doing okay or not, then you’re fine. If he thought you shouldn’t be on the team, you’d definitely know.”

“Yeah, if Tim gave you a big speech or whatever, it’s only because he’s understandably paranoid about your cousin because he knows how bad that kind of thing can go. When his dad found out—” Cissie breaks off abruptly. All of Tim’s friends look uncomfortable now.


There’s a pause and then Cissie just shakes her head. “It was really bad,” she says.

“His dad tried to shoot Batman at one point,” Bart adds.
“What the fuck?” Jason says.


“His dad was kind of—” Bart starts to say.

“Don’t,” Cassie interrupts. “Bart, do not start—”

“I’m not talking shit. I’m just making an observation about his dad being maybe not the most temperate person,” Bart says. “That’s not talking shit. That’s, like, a mild criticism.”

“You can’t talk shit about Tim’s dead parents,” Anita tells Duke. “Kind of obvious, but it’s worth saying. That’s a big no no.”

“Even if what you’re saying is technically true—”

“Bart,” Cassie says, a very clear warning in her tone now.

“Yeah yeah shutting up now.”

“Anyway,” Cassie says. “The point is, when Tim’s family found out it was a huge mess. Like, you have no idea. Tim had to quit being Robin, he was supposed to stop talking to all of us—”

“Which he obviously didn’t do,” Bart says.

“But it was still this big, awful—I’m just trying to say, this is the kind of thing that understandably stresses Tim out. So that’s why he was worried when you joined up. And I’m sure he came off, like, super condescending when he gave you his speech or whatever, because he always gets like that when he’s freaking out about something. But I know he really appreciates how seriously you’re taking the secrecy thing.”

Anita’s nodding. “Yeah, trust us, mon. We’ve known Tim a lot longer than you have. If he had a problem with you, we’d know about it by now.”

Duke still looks dubious, but he doesn’t argue. “You’re the experts, I guess,” he says after a moment. “To tell you the truth, I can’t really get a read on him? Like, I have no idea what he’s thinking most of the time.”

“That’s normal,” Cissie says. “He kind of takes a while to warm up to people.”

“Yeah, you are so early in your getting-to-know-Tim journey,” Bart tells him. “It might be another couple of years before you really get a handle on him.”

“Seriously?” Duke says. “A couple of years?”

Cissie grimaces. “Potentially? Yeah. No exaggeration. We all knew Tim for ages before he would even show us his face. And then he gave us an obviously fake name, which was pretty insulting. I think I might actually still be a little bit mad about that now that I’m thinking about it.”

“They’re not kidding,” Stephanie chimes in. “When Tim and I started dating, he knew my name, but I didn’t know his. Which, yes, was as fucked up as it sounds.”

“Tim’s just naturally secretive,” Bart says.

"And kind of an asshole about it half the time," Cissie adds.
"Cissie, do not start," Anita says.

"What? It’s true."

“That did drive me crazy,” Cassie says. “It ended up being a big issue, because he knew pretty much everything there was to know about us and we knew diddly-squat about him. At one point he had to quit the team over it.”

Cissie frowns. “I kind of expected you guys to do the whole drag-him-back-against-his-will thing when he left. Like you did with me.”

“That was different. You quit the team, but you were still our friend. Tim was being—you know what he was like back then.”

“How’d you get him to tell you?” Duke asks.

“He never actually did,” Bart says. “But there was this weird alternate dimension bullshit and we all found out and the problem kind of solved itself.”

“Um, no, that’s not how it happened,” Anita says. “You and Conner found out. And then Tim blabbed to everyone else immediately. Which was totally fair since you can’t keep a secret to save your life.”

“Hey, now,” Bart says, but Cassie starts laughing.

“Oh my god, I forgot he did that,” she says. “That actually did go a long way toward getting me to forgive him. He was so relieved to finally get it out and in the open.”

Bart grins and bumps elbows with Duke. “See? You already have all the background info on his actual identity and stuff. So you're practically starting on second base.”

“Do you have to use baseball metaphors?” Cissie asks. “It's literally the worst sport.”

“You only hate it because you kind of suck at—”

“If you want to hang out with Tim outside of work,” Cassie says to Duke, ignoring the argument that’s about to break out, “you're pretty much gonna have to initiate this friendship yourself. Tim's so busy nowadays we hardly ever see him anymore.”

“And he tends to match, like, the other person’s interest level?” Cassie says. “If you keep chilling in the acquaintance zone, he’s gonna assume that’s where you wanna be and you’ll end up stuck there forever. And you definitely want to upgrade to actual friendship. It’s way better.”

“You should try to find a way to combine work stuff and fun stuff if possible,” Anita says. “That's easier, at least to start with.”

The others are nodding. "You probably can’t bully him into doing things the way we can,” Cassie says. “We have totally earned that privilege—and let me tell you, it was an uphill battle—but you probably can trick him into hanging out.”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure I can't trick Tim,” Duke says. “I’m smart, but I’m not that smart.”

"It's not really tricking him,” Bart says. “You just have to give him an excuse. Like, sometimes when he’s really busy, he’ll brush you off every time you ask him to hang out or do something fun. But if you tell him you need his help—even for something totally stupid and unimportant—he’s
like, ‘oh, well, if you need me, I guess I can make it.’"

“Yeah,” Anita agrees, “sometimes you just gotta give him the flimsiest of justifications and he’ll go along with it even though he knows it’s total bullshit.”

“Ooooh,” Cassie says. “You can get him to help you out with the whole cousin thing. Like, you wanna get more training in, right? So train with Tim. It’ll save you from having to drive all the way out here and if you designate Tim as your go-to excuse, you can also force him into doing fun stuff occasionally. Just tell him it’s to legitimize your cover story.”

Duke frowns. “I really don’t wanna bother him with that kind of thing? He’s already super busy and—”

“Um, number one, you absolutely do want to bother him. You don’t know this yet,” Cissie says, “but bothering Tim is super fun and entertaining. Number two, I’m sure you guys can work out a training schedule that works for both of you and it will probably help Tim out too. He likes training with other people. And it’s just as important for him to keep up his skills as it is for you to be learning them. And number three—and this is worth repeating—bothering Tim is so much fun.”

“Look, you pretty much have to listen to us on this one,” Bart says. “This is really privileged information we’re giving you. We don’t spill this kind of intel to just anybody. But Tim says you’re cool. Plus you’re the only meta in a sea of bats and birds. A light in a dark city. A bit of sun in a place of eternal night. A candle in the—”

“Is he just making fun of my name now?” Duke asks. “Because I did not actually choose Signal. Bruce did.”

“I am making fun of it,” Bart says. “But that does not actually mean that I don’t like it. I do like it. It’s a bit like Impulse. Batman named me too. And an impulse is just, like, an electrical signal that your brain sends to the rest of your body. When you really think about it, all our actions are just thoughts made manifest. But yeah. Signal. Impulse. Good stuff. Also gender neutral and not something you’ll age out of. Basically, you and I actually have the best names? Also, I’m allowed to make fun of you now, right? Like, we just gave you a treasure trove of Tim hacks. You are totally gonna be unlocking more fun versions of him any day now.”

“There's only one Tim,” Cass says. She’s still sitting on Jason’s chair, leaning against his side.

"Um, no? I’ve met loads of different Tims," Bart says. "I mean, okay, there’s definitely, like, an ur-Tim. A core-Tim out of which radiate all the overlapping other Tims. But—"

“Bart, quit, you suck at this,” Cissie says. She turns to Cass. “You know how your dad is different when he’s being Batman? And different when he’s being Bruce Wayne, billionaire playboy? And how the Batman who busts up criminals is probably a little bit different from the Batman who talks to the police or to victims? That’s all we’re saying. Tim’s like that.”

"It's kind of a prerequisite for the whole superhero thing." Cassie says. "Unless you're a moron like me and get yourself outed. I don't really have to worry about any of that anymore."

"I mean, the whole double-life, secret-identity thing definitely exacerbates the identity stuff," Bart concedes. “But I’m pretty sure Tim’s just like that. Always has been. I mean, he has so many aliases.”

“Oh god, yeah,” Cissie says. “Tim will take literally any excuse to make a new alias. Like, did I ever tell you guys about that time he helped me with an audition last year?”
Anita immediately starts laughing.

“Oooh, no, I don’t know this one,” Cassie says.

Cissie grins. “Okay, so, basically my agent told me about a last-minute audition he thought I should try out for. It was this kind of quirky indie rom-com that included a lot of ballroom dancing and one of the leads just broke her leg—literally, not metaphorically. And he’s like, ‘You know how to dance, right?’ and I’m like, ‘Yes, of course I know how to dance.’ But I don’t, you guys. I do not know the first thing about ballroom dancing.”

Cass immediately perks up at the mention of dancing.

“Oh shit,” Stephanie says, trying not to laugh. “What did you do?”

“I called Tim. That’s kind of the go-to move when you’re suddenly in need of a weird skill set that you do not currently possess.”

“You gotta be careful with that, though,” Anita says to Duke. “Like, there’s a lot of obvious stuff you can call Tim about if you find yourself in a sticky situation. Stuck on the side of the road with a flat tire and no clue how to change it? Definitely call Tim. But sometimes we kind of assume that Tim will know how to do some weird, bizarre thing because, you know, it’s Tim. He knows all kinds of weird, bizarre things. And he’ll just go, ‘Yeah, sure, let me get back to you in an hour,’ and then he’ll go spend an hour learning how to do the thing which he did not actually know how to do before.”

“Yep,” Cissie says. “That’s exactly what happened. I called him in a panic and asked him to teach me how to dance in the next, like, twenty-four hours and he was just like, ‘Okay, I’ll fly over tomorrow.’ And then he showed up at my apartment in the middle of the night—scared me half to death—and was like, ‘Okay, I just watched four hours of dance competitions on Youtube. I think we can figure this out.’”

“Oh my god,” Stephanie says. “Why would you think Tim knew how to ballroom dance?”

“I don’t know? He’s a fancy rich person. Ballroom dancing seems like a fancy rich person thing.”

Cass is grinning widely now. “Did it work?” she asks.

“Kind of?” Cissie says. “We went from downright terrible to actually pretty good after about half a day of practicing. And Tim went and did the audition with me because he didn’t think I’d be able to pull it off with someone else. And because, you know, auditions are terrifying and I was kind of freaking out a little bit. I didn’t actually get the role, but it was still the most fun I’ve had in ages.”

“And your next film does involve a lot of dancing,” Anita points out. “So it did pay off eventually.”

Cissie grimaces. “Yeah. I’m doing this fake popstar biopic thing starting next month and, god, I’m gonna have to dance and sing. It’s gonna be a total disaster. I don’t know why I auditioned for this. Why do I keep doing this to myself?”

“You’ll be fine,” Anita says.

“I appreciate your sweet but misguided confidence in me,” Cissie tells her. “But, anyway, to get back to the actual point, Tim obviously used an alias while he was with me—way over-the-top, schmoozy Los Angeles type, terrible facial hair, of course, because he still thinks that’s hilarious for some reason—and he did get offered a bit role. And then went back and forth with the casting
director about the shooting schedule and where would it be staged and, oh, sorry, I’m gonna be on tour with, like, Ariana Grande or something, so I can’t make it.”

“Lemme guess,” Bart says. “He stayed in character for the rest of the day.”

“Obviously. We hung out with some of my LA friends for a couple hours afterward and I kept throwing out, like, the weirdest little bullshit facts about his backstory and he just rolled with it the whole time. That entire day was just both of us trying to hold a straight face while tripping each other up. After that, I don’t think I’ll ever crack up during a scene.”

“And that’s just one of his one-and-done aliases,” Cassie says. “He has a bunch of older ones he’s been maintaining for ages. Like, I guess Alvin’s probably the oldest but—”

Anita gives her a surprised look. “Oh my god, do you seriously not know?”


“Alvin’s dead,” Bart says. “Tim killed him.”

“He did what?”

“Oh my god,” Greta says in a small voice, her hands rising up to her face. “Not Alvin.”

“Timothy Pollock Bell-Gretzky!” Cissie yells in the direction of the old tracks.

“Ooh, good one,” Bart says.

Anita rolls her eyes. “Cis, your name is just as weird as Tim’s.”

“What?” Tim says, limping around the corner of the house, still slightly damp, with his hair mussed and Conner floating just behind him. “What have I done now?”

“You killed Alvin.”


“Yeah, sounds like you killed him off,” Bart says.

“Tim, how could you,” Cissie says. “I’ve known Alvin Draper longer than I’ve known you. He was my favorite.”

“Unfortunately, he’s no longer a viable cover,” Tim says.

“That means what exactly?”

“He’s wanted by Interpol,” Conner tells her. “For art theft.”

“You pulled a Catwoman?” Jason asks. He looks like he’s on the verge of laughing again.

“No, I did not pull a Catwoman,” Tim answers, frowning.

“Obviously,” Conner says with a grin. “Catwoman doesn’t get caught.”

Tim gives him a look of utter betrayal. “I admit that it was not my best work,” he says.

“You burned Alvin on a heist?” Cassie says. “What were you thinking? Why would you use him for something like that? I have literally seen you slap together a new alias just to go on a grocery
“That’s called practicing, Cassie,” Tim says. “It’s this thing that you do when you want to maintain a skill set. And I don’t know why you’re making a big deal out of the Alvin thing. I have plenty of other aliases left.”

“Yeah, but we’re not, like, personally attached to any of the rest of them,” Cassie says.

“What about Mr. Sarcastic?” Tim asks. “He was around for a while.”

“Oh my god, no. Do not bring him back, Tim. You specifically designed him just to piss me off.”

“You’re giving yourself way too much credit, Cassie,” he says. “I would never be that petty.”

“Yes, you would. You one hundred percent would.”

“Lies. Slander.”

“I liked Mr. Sarcastic,” Bart says. “He was fun. You know who is not fun? You know who is inarguably Tim’s worst alias?”

“Oh god,” Tim says, rolling his eyes. “Not this again.”


“And here we go,” Tim mutters.

“He’s creepy,” Bart says.

“Yeah, well, Tim’s creepy,” Cassie points out.


“Occupationally creepy, Tim. Because you are a Bat. And a detective. You once took me to an autopsy.”

“If you didn’t want to help solve that murder, then you shouldn’t have volunteered.”

“I don’t mean like that,” Bart says. “I mean, Tim Wayne’s creepy because he’s not creepy. He’s like the bland, PR-packaged version of my friend. Watching your interviews as him is like seeing a pod person. It is unsettling. Also booooring. Tim, he’s so boring.”

“I think Tim’s really good at interviews,” Greta says.

Tim just rolls his eyes. “I’m not changing my public persona for your entertainment. And he’s supposed to be boring. Boring is good. Boring is how you stay under the radar.”

“Tim, you beautiful fool,” Anita says. “That ship has sailed. Right around the time you became the teenaged face of the company. And landed yourself in the tabloids with that fiancée thing—”

“That was not my fault.”

“—and the fake getting-shot thing.”

“Okay, that was kind of my fault.” He frowns at them. “I still do not concede your point.”

“Well, if you want my opinion—” Cissie says
“I don’t,” Tim interrupts. “I genuinely do not.”

“But Tiiiiim, this is gonna be sort of permanent, right?” Bart whines. “Like, you’re gonna be doing this for ages. You can’t be Tim Wayne forever. I hate him. He’s the wooooorst.”

“He’s doing a really good job,” Greta argues. “Being in the spotlight is hard! And the Neon Knights charity is doing a lot of important work.”

“Tim Wayne is a corporate drone cunningly disguised as a human being and I. Don’t. Like. Him.”

“You sound just like those terrible people who always leave mean comments online.”

“And you sound like—wait. Wait. You sound like—”

Dick’s pretty sure this is the first time in history that he’s seen Bart Allen speechless. Tim, meanwhile, looks like he’s fighting down a grin.

“You,” Bart says, sounding horrified. “You’re Suzie S.”

Greta gasps. “You’re Crandallen?”

“Yeah, obviously.”

“Wait,” Conner says. “I thought you both knew that?”

“Okay, what’s going on?” Cassie asks.

“She’s my nemesis!” Bart shouts, vibrating in and out of visibility for a second.

“Bart’s been trolling the comment sections of Tim’s media appearances since, basically, forever,” Conner says. “And Greta always shows up and defends him. And they get into these ridiculously long comment chains and—did you guys really not know you were arguing with each other?”

“How did you know?” Greta asks. Her face has gone bright red now.

“Tim always sends me screenshots.”

“Sorry,” Tim says, but he’s nearly laughing now. “I did try to warn you guys not to get so heated.”

“Oh wow.” Cissie’s looking at something on her phone. “Yep, there you both are...twenty-six comments long? Jesus, you two.”

“Is that from the TV thing last month?” Anita asks. “I’m pretty sure I commented on that one too.”

“Yeah, there you are,” Cissie says, scrolling down. “But you just posted the number six?”

“Anita rates my outfits,” Tim says, sounding less amused. “Which, again, is an opinion that I did not ask to be continually afflicted with and yet here we are.”

“Tim,” Anita says, “I know that having a corporate job means you gotta keep up appearances and whatnot. But you’re too rich to be this basic. Bart’s right, it’s pretty boring.”

“Yes, very helpful, thank you so much,” Tim says. “But, again, I didn’t ask.”

“We’re just offering constructive criticism,” Bart tells him.

“How is any of this constructive?”
“Okay, that’s fair,” Cassie says. “We should not be tearing down your public persona without offering alternatives. Which means—”

Bart throws his hands into the air. “Pitch party!”

Tim frowns. “Does anyone remember the part where I explicitly did not ask for your opinions?”

“Just listen. Just hear me out,” Cassie says. “Bruce has already got the floozy playboy philanthropist thing locked down. It’s a classic, but you’re not gonna pull that off better than he can. But what if instead you become one of those rich, out-of-touch Silicon Valley types? Not the douchey dude-bros,” she says, holding up a hand to stifle Tim’s protests. “I’m talking about the clueless eco-hippie tech guys who get weirdly obsessed with, like, spirituality and enlightenment once they’re bored and rich.”

“Oh god,” Tim says.

“Ooooh, that’s a good one,” Cissie says. “Like, character-wise, you can claim that all your work stuff deals with technology, but you’re getting disillusioned about, like, modernity or something? So in your personal life you have to get away from it all.”

Tim looks at her for a moment and then his body language shifts. He drops his shoulders and lets out a languid sigh. “I just need to unplug, you know?” he says slowly, his accent suddenly a lot more posh than it usually is.

Cassie claps. “Yes, exactly! Think about it. It gives you the perfect excuse to disappear whenever you feel like! Next time you have to run off to space, just tell people you’re going to do a ten-day silent meditation in Brazil or something. And if you get injured, you can just say you were hiking the Himalayas looking for your spiritual guru and fell off a cliff.”

“I’m not telling people I fell off a cliff.”

“I think you should just keep getting engaged,” Anita says.

“No,” Tim says. “Nope. No.”

Anita goes on, “And then every time you break up, you get all sad and wander off. Just tell people you’re moping your way around Europe.”

“Okay, now we’re veering away from the point, which is not putting my secret identity at risk by being in the spotlight all the time,” Tim points out.

“Yeah, but the more often you do it, the less interesting it will be. People’ll just be like, ‘Ah, yes, that poor Tim Wayne fellow. Always unlucky in love. So tragic.’”

“Again,” Tim says, “I have told you guys this a million times. When you’re trying to keep a secret —”

“The fewer people who are in on it, the better,” Bart and Conner chorus, rolling their eyes.

“Oh. Oh my god,” Cassie says, grinning widely. “Ohmygod, I’ve just had the best idea ever.” She starts flapping her hands excitedly at them. “Okay, this has to wait a few years, probably, but Cissie’s obviously gonna be a big-time Hollywood star someday, right?”

“You guys—” Cissie says, looking embarrassed.
“Yeah, one hundred percent,” Tim says.

“Okay, okay, so get this: you two should have a torrid love affair!”

Bart gasps, looking absolutely thunderstruck by the idea. Anita rolls her eyes.

Tim and Cissie look at each other for a moment, perplexed, and then burst out laughing.

“Listen, listen, this is a great idea,” Cassie says. Cissie’s leaning on Anita now, choking a little bit on laughter, and Tim’s covered his face with his hands but his shoulders are still shaking silently. “You guys could be one of those celebrity power couples! There’d be no risk to your secret identity and once Cissie’s a megastar, nobody’s ever gonna remember you as anything except Cissie King-Jones’s ex-boyfriend. It’s the perfect plan!”


Tim elbows him. He’s almost stopped laughing when he and Cissie make eye contact and it starts up again. “We would have the most dysfunctional relationship in the history of relationships,” Tim chokes out. “You would be my meanest girlfriend. And I used to date Stephanie.”

“Hey, now,” Stephanie says. “You weren’t that great at communicating either!”

“Oh man. We should not date. We should not fake-date either,” Cissie says, wiping at her eyes. “But we should absolutely be celebrity friends who hang out together and confuse the media.”


“I can vouch for your whereabouts if you come under suspicion or whatever,” Cissie says. “And if my career ever nosedives, then maybe we fake-date.”

“This is such a bad idea,” Tim says. “A hilarious but terrible idea.”

“What would their celebrity couple name be?” Conner asks.

“Probably something with a lot of hyphens,” Bart answers.

Tim shakes his head. “Nope. No. Cissie, I love you and I will absolutely mislead the media in order to support your career if you really need me to, but otherwise no. Terrible plan. Veto. We are not building any sort of public persona around my romantic life. No, Conner, whatever you’re about to say, no.”

“Different suggestion,” Conner says. “No romance whatsoever.”

“Good idea,” Cassie says. “Romance is not one of Tim’s many skill sets.”

“Okay, wow, we’re back to roasting me,” Tim says. “Why did I invite you guys here again? Genuine question.”

“Listen,” Conner says. “You should be a prepper.”

“A what?” Greta asks.

“A prepper. You know, those survivalists who build underground bunkers in case the world ends. The ones who are always like, ‘Superman can’t save us forever,’ or who think the Justice League’s been infiltrated by mind-controlling aliens who are gonna take over and—”
Tim starts laughing again.

“‘It’s perfect,’” Conner goes on. “‘You get to be as weird and secretive and paranoid as you want. Plus, preppers are notoriously the selfish ‘fuck you, I got mine’ types, so nobody’s gonna expect you to be a vigilante risking your life for the greater good.’”

“God, he could go full conspiracy theorist,” Bart says. “Be a flat-earther, Tim! Talk about chemtrails!”

“I am not perpetuating conspiracy theories in today’s political climate,” Tim says. “If we’re gonna construct a new me, it has to be at least nominally responsible.”

“I thought you weren’t taking suggestions,” Anita teases.

“I’m not,” Tim says. “All your ideas are terrible and I will not be taking your advice. But now that this thought experiment has begun, I feel compelled to see it through.”

“I vote politician,” Jason says. “Slimy asshole politician.”

“Ah yes, a career guaranteed to make me lose my faith in humanity. Thank you, Jason.” He turns to Dick. “Dick, please save me from these terrible suggestions. What should I be when I grow up?”

And Dick’s surprised to realize that he hasn’t thought about this question in relation to Tim in a long time. They used to talk about his future. His uncertainty. But ever since Tim became Red Robin and started working for WE, Dick’s taken it for granted that this is the path Tim wanted to follow. Now he’s not so sure.

“What do you actually want to do?” Dick asks.

Tim scoffs. “I feel like you’re missing the point of this exercise.”

“I vote mad scientist,” Conner offers. “I mean, you’re practically halfway there already.”

“I wouldn’t be a mad scientist,” Tim says, looking offended. “I’d be a mad engineer. That’s completely different.”

They go on like that for a while longer. Tim’s friends keep offering up increasingly impractical suggestions that Tim picks apart. Dick can’t even parse some of the things they say. They’re either pop culture references that are going over his head or inside jokes that he just doesn’t get.

The way they talk to each other makes it obvious that they’ve all stayed in close contact despite the distance that separates them now. Even with Tim’s busy schedule, they’ve managed to goad him into visiting them occasionally. And they all seem to know a lot about both sides of Tim’s life. Not just his public appearances as the heir to Wayne Enterprises but also the personal dynamics between Red Robin and the rest of Gotham’s vigilantes.

And that’s a revelation that Dick’s still trying to wrap his head around. He had no idea that Duke—easy-going, laid-back, ever-confident Duke—felt insecure about his progress. And it never even occurred to him that Tim might get stressed out about Duke’s living situation. That it would remind him of his own struggle to hide half his life from his parents.

Dick remembers the version of Tim that always came out when his mom and dad were around. The quiet, dutiful son that could be left to his own devices for months at a time. The kind of kid you never had to worry about.
The same kid who showed up at the manor today acting completely normal. Who made it very clear that he wasn’t upset with Bruce for the way he acted on that video call or with Dick for losing his temper in the Nest the day before.

They haven’t even offered him an apology yet, and he’s already forgiven them. And Dick’s barely thought about it. He’d been relieved, yes, but he also took it for granted that Tim would be like that. Damian and Jason are volatile and unpredictable. They’re the ones who require special attention and careful handling. In comparison, Tim’s always been easier to deal with. Because Tim will put up with a lot more than anyone else in the family. It’s the same role he played for his parents. The low-maintenance kid who never asks for much.

And that kid is nothing like the person Tim's friends keep describing in all their stories about him. Their Tim is cagey and difficult and apparently a lot more fun than the carefully professional teammate Tim presents himself as when he's in Gotham. Based on all of their advice to Duke, becoming friends with Tim—even just staying friends with him—is something that requires time and energy and more than a little bit of strategy. And it's clear from the way they talk about him that they all think he's more than worth the effort.

Dick’s still turning all of his over in his head, trying to figure out how he's gotten things so wrong and what he needs to do to fix this, when Bruce finally reappears. He arrives just in time to hear the second half of Stephanie’s extended argument on why Tim should follow in Bruce Wayne’s playboy footsteps and help him establish a Kardashian-style dynasty.

Tim takes pity on Bruce—who looks confused and alarmed by the conversation—and tells him, “Don’t worry, we’re not starting a reality TV empire.”

“But you should,” Stephanie says. “You seriously should.”

“They’re just trying to fix me,” Tim continues, ignoring her. Solemnly, he adds, “As you can see, it’s not going very well for them.”

“They’re going to fix you,” Bruce says dubiously. “With reality television.”

“We’re not fixing you,” Bart says. “We’re fixing Tim Wayne. Totally different. Tim Drake’s fine. He can stay.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “I think I’m going to declare this thought experiment a failure. Nope, no, Stephanie, you have already made your case. C’mon, everybody up. If I stay out here any longer, I’m gonna get skin cancer.”

Bruce hangs back, watching Tim attempt to corral everyone inside, and then looks at Dick. “What was that about?”

And Dick doesn’t know how to answer. Because he’s just realized why Tim shut down the conversation as soon as Bruce arrived.

Tim and his friends talk about Tim Wayne like he’s just another alias. A persona that Tim puts on for work.

But Tim Wayne is Bruce Wayne’s son.

“It’s nothing,” Dick says after a moment. “Just another one of their dumb games.”

Bruce, to his relief, accepts the lie. He turns to head back inside and then stops for a moment to look at the abandoned deck chairs—half of which are covered in mud—and the now-empty pool.
And then he sighs. “I’m starting to understand why Tim didn’t want to bring them here.”

“Yeah,” Dick says, thinking about all the little things Tim’s friends have mentioned, completely off-hand, without even realizing that they're sharing secrets. “I think I’m starting to get that too.”

Chapter End Notes

Remember when I said that Chapter 5 was going to be the only monstrously long chapter? What an innocent and naive time that was.

A couple of quick notes: "Injured Bird" is a training game. I don't want to say too much more about it here (I may include it in the outtakes for this fic), but suffice to say, Bruce would not approve if he found out about it.

The thing Tim whispered to Cassie right before he grappled her into the pool was a secret about his personal life. It involves something that I'm hoping to explore in a separate story, so it's not one of the secrets that gets revealed during this fic.

Re: Tim's Bat-voice. There are a few panels in the original YJ of Tim doing his best Batman impression and they are simultaneously hilarious and kind of impressive.

In case anyone forgot, Anita is straight up the most menacing person on her entire team. She once impaled a werewolf guy on both of her blades--centimeters away from his heart--in order to give him an extremely scary speech about how she would literally murder him if he ever so much as looks at Cissie the wrong way ever again. She is terrifying and I love her.

At some point early in the Teen Titans run, Diana decides that Cassie needs to quit the Teen Titans (whyyyy, Diana is usually the sensible one) and for reasons that still do not make sense, the entire Justice League joins her and fights their own kids? (Tim and Bruce do not actually fight because this was in the early aughts, back when writers knew that Bruce wouldn't fight his own kids because he'd hate himself for that. Remember when that was an important part of his characterization?)

Tim's favorite pizza is canonically Canadian bacon and onion with artichoke hearts. This is a deeply weird boy.

"Timothy Pollock Bell-Gretzky" is part of a weird game Tim's friends play where they make up fake names for him using word association. So Cissie's referencing Jackson Pollock, Drake Bell, and Wayne Gretzky here.

The fate of Alvin Draper was never confirmed in comics canon as far as I can tell, but in Red Robin, Tim does break into a museum and then gets stopped by airport security while traveling as Alvin Draper. An uncharacteristically sloppy move by our usually meticulous boy.

Greta's username when she comments on Tim's media appearances is "Suzie S." For part of the original YJ run, she couldn't remember her own name, so Cissie offered to let her use one of hers instead. Suzanne is Cissie's legal first name. "Crandallen" is a portmanteau of Bart's actual last name, Allen, and his former guardian Max Mercury's civilian last name, Crandall. (Yes, I am still sad about Max.)
Lastly, Mr. Sarcastic is a canon alias that Tim used for a few issues near the end of the original YJ. He is also the inspiration for my many, many "Tim Drake has tons of aliases and it's a symptom of his identity issues" headcanons. One of my favorite Tim interactions of all time involves him trying to explain to Cassie that he's using Mr. Sarcastic to practice maintaining a "character" in deep undercover for an extended period of time. And Cassie just casually points out that that's what he does every time he becomes Robin. And our poor boy is absolutely dumbstruck by this. (The fact that Cassie knows him well enough to call him out like? Heartwarming. The fact that Tim's absolutely shocked that one of his closest friends knows him well enough to figure that out? Heartbreaking.)

I'm a little unsure about when I'll be posting the next chapter. Editing it shouldn't take as long as this chapter took, but the upcoming holiday may wreak havoc on my schedule. Likewise, I might be a little slower responding to comments this week for the same reason.
By dinner time, Bruce still hasn’t managed to snatch more than a few moments alone with his son. He knows this is by design. Whenever he approaches Tim, there’s a not-very-subtle shuffling of bodies until Tim’s friends are practically shielding him from Bruce.

It’s absurd.

His only consolation is that Tim seems to find it as exasperating as he does. Every time it happens, he rolls his eyes or pointedly elbows his way through the crowd.

This doesn’t stop his friends from hovering nearby, but it does ease some of Bruce’s anxiety. While it’s frustrating to spend time near Tim rather than with him, he has to admit that having Tim repeatedly seek him out is preferable to being avoided. Which would have been the likely outcome if he’d gone straight to Tim’s apartment the day before.

He owes that to Barbara. She came all the way to the cave to tell him directly that she had news about Tim and then refused to elaborate until he promised to sit down and listen to everything she had to say.

He’d been resentful before she told him and furious after. The idea that Tim was back on Earth and hiding from him had been—

He hadn’t handled that well.

“Look,” Barbara said when he tried stalking away from her, “if you want me to put the cave on lockdown—and freak out everyone else, including Alfred, in the process—I can do that. Or you can sit down and listen to me for a minute. I need to show you something.”

When he looked back at her, she was holding out a piece of paper.

He still has it with him now, carefully folded and hidden away in one of his pockets. A printed photograph of Tim and his team dressed in civilian clothes and making their way through what looks like a service tunnel. Cassie and Bart in front, laughing and talking. Conner and Tim just behind them. Conner’s grinning at Tim, but Tim’s looking directly at the camera, one side of his mouth quirked up in a small mischievous smile.

Bruce hadn’t understood what the photograph meant until Barbara showed him the surveillance footage that it came from. When she accessed the video on the cave’s main computer, Bruce immediately recognized the long corridor as one of the secret entrances to Tim’s Nest. It was empty when the video started, but within seconds he could see movement at the far end of the tunnel. This quickly resolved itself into four familiar figures moving toward the camera. There was no audio accompanying the footage, but they were clearly making no attempts to be stealthy. And none of them seem to be aware of the camera, which was likely hidden or camouflaged in some way.

None of them, except for Tim. For a single second, his eyes shift away from Conner and he looks directly at the camera. His grin, caught in motion, is downright conspiratorial.

“He’s not hiding,” Barbara explained to him in patient tones. “His friends are trying to hide him.
And he’s letting them fail miserably. They tripped pretty much every single one of his alarms on their way in.”

She was right. Tim would know how to circumvent or disable his own security system without alerting Barbara. And, if he’d really wanted to keep himself hidden, he wouldn’t have come to Gotham at all. He would have met his other friends in a different city, far from Oracle’s prying eyes.

“This is a little something I like to call context,” Barbara continued. “So, let’s try again without any attempts to storm off this time. Question number one: why didn’t Tim contact anyone when he got back to Earth?” When Bruce didn’t bother answering, she rolled her eyes. “Because he didn’t need to. He knew I’d catch them and spread the word. I’ve already sent the girls to surprise his friends. They’ll think twice about trying to sneak around Gotham after this, which is probably the point Tim’s trying to make to them. Now, question number two: why are they trying to hide Tim from you? You have to actually answer this one out loud or I’m going to be even more obnoxious than I already am.”

“Because of the video call,” Bruce said. “Because of the way I acted.”

“Being a little vague there, B,” Barbara replied.

“I’ve already spoken to Alfred about that,” Bruce told her. He had no intention of being lectured a second time about the same thing.

“Let’s put a pin in that one,” Barbara said. “We’ll talk about Alfred in a minute. Yeah, the video call was not your best work, Bruce. And remind me, who was the primary spectator for that conversation on Tim’s end of the call?”

“Impulse.” Bruce could already see where this was going.

“Bingo. Now, think about it. We’ve already seen how he sounds when he’s trying to be reassuring. Imagine what he’s like when he’s trying to do the opposite. He thinks Tim’s in big trouble. That’s why all of his friends are rallying around him right now.” She gave him a pointed look. “I know you were worried about Tim’s safety. And Tim probably knows it too. But his friends? Even if Tim tried to explain to them that you’re just like this sometimes, do you think that would really matter to them? Tim regularly works with Jason and Damian. Two people who tried to murder him more than once. So I’m guessing Tim’s friends don’t necessarily trust his judgment when it comes to his family.”

She waited a moment to see if he would say anything. When he stayed silent, she went on, “Now, what do you think they’re afraid will happen if they dump Tim back in Gotham and leave him to face you alone? Maybe some kind of unpleasant confrontation like the one you were just about to instigate?”

“I wasn’t going to confront him,” Bruce said, his voice harsh and agitated. Undermining his own point. “I was going to see my son who’s been missing and off-planet for a week.”

“And what were you planning to say to him?”

“Barbara—”

“I know you don’t like being questioned like this,” she said. “And you know who’s just like you in that respect?”

“Not asking questions is what led to this,” Bruce told her. “When I came back from the time
stream, I tried to be hands off. To let you all continue on without my interference. And now—"

“And now you’re going to make up for all of that at once? Bezneetan, the away protocol, what
happened to him in that year you were gone? All of it?” There was clear exasperation in her voice
now. “That’s way too much to cover in one conversation. Think this through for me. How is Tim
going to feel if he comes home and the first thing you do is interrogate him?”

“I’m his father,” Bruce said. “I need to know what happened to him. And why he didn’t tell me.
And—”

Barbara shook her head. “No. First off, you don’t need to know what happened to figure out why
he hasn’t talked to you about any of this. Whatever happened, he knew that it would upset you.
And Tim hates upsetting you. He was probably prioritizing the same thing you are: your feelings.
Not his own.”

“I’m not—”

“You are. You just said that you needed to figure out why Tim didn’t tell you. Well, guess what?
This isn’t about just the two of you. You aren’t the only one he hasn’t been talking to. I didn’t
know about all of this. Dick didn’t know. The rest of us are part of this team too, and none of us
knew that any of this was going on.”

“Alfred knew.”

Barbara closed her eyes for a moment. “You are really trying my patience right now, Bruce.” Then
she looked at him again, her expression more serious now. “Do you know,” she asked, “what Tim
said to Alfred before he left Gotham to search for you?”

He hadn’t been able to answer or to figure out why she was asking. It couldn’t have been anything
terrible. Tim would never—

“Nothing,” Barbara told him. “He trashed a room in the manor and then left without saying
goodbye.”

“Tim did this,” Bruce said.

alarming it might be to find that wreckage and then realize that he was gone. Alfred thought he’d
been attacked or kidnapped or worse. It never even occurred to him that Tim was the one who did
it. I had to show him the security footage of Tim leaving on his own before he believed it.” She
paused a moment to let that sink in before continuing. “And then that was it. For months. No word,
Bruce. Nothing at all. If you think the last week without Tim was bad, imagine what that was like.
Alfred lost both of you. The two people who were living in this house, living under his care. Both
gone. So I think you can forgive him for being careful with Tim now and choosing not to violate
his privacy for your sake. In case you’ve forgotten, helping you repair and maintain your
relationship with your son isn’t actually part of his job.”

Bruce couldn’t really argue with that. “If I don’t find out what happened to him,” he said after a
long moment of silence, “how am I supposed to help?”

“Tim isn’t a mystery for you to solve,” she said. “He’s not a suspect you need to wring a confession
out of either. He’s a kid who’s been having a really tough time in the last few years and who
doesn’t feel comfortable talking about it to us. You interrogating him isn’t going to fix anything—
it’s just going to make you both even more miserable than you already are. You and Tim aren’t
good at this sort of thing. Tim’s good at explaining himself, but expressing himself? Not so much. And frankly, Bruce, you’re terrible at both. If you want my honest opinion—and you’re gonna get it whether you want it or not—I think that if you try to go and talk to Tim right now, it’s gonna end badly. You need to cool off a little longer, and I think we need to get a better idea of how Tim’s doing before you talk to him. Gather some intel first, figure out a plan later.”

“You want me to wait.”

“Just for a little while. I already sent the girls to Tim’s place. They can check in on him and let us know where his head’s at. And it will probably do him some good to be welcomed home by people who are happy to see him.”

“How long am I supposed to wait?”

“I can’t answer that for you. I just know that you’re not ready right now and he probably isn’t either. We’ll have to figure out the rest as we go.” She sighed. “Look, I know you want to help. I get it. But you’re going about it the wrong way. Tim already knows you’re upset with him. If he still doesn’t want to talk about all this, that means he thinks telling you is just going to make you more upset. The best thing you can do for Tim right now is calm down. And when you’ve done that, you need to stop thinking about how you’re going to extract information from him and start thinking about how you’re going to convince him that he’s still welcome here. That he will always be welcome here, no matter what he’s done and what he hasn’t told us. That is still true, isn’t it?”

“Of course. He already knows that.”

Barbara gave him a tired look. “Just think about what I’ve said, okay? And talk to Alfred. Not now— you’re still too pissed off at me right now—but later.”

She left the photograph with him. Another one of her inexplicable gestures. She could have just shown him the video. Or showed him the picture of Tim smiling at the camera as a screenshot on the computer instead of physically printing him a copy.

It wasn’t until the group chat appeared on his phone that he started to understand. The app itself was confusing, and the names were all nonsensical. But the pictures—

In the first few photos that were shared, Tim mostly looked annoyed or exasperated. But within the first half hour there were already a couple candids of him looking at something off-screen—probably one of his friends—and smiling.

Those smiles would disappear the moment Bruce showed up with his long list of questions and concerns. That was what Barbara had been trying to tell him.

He stayed in the cave, monitoring the chat, until their plans for the weekend became clear. When he finally went upstairs to apologize, Alfred accepted it with his usual good grace and then mercifully changed the subject.

Bruce had been expecting another lecture. Instead, Alfred gave him a task.

“Master Timothy’s schedule seems to be filling up quite rapidly,” Alfred told him. “I’ve spoken with Miss Fox and she’s rescheduled all of last week’s missed meetings for Monday and Tuesday. I thought perhaps you could intervene and convince Master Tim to stay at the manor an additional day instead.”

A day without Tim’s friends underfoot. A day for just them.
“I can have the meetings cancelled,” Bruce told him.

“I don’t think he would appreciate that,” Alfred said gently. “I think it might be best if you convinced him to push them back instead.”

Bruce agreed to make it happen. He’d been more than a little relieved to have an actual goal in mind. And after having Barbara question his ability to even talk to Tim without it turning into a confrontation, Alfred’s faith in him had been reassuring.

But he’d still managed to screw it up somehow.

He’d thought things were going well. When Tim and his friends first arrived at the manor, he’d worried about seeing that startling shift again. The sudden disappearance of all Tim’s joy and humor. Like a light being abruptly snuffed out.

But Tim had seemed happy. And that hadn’t changed when he saw Bruce or when they began talking.

The shift didn’t happen until Bruce mentioned WE. He’d drawn Tim into the study to tell him that there was no need to rush back to work on Monday. That his responsibilities at the company could wait.

And the ease in Tim’s posture vanished. Bruce felt himself mirroring Tim’s expression—serious and concerned—but not knowing why it was happening or how to stop it.

“You went through the files I left you,” Tim said after a moment. “Tam said that you were—that you’ve been working on a lot while I was gone.”

“Yes,” Bruce said carefully, still trying to figure out why Tim sounded so tense and what Bruce was meant to do to fix it.

“What’s wrong with them?” Tim asked.

“With what?”

“The files. Did I—whatever’s wrong, I’m sure I can fix it. You don’t need to do it yourself. I can handle it.”

Bruce had been silent for a long moment, trying to find the right words to explain that he wasn’t taking on more WE projects to punish him or because his work wasn’t good enough or whatever other thoughts were making Tim look so ill at ease. And then Cassie Sandsmark had forced her way into the conversation and ended it by physically carrying Tim away.

Afterward, Tim acted like the conversation hadn’t even happened. He kept rolling his eyes, apologized repeatedly for his friends’ antics, and traded exasperated looks with Bruce every time they tried to form a human shield around him. But he didn’t mention WE again. And Bruce didn’t know how to bring it up without risking another over-the-top response from Tim’s friends.

Eventually, he decides to leave them to their own devices for a few hours and spends the rest of the afternoon training alone in the cave. It’s the first time he’s been able to train on his own, completely uninterrupted, in weeks. Most of the time, one of the kids is with him. And if not them, then Alfred is usually hovering somewhere in the cave, ready to give him a stern lecture if he does anything that might tax his still-healing ribs.

It feels like the quietest few hours of his life.
He makes sure to wrap up and get showered before dinner. When he returns to the first floor of the manor, he finds Tim and all of the non-Gothamites scattered around the den, looking like they’ve finally managed to wear themselves out. Tim’s sitting on the floor with his back against the couch. There’s a film on the television screen, but the volume’s muted and half of the kids are watching something on Tim’s phone instead.

He looks relaxed. Worn out, yes, but happy in a way that Bruce hasn’t seen in a long time.

Tim has been happy in the months since Bruce returned. He would have noticed if his son had stopped showing any kind of positive emotion at all. But when Bruce thinks back, he finds that almost every instance of joy has been tied to the successful completion of a task. Tim smiling when he solves a case. Tim cracking a joke after a criminal’s been captured. His mental picture of Tim is almost always in motion. Always working on a problem, solving it, and then stopping only briefly to celebrate that small victory before diving straight on to the next thing that needs doing.

There’s something different about seeing him just being. Getting to stop and soak in the sight of him, alive and well. It reminds Bruce of those rare moments when he comes across Damian entirely engrossed in a sketch or finds Dick asleep on the couch. His sons, comfortable and content and entirely at home in this house that used to be so empty.

He hasn’t seen Tim like this in...in a very long time. It’s a thing he hadn’t even known he was missing until this very moment.

So he stays in the doorway, not drawing attention to himself. And when Tim’s phone rings, Bruce sees the exact moment his expression jumps from annoyed to alarmed.

“I have to take this,” Tim says.

“Tim, if it’s a work thing—” Cassie starts to say, but Tim cuts her off.

“Assassin exception. I have to take this.” He’s already accepting the call. “Pru, what have you done now?”

Beside him, Cassie looks like she’s about to swallow her own tongue. “I can’t believe he’s invoking the assassin exception,” she says to the room at large. “I thought that was a joke.” Then she catches sight of Bruce in the doorway and frowns even harder.

He fights down the urge to sigh.

“You did what?” Tim says to his phone. “I asked you to keep an eye on him, not kidnap—Oh my god, yes, I’m on it. No, I’ll take care of it. No, put him on the phone before you scare him even more.” He switches to Korean then and spouts off a string of rushed reassurances, all while motioning desperately at Bart.

“Whatcha need?” Bart asks.

Tim makes a typing motion with one hand and then points at the coffee table in front of him.

“Away setup?” Bart asks. When Tim nods, he disappears. Less than a second later, there are three different computer monitors and a beaten up keyboard crowding the coffee table along with a bundle of cables that spills over onto the floor and snakes its way through the open doorway next to Bruce’s feet. It stretches all the way down the hall and disappears around the corner.

Seconds later, Damian rounds that same corner, looking annoyed as he steps over the mess.
Back in the den, Tim mouths thank you at Bart, starts typing rapidly, and then says into the phone, “Pru? Yeah, no, I’ve got you. You need to get down to the harbor, like, now. You’re both going to Japan. And can we please try to keep things clean and contained this time? You know exactly what I mean. I’m talking about the frankly excessive number of kneecappings that—well, yes, I know, but that’s not the point—”

“What is Drake doing?” Damian asks when he reaches the open doorway.

Cassie says, in a voice nearly as poisonous as Pamela Isley’s favorite lipstick, “He’s working.”

Her ire leaves Damian unimpressed. “Well, tell him to stop. Pennyworth has sent me to collect you. Dinner is ready.”

“He can’t quit,” Conner says. “It’s an assassination attempt or something.”

“No, Pru, you need to hang a left,” Tim says to the phone. He pauses typing just long enough to wave at them with one hand, clearly trying to tell them to go on without him. “Yes, I know that street gives you a more direct route, but it’s also going to land you in the middle of a festival, so unless you plan to plow your bike straight through a crowd of pedestrians, you need to turn left.”

Damian’s scowl has somehow grown even more pronounced. “Is that Prudence Wood?”

“The one and only,” Bart says. “Are we all gonna have to wait for food? Because I’m kind of starving.”

Tim waves at them again, more aggressively.


Greta nods quickly. “Me too. I’m not that hungry anyway.”

Cassie just sighs. “Okay, let us know when Tim’s free again. Everybody else out. The longer we’re in here distracting Tim, the longer he’s gonna be working.”

Bruce steps aside to let them through. Cassie gives him a suspicious look as she passes but otherwise doesn’t say anything.

Once the others have all made their way into the hall, a shadow at the far side of the den peels itself away from the wall and then Cassandra is crossing the room to stand in the doorway. She glances down the hall where Tim’s friends are disappearing around the corner and then looks at Damian expectantly. When he only scowls at her, she nods toward the hall and then tilts her head, clearly asking him a question of some kind.

Damian just rolls his eyes and waves at her dismissively. “I’ll watch them,” he says. “Father, are you coming?”

“In a minute,” he answers.

Damian doesn’t linger, but Cass hangs back for a second to look at Bruce, clearly ready to wait with him if he wants her to. He shakes his head and motions for her to go on without him.

He stays for a moment to watch Tim work. This is the Tim he’s gotten used to: quick, efficient, and utterly focused. His friends, in contrast, look a little bored already. Greta’s sitting on the floor right beside him, but she’s on her phone, clearly expecting that this will take some time. And Conner’s sprawled out across the couch just behind them, his head propped up on one hand while
he looks over Tim’s shoulder and occasionally comments on whatever’s happening on the screens.

If the two of them weren’t here, Bruce would forgo dinner, risking Alfred’s displeasure, and just sit. Just be in the same space as his son for a while.

But if his friends weren’t here, Tim probably wouldn’t be either.

Bruce gives himself another moment and then makes a silent retreat.

He knows the original plan for dinner involved opening one of the manor’s larger dining rooms, but when he follows the sound of voices, he finds them all outside near the empty pool. Someone’s set up tables that are now covered with enough food to satisfy a small battalion. Jason’s sitting in a foldout chair with his injured leg stretched out in front of him, but the rest of the kids have opted to picnic instead. Two tablecloths have been stolen from god knows where and are laid out on a dry patch of grass next to the pool.

As Bruce watches, Cassie decides that they’re too close to the lengthening shadow of the house and drags one of the tablecloths—weighed down by Bart, Cissie, and Anita—a few feet farther away. Dick, Duke, and Stephanie are sitting on the other one, apparently preferring the shade, and Damian’s hovering near the table, clearly trying to decide between joining his team members on the ground or imitating Jason and enjoying the dignity of a chair. Eventually, he decides on the latter.

When he pulls up a chair beside Jason—surprisingly close, actually, considering the number of other chairs available—Jason leans over and says something that makes Damian roll his eyes. Their voices are too quiet for Bruce to hear over all the noise Tim’s friends are making, but he can tell from Damian’s expression that he’s making an acerbic comment in response.

And Jason just laughs. Not the slightly manic laugh that used to escape him sometimes during those first few terrible months after his return to Gotham. And not the ugly, harsh sound he made the last time Bruce tried to convince him to give up his criminal enterprises and just come home.

Instead, it’s the exact same sound he used to make before he died. A loud, deep, full-bodied laugh.

He doesn’t look anything like the Red Hood in that moment. He looks like a college kid home on summer break, relaxing at the end of a long day and teasing his younger brother mercilessly.

For a moment Bruce can almost imagine that none of it ever happened.

It’s a thought that’s been haunting him more than usual in the last week. When Jason was staying in the cave, it was easy to imagine him always being there. Any time a call came through on the computer, he slapped on a domino mask like it was second nature. He had no real choice with his helmet smashed to pieces in the fight with the Tetrahedra. But still. When he was wearing a domino mask, he looked like one of them. Another one of Bruce’s children come home again.

He has that same feeling now. He can imagine that this is a world in which Ethiopia never happened. Where Jason was never taken from him.

But even as he thinks it, he knows it wouldn’t have been like this. If Jason had lived, Bruce never would have spiraled out of control the way he did in the months after his death. And Tim would have continued to keep his knowledge about their secret identities to himself. Might have never entered their lives at all.

Bruce can never quite reconcile himself to the fact that all the best and worst parts of his life are so hopelessly tangled together that they’re functionally inseparable. He can never have the good
without the bad. There are few people on this planet, or any other, that have caused him half as much pain and grief as the al Ghuls. But they also gave him Damian. And, in a roundabout way, they brought Jason back to him as well.

Bruce is still watching his two sons bickering amicably when Alfred catches sight of him. He has a look of utter disapproval on his face. “I’ve been told,” he says, “that Master Timothy will not be joining us.”

“Not yet,” Bruce acknowledges. “He wanted us to start without him.” There’s not much point in saying it—the kids are already eating.

“And Mister Kent and Miss Hayes are with him? Then that’s everyone accounted for except our Cassandra.”

That’s been an interesting verbal tic that they’ve all picked up in the last few hours. Having two Cassandras in the same house—and often the same room—has lead to a great deal of confusion that’s primarily been cleared up with the use of “our Cass” and “your Cass.” It’s a strategy that works for everyone except Tim, who just rolled his eyes and started saying Cass-my-friend and Cass-my-sister whenever his meaning wasn’t already abundantly clear.

Alfred, of course, shouldn’t have to worry about that confusion, since he normally refers to them as Miss Sandsmark and Miss Cassandra. But Bruce can understand why he’s picked up the habit. Cass lights up every time someone calls her "ours."

Even Jason’s said it once or twice, seemingly without noticing that he’s doing it.

Bruce retraces his steps and checks the den first. It’s perfectly possible that she doubled back via some alternate route while Bruce was in the hallway. But when he does a sweep of the room—ignoring the curious looks he gets from Conner and Greta—she’s not there.

“No, that’s not fair,” Tim is telling his phone. “Space mercenaries are completely different. They don’t count. Well, how would you even know? I mean—”

Bruce continues his search. He’s fairly certain she’ll be close. Probably somewhere in this same wing of the house.

He finds her hiding in a slant of evening shadow on the roof of the two-story extension that overlooks the impromptu picnic area.

Seeing her curled up on the rooftop gives him a moment of déjà vu. Of all his children, Cassandra is the one most at ease with stillness. Finding her like this is normally a daily occurrence, but he realizes abruptly that he hasn’t really seen her much in the past week. She hasn’t been making herself scarce, exactly, but she hasn’t been demanding his attention either. Normally, she would.

He thinks about the conversation he had with Dick. About not waiting until his kids need his attention. Not letting things get that bad.

He leans out of the window and signs to her, You OK?

She nods. Signs, quiet, and rest, and alone.

You want me to go?

No. Stay. Alone together.
It’s tempting. He’s tired of hearing conversations shut down every time he enters a room. He’ll only stay up here for a few minutes. Just until Tim comes out.

Maybe foiling the apparent assassination plot will take some time. Long enough that the others will finish eating and move on to something else. Then it can be just the three of them. Tim and Cass and him. And probably Conner and Greta too.

He climbs through the window and out onto the roof. It’s a good spot: from here they can see everyone except for Alfred, who’s presumably either inside the house or standing so close to the walls that they’d have to stick their heads over the edge of the roof to see him. They’re hidden from sight by the shadow of the rest of the house but still close enough to hear the conversation taking place below them perfectly. It’s as good a spot for eavesdropping as Cass could have found.

He’d explained that one to her once. The etymology of eavesdropping. She enjoyed the literalness of it. She liked words like sabotage and clue. Found remembering their meanings more manageable when they could be tied to stories or objects.

When he settles down beside her, she leans against him and places her finger to her lips.

“Prudence Wood?” Jason is saying, below them. “As in Prudence Wood of the League of Assassins? Why the fuck is she calling Tim?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Damian says. “Drake makes use of her as an operative from time to time. I have advised against it, but he won’t hear reason on the subject.”

“She doesn’t work with the League anymore,” Bart says.

“She’s still not trustworthy.”

“How would you know?” Cassie asks. “I don’t like her any more than you do, but if Tim says she’s okay, then she is. I mean, you used to be an assassin too, right?”

Damian’s turned his back to the house now, but Bruce can hear the scowl in his voice when he says, “I earned my place here.”

“And Pru did the same,” Cassie says.

“Look, it’s not that complicated.” Bart fills up his plate, cleans it off in the time it takes Bruce to blink, and then continues. “Pru works with Tim now. And as long as she works with Tim, she follows his rules. That means no killing, no putting innocent civilians at risk, blahblahblah, etcetera and so on. If she breaks the rules, they stop working together. She hasn’t so far, so there’s no reason not to trust her.”

“You don’t know what the League is like,” Damian says. “The likelihood that she will eventually betray him is very high.”

“Careful, kiddo,” Anita says. “Someone might think you cared.” Cissie not-so-subtly elbows her in the ribs and then makes a face at Damian. Something between a sympathetic wince and a grimace. Bruce can only assume that Damian glares at her in response.

“Nah,” Bart says. “Tim would know if she was playing a long con on him. She’s just—she’s basically just like you? When you worked for your grandfather, you believed in his way of doing things. And then you met Batman and realized he was, like, a million times better. So now you do things his way. Because you believe in him and stuff, right? Tim is Pru’s Batman. She won’t fuck him over any more than you’d fuck over your dad.”
“How’d that happen?” Jason asks.

“Dunno, exactly,” Bart says. “They met sometime last year, I think? While Batman was in the timestream. Pru showed up when Ra’s tried to kill a bunch of people in Gotham last year and she helped us out.”

“I’m just glad to hear that I’m not the only one who doesn’t have a clue what went on that year,” Anita says.

“Well, it’s a long story,” Bart tells her, “but basically it started when Darkseid sent Batman into the past to—”

“Yeah, I know that part. And Tim went off to find him. Or find evidence or whatever. But I don’t know what that actually means? Like where he went or how he ended up in that mess with the League or—or any of it.” She crosses her arms.

“Really?” Cassie says. “Don’t you guys talk all the time?”

Cissie rolls her eyes. “Anita texts him more than she texts me.”

“Yeah,” Anita says, “but we don’t actually talk about that much? We mostly just exchange photos.”

Cissie wrinkles her nose. “Ugh, don’t say it like that. It makes it sound like you’re sexting or something.”

Dick chokes on his drink. Anita just laughs. “Nah, mon, don’t worry. We are doing the absolute opposite of sexting. Our policy is fugly photos or get the fuck out.”

“You two are so weird,” Cassie says.

“You gotta show me.” Steph sets down her plate and makes a grabbing motion at Anita. “If you have embarrassing photos of Tim, you’re literally not allowed back into Gotham ever again if you don’t show me right this second.”

“Eh, they’re not that embarrassing,” Anita says, fishing her phone out of her pocket and handing it over.

“They’re just hideous,” Cissie says. “It’s really kind of remarkable.”

“Oh my god,” Stephanie says the moment she’s got the phone in her hand. “These are terrible. You’re so pretty, how are you even doing this?”

Anita shrugs. “It’s a finely honed skill.”


“You guys are so inefficient. Steph, gimme.” Bart grabs Anita’s phone, fiddles with it for a moment, and then sets it down on the tablecloth next to an oblong device that Bruce is positive wasn’t there a second ago. After a moment, the device starts projecting a small holographic image. Bart tinkers with it and then the image rises a little bit higher into the air and expands in size.

Cassandra immediately pulls away from Bruce and silently creeps to the edge of the roof to get a closer look. When she motions impatiently for Bruce to join her, he does.

It’s a series of messages. Most of them are photographs with text overlaying the images. The first is
a selfie of Anita standing outside and squinting at the camera. The angle of light indicates early morning—just after sunrise—and she looks frazzled and sleep-deprived. The text on top of the image just says, “WHY????”

Right after is a picture of Tim. It looks like he took it while lying down on a floor somewhere—there’s either tile or linoleum beneath him—and he’s squinting up at the camera, his skin washed out by fluorescent lighting that makes the darkness under his eyes look like bruises. His text just says, “because life.”

Stephanie keeps scrolling and there’s a seemingly endless series of similar photos, all of them immensely unflattering. Selfies taken too close. Annoyed, exhausted faces squished up against pillows or couch cushions. Grimaces and eye rolls and more than a few rude gestures.

Some of them are sillier than others. In one, Anita’s crouching on a riverbank with a couple of alligators floating a few feet behind her. She’s wearing a dour expression on her face and flashing a peace sign at the camera. The text on the photo says, “my new brethren.” That photo’s followed by a picture of Tim standing in what looks like a Wayne Enterprises lab. One of his arms is reaching out in front of him to take the selfie, while the other is stretched out beside him to show that the sleeve of his business suit is on fire. Tim’s expression is only mildly annoyed. Behind him is the panicked face of a WE employee rushing toward him with a fire extinguisher. The text says, “metaphor?”

The next one’s another picture of Tim, but this time he’s standing outside at night and his face is almost entirely obscured by a generic gas mask. The kind all Gothamites carry around just in case Scarecrow or the Joker decide to gas the city again. Over it he’s typed, “gotham glam.” Anita responds with, “Louisiana highlife” and a picture of her lying in bed, propped up against a mountain of pillows, with a white moisturizing mask on her face. She’s lit by the glow of a television screen and there are two small toddlers asleep in her lap.

“They’re cute as hell,” Duke says. “Are they your siblings?”

The kids—all of the ones that don’t belong to Bruce—look at each other. “Not exactly,” Anita says after a moment. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you the whole story, mon. It’s pretty wild. Even for us.”

Duke raises his eyebrows. “Try me.”

“They’re my parents. Baby versions of my parents.”


Anita sighs. “It’s a long story, but basically both my parents got murdered by my evil crime lord grandfather and then reincarnated as babies. And now I’m raising them, which is why I mostly can’t do field work anymore. At least not until they’re old enough for school. I cannot wait for them to be old enough for school.”

“That,” Jason says, “sounds fuckin’ insane.”

“It’s not that weird, though,” Cissie argues. “Didn’t you and the kid both die at some point? And look at you now.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t come back as babies.”

“Too bad,” Bart says. “It might have improved your personalities.”
When Cissie puts her hands on her hips and gives him a pointed look, he throws his own hands in the air and says, “Hey! As another formerly dead person, I am allowed—nay, I am obligated—to give them a hard time.”

“Just because you and Conner—”

“Man, we should totally start a club,” Bart says, ignoring her now to look at Jason and Damian. “You two and me and Conner. Actually, we could start an evil grandfathers club too. Anita and me and you, I mean.” He says the latter to Damian and then eyes Jason skeptically. “Was your grandpa evil?”

“He was kind of an asshole,” Jason says.

“Hmmm, I don’t think that counts. I’m talking, like, murderous mastermind evil. No? Just the three of us then.” He flops down on the tablecloth and then rolls over onto his stomach to look at Damian again. “I just realized we have a lot of weird things in common.”

Damian’s back is still turned toward the house, but Bruce can see that his posture is stiff now. And he’s the only one on the lawn who doesn’t appear to be eating. “I find that hard to believe,” he says after a moment.

“Yeah, sounds like a stretch,” Cissie says.

“No, listen, hear me out. There’s actually a lot? Evil grandpas, check. Conditioned to disregard the sanctity of human life, check. I mean, I was not actually raised by my grandpa or trained to be an assassin or anything, but he did have the government stick me in a VR program that I think was meant to inure me to the concept of consequences so that I could maybe eventually be trained to, like, blindly follow orders based on bullshit propaganda and stuff. Or something like that.”

“A tenuous parallel at best,” Damian points out.

“Well, yeah,” Bart says, rolling his eyes. “You’re kind of missing the point. I’m trying to relate to you by drawing parallels between my super weird upbringing and your super weird upbringing. I mean, at the very least, you have to admit that not everyone has a big-time murderer in the family tree. Anita’s grandpa killed both of her parents, which is pretty messed up. And my grandpa's government is the reason my dad got murdered, which really sucked.”

“Shit,” Jason says. “They killed their own kids?”

“No, I’m talking about my mom’s dad, not my dad's dad.” Bart says. “Which is still pretty fucked up, I think? Like, brat, let’s try this again.” He rolls over on the tablecloth, tilting his head back to look at Damian upside down, and then waggles his fingers in the air. “Empathy exercise! Imagine Ra’s kills your dad, the guy your mom is totally in love with, and then takes you from your mom and tells her you’re dead, so now she thinks the love of her life and her kid are both gone—and there’s no Lazarus Pit in this scenario—and then you and her don’t even get to see each other for ages and then you finally do meet, but you never really get to spend time together because she’s busy fighting Ra’s because the two of them are on opposite sides of a vast philosophical and ethical divide where he wants to rule the world and she thinks he needs to knock it off and also stop murdering people. And he sends a clone of you to kill you. Also, there’s time travel. Obviously.”

“I find this scenario unpleasant,” Damian says after a moment. “And this exercise is nonsensical. We have far more differences than similarities. And I do not think my time with the League can in
“Yeah, yeah I know. It’s not a competition. It’s just sort of useful? I dunno, I always like talking to people about that kind of thing. Like, I didn’t get to grow up with my parents, which was weird and kind of sucked, and it was always nice to talk to Conner about it because he also didn’t have parents for a long time too? It’s sort of nice when you’ve got something bad in common? Or, no, that’s not right. It sucks slightly less when the thing that’s weird or bad in your life is similar to the thing that’s weird or bad in someone else’s life, because then you can compare notes and commiserate? Like, being descended from super evil assholes is the kind of thing that bugs some people and drives them to make dumb decisions and keep secrets from their friends. So maybe if some people thought about maybe talking to their friends who might have a similar experience vis-à-vis having an evil heritage, then maybe those people wouldn’t be so dumb and dramatic about, like, the crushing weight of their terrible genetic destiny or whatever.”

“What?” Damian says.

“I’m just saying,” Bart says, his voice picking up in volume, “that it might have been nice if all my family drama turned out to be useful for someone else. If only I had a friend who might have had a similar problem. If only my experiences could have been put to good use for the sake of someone else, let’s say a friend, who—”

They hear a window on the first floor open and then Conner’s voice bellows, “I CAN HEAR YOU.”

“That’s the point, Conner. Also my grandpa’s still more evil than your bio-dad.”

“It’s not a competition.”

“Knock it off,” Cassie says at a normal volume, elbowing Bart. “You too, Conner, I know you can hear me.”

Dick’s moved from the Gotham tablecloth to the Young Justice one and is scrolling through Anita’s phone, looking more grim with every photograph that appears on the floating holoscreen. “He looks really miserable in these.”

“Don’t take that seriously, mon. We’re just joking around. It’s kind of our thing?” Anita glances at Damian and Bart, and then says, “Me and Tim, we got a few parallels of our own.”

“Ooooh, true. Chose to fight crime after being inspired by another hero,” Bart says, counting it off on his fingers. “Kept your crime-fighting career a secret from your parent and/or parents. Or tried to, anyway. Skilled martial artists with a signature weapon. Lost your moms to violence first, and then watched your dads get murdered. Similar sense of humor. Both—”

“You forgot devastatingly good-looking,” Anita interrupts. “Also, more to the point, the two of us had to grow up real fast. That’s kind of how the photos started? We both have to do adult stuff all the time. I am raising toddlers, and Tim does all sorts of weird, crazy corporate stuff at his job. And adulting is just soul-crushingly mundane and exhausting a lot of the time? Don’t get me wrong. I am so grateful. I know how lucky I am to have my parents back and to get to spend time with them like this. Most orphans don’t get that kind of opportunity. But they’re never gonna be my mom and dad again. They can’t give me advice or tell me family stories or walk me down the aisle or any of that.”

“Um, pause,” Cissie says. “Having your tiny, little-kid parents walk you down the aisle when you
get married would be the most adorable thing in the world.”

Anita looks skeptical. “I think I’d rather have Ish do it, honestly? And what was I saying? Oh, yeah. I’m lucky as hell, but raising kids is exhausting and full of lots of mundane bullshit that you just have to get through every day, over and over again. And Tim’s day job is kind of like that.”

“So it’s like a coping thing?” Dick asks.

“Yeah, pretty much. Again, don’t get me wrong. We are killing it. I am raising those little ones so right. And Tim kicks ass at his job. Obviously. But we’re still teenagers and we can’t really complain to anyone else? People our age don’t really get it because they’re not doing this stuff yet.”

“Um, hello, I have a career,” Cissie says.

“Your mom still does your laundry and makes you clean your apartment, Cissie,” Anita answers. “And you have a manager who takes care of the boring bits of your job. Trust me, you guys don’t get it yet. And talking to adults about this kind of thing?” She rolls her eyes. “Way worse. Most of them are so burned out that they don’t care anymore. And the rest get super weird about it when you say anything that’s even a little bit negative. Like, they always decide that complaining is a cry for help or a sign that you’re not handling things. Even when you demonstrably are. Sometimes you just gotta vent, ya know? Especially when all this stuff feels so boring and unimportant. I mean, I know it’s necessary and all, but compared to fighting and saving people and being out in the field?” She shrugs. “Everything else is dull as ditchwater.”

Cissie snorts. “Of course you two feel like that. You guys were made for this kind of life.”

“You really don’t miss it?” Anita asks. “Even a little bit?”

“I miss you guys,” Cissie says. “And I miss being part of a team. And the victories and the moment right after you know you just won a fight. But the actual fighting and near death misses and the crushing weight of being responsible for other people’s lives? No. I don’t miss that at all.”

“Well, I miss all of it,” Anita says. “Don’t get me wrong, spending time with these little ones is one hundred percent worth being out of the field for a few years. But it was still a weird transition. If you’d asked me back in the day if I’d ever give up the game to focus on schoolwork and childcare, I’d have said hell no. And I know all that corporate stuff is the last thing Tim expected to be doing at this age.”

“Really?” Duke says, sounding surprised. “I thought he was all about that kind of thing. I mean, he works on company stuff all the time.”

Beside him, Stephanie’s already shaking her head. “No, the job stuff is still pretty new. He’d only been heir to the company for a little while before you showed up. He was just doing school and vigilante stuff before that.”

“That was so weird to come back to,” Bart says. “Like, I thought I’d accidentally ended up in the wrong universe or something.”

“Seriously?” Cassie asks.

“Yeah. I mean, Tim’s one of the first people I went looking for—figured he’d be able to explain what all I’d missed better than anybody else—and he wasn’t Robin anymore and he was a CEO for some reason?”
“He’s not a CEO,” Cassie says. “He’s the majority shareholder. Totally different. Tam’s dad is the CEO.”

“What—and I can’t emphasize this enough—ever. The point is, it was weird, yeah? Especially him doing the corporate thing after he swore he wasn’t gonna. Plus, when you think about it—”


“He always used to say he wasn’t gonna do the corporate thing when he grew up,” Bart says. “He made a really big deal about it back when his dad was still around.”

“You seem misinformed,” Damian tells him. “Drake has been quite tenacious about maintaining his position within the company.”

“We’re not talking about WE,” Cissie says. “That’s different. We mean the big blowup over Drake Industries. Tim’s dad wanted him to take over when he grew up.”

“That seems logical,” Damian says.

“Yeah, well, Tim wasn’t having it. He’s not gonna do something just because somebody tells him to, you know? So it was this whole big thing. They fought about it a lot back when his dad made him quit being Robin for a while.”

“I think the company was the thing they fought about instead of fighting about Robin?” Cassie says. “Cause that whole situation was just too big for them to get into.”

“Then Drake doesn’t wish to work for Wayne Enterprises,” Damian says slowly.

“Wait, no,” Cassie says, holding up her hands. “I didn’t say that. WE’s, like, part of the mission, right? It helps the city and funds Batman, Inc., and all that stuff. It’s a necessary part of Tim’s real job.”

“Drake could have done those things using his father’s company,” Damian points out.

“It’s still different?” Cassie says, sounding less certain now.

“Totally different,” Cissie says firmly. “WE’s a thing Tim was entrusted with. So even if the day-to-day stuff isn’t always what he wants to be doing, it’s still...it’s kind of an honor, right? Whereas DI was an obligation that Tim never agreed to. It was just a thing he was supposed to do because he was a Drake. Like, his dad was a businessman, his grandfather was a businessman, his great-grandfather was a merchant, I think? And Tim’s not really like any of them.”

Cassie’s nodding along with her now. “Exactly! He’s way more like his mom’s side of the family.”

“How so?” Dick asks.

Anita grins. “Ah, mon, how did he describe them, Bart?”

“A long line of eccentric intellectual and/or artistic types,” Bart recites, “many of whom felt compelled to pursue one central passion, often to the detriment of every other aspect of their lives.”

“Oh god, yeah,” Cassie says. “That was Tim’s mom to a T. I mean, archaeology is my mom’s life too, but not the way it was for Mrs. Drake.”

“I was not aware that Drake had any lineage to speak of,” Damian says.
“Same,” Duke says. “He doesn’t really talk about them much.”

“You just gotta ask him about it sometime,” Anita tells him. “He has a bunch of crazy stories. Like, he’s literally descended from pirates. Which really explains his issues with authority and penchant for vigilantism now that I think about it.”

“Pirates,” Jason says. “Seriously?”

“Hand to fucking god,” Anita answers. “Also, we are getting way off topic. That topic being, obviously, what the hell happened during the Year of Disastrous Decision-Making? Literally all I know about the spleen story is that it was the League who actually took it, but that they weren’t the ones who stabbed him in the first place? That was the arachno assholes, not the assassins?”

“The arachno assholes are also assassins,” Cassie says. “Just not League assassins. And they were trying to murder members of the League as part of some kind of tournament thing.”

“I thought that was the League,” Cissie says. “Remember that thing with the creepy predator lady that Tim’s sister had to save him from? Wasn’t that a relative of Ra’s?”

“Yeah, but that was a different murder tournament.” Cassie sighs. “Tim gets mixed up in the weirdest shit.”

“Sorry,” Stephanie says. “But did you just say the League of Assassins are the ones who took out Tim’s spleen?”

“Pretty sure, yeah,” Cassie says. “You’d have to ask Tim. I’ve never actually heard the entire story all the way through and Tim...well, he tends to be a little stingy with details, you know?”

“He let my grandfather’s organization perform a medical procedure on him?” Damian says slowly, sounding absolutely incredulous. “That is—” he pauses and then says, “I would not ascribe that level of foolishness to Drake. Allowing the League any level of access to—”

“I don’t think ‘let’ is the right word for it?” Cassie says. “Pretty sure Tim wasn’t in any kind of condition to consent by the time they got a hold of him.”

Stephanie’s frowning and pulling at her hair, clearly agitated. “Why the hell would Ra’s save him in the first place?”

“Isn’t that kind of one of his things?” Anita asks. “Stealing your dad’s kids and trying to turn them to the dark side or whatever?”

Cassie’s nodding. “He needed Tim to find Bruce. Plus he was already in full recruitment mode and probably thought it would make Tim feel indebted to him or something. Which backfired spectacularly. Tim’s internship with evil only made him even more determined to burn the entire League to the ground. Which he kind of did?”

“He torched, like, all their bases,” Bart says. “Baller move, but he’s pretty much got an enemy for life now.”

“I was wondering why they were nemeses,” Anita says. “I mean, I know Tim thinks having mortal enemies is, like, a sign that he’s doing his job or whatever...but did he have to pick a fight with a dude who’s functionally immortal? That’s just plain dumb.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s most of what happened?” Cassie says. “The details are kind of fuzzy. Tim still hates talking about that whole thing.”
“I was starting to think you guys knew everything about him,” Dick says.

Cassie frowns at him. “Nobody knows everything about Tim. He’s just—he’s not that kind of person, you know?”

“That’s a really nice way to say he’s a secretive bastard,” Cissie says, her voice gone suddenly sharp, “who doesn’t give a fuck about scaring us all half to death.”

From the rooftop, Bruce can see the ripple effect her words have on the rest of them. His kids mostly go still, clearly surprised. Anita and Bart both share a slightly panicked look. Cassie grimaces. “Cissie, don’t—”

“I’m just saying—”

“Cissie, you promised—”

“I just cannot fucking believe,” she says, each word coming out angrier than the last, “that he dropped off the map for a whole fucking year.”

“Here we go again,” Anita mutters.

“It wasn’t a whole year,” Cassie says.

Cissie glares at her. “It sure fucking felt like it.”

“You guys didn’t know where he was either?” Stephanie asks. Bart briefly disappears and then reappears, just behind Cissie, holding a sign that says, \textit{Abort! Abort! You’re gonna make it worse!!!!}

Cissie doesn’t notice. “No. Nobody knew. He disconnected everything without so much as a goodbye. We thought he was dead for months.”

“I told you he wasn’t,” Cassie says. “I told you he was—”

“You didn’t know, Cassie. You couldn’t tell me where he was. You just said his dad was dead and he was going off the deep end \textit{again} and then he disappears and doesn’t contact anyone? Doesn’t leave us any way of getting in touch with him? Our Tim? The person who always shows up when you need help? What other explanation made sense?”

There’s a moment of dead silence. Cassandra’s pressed herself against Bruce’s side and her hands on the edge of the roof are white-knuckled. Dick and Damian both have their backs to the house now, but Jason’s turned sideways and what Bruce can see of his expression looks pained.

“That was foolishness on your part,” Damian says, his voice oddly stiff now. “Drake is extremely difficult to kill.”

Cissie closes her eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath. Then she looks at Damian and says, “Okay, first off, I realize that you’re maybe trying to be comforting or something, but hearing you say that is really fucked up. I know you and Tim are cool now or whatever, but don’t talk about trying to kill him to us, okay? It’s extremely off-putting. And secondly, Tim was gone \textit{for months}. What else were we supposed to think? Tim’s disappeared before but only for a little while. And he always checks back in and he always makes sure you can reach him if you need help. I did everything I could to contact him and got nothing. Even your technogoddess Oracle couldn’t find him for me. I \textit{mourned} him and he was \textit{fine} the whole time.”
“He was alive,” Cassie says, “but I wouldn’t say he was fine.”

“You know what I mean.”

Cassie shakes her head. “We’d have known. If something happened to him, we’d have heard.”

“Really? ‘Cause I think it sounds exactly like something he’d do. I mean, Bart and Conner? Yeah, of course they die in big, spectacular crises. No offense, Bart, you know what I mean. But Tim? Mr. Secretive? Mr. Need-to-know-basis? I could absolutely see him ending up in an unmarked grave somewhere and none of us ever knowing why or what happened to him or—”

Anita rubs at her face and says, “Cissie, knock it off,” with a voice gone suddenly rough. After a moment, she reaches over to put her arm around Cissie’s shoulders and squeezes.

“I just get so fucking mad,” Cissie says. “That was the worst year of my life. We lost all three of them in a row. Conner and Bart and Tim. All of our boys gone. Wiped out in a matter of months.”

“We all came back,” Bart says, but his voice is smaller than Bruce has ever heard it.

“You coming back doesn’t magically erase the trauma of losing you in the first place,” Cissie says. “I wish that it did. I know how stupid I sound right now for still being upset about this. I know that I should just be grateful that you’re back—and I am. I don’t even have words for how grateful I am. But it still—I just can’t—” She makes a frustrated sound and shakes her head. “My therapist would know exactly how to explain this.”

“Just don’t yell at him again, Cis,” Anita says. “You promised.”

Cissie opens her mouth to reply, but stops when she hears the door to the manor open. Bruce watches as all of the heads below him turn in unison to look at the house. He hopes that it’s Alfred. Hopes that he was inside, readying dessert or searching for Cassandra himself. Not standing out here listening to a child talk about mourning Tim.

“We’re free!” Conner announces, appearing below with one arm around Tim and the other around Greta. “Please tell me you didn’t let Bart eat everything already.”

“Oh my god, Conner,” Cissie snaps. “Read the room.”

“Whoa.” He lets go of his friends to hold his hands up. “What did I do? I just got here.”

“What’s going on?” Tim asks. His back’s to the house, but Bruce can already read the tension building in his shoulders.

“Nothing,” Cissie says. “Everything is fine.”

“Oh my god?” There’s a moment when they seem to stare at each other—although Cissie’s expression is closer to a glare at this point—and then the tension in Tim’s shoulders seems to snap. “Oh my god, no. You have got to be kidding me. You are not doing this right now.”

Cissie snaps right back. “You lost my phone number for a fucking year, Tim.” Beside her, Anita is covering her face with her hands and groaning while Cassie just raises her face toward the sky like she’s looking for strength.

“I am not doing this again,” Tim says. “Nope. No way. Not even a little bit. I absolutely refuse.” Beside him, Conner is turned toward Cassie, apparently having some kind of silent conversation with her. When Cassie gestures helplessly at Cissie and then grimaces, Conner just shakes his head
and stalks over toward the food-covered tables. Greta stays back, hovering between Tim and Cissie with a miserable expression on her face.

“Oh no,” Cissie says, her voice sharp and sarcastic. “What are you gonna do, Tim? Fuck off and ignore me again?”

“What would you like me to do?” Tim demands. “Apologize again? That’s clearly not helping since you’re still mad at me. How are you mad at me right now? I didn’t even do anything.”

Cissie makes another frustrated sound and throws her hands in the air. “I don’t know! It just happens!!”

“Well, actually,” Bart chimes in, “Anita brought up the whole—ow, sorry, shuttingupnow.”

Tim’s attention is still on Cissie. “You said you forgave me.”

“I do forgive you!”

“If you forgave me, you wouldn’t be yelling right now.”

“I can forgive you and still be mad!”

“That’s not how forgiveness works.”

On the rooftop, Cassandra flinches. Bruce isn’t sure if it’s in reaction to the anger in Tim’s body language or the unexpected harshness in his voice.

Bruce has heard Tim raise his voice before, but almost never in anger. He yells when he wants to be heard over his much louder brothers or to get someone’s attention or to call out a warning. The way he sounds now—

Bruce has never heard him sound like this.

Below, Conner pauses putting together his plate of food and looks back at the two of them, his face grim. All of the rest of them—Tim’s friends and his siblings—have frozen in place, watching with concern as the argument unfolds in front of them.

Cissie crosses her arms, clearly defiant, but she lowers her voice when she says, “You don’t get to decide that, Tim.” And Tim’s friends all seem to—not relax, exactly. But the tension in them eases. Cassie sighs, obviously relieved, and Conner turns back to the table, setting aside one full plate of food and starting to assemble a second.

“Look,” Tim says, his voice lower now too but just as obviously frustrated as before. “I know I fucked up. Everyone knows I fucked up. But in my defense, literally everything I did last year was dumb. And the only person who is still having issues with that is you.”

“Okay, guys,” Cassie says gently. “Maybe we can just—”

“Stay out of it, Cass,” Cissie snaps. “And no, you of all people do not get to play the dumbass card. You were being an asshole is what you were being. Like, fucking up is fine. We all do it. God knows, I was not fun to be around when I was having my nervous breakdown. Which, I will remind you, I had in public where my friends could find me and keep an eye on me. You didn’t make one mistake, Tim. You kept making the same mistake every single day for months. You should have fucking called me.”
Conner heads over to the tablecloths with two plates balanced on his fingertips—obviously using tactile telekinesis—and sits down next to Cassie. “Tim,” he says, patting the tablecloth next to him.

“That’s not how that works,” Tim says, still looking at Cissie. Conner has to say his name a second time to catch his attention. When Tim’s head turns toward him, Conner holds up the two plates and gives him a pointed look. After a moment of silence, Tim sighs and then limps over, flinging himself down onto the ground between Conner and Cassie. He accepts one of the plates, but his focus is clearly still on Cissie. When he turns to look at her, Bruce can see his face in profile. He looks angry. And exhausted. “Look,” he says, “I understand why you were upset at the time, but I wasn’t—I just got caught up in looking. And it was still just the one time. And I said I was sorry. And that I wouldn’t do it again. And, anyway, I thought everyone got a ‘what was I thinking?’ phase.”

“Tim,” Cissie says, her voice slipping from anger to disbelief, “that’s usually sartorial. Which I guess technically does apply, since you did start wearing that awful cowl—”

“Once again,” Tim says, “I would like to remind you that I did not design the uniform.”

“Yeah, but you keep wearing it.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “Cissie, you made some pretty questionable costume choices early on in your career and I have never once commented on any of them. So who is the real asshole here?” He picks up a fork and points it at her. “It’s you.”

“Tim,” she says, sounding angry again, “you let me think you were dead. That’s not even a little bit comparable.”

“I’m sorry that you drew the wrong conclusions from my absence, but—”

“Oh my god, if you condescend to me right now, I swear I will throttle you.”

“You could try,” Tim says. For a moment they just glare at each other. Dick makes an abortive movement, like he’s going to draw their attention and try to defuse the situation. But before he can find something to say, Tim’s speaking again. “If letting you beat me up would get you to stop freaking out about this, I would. I really don’t know what you want me to do besides go back in time and change the past. Which I’m not gonna do. We’re not fucking up the timeline just because you’re still holding a grudge. You need to let this go.”

“I’ll let it go when I’m damned well ready,” Cissie snaps.

“That means never,” Cassie says. She shifts over and bumps shoulders with Tim. “She’s still mad at me about that stupid baseball game. Cis, I love you, but I know supervillains that hold fewer grudges than you.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Cissie glares at her for a moment and then shakes her head. “I can’t believe all of my friends are stupid assholes. Why do I love you guys so much? You’re all horrible.”

“Stockholm syndrome?” Tim suggests. He’s still frowning, but the anger in his voice is gone. Now he just sounds tired.

Cissie sighs and uncrosses her arms. She’s not looking at Tim when she says, “Look, I’m sorry I lost my temper. Again. I am trying, okay? But you don’t get to act like I’m freaking out over nothing.”

“Yeah, but you are.”
Cissie rolls her eyes. “Oh, yeah, nothing’s happened in the last week that could possibly have triggered this. It’s not like you ran off and disappeared again.”

Tim scowls. “That was completely different.”

“Well, yeah, I know that. But my stupid brain doesn’t.”

The scowl turns into a grimace. “Fair enough,” he says, as if what she just said made perfect sense. “Brains are the worst.”

“Yeah,” she says. She’s looking at him now. “Also, full disclosure, I’m probably gonna be mad about this for as long as we are friends. Which is forever. And you’re just gonna have to deal with it. And admit that you’re an asshole.”

“Fine,” Tim says, rolling his eyes. “I was an asshole. But shouldn’t I get a reduced guilt sentence or something? Since it was literally only one time and there were some pretty extreme extenuating circumstances.”

Cissie snorts. “One time? Seriously, Tim? That was definitely the worst time, but you have been an asshole to me so many times. An uncountable number of times.”

“Such as when?”

“Um, how about every fucking time you get my autograph?”

On either side of her, Anita and Cassie immediately start snickering.

“That’s a legitimate training exercise,” Tim says. “Also, I’m not the only one who does that. Why am I being singled out?”

“Because you do it the most and because you started this whole dumb thing. I mean, was everyone else incredibly obnoxious before? Yes. But you made it so much worse, Tim.”

“Hey, now—” Anita protests.

Cissie crosses her arms again and huffs. “There is not a single person on this team who is capable of greeting me like a normal person in public anymore. It’s all, ‘Ooooh, Cissie King-Jones, I’m your biggest fan! Cissie King-Jones, can I have your autograph?’”

“Um, we are your biggest fans,” Tim says. “I am literally the president of your fan club.”

“That’s still unauthorized and my mom’s still pissed about it.”

“Cissie’s mom started the official fan club,” Bart tells Duke, “but we started an unofficial one and it’s about a hundred times better.”

Cissie rolls her eyes. “You guys are such jerks.”

“We are not,” Tim says. “I don’t know why you think we’re messing with you. This fan club is 100% sincere. There is zero irony. We have literally every piece of media that you’ve ever been in. The television appearances. The movies. The Japanese commercials.”

“Tim, do not.” She leans toward him and hisses, “You’re embarrassing me in front of Nightwing,” so quietly that Bruce only makes it out by reading her lips.

Bart appears at his side holding a clipboard and wearing a button-down shirt and tie that are both too big for him. Bruce is fairly certain they belong to Tim. “Okay, entrance interview: how much of her oeuvre have you seen so far? Because we have all seen every single one of her appearances. Except for the ending of Blood of the Crows, which like half of us skipped out on for obvious reasons.”

“See,” Tim says. “I don’t know why we’re talking about me being an asshole when you didn’t warn us that you died in that one.”

“You said no spoilers. You literally said, ‘The only spoiler allowed is Stephanie Brown.’” She turns to Steph and adds, “He says dumb shit like that all the time. I cannot believe you dated this nerd.”

Tim ignores the wide grin Stephanie’s giving him now. “No spoilers doesn’t mean send me into the theater unaware to see another person I care about die a violent and extremely graphic death.”

“Tim, it was a horror film! And you’re a detective! How did you not see that coming?”

“Oh shit,” Duke says. “That death scene was kind of intense.”

Tim nods. “I left the theater. I have never walked out of a film in my life, but that was—ugh.” He apparently gives up on words and just flops backward onto the tablecloth.

“Smart,” Cassie says. “I watched the whole thing ‘cause I’m an idiot, and it gave me nightmares for weeks.”

Cissie winces. “Guys, stop making me feel bad. We’re making Tim feel bad, remember?”

From the ground, Tim says, “Why, Cissie? I’m already great at feeling terrible. Please stop helping me. This is not an arena in which I require assistance.”

“Explain the autograph thing,” Duke says.

Tim immediately sits back up again, grinning. “I can show you actually. Someone give me my phone.”

Cissie gives Duke a dead-eyed look. “Tim puts on disguises and tricks me into giving him autographs and taking selfies with him. It’s literally the worst thing in the world.”

“Did you get her after the Good Morning America appearance?” Bart asks.

“Yeah, of course,” Tim says, taking his phone from Cassie. “I went full geriatric for that one.”

“How is it that you can still trick her and I never can?” Cassie asks.

“Because I am better at disguises than you, as evidenced by this.”

Bruce half-expects him to link the phone to the alien holoprojector, but Tim only turns up the volume on his phone and starts playing a video. There’s a quick shuffling of bodies and a great deal of shushing as kids crowd around him to watch over his shoulders. Jason and Damian maintain their distance, although they’re obviously curious. Cissie just glares at them all.

From the roof, Bruce can just barely hear the sound of Cissie’s voice coming from the phone, cheerful and friendly. It’s followed by an elderly Texas twang that Bruce recognizes as one of the voices Tim occasionally uses on the phone when he’s trying to retrieve information for a case.
He can’t distinguish what either of them are saying on the video until Cissie’s voice lets out a sudden, outraged, “Timothy?”

Tim starts cracking up.

“He has done this to me at least half a dozen times,” Cissie says. “Because he’s an absolute monster.”

“Okay, but how come you always know when it’s me?” Cassie asks. “Even when Tim did my disguise, I still couldn’t get within five feet of you without you recognizing me. Even Bart’s managed to trick you!”

Cissie gives her a pitying look, “Sorry, Cassie, but you get the dumbest smile on your face every time you see me? It’s impossible to miss.”

“The Cissie smile,” Anita says.

Tim’s nodding along, still grinning. “I can literally tell when she’s texting you because you always make the exact same face.”

“Aw, I just can’t help it.” Cassie wraps her arms around Cissie. “You’re my best friend and I get excited! But next time I am totally going to get you for sure.”

Cissie pointedly does not return the hug. “Do you see?” she says to Tim. “Do you see what you’ve started?”

“It’s good practice,” Tim says. “If I can fool an old friend who’s literally a world-class actress and who knows me just about as well as anyone, mask or no mask, then I’m not going to have trouble fooling anyone else, right?”

“You’re so full of shit, Tim. Just admit that you are an asshole who likes fucking with me.”

“That’s a gross oversimplification.”

“Meanwhile,” Cissie says, shrugging off Cassie and turning toward Duke and Stephanie instead, “I’m the one who’s getting a reputation for being an asshole to my fans because I keep making weird suspicious faces every time I’m approached. Because I’m afraid it’s one of these jerks trying to mess with me. They’re gonna turn me into a paranoid, neurotic wreck.”

“To be fair to us,” Tim says, “you were neurotic before we met you.”

Cissie snorts. “Oh, fuck you, boy wonder.”

“I think I’m gonna have to side with Cissie on this one,” Cassie says.

Tim rolls his eyes. “Typical.”

Cassie shifts away from Cissie and puts a hand on Tim’s shoulder. Her voice is serious as she says, “The memes, Tim. The memes have got to stop.”

“No,” Tim says. “Absolutely not. They’re art, Cassie. They’re the only way I can express myself.”

“They’re evil. They’re slanderous. They are humiliating.” She looks at Stephanie and Duke. “He makes shitty memes using news coverage and surveillance tapes of me and they’re just—they’re so dumb and terrible and—”
“You laugh every time,” Tim says. “Admit that you do.”

“Um, I laugh occasionally, but it is the laugh of the hysterical. It is a defeated, downtrodden, why-is-my-friend-like-this laugh. And you have the worst timing in the world. I had a team up with Hawkgirl last month and we kicked ass and it was awesome. Then we were chatting afterwards and, like, maybe we were gonna hang out or something? I don’t know, I will never know, because you sent me that stupid picture of myself and I just about lost my shit in front of her. And then she asked me what it was and I didn’t know what to do, so I had to show it to her, Tim.”

Tim starts laughing again.

“I can never talk to her again,” Cassie says. “We can never be colleagues. I can never join the Justice League. You’re literally ruining my entire life plan.”

Tim’s lying down again, one hand covering his face, still laughing a little bit to himself.

“See?” Cissie says. “Total asshole. Just selectively. And with an intensity and precision that is characteristic of his approach to basically everything in life.”

“I need to see these memes,” Stephanie says.

Cassie shakes her head violently. “No. Absolutely not. You would instantly lose all respect for me and then we’d never be able to work together again.”

“They can’t be that bad,” Duke says.

“But they are.” Cassie looks at Tim and says, her voice suddenly sharp, “Timothy.”

“Cassandra,” he replies in a formal voice, sitting back up to look at her.

“Tim,” Cassie says. “I love you so very much.”

“Always,” Tim answers. No hesitation. It’s so automatic that Bruce can’t tell if it’s meant to be an acknowledgment or an affirmation or something else altogether.

“If you ever show that shit to anyone, my vengeance will make the sacking of Troy look like a children’s t-ball game.”

“Okay.” Tim says. “That seems fair.” When he catches Stephanie making a disappointed face at him, he shakes his head and says, “They’re just too powerful,” before flopping back down to the ground.

Up on the rooftop, Cassandra puts her hand on Bruce’s shoulder and starts pulling him away from the roof’s edge. She doesn’t let go until they’re both far back enough that they can sit up without being spotted. Then she points to the ground and then signs, secret, which means she won’t tell if he doesn’t. He gives her a solemn nod in response.

She looks at him a moment longer and then reaches out to run her finger down the middle of his forehead. Right down the groove he knows is forming between his eyebrows. Now that she’s drawn attention to it, he can feel the beginnings of a tension headache in the tightness around his eyes and in his jaw.

He forces the muscles in his face to relax and then, spontaneously, reaches one arm out to pull her against his side in a half-hug. She wraps her arms around his torso carefully, mindful of the ribs that are mostly healed by now, and then gives him a quick peck on the cheek. She waits until he’s
retreated back through the window and into the house before she takes a few quick steps and jumps off the roof. He’s too far back to see her land, but he can hear gasps, stifled screams of surprise, and a bright burst of laughter that sounds like Tim. Then two slaps that he assumes are high-fives, probably from Stephanie and Jason.

It’s tempting to stay put. To sit and listen and know that all of his kids are here, together, safe at least for the moment. And he knows that he can’t go down just yet. He won’t be able to summon even a neutral expression for a few minutes more. And he can’t imagine eating anything right now. Not with the image of his son bleeding to death somewhere far from home, with only the Demon’s Head to save him. So far gone that even his closest friends thought he was lost.

He feels a heaviness in his chest, an ache that’s been building up for hours now. He really doesn’t want to join the laughing crowd of children down below. He has too much to think about. Tim’s entanglement with the League of Assassins. His apparent ambivalence about Wayne Enterprises. All the stories about Tim’s family—his first family—that Bruce knows nothing about. Things that Tim kept to himself, to spare Bruce’s feelings.

He knows that he can’t retreat back to the cave again—if he’s gone much longer, Alfred will send someone to find him—but he still needs another moment to process it all. Otherwise, the anxiety he’s feeling will show in his face and in his stance. And he knows from experience that it will look like anger from the outside.

He doesn’t want to be angry. He wants to talk to his son, to understand what happened, but he can’t think of how to do that without it devolving into a confrontation. Because Tim clearly still doesn’t want to talk about this. He’ll get upset. Bruce will already be upset. And Tim will take that personally. He’ll read it as Bruce being upset with him instead of for him.

He doesn’t know how to do it like these children apparently do. To be so full of anger and affection at the same time. To switch gears so seamlessly between fighting and teasing. They’ve long since moved on from the original argument, but Bruce feels stuck. Part of being a detective means not letting go. Digging in and digging deep and getting all of the details, no matter how horrible they are. Collecting data so that you can assemble a clear view of what happened and why.

He’d said as much to Alfred days ago while confronting him about keeping Tim’s secrets. And Alfred had only raised an eyebrow and asked him, with frosty politeness, which was more important: finding out what happened to Tim a year ago or spending time with Tim now. Because his pursuit of the former would complicate his attempts at the latter.

It’s the same thing Barbara was trying to tell him. And Bruce has occasionally disagreed with one or the other of them in the past, but never both of them at the same time. If they’re in agreement, then he has to accept that they’re right. So he waits a few minutes longer and listens to snatches of chatter carried up by the wind.

They won’t be the same when he joins them. Tim’s friends will still be silly and over the top and obnoxious. But the atmosphere will become more subdued. Tim won’t be quite so open. Jason will tense up and make a show of ignoring him completely. Dick and Damian will both keep glancing at him, like they’re checking him over for injuries or distress. Like they’re still worried about him.

They’d be happier and more at ease without him. But even as he thinks this, he knows that it’s not entirely true. They might be more comfortable without him, but they wouldn’t be happier. His absence last year hurt them. His absence this past week hurt them. And keeping his distance these last few months has only made things harder on them all.

He’d thought he was doing the right thing. He’d thought that they were taking care of themselves
and each other better than he ever could.

And maybe they were. But even if that’s true, it doesn’t absolve him of his responsibilities. It just means he has to try harder. Be better. Make sure that his presence in their lives helps them more than it hurts them. Leaving them to fend for themselves isn’t an option, and he never should have pretended that it was.

All the love he feels for them means nothing if they don’t know that it’s there. If they don’t believe him when he tries to tell them.

He’ll have to do better. Even if it takes time. Even if he makes mistakes.

By the time he joins them outside, most of the food is already gone and the kids are nearly through with dessert. Alfred gives him a pointed look, but doesn’t say anything. Jason does ignore him, but he doesn’t tense up as badly as Bruce expected. He still looks comfortable. Relaxed.

Tim, when he notices Bruce’s arrival, grins and motions him over. “Saved you this,” he says, holding up a full plate, “at great personal cost and against incredible odds.”

And it’s easier than he expected. He feels his face begin to mirror Tim’s, a smile tugging at his lips as he takes the plate and says dryly, “Incredible odds. Is that what we’re calling Impulse now?”

Tim laughs. Beside him, Conner grins and says, “Solid burn.” Bart just sticks out his tongue and then disappears before Cassie can smack him on the shoulder.

It’s not perfect and it’s not going to last. But for now, he’ll enjoy it while it does.

Chapter End Notes

First off, apologies for the longer-than-usual wait. Between festive family fun and working overtime (December is hellmonth for my department), I'll be a little slower with the last few updates.

Notes:

Eavesdropping is something that I hate in real life but absolutely adore in fiction?? I blame Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. It's a habit that Cass's family doesn't necessarily like, but that they've all gotten used to. Cass sometimes likes to spend time with her family but doesn't necessarily want to participate in group activities. And she has a habit of lurking and hiding out. Canonically she has a pretty loose grasp on other people's boundaries as well as certain kinds of social norms. So she does understand, to a certain extent, that she needs to respect other people's privacy. But to her that means leaving people alone when they've retreated to "their" space (their bedroom) and also not wandering into an occupied bathroom just because the door was unlocked (Tim did *not* appreciate that). But a public space or public discussion? You just have to assume that she's probably there and can hear everything you're saying. So plan accordingly.

Bart Allen's backstory is *wild as hell*. I fudged a couple of details (the government was probably just going to let him die of old age rather than using him as a weapon or operative--they had a clone of him for that), but I think Bart's interpretation isn't too far off the mark. His evil grandfather is Thaddeus Thawne, President of Earthgov in
the 31st century, and is a descendant of Professor Zoom, the original Reverse-Flash. Technically, Bart's dad was actually killed by an alien race called the Dominators, not by his grandfather's forces, but I'm just going to simplify and blame Thawne's machinations instead.

[Edit: I WAS WRONG. There's a line about "controlling shareholder" AND another line that explicitly states that Bruce made Tim CEO in Red Robin (Lucius is CEO in other comics but not here?). I either missed that while I was taking notes or wrote down my preferred headcanon and misremembered it as canon later on. I'm leaving the following note intact as a Testament To My Hubris.] In Red Robin, Tim tells Ra's that he's now the "controlling shareholder," not the CEO. Normally I would not be so pedantic about something as boring as corporate governance, but I think the fandom idea that Tim is a CEO is just way less funny than the canon explanation? The CEO is essentially the main manager or the highest-ranked employee. They work for the shareholders. And the controlling or majority shareholder is the person who owns the most shares and has the most voting power. Tim owns at least 50% of WE's shares, which means he's effectively the only vote that matters. If any other shareholder wants to change anything about the company or how it's operating, they have to convince a teenage boy. I know I am the only one who thinks this is funny, but it objectively is.

I made up a lot of the stuff about Tim and his parents. My headcanons for them are way too long to fit here (I would continue to abuse the Notes Section and try to cram them in but they literally don't fit), but essentially my Jack Drake is based mostly on his canon characterization (inattentive father, bad temper, zero parenting skills, holy shit, this dude doesn't know what he's doing). Janet got a lot less attention before her death, so her fandom interpretations are pretty varied. My version of Janet is, essentially, someone who's like Tim in some ways. Very passionate about her chosen career and also didn't have a very good relationship with her own family. She was pretty ambivalent about having kids and leaned towards not. Jack convinced her by claiming that he'd be the primary caregiver. Which obviously didn't happen. When he failed to step up, she never really picked up the slack because she didn't know how to. Basically, she's someone who was very flawed and had good intentions, but completely failed her son. And knew it. And always meant to do better but never quite managed it.

Tim being descended from pirates is the remnant of a silly gag that didn't make it into this fic. Essentially, Tim insists that, no, he's descended from privateers, which are totally different (except not really). This leads to people assuming he's related to Francis Drake, famed English privateer, through his father's side of the family, and Tim gets increasingly exasperated because he keeps having to explain that, no, the privateers were on his mother's side of the family. The Drakes fled to America from England in order to avoid debtors prison. Basically, even though he had a bad relationship with his parents, I like the idea of him still feeling a tentative connection to his own family history. Like Dick, he's part of the Wayne family now, but where he came from is still important to him.
Content warning for very vague reference to attempted sexual assault on a college campus. This is only mentioned in the context of crimes that vigilantes have to deal with. It does not involve an assault happening to any of the characters in this story, and the subject is not dwelling on or treated in depth.

Jason doesn't notice his own escape plan falling apart until it's already too late.

He only steps away from the group for a few minutes. Just long enough to review some images Barbara sent him. She’s supposed to be taking some time off to rest, but she still set aside a couple of hours to look into the McGowan case for him.

He’d resigned himself to picking up a cold trail after he recovered. With Tim out of commission with his broken foot, Jason figured there wasn’t anyone else to keep the case going for him. But Barbara’s apparently been keeping an eye on things for him. So he drags himself away from the noisy scene in the den and does a quick review of the files in the hallway.

He expects everyone to be exactly where he left them—sprawled out across the room, arguing about the merits of different Green Lanterns they’ve encountered over the years—but when he comes back almost everyone’s standing up and talking excitedly. Tim, as usual, seems to be in the middle of it all. He’s standing and frowning while Anita runs a hand through his hair and gives it a considering look.

There are only three other Gothamites left. Bruce and Alfred have been down in the cave for a few hours, and Cass and Damian joined them a while ago. Steph and Dick have been lingering, though, clearly wanting to spend more time with Tim. And Duke’s standing in the middle of the chaos, holding his phone in his hand and grinning widely.

“What’d I miss?” Jason asks. He rejoins Dick and Stephanie on the couch just in time to watch Tim and his friends all disappear out into the hallway, clearly heading somewhere with a purpose.

“Tim’s getting an emergency haircut,” Stephanie explains, “so that Duke can go on patrol with us tonight.”

Duke’s still grinning. “I’m doing a stint with the night shift,” he says. “My cousin just gave me permission to stay here overnight.”

“How the hell did you swing that?” Jason asks. “He never lets you stay out.”


“No, no, Tim smoothed things over, but you’re the one who really sold it,” Stephanie says. “Amazing performance, by the way.” Duke ducks his head, looking a little bit embarrassed, but he’s still grinning.

“They leveraged Cissie’s celebrity status,” Dick explains. “Apparently even Duke’s cousin isn’t
hardhearted enough to make him miss out on an all-night movie marathon with an actual movie star.”

“His favorite movie star,” Stephanie says.

“I didn’t actually say that,” Duke insists.

“It was strongly implied.”

“None of that explains the haircut,” Jason points out.

“Oh, that’s just Tim being Tim,” Stephanie says, rolling her eyes. “He wants to get a few photos of the three of them hanging out to back up Duke’s story. But he also won’t let them take any photos until he’s gotten a haircut because the whole time dilation thing means his hair’s grown more than it should have in the last week. Which apparently counts as a major continuity error that has to be corrected immediately.”

“My cousin is not going to notice,” Duke says.

“Come on, don’t lie. You are so going to be showing these photos to more than just your cousin. I mean, it’s Cissie King-Jones.” Steph swoons backward, forcing Dick to catch her. Duke rolls his eyes but doesn’t deny it.

The whole thing would be funny as hell if it hadn’t just screwed up Jason’s entire exit strategy. He’d been counting on Duke’s early curfew. Figured the kid would have to catch a ride, probably from Stephanie, well before everyone else suited up for the night. Jason would join them at the last minute and disappear back into the city without any fuss.

Dick’s mentioned more than once that he can give Jason a ride back if he wants, but Jason’s not stupid enough to get stuck in an enclosed space with him right now. There’s no way Dick can go a full car ride without trying to instigate a heart-to-heart, and Jason’s way too tired for that shit tonight.

They’ve managed to go a full week without really arguing, which is a goddamn miracle in and of itself. And it’s been nice and all, but Jason’s not stupid enough to think it’ll last. Something’s gonna go wrong eventually and then they’ll slide back into their old patterns. Just like they always do.

But still. No reason to break their streak just yet. He’ll find some other way back to the city. And this does buy him a little extra time. There’s one more thing he wants to take care of before he leaves.

He waits until the others return and start their impromptu photoshoot—with lots of heckling from Tim’s friends—before he slips out into the hallway and taps out a quick text.

Stephanie joins him a moment later. “Lemme guess,” she says, smirking a little bit. “Your escape plan just went up in flames, didn’t it?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Should have seen that one coming. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

“Uh huh. What’s up?”

“It’s about Damian.”
That wipes the easy smirk right off her face. “What about him?” she asks, glancing over her shoulder for a moment, checking to see if anyone’s there. Jason wouldn’t be having this conversation at all if there was even the slightest chance of the brat listening in.

“He cornered me earlier,” Jason tells her. “After dinner. And started asking me a lot of weird questions about Tim.”

It was a surreal encounter, start to finish. Damian asked for a moment of Jason’s time in a tone of voice far too formal for a kid. The attempt at politeness was undermined by the fact that he’d already grabbed onto Jason’s sleeve and started dragging him into an empty room. It was kind of funny at first—the kid’s just so damn weird sometimes—but once they were actually alone, something about his manner set Jason on edge. He’d looked so serious. Like whatever he wanted to talk about was really important.

But even now, hours later, Jason’s still not really sure what that conversation was actually about.

He’d been expecting bad news of some kind, although he couldn’t fathom why Damian would be the messenger for that kind of thing. Instead, the kid started interrogating him about Tim. Asked a lot of questions about the cases he and Jason were working on together. Wanted to know if Tim had any big projects in the works in Gotham or abroad. Things like last year’s hit list or the theater renovation. Seemed less interested in the actual work itself than the timelines involved. When Jason told him to butt out of Red Hood’s business, Damian only rolled his eyes and asked again about how long their current operations were likely to last. And did they have any plans for the rest of the summer? This coming autumn? The first half of next year?

None of it, as far as Jason could tell, made any sense. Damian was there when they went through Tim’s away protocol. That damn thing included everything Tim’s been up to in the last few months and everything he’s likely to work on for the foreseeable future.

But when he pointed this out to the brat, Damian just scowled and muttered something about “Drake’s secretive nature” and “machinations within machinations.” Which, again, would have been kind of funny coming from a pint-sized adolescent if he wasn’t being so damned intense about it.

Then Damian started asking about Tim’s friends, and Jason’s vague unease tipped over into outright suspicion. Because the rest of the interrogation could be explained away as Damian wanting to steal cases, maybe, or possibly even worrying about the team’s workload since Red Robin and Red Hood will be out of commission for a while. But Tim’s friends aren’t Gotham-based. Which means Damian’s little information-gathering mission wasn’t about the team or protecting the city. It was something personal.

“You think he’s planning some kind of retaliation?” Stephanie asks after he’s finished explaining the encounter. She looks skeptical.

“When I asked him if he was up to something, he got huffy and stormed off,” Jason says. “Not exactly an innocent reaction.”

Steph just shakes her head. “It’s Damian. If you implied that he was being...I don’t know, disloyal or something, then you’re lucky all he did was get pissed and leave. He hates getting questioned about that kind of thing.”

“He looked pretty freaked out after he got magicked,” Jason points out. “And he’s been lurking around Tim and his friends all day. You gotta admit that’s suspicious.”
Stephanie grimaces. “Yeah, that was a fucking mess. Could have been a lot worse, but—” She stops. Shakes her head. “Look, I’ll admit he’s been acting kind of weird today. And the Anita thing definitely pissed him off. But I don’t think he’s gonna do anything.”

“Why ask me all those questions unless he’s planning something?”

Stephanie just rolls her eyes. “You only think he’s plotting some kind of payback because that’s what you would do.” He must make a face, because she gives him an unapologetic shrug. “Sorry, Jay, but it’s true. You’re the one who’s into that dramatic Count of Monte Cristo-style retribution. Damian? Not exactly the revenge-is-best-served-cold type. If he was gonna retaliate, he’d have done it already. Also, I demand a high-five for that literary reference.” When he scowls at her, she just raises a hand expectantly. “C’mon, nerd, I’ve earned it.”

He rolls his eyes, but still gives her hand a half-hearted slap. “You really don’t deserve this,” he says. “Also? Fuck you.”

She grins for a moment before her expression settles into something a little more sober. “Seriously, I understand where you’re coming from and all, but don’t worry too much about the Damian thing. He’s definitely upset about something—not just what happened with Anita—but I don’t think he wants to hurt Tim right now. I get why you’d think that, but they’re—things between them aren’t that bad anymore. They’re both just sort of...stuck? Like, all the bad blood between them is mostly gone now, but nothing good’s taken its place yet, so they’re still...” She waves her hand vaguely, clearly not sure how to sum up the weird tension that seems to spark anytime Tim and Damian try to interact.

Jason wants to believe her. He’s pretty sure Damian actually does care about Tim. The brat had a meltdown when he saw Tim being taken by the Tetrahedra, and he seemed genuinely concerned about Tim working with Prudence. But Jason knows that you can care about someone and still want to hurt them at the same time. One feeling doesn’t preclude the other.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and says, “Fine, then. You know them better than I do. But I think we should tell Tim what happened. Give him a fair warning, so he doesn’t get blindsided if it comes up later.”

Stephanie grimaces. For a moment it looks like she’s considering it, but then she shakes her head. “He’s stressed enough? I mean, maybe we can mention it later, after everyone’s gone. If we tell him now…” She trails off but Jason knows what she’s trying to say.

They’re all being careful with Tim right now.

It’s weird. This is probably the most relaxed Jason’s ever seen him, but at the same time, there are moments when something changes and the kid just looks brittle. Despite constant reassurances to the contrary, he clearly thinks he’s still in trouble. And he’s obviously waiting for something to go wrong. For the other shoe to drop.

Jason can fucking relate. He’s always preferred an outright argument to the smothering feeling of tension that precedes it. The longer he goes without getting into a fight with someone, the more he just wants to get it over with.

Tim, though, obviously hates all of it. He’ll get into dumb arguments with his friends all day long, but his fight with Cissie—that was real. He very nearly lost his temper and Tim doesn’t do that. Which means he really is exhausted and stressed out and nearly at the end of his rope.

“Yeah, alright,” Jason says. “I’ll keep it to myself for now. But if Damian says anything weird to
you—"

"I’ll let you know," Stephanie says. "And thanks. Not just for the head’s up. For, you know…"
She makes another vague gesture. "All of it."

"All of what?" he asks, genuinely confused.

She frowns. "You know. Helping out with the Tetrahedra. And then helping us look for Tim."

"I literally didn’t do anything," Jason points out. "Tim stopped the Tetrahedra. And his friends are the ones who rescued him."

"Well, yeah, but you still came when we needed you," she says. "And stuck around until we got him back. And this whole fucking week was awful, but having you around was—I mean, we really appreciate you not, you know, getting into with Bruce or—and it could have been—"

"Steph," Jason says, interrupting her. "Are you thanking me for not making everything worse?"

"Fuck," she says. "I didn’t mean it that way." When he just raises his eyebrows, she pulls another face. "Okay, I maybe did mean it that way. Sorry. I am not actually trying to insult you right now. To be fair to me, though, thanking someone is usually easier than this. I say, ‘Thank you,’ and you say, ‘You’re welcome,’ and then everybody moves on and nobody ends up looking like an asshole. And now I’m blaming you. Which is another cool move on my part." She tugs at her hair and sighs. "Look, I’m just trying to say, via the dumbest possible route, that I know everything between you and Bruce is still...let’s go with supremely fucked up? So it means a lot that you stuck it out with us. I am just being appreciative, okay? Don’t make this weird."

"I don’t think you’ve ever had a conversation with anyone that wasn’t weird," Jason says.

"You’re really not going to thank me back or say, ‘You’re welcome,’ or do anything to make this less awkward for me, are you?" Stephanie says, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Nope," he answers.

"Well, that’s what I get for indulging in sincerity," she says, rolling her eyes. "Anyway. I’ll keep an eye on Damian tonight, and I’ll let you know if anything weird comes up. That good?"

"Peachy," he answers.

She waves a middle finger at him and then starts to head back toward the den. When he doesn’t follow, she stops and raises her eyebrows at him. "You coming?"

"Yeah, gimme a minute," he says, holding up his phone like he’s gonna make a call or something. Steph looks un convinced, but she disappears back into the room without pressing the issue.

He has no intention of going back in there. Now’s as good a time as any to slip out. Nobody’s actually suited up yet, so in theory he could probably steal a car and get back to Gotham before anyone notices he’s gone. It won’t be the first time he left without warning.

The only person he owes a proper goodbye is Alfred. But he can apologize during their next phone call. Alfred will understand.

He knows there’s a bedroom upstairs prepared for him. Knows that Alfred’s been keeping it clean and airing it out every week since he came back from the dead. Even back when he was—even back before the truce. Not his old room either. That one’s apparently still exactly as he left it.
Closed up and untouched. Like a fucking museum display.

But Alfred’s opened up another one for him. And kept it ready. Just in case.

He mentioned it again earlier today, but only in passing. His reminders used to make Jason feel anxious in a weird way. Knowing there was a room in the manor meant for him—it felt like a taunt or a trap. Now it just feels like a fact. Something that’s true now and will be true tomorrow too.

He can’t really pretend that he’s not part of the team anymore. Not after the past week. Not when he’s got Barbara covering his cases and Cass covering his territory. But being on the team just means they’re all a little bit more than allies now. It doesn’t mean he wants to be part of this fucked up family. It doesn’t mean he wants to stay.

Mind made up, he turns in the direction of the garage. And almost walks straight into Bruce.

“Jesus fucking,” he says, jerking himself backward, one arm already raised. “I nearly punched you in the fucking face.”

Bruce frowns but doesn’t move. And, yeah, appearing out of nowhere is a big part of Batman’s whole schtick, but it’s not something Jason expected here and now.

He didn’t plan for this. Didn’t even take Bruce into consideration when plotting out his escape. Figured he could count on Bruce to just keep avoiding him like he has been all day.

The fact that he’s not avoiding Jason—because there’s no way Bruce ended up in this hallway by coincidence—is suspicious in and of itself. Makes him think that something must have gone wrong. Maybe Damian’s already told Bruce about getting magicked, or something’s happened in Gotham, or—but none of that makes sense. Bruce would be talking to the others about that. Not to him.

“Did you need something?” Jason asks, crossing his arms in front of his chest. He remembers being tired just a few minutes ago, but now there’s a nervous energy thrumming through him, making him feel jittery and a little bit angry even though nothing’s really happened yet.

“I was hoping we could talk,” Bruce answers, his voice stiff and awkward. Someone must have coached him on that, because it isn’t the kind of phrasing he’d normally use. It’s not a demand or even a request, exactly. Just a statement.

Whatever it is, Jason does not have the fucking energy or patience for it right now. Not when he was literally seconds away from getting the fuck out of here.

“Look, can we save this for later?” He’s aiming for chilly civility, but it ends up sounding gruff and aggressive. Bruce is blocking his way to the garage, and he’d probably object to having another one of his cars stolen. Jason dropped the first one off at a chop shop. No one’s brought it up to him yet, but he figures they must know by now.

Bruce stares at him for another moment and then asks, “Will you still be here after patrol?” Like he thinks Jason is seriously asking for a raincheck and not just making a transparent attempt to get out of this conversation. Jason spends a solid ten seconds trying to figure out if Bruce is actually that oblivious or just pretending to be. Then the actual implications of what he just asked finally sink in.

“You’re heading out? With your fucked up ribs?” He doesn’t mean to say that. It’s a stupid, knee-jerk reaction. The kind of thing Robin would have said. Not Red Hood.

“They’re nearly healed,” Bruce answers. “And I’ll be taking the car.”
That means no grappling hooks, no swinging, no rooftop brooding. It doesn’t necessarily mean no fighting. Not if they come across something especially bad. But none of that’s Jason’s problem to deal with. Not anymore.

“Right, then. Have fun puncturing your lungs, I guess.” He knows he should turn around. Go back to the den. Wait it out. Bruce is obviously tensed up, waiting for something to go wrong, and that’s making Jason tense up too, and he’s pretty that they’re both about two wrong words away from blowing up. Just like always.

But some perverse part of Jason keeps him rooted to the spot. It'd be so much easier to just let go. Get into another screaming match. Release all the goddamn tension that's been building up all day. Jason tried. He did his fucking best and he made it through the whole day, the whole damn week, without blowing up anything, literally or metaphorically. And now Bruce decides to pull this shit?

It's fucking infuriating. Even more so when he realizes why Bruce is doing this now. For him, the timing’s perfect. When things go wrong, he’ll be able to retreat to cave, suit up for the night, and then brood all over the damn city.

It feels inevitable. Inescapable. And Jason doesn't feel like trying to stop it from happening. Another fight would work in his favor. Storming out would be easier and faster than trying to sneak off.

But he's just so damned tired right now. And he knows the anger will whip through him and keep him going long enough to get out, but when it leaves him—and it always leaves him nowadays, never stays as long as it used to—he's going to crash so damned hard it hurts just thinking about it.

It'll fuck up everyone else's night as well. Between Damian's twitchiness and Bruce's inevitable bad mood, they'll have a hell of a patrol. And somehow it's going to be Jason's fault. He's the one with the hair-trigger temper. He's the only one who still gets into screaming matches with Bruce, because he's the only one who doesn't bend over backwards to accommodate his bullshit. Everything happens on Bruce's terms, on his timeline, and Jason can't fucking stand it.

It’s like some kind of cosmic joke. Stephanie thanks him for not blowing up and then five minutes later he does. Of fucking course.

“Jason,” Bruce says again.

“For fuck's sake,” Jason says, cutting him off. Voice savage but not rising loud enough for anyone else to hear. Trying to rein it in. “If you're about to give me a speech about family togetherness or something, fucking save it. Or better yet, try it out on Tim first. That sentimental garbage would probably work on him.”

It's a low blow, but one that he knows will work. He can see the words land. Can see the surprise on Bruce's face, even though he hides it well. Just the barest twitch around his mouth and a tightening around his eyes. “Seriously,” he adds. “Tim might actually be open to that kind of thing.”

“Open to what?” Bruce asks. That old familiar wariness is creeping back into his voice. Hearing it makes Jason feel better. More stable. Knocking Bruce off-kilter always makes him feel like he’s back on solid ground.

“To being your kid again,” Jason says.

“He's already my son,” Bruce says. “You both are.”
Jason scoffs. “Bullshit. I died. I'm not the kid you knew back then, and you fucking well know that already. And then you fuckin' died, and Tim got himself emancipated or disowned or whatever the fuck. So he's not yours now either. But give him a big speech or whatever bullshit you're trying to pull on me and maybe he'll come back around again.”

Bruce has stopped trying to maintain a neutral expression. He’s frowning, brow pulled tight, eyes a little too intense. Clearly distressed. “Tim was never disowned,” he says, sounding almost angry now. “Emancipation doesn't mean he's left the family.”

“You're the only one who seems to think that,” Jason says, lying through his teeth. “Everyone else knows he's a Wayne in name only now.”

The wariness is much stronger now. “Did he say something to you?”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Seriously? He's not exactly the type to spill his guts, is he? At least, not metaphorically.” That one hurts. He can see it on Bruce’s face. Tim’s missing spleen is the kind of ammunition that’s going to work on Bruce for a long time. Jason can already tell. “Jesus Christ, Bruce, you're a fucking detective. Figure it out yourself. And leave me out of it.”

He's pretty sure that's enough. Bruce is gonna be broody and miserable for the rest of the night, but no one's gonna be able to pin it on Jason. That's about the best he can hope for.

He turns to go, but Bruce, of course, doesn’t know when to fucking quit. He says, “Jason,” still sounding strained but with that underlying note of command that used to make Jason stop in his tracks when he was a kid. It still works on him in the field sometimes. Makes him pause for a split second, which is just fucking unfair. He was Robin for less than three years. It’s been nearly twice that long since he died, so why the fuck does Bruce’s voice still work on him?

It’s infuriating, but Jason doesn't make the mistake of turning around. He's getting out of here now. He's not getting into a fight. He's done with this, he's—

“Jay,” Bruce says.

“Do not fucking call me that,” he spits out, rounding on him, tempering roaring back to life again, hands already in fists—

And Bruce takes a step back, hands rising from his sides for a moment—the start of a placating gesture—and then dropping down again. He looks miserable and unsure when he says, “Jason.” Like he's correcting himself after the fact.

And Jason wants to throw a punch so bad that holding himself back almost hurts. “What? What is so fucking important that we need to talk about it right fucking now?”

“I just wanted to say thank you,” Bruce says, sounding frustrated.

“For what?”

“For being here.”

And Jason doesn't know if he means today or this past week or something else altogether. Decides it doesn't matter. “I didn't do it for you. Not everything is about you.”

“I know.”

“I'm not your kid anymore,” Jason says. “The person you knew is dead. He's never coming back.”
Bruce looks like he wants to argue, but he stays silent instead. After a very long moment, he starts to speak slowly, carefully, like he’s picking his way through a field of landmines. “I know things are different now. And that you don’t—that you want—”

He stops. Jason waits, silent and seething, wanting to know just what the hell Bruce thinks he wants because Jason sure as fuck doesn't know right now. But Bruce stays silent. Not the eerie blank brokenness from the past week. Just a miserable, awkward mess. Which is unnerving in its own way. Because Bruce doesn't struggle. Bruce conquers. Bruce is good at everything, because unlike the average schmuck on the street, Bruce Wayne can always afford to drop whatever he's doing and fuck off to the other side of the world. When he decides to master a skill set, he goes off and he does it. Half his fucking life could probably be reduced to one long training montage.

But he clearly sucks at this. At dealing with people and maintaining a team. Jason doesn't remember him being this bad when he was a kid, but the two of them mostly got along back then. Dick's implied, more than once, that Jason knew Bruce when he was at his best. Which is just about the saddest thing Jason's ever heard.

But it seems like it might be true, because this past week Bruce has completely failed to keep his shit together. Jason’s pretty sure that the only reason the team’s lasted so long is because Bruce hasn't been doing it on his own. Alfred and Dick and Babs—they’ve all made a concentrated effort to keep Bruce from utterly fucking up. And even then, they haven’t completely managed it. That video conversation with Tim was an absolute disaster. If Jason hadn't seen him acting like an automaton all fucking week, he wouldn't have even known Bruce cared about the kid at all. But he clearly does. And clearly sucks at dealing with it.

The whole fucking situation just makes him tired. He doesn’t want to be here anymore. He doesn’t want to deal with all this mess. He just wants to be done.

“Can we just not?” Jason asks, letting the exhaustion he feels creep into his voice. “Just this once, can we not do this?”

And Bruce looks like he’s not quite sure what Jason means by this, but after a moment he nods. “The last few nights have been quiet,” he says, his voice still stiff. “We don’t expect tonight to be any different.”

Jason’s not entirely sure, but he thinks Bruce is trying to say that they’ll be back from patrol earlier than usual. Which might be Bruce's way of asking him to stick around. Or he might be giving Jason a chance to clear out of the manor before they get back.

Jason shoves his hands into his pockets. “Yeah, whatever. I might still be around, I guess.”

They both know he’s lying, but this time Bruce doesn’t call him out on it. When Jason turns back toward the den, Bruce lets him go without another word.

His second escape plan doesn't exactly fail. It just gets delayed.

He’d planned to steal a car and make his getaway once everyone else was out for the night. He hadn’t expected Dick to stay in, although in retrospect it made sense. With Bruce out on patrol with the others and Alfred running the comms, someone had to stick around and keep an eye on things upstairs. And that complicated Jason’s plan a little bit—Tim and his friends wouldn’t object to him taking off, but Dick probably would—but he figured he’d cross that bridge when he came to it.

His real mistake was nudging Dick in the ribs and asking, thoughtlessly, if Cissie was really that
big of a deal.

He hadn't even asked loudly. The two of them were sticking to the relative safety of the couch, well away from the scuffle engulfing the rest of the room. Stephanie and Duke had left, but the photoshoot hadn't stopped. Tim and his friends were all trying to take solo selfies with Cissie—to her very obvious annoyance—while everyone else tried to photobomb every picture. This resulted in a silly sort of melee, with lots of shoving and laughter. And they were being loud enough that Jason figured he could ask Dick a simple question without being overheard.

Dick had shrugged and said, “Kind of, yeah. She’s still better known for archery than for acting, but a lot of Duke's friends are big fans. You've never seen her in anything?”

“Don't think so,” Jason said. Like a moron.

Nobody else should have been able to hear him over all the teasing and tussling, but Conner Kent's whole body swiveled in a way that was downright creepy—definitely some small amount of flight or tactile telekinesis involved—and he stared at Jason like he'd just confessed to growing up Amish or something.

The kid apparently has superhearing and an unhealthy adoration for some dumb show Cissie used to guest star in.

“How have you not seen Wendy?” he kept saying, aghast. “Everyone's seen Wendy.”

Wendy the Werewolf Stalker was, according to Conner, an irreplaceable media touchstone. A mandatory viewing requirement for their generation. A work of genius cancelled far too soon.

Tim looked like he wanted to disagree but surprisingly kept his mouth shut. And Cissie only rolled her eyes and said, “It’s really not a big deal. Although it is weird that you’ve never even heard of it.”

“I don’t pay much attention to pop culture,” Jason said with a shrug.

“Okay, but then what do you do?” Bart asked. “When you’re not, you know, terrorizing the criminal underworld and all that?”

And Jason hadn’t been able to answer. He didn’t do much when he wasn’t working. Occasional drinking binges. TV sometimes, books more often. That was about it.

“Stuff,” he’d said. It was too hard to explain that he was the Red Hood now, first and foremost, above everything else.

Normally he’d say something about how Jason Todd was dead and that’d be explanation enough. But that kind of thing really only worked on Bruce and Dick, and only because they knew the old him. Saying that kind of shit hurt them in a way it didn’t hurt other people. The last time he’d tried to use that line on Stephanie, she rolled her eyes and accused him of plagiarizing Taylor Swift.

“You can’t be fighting and committing crime all the time,” Cissie said. “Or are your hobbies all too nefarious to share or something?”

“He reads books,” Tim said, interrupting before Jason could think of something to say. “Like a nerd.”

“Fuckin’ philistine,” Jason answered.
“You have to watch Wendy,” Conner insisted, ignoring Tim. “You have to.”

Now, two hours later, Jason’s still stuck in the manor, and he’s being forced to watch some of the least convincing drama he’s ever seen committed to film. On screen a dark-haired girl stabs a werewolf and then freaks out because this apparently wasn’t the werewolf she was supposed to stab. Conner and Bart keep explaining the plot, which they seem to think makes sense but which pretty obviously doesn’t. And Dick, the absolute asshole, keeps egging them on, asking questions and looking genuinely interested. Which must be an act. Jason remembers Dick having bad taste in television, but even he can’t be enjoying this crap.

Still, it could be worse. The food’s good. They’ve got weird artisanal popcorn that Bart grabbed from somewhere in Texas as well as a fuckton of juice boxes in weird flavors like durian and dragonfruit. This, apparently, is the only beverage Tim trusts them not to spill all over Alfred’s pristine carpets. And Jason’s only being subjected to Cissie’s limited run on the show, which took place in one of the later, supposedly “better” seasons, according to Conner. He apparently has way too many opinions about this stupid show. The only ones who are worse than him are Anita and Cassie. Every single time Cissie appears on screen, they both give a small cheer, which Jason thinks is absolute overkill.

The girl herself isn’t with them anymore, and neither are Tim and Greta. Those two both opted out of the television marathon. This was apparently the perfect time to wander around outside and work on Greta’s photography skills. Tim, stalker extraordinaire, being the obvious expert on taking photos at night.

Jason kind of thought that sounded like a romantic tryst situation—and to judge by the look on Dick’s face, he did too—but nobody else in the room seemed to bat an eye at it. And both Tim and Greta looked genuinely pleased when Cissie decided to join them instead of watching herself on screen. “Way too awkward,” she said.

She and Tim seem fine now. Still bickering some but otherwise getting along. As if the fight hadn’t even happened. It’s weird. He always thought Tim was the grudge-holding type. When he and Stephanie fall back into their old pattern of arguing, she tends to get over it after a couple of hours of anger. Tim sometimes sulks for days. And Jason’s pretty sure he and Dick still haven’t recovered from whatever went down last year when Dick chose Damian to be his Robin.

But maybe it’s all situational. He’s apparently forgiven Jason, which is pretty fucking crazy, and he seems to have buried the hatchet with Damian as well, which might be even crazier.

It’s not something they’ve ever really talked about beyond a few sharp-edged comments Jason made back when they first started working together. Tim usually either ignored him or brushed it all off. And something about that has always pissed Jason off, although he can’t put his finger on just why that is.

He’s lost in thought and only half listening to Conner’s long-winded explanation about the double-crossing and literal backstabbing happening on screen.

“—so basically, this lets the production team write her out of the show for now, so the actress is free to go shoot a film instead, but they can still bring her character back if they want to. And it also nukes TJ’s romantic relationship because the writers of these kinds of shows never know what to do once the leads get together, right? So they gotta break them up again, and having her get betrayed by her best friend brings up all these deep-seated trust issues and causes a lot of problems in her new relationship. So they were actually accomplishing a lot with this one plot twist. Killing, like, three birds with one stone. Also, they—oh shit, sorry!”
Jason figures he must have missed something, because Conner’s giving Dick an almost panicked look—and his friends look a little shocked as well—but when Jason catches Dick’s eye for probably the hundredth time that day, he looks just as confused as Jason feels.

“Sorry...for what?” Dick asks.

“Um,” Conner answers.

“That’s just one of those things you can’t say in Gotham, right?” Cassie says. “Like, it’s rude? Because you guys are—obviously you’re not literally birds, but it’s still not—”

“Are you serious right now?” Jason asks. “How freaking sensitive do you think we are? I make more dead jokes about myself than anyone.”

“We just don’t wanna make anyone mad,” Bart says. Which is total bullshit because Jason’s pretty sure half these kids enjoy pissing people off.

Dick’s frowning. “Did Tim tell you guys not to say that kind of stuff around us?”

“Not really?” Bart says. “We just assumed it might be a Gotham-based vigilante thing? We told Tim a really shitty joke once about, um, a Gotham-type thing and he got really mad.” For a moment, Bart’s eyes flicker and Jason’s almost positive that the kid just glanced over at him.

“When Bart says ‘we,’ he really means that he told the joke,” Cassie says. “And yeah, I thought Tim was gonna kick you off the team or something.”

“What was the joke?” Jason asks.

“Um,” Bart says. He looks uncomfortable, which Jason would have thought was impossible for him. “It’s really not a funny joke.”

“You gotta tell me. I can barely piss Tim off when I’m actually trying.”

“Um, okay, look. I was not actually joking about you being dead,” Bart says. “I would never do that! Not on purpose! And not in front of Tim. Back then I didn’t even know about you or the fact that you were dead at the time. I didn’t know anything! I still thought that Batman was Tim’s dad.”

“Batman is Tim’s dad,” Anita points out.

“Yeah, but he wasn't back then! Anyway, so I know nothing, right?”

“Obviously,” Cassie says, rolling her eyes.

“So there was this mission with all these weird booby traps, and we got blown up a little bit, and there was also a crowbar, and at some point Tim got mildly injured by said crowbar. And I made a joke about it and it did not go well. Because I didn't know! I wouldn't joke about you being dead and I definitely wouldn't make a joke about someone being killed by the Joker!”

“Wow,” Anita says. “This fuck up has so many layers I feel like it should win some kind of baking contest.”

“Kid,” Jason says. “Tell me the joke. I need to know. You’re killing me.”

“I see what you did there,” Bart says. “Respect. Okay, all I did was ask him if the crowbar hurt extra because it was a bird-based betrayal. You know. Because Robin. And crows.”
“That’s it?” Jason says. “That’s not even that bad.”

“Yeah, well, Tim disagreed. Loudly.” Bart frowns at the memory and then gives Jason the biggest puppy-dog eyes he’s ever seen. “Please don’t tell Tim I told you. Peeeeeeeee-”

“Jesus Christ, all right,” Jason says. “I don’t see what the big fuckin’ deal is.”

“You were kind of a sore subject,” Cassie says. “You know, back when you were dead. On account of the whole filling-your-shoes thing.”

“The fuck are you talking about?” Jason asks. He glances at Dick, expecting him to look just as flummoxed, but Dick’s got a pained expression on his face instead. Like he knows exactly what she means.

“Oh, kind of hard to live up to the guy who died in the line of duty?” Cassie says. “Actually, literally impossible to live up to, now that I think about it.”

Well. Fuck. Steph said something similar, back when Tim first disappeared, but Jason just brushed it off. He forces himself to roll his eyes. “If he’s fucked in the head about that kind of thing, it’s Bruce’s fault. Him and that fuckin’ memorial case.”

“Yeah, well, it’s still one of those things we try not to bring up. You trying to kill Tim? Whatever. He barely cares. You dying? Totally different reaction. And it’s pretty damn hard to piss Tim off, but when you manage it—well, let’s just say we try to avoid sensitive topics.”

“What’s sensitive?” Tim asks.

Jason only manages to stifle his startle reflex because Gotham’s full of sneaky drama queens who like to appear out of nowhere. The kids are apparently not yet immune. Bart jerks around so hard that he sends a spray of popcorn across the room.

Tim looks at them all from the doorway, clearly amused, with Cissie and Greta snickering and giggling behind him.

“Okay,” Tim says slowly. “What did I miss?”

“Um,” Cassie says, clearly flailing for an answer and not finding one. “We were just—”

“I told Jason the crowbar joke,” Bart blurts out.

The others all groan or cover their faces with their hands. Cissie and Greta both looked shocked. Tim just looks like he’s about to have a stroke.

“Bart,” he finally manages to bite out. “What the fuck.”

“Look, look, look, it’s okay. As another former dead person, Jason said that I could.”

Tim turns his exhausted and extremely frazzled gaze to Jason. “Jason. What the fuck.”

And Jason can’t really help it. He grins. “You let yourself get exploded and hit with a crowbar? Tim, you have got to stop copying me. I know imitation is the highest form of flattery, but—”

“Why,” Tim says in a blank, ragged monotone. “Why did I think it was a good idea to leave you all alone together? Why would I do that? What was I thinking?” He sits down heavily on the floor next to his friends, grabs a stray piece of popcorn, and pops it into his mouth. When Cassie looks at him askance, he just says, “This carpet is clean and free of sin. Unlike all of you.”
“It’s fine,” Bart says. “He took it a lot better than you did.”

“Bart, if you ever tell that joke to Bruce, I will disown you and then myself.”

Bart rolls his eyes. “You’re already emancipated. And I don’t think you can disown yourself. Or me. I mean, I read a law library once and there was nothing about—”

“I will do it,” Tim says firmly. “I’m serious. We will both end up alone and adrift in this world and it will be your fault.”

“Gasp,” Bart says. “I’m gonna be ruined.” He throws himself dramatically on the floor but ends up landing mostly on Conner and Cassie.

“Ha ha,” Cassie says, rolling her eyes and shoving him off.

“Actually, that reminds me,” Dick says, leaning over the edge of the couch to catch Bart’s attention. “Did you ever call Wally?”

“Hmmmwhatnow?” Bart asks.

“Have you talked to Wally?” Dick asks in his I’m-being-patient-with-you-right-now voice.

“About what?”

“To let him know that you’re back,” Dick says. “Clark and Diana already talked to me earlier. But I haven’t heard anything from Wally. Does he even know that you’re here?”

“I dunno. Probably not?” When Dick gives him a stern look, Bart just rolls his eyes. “I haven’t gotten around to it yet. And why’s he gotta know anyway?”

“Isn’t he your guardian or whatever?” Jason asks. He actually has no idea now that he’s thinking about it. It seemed like most of the sidekicks from his era lived with their mentors, but he knows that Conner and Cassie—and Tim, come to think of it—don’t.

“No,” Conner says. “He lives with the Garricks.”

Cassie frowns. “Um, no? He’s been staying in Manchester, right? With Helen?”

“Um.” Bart gives Tim a frantic look.

“Don’t look at me,” Tim says. “You did this to yourself. Also, I still cannot believe you told the crowbar joke.”

The rest of the kids look very confused and suspicious now. “Okay, fess up,” Cassie says. “What’s going on?”

Tim gives her a tired look and then says, in a perfect imitation of Stephanie’s super-fake customer-service voice, “Nothing. Why do you ask?”

“Tiiiiim,” Bart whines.

“Yes?”

Bart waves a hand at the room at large. “Fix this?”

Tim sighs. “So Bart’s not actually been staying with anyone since he got resurrected.”
“What?” Conner sputters out, his voice loud and incredulous.

“And we’re yelling again,” Tim says. “Great. Fantastic. Just what this evening needed.”

The others ignore him. “What do you mean you're not staying anywhere?” Cassie asks.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Cissie says, “do the Garricks know about this? Or the Flash? Or—”

Bart holds up his hands. “Guys, I can explain.”

“Okay,” Cassie says, quieting the others with a raised hand. “Explain.”

Bart shoots Tim another wide-eyed look and waves his hand at the room again, clearly asking for help.

Tim rolls his eyes. “The Garricks and the Flash think he's staying with Helen. Helen thinks he's staying with the Garricks. He has technically not lied to any of them, there was just an initial misunderstanding and he, well, ran with it. Pun intended.”

“Okay, but then where are you living?” Cassie demands, looking at Bart.

He shrugs. “I just stay wherever I want?”

“Technically, he's homeless,” Tim adds.

“That’s not helping,” Bart hisses. “And that’s a complete misrepresentation of the situation. Being homeless means you don't have anywhere to go. I am, like, the opposite of homeless. I can go anywhere in the world whenever I want.”

“Uh huh,” Cissie says. “Where do you sleep?”

“Depends? Sometimes I crash at the Tower. Other times I just stay with friends? I know people all over the place. I mean, I’ve slept over at literally all of your houses a ton this year.”

“I thought you wanted to hang out,” Anita says. “I didn’t know you were couch-surfing because you literally don’t have a home.”

“Plus,” Bart says, plowing onward and ignoring her, “I don’t have to worry about the weather or being in a bad part of the big city or whatever. If I get tired, I can just go nap on a beach in Tahiti and then get up and go. Which is a thing I used to do anyway back when I did live with other people.”

“Okay, but why?” Conner asks.

“I don't know?” Bart says. “It just sort of happened and I went with it? I mean, I wasn't gonna stay with Wally, Helen's got her own stuff going on, and the Garricks have already put up with me enough for one lifetime. They don't need me showing up again and 'ruining their twilight years' or whatever.”

Conner frowns. “They love you, Bart.”

“Yeah, I know,” he answers. “But people can love you and not want to take care of you all the time. Plus, I don’t need to be taken care of anymore. I’m good.”

The others are exchanging glances. Conner’s just scowling. “They’re your family. You’re supposed to let them take care of you whether you need it or not.”
“You only think that because you ended up with—”

“You are bullshitting us right now,” Cassie says, cutting him off.

Bart looks a little bit hurt by the accusation. “No, I'm not.”

“You're pulling a Tim and leaving something out. I can fucking tell.”

“Hey,” Tim says.

“Do not start with me, mister.”

“Look,” Bart says. “I just decided I wasn’t gonna waste any more of my life being a boring teenager and doing boring teenage stuff. Like, I get why I had to before? For life experience and all that. But I've done that already and I was an adult for a while and—”

“What do you mean you were an adult?” Jason asks.

“I was an adult,” Bart repeats, like that’s an answer in and of itself, “and also the Flash, and that second part was cool, the first part not so much, and that’s when I died which really sucked. And anyway, I came back and was like, why waste my time on all of that? Plus, this works out for everyone? I don’t have to deal with any of that stuff anymore and nobody else has to put up with me when they don’t feel like it. It’s a win-win.”

“Nobody’s putting up with you, Bart.” Conner says. “That’s not—”

Bart gives him an incredulous look. “Conner, remember when we were in space last week and you literally said, and I quote, that if you had to listen to me for one more second, you were gonna—”

“That doesn’t count!” Conner says. “We were stuck in a confined space for two days and you wouldn’t stop singing sea shanties over the intercom!”

“I won music rights fair and square! And you’re proving my point.”

“Yeah, but—”

Cassie just shakes her head at the two of them and turns her attention to Tim. “Okay, how did you even—scratch that, of course you knew. Why didn't you tell us?”

Tim gives her an unimpressed look. “I was asked not to. Obviously.”

“Tim is the only person here who can keep a secret,” Bart says, “which is why he’s been in on this from the beginning and you haven’t. You’re gonna blab. I can already tell.”

Cassie rolls her eyes. “Nobody’s gonna blab.”

“Um, hold up,” Conner says. “Yes, we are.”

“I don't get why this is a big deal,” Bart says. “Tim and I are practically the same age, sort of, and he gets to live on his own.”

Conner scowls. “That’s totally different.”

“And Tim is absolutely not a healthy role model for good life decisions,” Cassie adds.

“Hey,” Tim says.
“Tim, I love you, but this is the one arena of life in which you are an absolute disaster.”

“I think I’m doing fine,” he says.

“Because you are pathological. That time with your fake uncle—”

“That made sense in context.”

“No, it didn’t! Also, why are you letting him do this?”

“Tim’s not the boss of me,” Bart says.

Conner rolls his eyes. “Yes, he is.”

“I mean only sort of,” Bart concedes.

“I tried to buy him an apartment,” Tim says, “but he didn't want it.”

“I don't need one,” Bart says. “This is my new thing. I’m all about being, like, totally free and not getting tied down and stuff. And I get a lot more done this way.”

“This is why you’ve been running into so many random evil labs and cursed ancient temples and crashed alien spaceships,” Cassie says. “Because you're just wandering around, looking for trouble.”

“He's the world's most heroic hobo,” Tim says.

Cassie and Conner both look like they have a lot to say about that, but Anita cuts them off. “You know what I think?” she says. “I think this sounds rad as fuck. High-five, buddy.”

She tries to raise her hand, but Cissie intervenes, slapping it down and then glaring at her for good measure. Bart just grins and rematerializes on Anita’s other side where he gives her a not-at-all-discreet fist-bump.

“What?” Anita says, looking at the others. “I also don’t get why this is a big deal? We did stuff way more dangerous than just living on our own when we were younger. Like, so much more dangerous.”

“Are they really not checking in on you?” Dick asks. He looks almost as concerned as Conner. “The Garricks and Wally and—none of them are asking after you? At all?”

Bart shrugs. “I don’t really give them the chance? I drop by and bug all of them a couple of times a week. Just often enough that they don’t have a chance to wonder what I’m doing, because I always show up and tell them. I even let them know about all the people’s houses that I’ve stayed over at. And I do sleep over with the Garricks or with Helen every now and then. So I’m, like, barely even lying when you think about it.”

Cassie looks at Tim. “This stinks of strategy. Your kind of strategy.”

“It’s also just kind of nice?” Bart says, ignoring her. “I get to see all the people I care about all the time and they’re almost always happy to see me? Whereas when you see people every day, sometimes you get sick of each other.”

“You’re supposed to get sick of each other sometimes!” Conner says. “You’re family. That means putting up with each other. And being there and being together and—”
“Conner, cool it,” Cissie says. “Your opinion has been noted.” Turning to Bart, she asks, “Okay, but how are you surviving?”

“The world provides,” Bart says.

Cassie looks at Tim. “You're paying for this, aren't you?”

“In the sense that I am suffering the consequences right now?” Tim says. “Yes, I am paying for this. I am being yelled at for the *fifth* time this weekend and—”

“Do not weasel out of this, Tim Drake. You are bankrolling this. You are not just keeping this secret, you are actively aiding and abetting.”

“I mean, yeah, obviously,” Tim says. “I don’t know if you guys noticed this, but I have...a lot of money. A stupid amount of money.”

Conner’s shaking his head. “Bart, you can’t just take advantage of your wealthy friend—”

“Actually, you can,” Tim says. “I tell you guys *all the time*—”

“I'm not taking advantage!” Bart says. “I totally pay him back.”


“What do you mean how?”

“Bart,” Cissie says, “all I am hearing right now is that Tim is your sugardaddy, which—”


“I am super helpful!” Bart says. “Again, killing it at the hero thing, obviously, and I also help Tim out with his cases and identities and stuff all the time. Tim, tell them!”

“This is true,” Tim says.

“How are you helping?” Cissie asks.

“Well, first off, I am amazing at smuggling and stealing things, obviously.”

Cassie covers her face with her hands, “Ohmygod. Tim. Tim, why?”

“I mean from bad guys!” Bart says. “You know, stealing things back that have already been stolen. Or stealing from LexCorp! Remember the kryptonite? That was good stealing! That was stealing for justice. Also, I’m good at planting bugs and stuff! Great at that. Not in Gotham.” He gives Dick and Jason a worried look. “Obviously, I am not allowed to operate in Gotham. But, like, I can check on things elsewhere. And I do all kinds of alias stuff.”

“Tim does not need any help with his aliases,” Cassie points out.

“It’s actually really useful to have someone establish a paper trail and a physical presence,” Tim says. “It adds—”

Bart and Conner roll their eyes and chorus, “*Verisimilitude.*”

“Yeah, that,” Tim says.
Bart goes on. “So, like, I take care of his apartments outside of the U.S. Keep his plants alive. Use his aliases’ credit cards here and there. Stuff like that.”

“And you get paid for this?” Cassie says, still sounding dubious.

“I don't have a salary,” Bart admits. “I just spend his money. Mostly his aliases’ money, actually. Oh, oh, hey, guess how Tim puts me in his budget. Guessguessguess.”

There’s a collective groan from the room.

“Impulse purchases,” Tim says dryly.

“Okay,” Cassie says, “even if this is working for now—and I don’t think that it is, but let’s say for the sake of argument—even if this is working, it’s not a long-term plan. Your family's gonna figure this out eventually and also this is not a long-term plan.”

Bart rolls his eyes. “Sorry, do you have your whole life figured out? No? And we’re working on all that. Like, I told everybody that I'm taking a year off to get over the trauma of being dead or whatever, but after that I'm gonna get my GED—totally already aced all the practice tests, I just gotta sit down for the real thing—and then I'll sign up for college.”

“You are going to college,” Cissie says, clearly skeptical. “You hate school.”

Bart shrugs. “You can take online classes now, so I won't actually have to show up. And if nobody else finds out by then, I can just pretend that I'm living in a dorm on campus. And if someone does find out, I guess I can get a dorm room for show or whatever. That way everyone’ll think I'm being responsible, which will probably get Wally off my back, which is stupid because getting a degree in this day and age doesn't really provide you with a guarantee—”

“How are you gonna pay for college?” Conner asks. “You gonna let Tim pay for that too?”

“Why not?” Tim asks. “I genuinely don’t see the issue here. I’m only giving him Drake money. You know, the unearned inheritance that I got just for being born?”

“Yeah, I don't know why you're stuck on the Tim thing,” Bart says. “Like, if it wasn't him, it would be the Garricks or the Wests or someone else. Tons of kids my age don't pay for school or places to live or whatever.”

“Well, yeah,” Conner says, “but they're your family. That’s their job.”

“If you mean biologically, no? They aren't? I'm not related to the Garricks or Helen. I mean, Wally's my cousin and there’s Grandma Iris, but other than that I don't have family in this time period.”

“I'm not related to the Kents, but they're still my family. The Garricks were yours.”

“I don't disagree,” Bart says. “They are my family if we’re gonna define family as the people who love me and care about my wellbeing and all that. And by that definition, half the people in this room count. Including Tim.”

“You guys just need to accept that I'm rich and like to pay for stuff,” Tim says. He’s still tiredly eating popcorn off the floor.

Conner shakes his head. “This is clashing so very badly with the Kent family emphasis on self-sufficiency,” he says.
“Nobody does anything on their own,” Tim says. “Not really.”

“So, again,” Bart says, “I’m totally being helpful and I’m gonna be self-sufficient at some point. Like, I can probably pay for half of college, right? If I hold off another year or two?”

“Depends on the program and scholarships and stuff,” Tim says. “But yeah, probably.”

“But how?” Cassie asks.

“Bart is uniquely suited to thrive in the gig economy,” Tim answers.

“Yeah, I do a bunch of odd jobs when I get bored,” Bart says. “Which is all the time.” He grins and then adds, “I’m also following in the family footsteps.”

“Um, you’re definitely too young to be a forensic whatever,” Anita says.

“No, I’m not getting into criminology,” he answers. “I get enough of criminals when I’m suited up. And that would probably give me a terrible schedule. But I’ve been doing a lot of writing lately. Like Grandma Iris and Linda.”

“What, you’re gonna be a reporter?” Conner asks.

“Nah, I don’t think so. Tim doesn’t think I’d be good at maintaining a cover in that kind of environment for very long, so I don’t want to get a job at, like, a newspaper or a news station or anything. But I’ve been doing some freelance stuff and it’s pretty cool to just write about whatever I want? Like, I’ve read tons and tons of stuff, but there are still all these cool things that you can’t learn about in books or online yet. Like, one time I talked to this guy in Bolivia and he told me all about these local traditions I’d never heard about, so I wrote them all down and then talked to a bunch of other people to verify them. And then Grandma Iris helped me edit it—it needed a lot of structural work—and then I sold it? So I don’t totally suck and she says I’ll get better with practice, so I practice a ton, and I’ve got, like, a bunch of bylines already. Interviewing people’s pretty fun? Like, if you ask a ton of questions just ‘cause you’re curious, everybody gets annoyed. But if you ask a ton of questions and pretend to write down all their answers, suddenly people want to tell you everything.”

“So it’s like human interest stuff?” Conner says.

“Yeah, sometimes. And travel recommendations and reviews and stuff like that.”

“Okay, but how are you pulling this off?” Cassie asks.

“I would like to introduce you to a little something called pseudonyms. Duh. Also, I am getting pretty good at the whole disguises thing. And Tim set me up with an alias so that none of my travels get tied to Bart Allen.”

Anita elbows him. “Okay, this I wanna see. You got any fake alias stuff?”

Bart grins. “Yeah, I’ll go grab it! Berightback.” And then he’s gone in another gust of wind.

Jason has to hand it to Tim. When most of his friends turn accusatory gazes at him, he doesn’t even flinch. “So,” he says, looking utterly unruffled.

“Timothy,” Cassie says, crossing her arms, her expression disgruntled. “Do you really have nothing else to say for yourself?”
“No,” he answers. He’s stopped looking at her in favor of picking through the stack of unopened juice boxes on the floor. “Not really.”

“I cannot fucking believe you didn’t tell us about this,” Cassie says. She looks like she has a lot more to say, but Tim raises a hand to stop her.

“Just to confirm,” he says. “You’re mad because I kept this a secret from you?”

“Yes, obviously.”

“Right,” Tim says. “Me keeping secrets is a problem. Right up until you need me to keep one of your secrets. Then it’s suddenly okay again.” Cassie opens her mouth like she wants to argue. Closes it again. Points her finger at him. Lowers it. Looks around for support. “If you’re wondering if there’s a single person in this room who hasn’t asked me to keep a secret for them at some point,” Tim says, “the answer is no. There is not.” He takes a sip from his juice box.

“Stop being so smug,” Cassie says. “You are—you are so full of shit right now. You are drawing a—fuck, what’s it called? A false equivalency.”

“False equivalence,” Tim says. “And no, I’m not.”

“You are. You’re trying to imply that all secret-keeping is the same, when it is demonstrably not. My argument is not that you shouldn’t be allowed to keep other people’s secrets, it is only that this particular secret should not have been kept from me. Everyone else, I can understand, but—”

“Sorry, what?” Conner says.

“Shush, I’m winning an argument with Tim,” Cassie says. “I fucking took a class on rhetoric and everything to better prepare myself for this eventuality.”

“I knew you had ulterior motives for that,” Tim says.

“I am your co-leader on this team,” Cassie continues. “And this concerns the welfare of one of our teammates. So you should have told me.”

“Hold the fuck up,” Conner says. “If he should have told anyone, it should have been me. I’ve known Bart the longest—”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just because you’re team leader doesn’t mean you’re in charge of what we do when we’re not on a mission. That’s not how this ever worked. And I have been looking out for Bart since—”

Greta looks miserable about the fighting. Anita just looks kind of impressed. She catches Tim’s attention, silently points at Conner and Cassie, and then spreads her hands in a questioning gesture. Jason’s pretty sure it translates to something like, *How did you do that?*

Tim just shrugs.

“Guys,” Cissie says, raising her voice to cut into the escalating argument. “Can you save the custody battle for later? Pretty sure we’re supposed to be arguing with Tim right now.”

Tim sighs.

“Okay,” Cassie says, holding up a hand to preemptively shush Conner—to his obvious annoyance—and turning back to Tim. “Am I right in assuming that you talked him out of doing something
“I can neither confirm nor deny—”

“Right, that’s a yes,” Cassie says. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Just tell me this much: is he really okay?”

“For someone who was literally dead last year, yeah, he’s doing great.”

“What?” he says, looking annoyed now. “You know I would let you know if anything was really wrong.”

“Okay,” Cassie says.

Conner scowls. “Um, not okay? At all?”

Cassie pinches the bridge of her nose and then just shakes her head. “We’re gonna trust Tim’s admittedly warped judgment on this one. At least for now.”

“Gee, thanks,” Tim says.

“That goes for you guys, too,” she says, looking at Dick and Jason now. “No snitching.”

“All good,” Jason answers.

Dick frowns. “I really don’t like this.”

“You don’t have to like it,” Cassie says. “You just have to promise that you’re not gonna rat him out to Wally or the League or anything.”

“You’re seriously okay with this?” Conner says, looking at Tim now. “I mean, aren’t you busy enough as is?”

“What does me being busy have to do with anything?” Tim asks. “It’s not like I’d be seeing Bart any less if he was staying with someone. He’d be dropping in on me either way. I don’t even check in on him. He checks in with me.” When Conner looks completely unconvinced by this, Tim adds, “I’m genuinely not tracking him any more than I track the rest of you.”

Cissie rolls her eyes. “It’s honestly kind of disturbing how much you’ve acclimatized us to being stalked.”

“I vote we let him do what he wants,” Anita says. “Tim’s right. It’s his life, he ought to do what he wants with it. Plus, he was already an adult and had to look out for himself for a while anyway. Making him live with somebody else just because he’s younger again is stupid.” When Cissie gives her an annoyed look, she adds, “What? Full-time heroics and no extraneous, mundane bullshit? He’s literally living the dream right now.”

“Strongly disagree,” Cissie says. “I’m not saying we make him move back in with anybody, but we definitely ought to let his family know what’s going on.”


Greta gives Tim an apologetic look. “I agree with Conner. We should tell someone.”
“Then we’re at a stalemate,” Cassie says. “Big fucking surprise.”

“I vote you let the kid do what he wants,” Jason says.

Conner frowns. “You don’t get a vote. You’re not on the team.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “Jason has as much a right to vote on this as any of us. Which is to say, none whatsoever. We vote on team stuff. This is not team stuff. If we actually voted on each other’s personal lives, I would have a truly terrible public persona and Cissie would be starring in that horrible Thundercats reboot.” When Cassie starts to protest, he cuts her off and adds, “And even if we were voting—which we very much aren’t—it wouldn’t be a tie. Jason and Dick cancel each other out—don’t argue, Dick, I know what your vote would be—meaning the tiebreaker vote goes to Bart.”

“Cool, what are we voting on?” Bart asks, reappearing in the middle of the room with an armful of documents. “Also, was that long enough for everyone to confer behind my back or should I go run some more laps or something?”

“Yeah, we’re pretty much sorted out,” Cassie says with a sigh. “None of us are gonna tell.” She gives Dick a very pointed look as she says it.

“We are not sorted out,” Conner says, crossing his arms over his chest. “Look, Bart, the only way I agree to this is if you put the Kents into your weekly rotation or whatever. Come over for dinner and spend the night once a week or I’m telling, Cassie’s wrath or no.”

Cassie doesn’t look upset. Instead, she looks kind of pleased at the idea.

Bart makes a face. “Ugh, yeah, sure. fine. That is kind of going against the spirit of this entire venture but okay.”

“Uh huh,” Conner says. “You do realize Tim straight up tricked you, right?”

“What do you mean?” Bart asks. “What trick?”

Conner gives him a very unimpressed look. “So originally Tim wanted to buy you an apartment and you said no. Because you want to be independent and all that.”

“Yeah?”

“So instead he gave you access to multiple apartments all over the world.”


“Yes?” Tim says. “If you’re surprised I had an ulterior motive, then you clearly forgot who you were dealing with.”

“Tiiiiim.”

“You are a legitimately useful operative,” Tim says. “Although, again, my support is not contingent upon your continued utility. You can absolutely be my layabout fake relative if you want. I really don’t care.”

“Wait, relative?” Conner says.

Bart’s grinning ear-to-ear now. “We’re cousins!” He waves a passport in front of them. Cissie snatches it out of his hand.
“Distant fake cousins,” Tim adds.

“This is what I use when I'm overseas,” Bart says. “'Cause Bart Allen does not have the means to travel a bunch and also I don't want any of this to get back to Wally or the Garricks, you know?”

“Henry Allen Thomas,” Cissie reads out. “Well, you sure did stick with the first-names-only thing, didn't you?”


“Maternal grandmother's surname,” Tim says. “I just stuck him in a far off branch of my family tree. Makes it easier to verify stuff if he ever needs someone to vouch for him.”

“I can't believe I didn’t see this coming,” Cassie says. “Of course, you think inventing fake relatives is a sensible solution to a problem. Of course—”

“As my fake relative,” Tim says, pointedly ignoring her, “it makes sense for me to pay for his upkeep and stuff. Plus, like, I have a whole college fund that I'm never gonna use, so that might as well go to someone.”

“Wait, what?” Dick says.

“What?” Tim echoes.

“What do you mean you’re not going to college?”

“What do you mean what do I mean?” Tim says. “I’m a high school dropout. Why would I go to college? What would be the point?”

“Tim’s already smart enough,” Bart says. “And rich. Isn’t that why people go to college? To get smart and increase their earning potential and stuff?”

“Also to pursue scholarship and higher learning,” Cassie says. “My mom is literally an academic, and you’re kind of shitting on her profession right now.”

Bart shrugs. “Eh, still boring.”

“Does Bruce know about this?” Dick asks.

“Dick,” Tim says, “if this is about the big blowup the two of you had back when you dropped out, don’t worry about it. Bruce isn’t gonna care. He only got so weird about it with you because you’re the firstborn and he didn’t know what he was doing. And because he’s a control freak who is terrible at dealing with change.”

“He’ll care,” Dick says, looking a little wounded.

“Pretty sure he won’t,” Tim answers. “It really doesn’t matter and it’s kind of a waste of time.”

“A agreed,” Bart says.

Dick frowns. “It's not all about efficiency. You could just go and have a good time. Lots of people enjoy their college experiences.”

Tim looks like this is the dumbest thing he's ever heard. Beside him, Cissie snorts. “What, like going to parties and things? Tim's already done that. And he sucks at it.”
“Cissie,” Tim says, a warning in his voice.

“Ooooh, is this about that time you guys visited Greta back in October?” Cassie asks.

“We are not telling this story,” Tim says firmly.

“I am not telling this story,” Cissie says, “unless Dick promises not to tell on Bart.”

Dick looks indecisive.

“It’s a really good story,” Cissie says.

“It’s really not,” Tim tells him. “It’s very boring.”

“Also, Bart’s family is gonna figure out what’s going on eventually anyway. Like, he’s definitely gonna slip up at some point.”

“Hey!” Bart protests. “I might not.”

Dick still looks uncertain. “Come on,” Jason says, elbowing him. “Enter the shadow of conspiracy with us. I wanna hear this one.”

“Okay,” Dick says slowly. “I’ll keep it a secret for now.”

That’s an equivocal answer if Jason’s ever heard one, but the others don’t seem to notice. Bart throws his arms in the air, lets out a victory whoop, and then throws himself at Cissie, enveloping her in a big hug.

Tim looks much less pleased. “Cissie,” he says.

She rolls her eyes. “Okay, obviously don’t share this story with your dad,” she says. “So, Tim and I, being the wonderful friends that we are, visited Greta last year once she’d settled in at Gateway U. And we ended up going to a frat party while we were there. Because it’s one of those things you have to do at least once and there was no way she was gonna go on her own. And then—”

“It went fine,” Tim says. “It was totally normal. Nothing weird happened.”

“No, no, no,” Cissie says. “Do not listen to this lying liar who lies. What actually happened is his predator radar went off the second we stepped inside. Like, we got two feet into the house and then Tim immediately elbows this girl’s drink right out of her hands.”

“Shit,” Jason says. “Was someone trying to—”

“Yeah,” Tim says, grimacing. “More than one person, actually.”

“What do you think happened next?” Cissie asks. “We catch the assholes trying to drug their victims, get them all arrested, and then go on with our night?”

“...yes?” Dick says.

“Of course not,” Cissie answers. “Instead, Tim went full dude-bro, ditched us so that he could infiltrate this guy’s predatory friend group, and got them to spill about their drug dealer—who, by the way, was a doctor who worked on campus—and then he had to coordinate with the police—the real police, not the campus police who he got into a heated argument with—and set up a massive sting operation. It was all super elaborate and took up half the weekend.”
“How did you infiltrate them?” Jason asks.

Greta covers her face with her hands.

“I fake roofied Cissie,” Tim says. “Great performance, by the way.”

“And then I got Greta to publicly confront me while I was trying to get Cissie out of the house.”

Greta makes a small pained noise behind her hands.

“She decked him,” Cissie says. “It was amazing.”

“Holy shit,” Cassie says, sounding impressed.

“I thought you were going to dodge!” Greta wails. “I didn't think you'd just let me punch you in the face!”

Tim shakes his head. “That would have been less convincing. Also, when I said hit me, I sort of thought you'd go for a slap.”

“Was it a good punch?” Conner asks.

“Oh yeah, it was fantastic. Perfect form. Knocked me off my feet.”

“Because you didn't dodge,” Greta says.

“I had a spectacular black eye,” Tim tells them, “which earned me some sympathy from all the actual and aspiring rapists I had to hang out with for the rest of the night.” He stops and makes a face. “Which was the actual fucking worst. I cannot believe you've made me remember this, Cissie.”

“Right, so that was Tim’s whole Friday night,” Cissie says, ignoring him. “And he had to hang out with the douchebag sexual predators for most of Saturday. And then he caught the doctor guy late that night, got him to turn himself in to the police and agree to do a sting operation so that they could catch more of the predators on campus. So we didn’t even get to see him again until late, late Saturday night when he came back to Greta’s dorm room and crashed super hard. So that was most of the weekend gone. Gone for a good cause, obviously, but still gone.”

“I don’t understand how you’re turning this into a criticism of me,” Tim says.

“I’m not,” Cissie answers. “I’m just pointing out that you literally never turn off your crime radar even when you’re supposed to. Obviously, this is a good thing for potential crime victims. It is a less good thing for, like, your social life and general well-being. I know you hate hearing this, but maybe that was one of those crimes that you could have handed off to the actual police instead of micromanaging everything and—”

“I feel like you fundamentally don’t understand the whole vigilante ethos,” Tim says.

She rolls her eyes. “Also,” she says, turning back toward Dick, “that was not actually the fun part of the story since obviously none of that was remotely fun.”

“Wait,” Tim says.

“The actual fun part of the story was Sunday,” Cissie says.
“I don’t feel that this is necessary,” Tim says.

Cissie goes on, smirking, “We had a nice fancy brunch in the morning, and then in the afternoon we locked ourselves in Greta’s dorm room where there is no crime, got spectacularly drunk—which, now that I’m saying it, I realize is technically a minor crime, actually. But still less of a crime than our viewing material. Tim made us watch the entire Star Wars trilogy.”

“Oh no,” Dick says. “Not the—”

“The prequel trilogy,” Cissie confirms.

There is a collective groan from the rest of the room. Even Conner, who seems like he has Tim’s back more often than not, just starts shaking his head.

“Look,” Tim says. “I’m not saying they’re good. I’m not even saying I like them. But—”

“You love those stupid films,” Cissie says. “You love them so much it’s absurd.”

“They could have been great,” Tim says.

“But they weren’t, Tim,” Dick tells him, gently. Like he’s said this before.

“But they could have been.”

“Just because you keep repeating that doesn’t mean it’s true,” Cissie says. “Anyway, so we had to watch that trash and listen to Tim’s extensive opinions on how they could have fixed films and also a bunch of stuff about the lady who edited the first ones and also—”

Conner cuts in with, “—how they completely failed Natalie Portman.”

Cissie grins at him. “You’ve heard the sober version of that rant. The drunk version is just…” She brings her fingers up to her mouth and does a little chef’s kiss. “Tim is a very talkative and opinionated drunk.”

“You think I was the argumentative one? Seriously?”

“Okay,” Jason says, cutting in because he has to know. “When you say, ‘spectacularly drunk,’ does that mean—”

Tim makes a face. “I might have puked.”

Bart looks delighted. “Gross!”

Cissie shakes her head. “No, no, he’s telling it wrong, it was kind of amazing. We were arguing and I said something about how Padmé was kind of overrated—” Conner straight up gasps, but Cissie just nods. “Yeah, and in the middle of me talking, he just reached over, grabbed a trash can, yarfed into it, and then looked me dead in the eye and said—do you remember what you said, Tim?”

Without missing a beat, Tim says, “That’s what I think of your bullshit opinion.” When his friends start laughing, he adds gravely, “I still maintain that it was your disrespect for Senator Amidala and not the alcohol poisoning that sickened me the most.” For a moment he looks mock-serious—mouth tipped down into a forced frown, but eyes crinkling a little like he’s going to laugh—but then he glances back over toward the couch where Dick and Jason are sitting. And the frown suddenly looks a bit more real.
“Okay, but seriously, can we not tell Bruce about this?” he says. He’s looking back and forth between Dick and Jason now, and his manner’s still casual—he’s a hell of a lot better at hiding his agitation than Damian or Bruce—but there’s still something off about him.

Jason scoffs. “Like I’m gonna snitch to him.”

“Are you talking about the college thing or the drinking?” Dick asks.

“The drinking, obviously,” Tim answers. “He’s seriously not gonna care about me not going to college.”

“Is he really gonna care about the drinking thing?” Anita asks.

“Um, yeah?” Tim says. “Teenage face of the company drinking underage? Kind of a bad look.”

Dick somehow manages to look even more uncomfortable about this. Beside Tim, Anita rolls her eyes and says, “Someone give Tim his phone back.”

“Why?” Tim asks, looking suspicious.

She’s already pulled out her own. “I just googled ‘Bruce Wayne antics’ and I’m sending you the first ten stories that popped up. I am pretty sure he’s drunk in all of them.”

“He’s fake drunk,” Tim says. “That’s completely different.”

“Not from a PR standpoint. You worry about this kind of thing too much. Bruce Wayne has a terrible reputation.”

“Bruce is a beloved public figure with a tragic backstory,” Tim points out. “He can get away with that kind of thing.”

“Tim, you are literally describing yourself right now. You are—”

“Also,” Tim says, ignoring her, “I have already promised Lucius and Tam that I will not put them through any more unnecessary PR nightmares this year. So I cannot throw away my reputation anytime soon or they’ll both go back to hating me. And I don’t actually think Bruce would be upset about that stuff. He’d be much more focused on the irresponsible and reckless endangerment angle.”

Cissie rolls her eyes. “Tim, you have one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. This was safe in comparison. What could have gone wrong?”

Conner groans. “Why would you—”

“Thank you for asking,” Tim says. “I can think of two dozen scenarios where physically and mentally handicapping myself could lead to death and/or disaster.”

“Oh god,” Cissie says. “Please don’t start listing—”

“Numbers one through seven involve assassins,” Tim says. “Numbers eight through—”

“This is why we had to get you drunk,” Cissie says, raising a hand to flick Tim in the forehead. She projects the movement, but Tim doesn’t try to stop her. Just lets it happen and then gives her an aggrieved look. “Because your brain is a literal nightmare.”

“My nightmare brain is an asset and you know it,” he replies. “You can’t create contingency plans
for terrible things unless you spend time thinking about terrible things. That’s how that works.”

Cissie just rolls her eyes. “Yes, congratulations, you’ve managed to weaponize your anxiety and paranoia instead of actually dealing with them. Bravo. We’re so proud.”

“You call it anxiety and paranoia,” Tim says. “I call it a wildly successful survival strategy.”

“Tim is kind of our survival expert,” Bart points out.

Cissie frowns. “I’m just trying to point out, again, that this is a skill set that’s really important for your job but also super inconvenient for the rest of your life.”

“Well, the rest of my life is gonna be really short if I stop. So.” He shrugs. “Not gonna.”

“I hate that I can't argue with that,” Cissie says. “You and your terrible life choices are being extremely frustrating right now.”

“You’re criticizing everyone in the room,” Tim points out. “Except Greta, I guess.”

“I’m not criticizing. I’m just reminding you guys about the inherently shitty nature of your chosen profession. We’ve all already agreed that dedicating your life to an activity that constantly brings you into contact with the absolute worst aspects of humanity is, you know, incredibly damaging to your mental health.”

“The worst and the best aspects of humanity,” Bart says. “The best being us, obviously.” When Cissie just snorts, unimpressed, he adds, “Seriously. As long as we hang out together a lot, it really all balances out in the end.”

“Kind of true,” Conner says. When the others all shoot him doubtful looks, he adds, “What? Isn’t that, like, the entirety of our Titans West strategy?”

“True!” Bart says. “We actually need to hang out together more now that I’m thinking about it. Just to be on the safe side.”

“There’s more than one Titans team now?” Jason asks.

“No, there is not,” Cassie says. “And as long as we don’t totally fuck up, there never will be.”

Jason raises his eyebrows at Tim, expecting him to explain, but instead he just gives Jason a tired, blank look and then shakes his head and lies down.

Anita pats him consolingly. Then she takes pity on Jason and tells him, “They all turned into evil assholes in a shitty alternate future where everything sucked.”

“Except for me!”

“Except for Bart,” she adds.

“You guys,” Jason says, unable to keep the disbelief out of his voice. “Evil. Seriously?”

“Yeah, we turned into a bunch of murderous assholes,” Conner says, grimacing. “Like, your little city-based crime spree? Adorable in comparison.”

“I still think it must have been a trick,” Greta says. “You guys would never—”

“It was real,” Bart says. “I know a fake timeline when I see one.”
“You wouldn’t have even recognized us,” Cassie tells her. “We changed...a lot.”

“Bunch of joyless fucking psychos,” Conner mutters.

Tim’s still not saying anything. Jason kicks his uninjured foot. “Are they fucking with me right now or did you actually meet yourself in the future?”

“An utterly unhinged version of my future self, yes,” Tim says. Jason expects him to kick back, but he doesn’t move.

“Unhinged how?”

“He was kind of like a really scary, murdery version of you mixed with Batman,” Bart says. “But with, like, way more leadership skills. Which now that I think about it is probably how our futures selves managed to pull off all of that—”

“Can we please stop talking about this?” Tim says. He throws one of his arms up over his face, blocking the overhead light and hiding his expression.

“Okay, but how the fuck did you get away with going evil?” Jason asks. He doesn’t ask what the fuck Bart meant about Tim being like him because that’s too absurd to even consider. “Seriously. How come nobody stopped you?”

“Couldn’t,” Tim says, his voice muffled by his arm. “Not around anymore.” Beside him, Bart grimaces and then draws his finger across his own neck.

Jason’s stomach drops. “All of them?” he says.

Tim doesn’t answer.

“None of that’s going to happen,” Cassie says firmly. “As long as we don’t split up the team, we ought to be fine.”

“If you guys start to go evil and/or crazy, I will forcibly drag you all to therapy,” Cissie says. “Yes, even you, Tim. I know you would literally rather get stabbed again, but—”

“Things that could go horribly wrong,” Tim says, raising his hands to count off points on his fingertips. “Exposing your secret identity. Getting hypnotized. Getting drugged against your will. Having your personal information and psychological profile stolen and used against you. Being gaslit. Being driven insane by the person who’s supposed to help you. Being—”

Anita reaches over to the couch, grabs a throw pillow, and whacks Tim in the face with it. “Quit catastrophizing.” When she goes for a second hit, Tim blocks it and then starts trying to wrench the pillow out of her grasp.

“He’s not,” Cissie says. “I have heard this list before. These are all things that have actually happened to people under psychiatric care in Gotham. Because this city is terrible.”

“You live in Los Angeles,” Tim says, managing a fair amount of contempt while still lying on the floor and fighting over a throw pillow.

“At least my shitty city gets sunlight.”

Tim abandons his tug-of-war with Anita in favor of flipping Cissie off. Anita raises the pillow above her head, clearly planning to smack Tim with it again, but Conner reaches over and easily
plucks it out of her hands. “Guys,” he says, ignoring the annoyed look she gives him, “I feel like you left out something super important in that story.”

“What?” Cissie asks.

“Tim’s a talkative drunk,” Conner says. “And Cissie’s a mean drunk. But what about Greta?”

Cissie and Tim look at each other. Greta’s gone pink in the face.

“Oh my god,” Cassie says. “You have to tell us.”

“Guys,” Cissie says. Greta covers her face.

Tim grimaces. “She gets kind of...weepy.”

“Oh no,” Bart says.

Anita looks surprised. “Did not peg you for a sad drunk.”

“I am not,” Greta says. “It was just the one time! And it was their fault.” She pulls her hands away from her face and waves them at Tim and Cissie.

“Holy shit,” Conner says. “You two were so mean that you made Greta cry?”

Tim sighs. Cissie rolls her eyes. Greta looks wide-eyed and then sputters out, “No! Not like that! It was—I was crying because they're so nice!”

Most of them look skeptical at this. “People don't cry when someone's nice to them,” Anita points out.

“Um,” Conner says. “Sometimes they do.”

“I was just really happy,” Greta says. “Gateway U is great and all, but when I first started going there, it was kind of scary? Because I was all alone and I didn’t know anyone. And I really missed being at Elias and being roommates with Cassie and seeing Cissie and Traya every day. And then Tim and Cissie came to visit me even though they're both super busy and it was just so nice and—”

To the visible alarm of almost everyone in the room, her voice starts to wobble, but she takes a deep breath and then goes on. “And I was just really happy? About everything? Back when I was locked up by the DEO, I never thought I'd have any sort of life. And then you guys saved me, and being on the team was great and all, but I didn't think—I mean, I never thought I'd get to do, you know, normal stuff. Have a real life again. And then I got my body back and it was so great but I thought that—I didn't think that we'd all still—I figured once I was off the team, maybe you'd all forget about me—”

“Greta,” Bart says, sounding horrified.

“—because I tried to kill you and I wasn't a hero anymore and I j-just feel so l-lucky and I can't believe this is my l-life a-and—” She stops. Takes a shaky breath. Her face is very pink again.

“Greta,” Cassie says, her voice gentle. “Are you about to cry again?”

“N-no,” she says.

“Do you need a hug?” Bart asks.

Greta opens her mouth to answer and then bursts into tears.
Jason’s not usually bothered when someone cries. He sees a lot of that in his line of work. People crying because they’ve been hurt or because they’re scared or just because they’re so fucking relieved to be alive. People crying because he hurt them or scared them or saved them or whatever. It’s part of the job.

But those are usually strangers. And he doesn’t know Greta very well, but apparently half a day of mild proximity is enough to make him feel really uncomfortable about just sitting by while she gets caught up in a crush of hugs and babbled reassurances and a little bit of teasing that’s much gentler than the ribbing Tim and his friends usually give each other.

He waits until things have calmed down before he sneaks out. Greta’s still sniffling a little bit but Cissie’s giving them all a play-by-play of the last time she publicly burst into tears—on set, frustrated and stressed because she’d been filming in the rain for six hours and someone kept fucking up the practical effects, ruining every single one of her takes, and, yes, they caught her meltdown on camera, which was mortifying—and the way she tells the story is funny enough that Jason’s able to slip out of the room unnoticed while they’re all distracted.

He’s in the garage, examining the car keys hanging on carefully labeled hooks, when he hears someone deliberately scuffing their feet behind him. The kind of sound you learn to make when you spend a lot of time around paranoid, easily startled vigilantes.

He doesn’t even bother glancing back. “Can we skip past the part where you try to get me to talk about my feelings or whatever and just go straight to the bit where I tell you to fuck off?”

He expects a long-suffering sigh or a dumb joke. Not a soft, amused huff of breath.

“I thought you were Dick,” he says, half-turning to look.

“I figured,” Tim answers, leaning against the door frame. The hallway behind him is dark, but Jason’s pretty sure it’s empty. “You heading out?”

His voice and stance are casual, but the question strikes Jason as off somehow. Too inane. He’s used to Red Robin’s kind of questioning—sharp, deliberate, purposeful. Not small-talk bullshit meant to fill space.

“Yeah,” he answers slowly, not bothering to hide how suspicious he finds this. “I didn’t sign up for a slumber party.”

“Fair enough,” Tim says. “They’re kind of a lot to deal with.”

“I’m surprised you got away. They gonna be tearing down the hall in the next sixty seconds?”

Tim shakes his head. “No. They know where I am. And they’re keeping Dick occupied.”

“Okay,” Jason says, pocketing a set of keys at random and then turning to face Tim. He makes a show of crossing his arms and then asks, his voice impatient now, “What exactly do you want?”

For a moment he’s not sure why he feels so prickly and annoyed all of a sudden. He should be relieved. He really didn’t want to deal with Dick right now. Tim, in comparison, is usually a lot more tolerable.

But with Dick, he at least knew what to expect. He’d been fully prepared to brush off whatever maudlin guilt trip Dick decided to spring on him this time. He’s got no idea why Tim’s here, and he’s sick of getting ambushed in this damn house for reasons that he doesn’t really understand.
At this point he'd prefer getting interrogated again over getting another fucked up thank you that makes him feel like shit because apparently everyone’s lowered the bar for him so much that it might as well be buried underground.

He doesn’t expect Tim to frown, openly serious now, and say, “Sorry. About last week. I don’t think I said that before.”

“You’re sorry,” Jason says, letting all of his skepticism bleed into his voice. “Okay. And just which part are you sorry about?”

It’s the kind of thing his mom used to ask him back when he was still young enough to think that saying sorry was some kind of get-out-of-jail-free card. He always had to prove he was sorry about more than just getting caught. Had to explain what he’d done wrong and what he’d do differently next time.

Tim’s apparently never had this one pulled on him before. He hesitates a moment and then tries, “All of it?”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Fuck off. You’re not sorry at all. You’re just trying to make sure I’m not still pissed off at you. Which, for the record, I am.”

Tim frowns and looks like he’s trying to figure out how to respond. Jason fully expects another bullshit answer, but instead Tim says, “I’m not sorry for tricking you. It was necessary. But I am sorry that I asked you to trick the others. I shouldn’t have done that.” He breaks off. Then adds, “I know I left you in a bad position. With the team. I am sorry about that. I won’t do it again.”

“Only because you know I’m not stupid enough to fall for it a second time,” Jason says. “Seriously. That’s the best you can come up with?”

“If you want honesty,” Tim says, “that’s all I’ve got.”

“Honesty being one of your cardinal virtues,” Jason snaps back. He’s surprised to realize that he’s well past annoyed and edging toward angry now.

Tim shoves his hands into his pockets. “I don’t know what else you want me to say.” His body language is shifting from deliberately relaxed to something a little more wary, and Jason wonders, abruptly, what the hell his friends were thinking, letting him come down here alone. They’ve been deliberately and aggressively shielding him from any kind of conflict all damn day. So why the fuck are they letting Tim do this now?

He should just go. Accept Tim’s shitty, insincere apology and be on his way. The stupid kid is just trying to make sure they’re okay because that’s what Tim does. And Jason’s turning it into a confrontation because that’s what he does. Tim likes building bridges, and Jason likes burning them down. That’s just who they are.

That’s something that he still hates about Tim sometimes. The fact that Tim’s the inverse of him in so many ways that it almost feels deliberate. Like he built up his vigilante persona by looking at Jason and then trying to be the exact opposite of him. Jason’s sometimes impulsive. Tim’s always deliberate. Jason lets his emotions get the better of him. Tim pretends he’s as logical as a Vulcan. Jason died and still isn’t over it. Tim’s so prepared for his own death that he has a whole fucking protocol for it.

Jason will not—cannot—forgive the world for letting it all happen. His death and all the things that came after. Meanwhile, Tim brushes off murder attempts like they’re nothing, and Jason just
can’t fucking understand that.

Even now, it pisses him off. He doesn’t regret most of the terrible shit he’s done. The people he killed all deserved it. The world is better off without them in it. But Tim doesn’t fall into that category. Trying to kill Tim wasn’t about making the world a better place. It was just his own batshit vendetta getting the better of him. And he’s pissed off at himself for going that crazy in the first place. And he’s even more pissed off at Tim for just letting him off the hook. For always playing at being some kind of saintly fucking martyr.

And he really wants to ask Tim just what the fuck is wrong with him. And why he’s spent so much time trying to drag Jason back into the fold. But he’s brought this up before, and Tim’s always given him bullshit platitudes or just brushed off the question entirely.

Jason thinks he might have a better idea now. Thinks it might have something to do with that fucked up future Tim and his friends visited. A future where Tim lost everything. And ended up like him.

It’s like some kind of sick joke. Jason goes off the deep end because he died. Tim loses it because he lives. Jason wouldn’t even believe it if he hadn’t just spent a full day listening to Tim’s friends rattle off all their fucked up life stories without a second thought.

And he wants to know if that’s it. If that’s the reason Tim’s been so persistent about working with Jason this past year. But he recognizes the expression on Tim’s face right now. It’s the same look he was wearing right before he tipped over the camera back when he was still in the hospital and didn’t want to deal with Bruce’s questions anymore. Tired and touchy and pissed off about dealing with something that he didn’t expect. And based on his reaction earlier, Jason’s pretty sure he’ll fuck off back to the safety of his friends if Jason brings up that future timeline.

But Tim’s frankly sickening sense of forgiveness apparently applies to more than just Robins. So Jason takes another moment to stomp down on his temper—as much as he can, anyway—and then asks, “Did she really try to kill you?”

“What?” Tim asks, obviously taken aback.

“Greta. She said she tried to kill all of you. And Steph mentioned it earlier too. Said she went full psycho.”

Tim just stares at him. Then asks, clearly confused, “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You asked me what I wanted to hear and I’m telling you. Just answer the damn question.”

“Yeah?” Tim says after a moment. “She did. But that was a long time ago. And there were extenuating circumstances. And she didn’t actually manage it, so—” He pauses. Then gives Jason a tired, exasperated look. “I don’t understand why we’re talking about this.”

“That’s it?” Jason says. “That’s the whole story? Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Tim says. Like he really thinks it’s that simple. “She reached her breaking point and tried to do something terrible. And we managed to stop her before she crossed that line. And she’s—she isn’t the only one on the team who’s been there.” He pauses, looking like he’s trying to figure out what to say. The look he gives Jason now is less confused and more considering. After a moment, he adds, “Everyone has a breaking point. The only difference, for most of us, is whether or not we’re unlucky enough to learn what that point is. And whether or not we have someone to stop us when we get there. That’s what the team’s for. Making sure that kind of thing doesn’t happen.”
“Bullshit,” Jason says, his voice more vicious than he means it to be. “You don’t believe any of that. I’ve heard all your fucking speeches about how everyone has the capacity to do good and why all those scumbags on the street don’t deserve a bullet between the eyes and—”

“Everyone’s capable of doing good,” Tim says. “And everyone’s capable of doing the opposite.” He stops. Shrugs again. “Anyone can go off the deep end. Given enough pressure or the right set of circumstances. Even Bruce—” He cuts himself off, then seems to think better of it. “There were times when he—it could have happened. Not now. Not anymore. But it could have.”

“You stopped him,” Jason says. He feels stuck. Rooted to the spot. He wanted to talk about Tim, yeah, but he doesn’t want to hear about Bruce. Doesn’t want to talk about this.

“I helped,” Tim answers. “Some. It didn’t need to be me. He just needed someone to—he just needed someone. That’s all.”

Jason doesn’t believe that for a fucking second. “That’s not how Dick tells that story.”

Tim winces. “You guys—you talked about that? About me?”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Yeah, dipshit, you were kind of the main topic of conversation last week. Can’t imagine why, but—”

Tim looks like the thought makes him feel sick. His expression is pathetic enough that Jason almost feels bad for him.

“Dick told us some stories,” he explains. “After the first call. The one from Impulse. Before you sent the video message.”

Dick had ushered them all away from the computer—away from Bruce, who’d gone from eerily blank to silently apoplectic during the course of that call—and started answering Duke and Damian’s incredulous questions about Tim’s early years. And that, inevitably, led to the story of how the weedy little neighbor kid next door became Batman’s crime-fighting partner.

At the time, it felt like yet another confirmation of what he already knew: that Tim was meant to be Robin in a way that Jason never was. Because Tim was there the night it all began. He saw the Graysons fall to their deaths. Still remembered it vividly years later, even though he’d been young enough that it should have faded away into some hazy, half-forgotten childhood trauma.

Tim was there the night that Bruce and Dick first met. And Dick’s signature quadruple somersault tipped him off to the identities of two of the world’s most secretive vigilantes.

The whole thing makes Tim’s tenure as Robin sound fucking fateful. Like he was always supposed to be the one to take up Dick’s mantle. Not Jason. Jason was a mistake that everyone just wanted to forget.

He’d thought that, listening to the careful way Dick’s stories all managed to avoid mentioning his death. He took it as more evidence that he didn’t really matter to them and never had.

But he’d known, even then, that he wasn’t really making sense, although he hadn’t been willing to admit it yet. He’d been twisting the facts to suit his own purposes. Because of course Dick skipped over his death. Jason was in the room, listening along with the rest of them, and he has a long and storied history of freaking the fuck out when other people bring it up.

He’s been doing that a lot, recently. Cherry-picking details and purposefully throwing out anything that complicates the story he’s been telling himself for so many years.
When Tim sent that video message a few hours later, Jason chose to ignore the parts he didn’t want to hear. Tried to disregard the fact that Tim’s main concern, after explaining that he didn’t need or want a rescue, was telling Bruce to keep it together. To take care of the team and let them take care of him. To not lose himself in grief if something went wrong.

It was like Tim knew, even light years away, that Bruce was strange and blank and clearly in danger of having some kind of breakdown. And some of the others—they hadn’t really been surprised by Bruce’s behavior either. Barbara and Dick and Alfred all acted like whatever was happening to Bruce was worrying but not unexpected. Like they’d seen this side of him before.

Jason’s always imagined himself being cut out of the story almost entirely. Reduced to nothing more than a glass-cased uniform that looks less like a memorial and more like a stage prop Bruce can point to every time he wants to bust out a cautionary tale. That’s the story that Jason’s been telling himself for years, and he doesn’t want to admit that it’s not true. That’s he’s been wrong this whole time.

It’s easier to pretend that they never cared. That they replaced him as soon as they could and forgot about him. Easier to be angry that his life—his first life—ended up being exactly what he’d always known it would be: nasty, brutish, and short.

It’s hard to admit that they had cared for him. Loved him. Mourned him. And then moved on because that’s life. That’s what you do. What you have to do.

Jason’s not ready for that. Not ready to let go and move on. And he hates that this past week makes him feel like he has to. Like he’d be living a lie if he kept clinging to a story that he knows isn’t true. And he’s fucking furious with Tim because this whole damn thing is his fault for fucking off to space in the first place.

He’s angry enough that it must be coming off him in waves by now. Tim, at least, obviously notices. He frowns at Jason’s expression and then crosses his own arms. His voice is petulant when he says, “I really don’t know why you’re so upset with me right now. I mean, I expected you to be kind of pissed about last week, but I still don’t—”

“Seriously?” Jason says. And he doesn’t have the ability or inclination to explain that he’s pissed off because he’s having an extended existential crisis about his own mortality, so he settles for spitting out, “You fucking lied to me, you piece of shit.”

Tim frowns harder. “Technically I didn't actually lie. I just—”

“Fuck off, Tim. I’m not gonna explain the concept of lying by omission just because you’re pretending to be stupid right now.”

Tim rolls his eyes, but his shoulders are starting to inch up towards his ears. “You know why,” he says, openly defensive now. “If I told everyone what was really happening, someone would have tried to stop me.”

“Why the fuck would we have done that?” Jason asks.

Tim shifts, suddenly uncomfortable, and doesn’t answer.

“It’s almost like we’re all on the same team or something,” Jason says. “You know, the team? The stupid fucking group you dragged me into before you decided to fuck off and bail on all of us like a fucking—”

“This didn't have anything to do with you or the rest of the team,” Tim says. “The Tetrahedra—”
“That doesn’t matter. It had to do with you, and last time I checked you were on the fucking team. And according to all the goddamn pontificating you gave me last year, being on a team means that you don’t get to do whatever the fuck you want. You have to take the rest of us into account.” He’s not actually raising his voice—he’s very consciously trying to keep his volume under control—but Tim’s just scowling at him now, and it kind of makes Jason want to throw something at his stubborn ass. “For fuck’s sake, Tim, I don’t get to kill people anymore. You don’t get to make dumbass sacrifice plays without fucking explaining yourself to us first. That’s how this stupid shit is supposed to work.”

“Look,” Tim says, “if there had been more time, I would have tried to explain it all first, but—”

“You would not. You know we’d have all said fuck no to that plan. I mean, you literally just said that the whole point of having a team is having people who can keep you in check and stop you from doing stupid shit. And that plan was the definition of stupid shit.”

“It worked out,” Tim says. “How stupid can it be if it—”

“Oh my fucking god, Tim, if you weren’t an invalid right now, I would punch you in the face. Just admit that you were wrong. You fucked up. You lied. If you want it in bullshit technical terms, you withheld intel in the field. You asked me to trust you and then you fucking tricked me—”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Tim snaps. “I fucked up, I was an asshole, and I’m sorry. There. Are you happy now?” He doesn’t look sorry at all. He looks bristly and defensive and pissed off. And Jason can’t believe he ever worried about this stubborn asshole being brittle.

“That’s even worse than your last apology,” Jason says. “You are fucking terrible at this.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “I can’t believe you’re lecturing me on teamwork right now. What the fuck is going on? Am I hallucinating? Is this real life?”

He looks downright offended.

“Well, someone had to do it,” Jason says, “and nobody else looked like they were gonna step up anytime soon. They’re all too busy tip-toeing around you right now because you freaked them out with your I-have-a-terminal-illness protocol.”

Tim frowns. “I don’t have a terminal illness.”

“Well, you’re acting like you do. Between the protocol and that fucking video message you sent back—”

“Wait, you saw that?” Tim says. “Bruce showed that to you?”

“Everyone watched it,” Jason says.

“Well. Fuck.” Tim rubs at his face. “Is that why everyone’s being so weird? This whole day—Bruce and Damian have both been really off, and Dick too, and now you’re being weird and—”

“It’s been a strange week all around,” Jason says. “And, as a reminder, this whole thing was your fault.”

Tim flips him off, but it seems like it’s more reflex than anything else. He looks almost as tired as Jason feels. “Steph mentioned that things were weird. While I was gone.” He pauses and then asks, “Did you really stay in the cave? All week?”
“Yeah,” Jason says, because there’s no point lying when the whole rest of the team was there. “It was all hands on deck until we found you, you complete fucking moron. Seriously, do not ever pull that shit again. You’re supposed to be my buffer, so I don’t have to deal with everyone else’s bullshit all the time. They’re fucking insufferable.”

Tim looks serious, and for a moment Jason almost reads that as sincere. But then he says, “Is the cave still intact? I haven’t actually been down there since—”

“Fuck off,” Jason says. “I was on my best fucking behavior.”

Tim clearly doesn’t believe him. “Stephanie said you spent half the time antagonizing Damian.”

“Well, he deserved it. Plus, it’s just way too easy to wind him up.”

“I’m amazed that you’re both still alive,” Tim says. He gives Jason another long, considering look. “I’m glad that you—that things are okay. With you and the others.”

Jason shrugs. “Eh. Most of ‘em are fine, I guess. Bruce is still a stupid asshole, though.”

Tim makes a face. “I don’t know why he’s acting like he’s not mad at me right now. I know that he is.” He pauses and then says, “He is mad, isn’t he? I’m, like, ninety percent sure that—”

“He’s being weird as fuck because you broke his emotional processor with your dumb message,” Jason says. “You know, the one where you literally told him to just give up on you and leave you for dead. To not bring you back.” Tim grimaces again but doesn’t say anything. “You know that’s fucked up, right?” Jason says. “Just because I came back kind of crazy doesn’t mean you will. Damian took a dip in the pit and he doesn’t seem any more murderous than he was before he went in. Maybe less even.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have sent that stupid thing,” Tim says. “I knew that was a bad idea. Why did I do that? What was I thinking?”

He’s wearing his I’m-in-trouble-and-find-it-existentially-agonizing expression again. Jason just rolls his eyes. “Buck up, buttercup. You’ll be fine.” When Tim glares at him, he adds, “You know, you were right about one thing in that video.”

“I was right about a lot of things,” Tim says. “I don’t remember what all of them were but I’m pretty sure—”

“Nobody here needs you,” Jason says, gesturing widely to take it all in. The house, the cave, the team. “Not any more than they need me.”

Tim looks, for a moment, like he wants to argue. But he can’t. He knows it’s true. He saw the mess Jason’s death apparently left behind and he also saw the recovery. He knows the world will keep spinning once he’s gone.

“Still,” Jason says. “These dumb assholes sure seem to want us around for some reason.”

“Yeah,” Tim says after a moment. He only sounds half-convinced. “Yeah, I guess they do.”

Both their phones go off at the same time. The little chime of a text notification. Jason knows his phone’s on silent, so it must be Barbara.

Tim has his phone out in a flash, even though there’s no way it’s an emergency. If it was, Barbara would have called instead of texting. “Speaking of dumb assholes,” Tim says.
“Wait, let me guess,” Jason says. He’s pulled out his own phone but hasn’t looked at it yet. “Your friends are causing trouble.”

Tim rolls his eyes. “They woke up Barbara. On her night off. Just to speculate wildly about whether or not you’re currently in the process of murdering me.” He glares off into the distance and says, “Conner, I know you can hear me. Back off. And—wait, what are you doing?”

Jason’s just unlocked his own phone, noted the dozens of new messages in the chat, and then pulled up camera mode and turned on the flash.

He’s not actually fast enough to catch Tim unawares—the kid manages to flash his middle finger at the camera just as Jason takes the photo—but it’s still a pretty awful picture. The flash reflecting off his skin makes him look almost ghoulis.

“Do not—” Tim starts to say, but Jason’s already uploaded it to the chat.

“They’re claiming this is not actually evidence of you still being alive,” Jason tells him after a moment. “Because you look like a goddamn ghost.”

“Why did I invite you here again?” Tim asks. “Genuine question.”

“Terminal optimism,” Jason answers. “I am seriously getting the fuck out of here though. Tell Alfie I said bye and also that I had to leave because I need to get some peace and quiet before I lose my goddamn mind.”

“Quiet,” Tim says wistfully. “I remember quiet.”

“You did this to yourself,” Jason tells him.

“That doesn’t mean I deserve it,” he answers. But he’s looking at his phone again and grinning a little at whatever stupid shit his friends are saying in the chat. “Okay. Go enjoy your freedom. And don’t take the Ferrari. It’s Cass’s favorite.”

Jason takes the Ferrari.

It drives like a dream. He’d rather be speeding through the dark, forested roads of Bristol on his bike, but he can admit that this is a decent enough alternative. He keeps the windows rolled down and doesn’t turn on the radio. The sound of the wind is kind of soothing on its own and the night’s just cool enough to keep him awake and alert.

He’s surprised to find that he’s looking forward to the next few days. Most of the time, he dreads having to hole up while he recovers from an injury. It usually only takes a day or two of reading and sleeping before he starts to get too restless and agitated to concentrate properly. And then he ends up drinking just to stifle his own boredom and frustration. He hates not working. Hates wasting time.

But right now he feels like it won’t be that bad. He doesn’t have to worry about his patrol route or any of his cases. They’re all being covered. And if he gets too restless to read, he has plenty of other things to distract him.

The chat quieted down a lot once almost everyone was gathered together at the manor, but it’s still been pretty active all day. Tim’s friends have been using it as a dumping ground for links to dumb YouTube videos and a long list of recommendations for everything from podcasts and webcomics to parody Twitter accounts. At least thirty of the messages are just Conner and Duke naming obscure bands that no one else has ever heard of.
If their taste in TV is anything to go by, most of the stuff in the chat is probably complete trash. But he might still check out some of it anyway. And if Jason starts going stir crazy, he can just call up Babs and see if she has anything he can do from home. And he can still work on his cases if he feels like it. Steph and Cass will probably run down potential leads for him if he asks.

But he thinks he’ll try to put that off. Maybe take a real break for once.

Looking back, he’s pretty sure he was on the edge of burning out last year. Before he started working with Tim and Barbara. And even in the last few months, he’s still found it hard to get motivated sometimes because this job is so fucking huge and impossible and endless. He knows that what they do matters. He knows that it makes a real difference in the city. But it’s hard, sometimes, to do the same thing over and over and over, knowing that it’s never gonna stop.

He’s been focusing on that lately. On all the things he’s fighting against instead of all the things he’s trying to save. The ordinary people just trying to get by in this shitty, fucked up city.

He’d been kind of jealous, listening to Tim and his friends talk about all the parts of their lives that don’t involve wearing a mask or a cape. School and careers and parties and traveling. Their future plans or lack thereof. All these things that they just take for granted. He cannot fucking believe how blasé Tim and Bart are about being able to go to college. The way they just brushed off something that a lot of kids would kill to be able to afford.

Cassie, at least, doesn’t seem to take that kind of shit for granted. And neither does Greta. He still feels a little bit weird about that part of the night. Greta and her overwhelming gratitude for just being alive. How lucky she apparently feels to have a life that sounds absolutely mundane compared to everyone else’s.

Tim said something similar in his video message. Said they got lucky with Jason and Damian. Luckier than they deserved.

It’s never felt that way to him. His resurrection’s always seemed more like a mistake than a miracle. Some kind of cosmic glitch that’ll correct itself given time.

He didn’t really come back to life. Not the way that half of Tim’s friends have. He just came back. Like a ghost returning to take care of unfinished business.

But this work, this job—it’ll always be unfinished. He’s not stupid enough to think that he can ever really fix this city. People are always gonna be terrible and they’re always gonna treat each other like shit. He knows that. He’s always known that. He just figured he should try to get as much done as quickly as possible before the universe wised up and put him back into the ground where he belongs. He knows that’s where he’s gonna end up, sooner or later.

But all things being equal, he’s starting to think that it might be nice to do something else with whatever time he has left. He’s not giving up the Red Hood. No fucking way. But he can admit that single-handedly murdering his way through Gotham’s criminal underworld wasn’t really something he could have sustained long-term. That plan was always going to end with him having too many enemies and not enough allies, and he knows where that math leads.

He’ll probably last longer if he sticks with the team. Plays by their rules, at least for now. And if anything serious ever comes up—if they ever face someone who really does need to be put down—then they’ll have him there to take care of it for them.

They won’t like it, but he’ll cross that bridge when he comes to it.
For now, he’s not gonna worry about it. The night’s too nice to ruin with all that shit. He’s not quite out of Bristol yet, but the far-off lights of Gotham are getting closer by the second. He should be thinking about where he can drop off the Ferrari so that Cass will find it before Gotham’s car thieves do. And he needs to decide which safehouse he’s gonna use this time. And he should be thinking about things like repairing his bike and stocking up on supplies and all the other little tasks that he’ll need to do to get back into the swing of things.

But he’s on a break. So all of that will just have to wait.

He lets his hand dangle out of the open window and thinks about going back to school. Skipping ahead to university. Getting a degree. Just for the hell of it. Just because it’s something he used to want a lifetime ago.

He’d need an alias. Forged identity papers and a fake high school diploma. He's got plenty of cash but laundering it would take some time. And there’s no way he could really fit full-time studies into his schedule right now. Not unless he scaled back a few of his operations. And he’d have to convince Stephanie not to rat him out if they ever ran into each other on campus. And—

Whatever. Those are all just details. He can work out the logistics later. He doesn’t have to decide every single thing right now.

He’s got time. He’ll figure it out.

Chapter End Notes

First off, thank you for your patience during that unexpected hiatus. The last two chapters will each take a few weeks to wrap up, but I don't expect another break as long as this one. Life just got in the way. I'm also extremely behind on responding to comments, but I have been reading and loving all of them, and I'm going to start responding to them again now that this unruly monster of a chapter isn't hanging over my head anymore. So apologies to any commenters who are about to get a reply well over a month late.

Actual notes:

Conner is canonically a big fan of the fake show Wendy. Tim canonically thinks it's kind of dumb. Cissie did have a small role in an episode of the show, but her being brought back for additional episodes isn't canon.

Jay Garrick was the original Flash. He and his wife took Bart in after Max Mercury disappeared. Helen is Max's adult daughter.

During his Flash run, Bart was aged up into an adult (a trope that I hate) and also stripped of a lot of the characteristics that make him so unique. He gets a job in a factory and then starts taking classes in forensics (like his grandfather Barry) and tries to live a mundane life. Which is bizarre. I cannot think of a character less suited to that kind of thing than Bart.

Instead, my headcanon is that he never settles down into a "normal" life. Instead, he does lots of different things. He canonically enjoys creative writing, is good at picking up new languages, and is a talented artist. So he does a lot of freelance writing and
translations and art commissions. At some point he also starts developing weird indie videogames. They gain a cult following because no one knows where these things came from and also they're just super bizarre? Bart's more likely to incorporate an interesting glitch into gameplay instead of just patching it, and his storylines can best be described as confusing fever dreams. Fans of the games often describe them as "incredibly fun and incredibly frustrating."

As for his bohemian lifestyle? His family kind of hates it once they find out. The fact that he just sort of floats around and lives with his friends? Not okay, to most people. His friends don't mind finding a speedster napping on their couch at irregular intervals, but his family still doesn't approve. (A common conversation is someone telling Bart that he needs to "make something of himself" and Bart responding that he already is something, thankyouverymuch.)

Eventually he does get a few degrees to placate them. And buys a house and some land in rural Kansas. Mostly just as a place to store stuff that won't fit in the Titans basement. And it's never really supposed to be a place he cares about, but it turns out the location's actually really convenient? His friends are scattered all over the country, so meeting up in the middle is a good compromise for everyone. And it's remote enough that it kind of reminds of them of their old hidden headquarters. So Bart's house is where they tend to congregate as a group. And when someone needs a place to stay--because they've hit hard times or just went through a bad breakup or just because they need to get away for a while--they know they can always stay at Bart's place for as long as they need to. He'll hang out with them if they need it or he'll leave them alone and let them have the place to themselves while they sort things out. And nobody, including Bart, ever thinks of it as Bart paying them all back for sharing their homes with him for so long. It's just the kind of thing they all take for granted. It's just how they are.

Also Bart is absolutely delighted when he realizes that his alias's initials are H.A.T. He always decorates his signature with a different hat based on his mood, thus cementing his reputation as a weird, creative eccentric.

After Tim's dad died, he hired an actor to be his fake uncle instead of just asking Bruce to adopt him. Because Tim has...so many issues.

Dick canonically dropped out of college to focus on leading the Titans.

I don't think Tim has any canonical opinions on Star Wars but...c'mon. This kid imprinted hard on Padmé after seeing her seamlessly switch between her Queen persona and her Handmaiden one. It might not be canon, but it is a fact.

There are multiple storylines about Tim and/or other characters being evil in the future. And I kind of hate most of them, but it's still an interesting idea to explore. And the kind of thing that would leave a really strong impression on a kid like Tim.

Lastly, my headcanon is that for a decent period of time, Jason and Stephanie are the only Batkids of their generation (excluding Barbara) who get college degrees. And they're obnoxious as hell about it to everyone besides Cass.

The only person Jason invites to his graduation is Alfred, but Alfred is not the only one who shows up.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!