Third Time's a Charm

by Magebirdy

Summary

The first time he died, it was a metaphorical death: the end of one existence and the start of another.

The second time he died, it was with a crowbar to the gut and an explosion that rang in the ears of the man he had come to see as a father for the countless months afterwards.

And the third time he died, it was because of Damian Wayne.

Notes

This fanfiction was heavily inspired by rants with damsevendemigods, so go check out her fics if you're looking for some awesome fics!
Chapter 1

Joker was standing over his bloody corpse.

What was soon to be his corpse, anyways. Jason had been counting down the days until this was supposed to happen. It had been hard to guess it, at first, but then he had gotten the sinking feeling in his gut. His dad – thank God he couldn't read minds, because Jason would have been in a serious dilemma if Bruce knew he was thinking of him like that – knew that something was up, but talking about your impending doom just wasn't something you did in the Wayne household. Especially when said doom involved something that was outside the realm of gadget-equipped vigilantes. Bruce hated metas, and while he was sure Bruce would come around to it eventually (knew he'd come around to it eventually) if one of his kids suddenly gained meta-like abilities, Jason didn't really want to risk this whole thing blowing up in his face.

...Like the warehouse was about to.

And he had thought getting hit with the crowbar hurt.

He wanted to come up with a witty remark, but Joker had done more damage than he had expected. Maybe he should try going all out. A little comment here or there wouldn't change things too much, right? Joker was still going to leave with that bomb ticking, and he was still going to end up dead. Bruce was going to mourn him and go dark for a bit, Dick was going to (hopefully) mourn him, and Tim – poor kid – was going to get so frustrated with all of it that he'd just force himself onto Bruce as his new Robin.

That was how this story was supposed to go.

Jason knew that. He had watched *Batman: Under the Red Hood* twenty-one times, had done extensive research on Jason Todd's wiki, and even had a lamented picture of the classic death scene up on the wall in his dorm room. His roommate hadn't, uh, exactly understood that one, but they had only been rooming together for about a month before he was suddenly whisked off to Gotham. Jason Todd – who wasn't really Jason Todd, but also was after being stuck as him ever since Jason contemplated stealing the wheels off of Bruce's car – was the expert on everything that was supposed to happen in his life.

Joker was poking and prodding him. The killer clown – heh, he was getting killed by a clown-God, how much blood had he already lost? – thought that Jason's lack of despair was from the belief that Bruce was going to save him, and seemed to revel in the little secret of his, but Joker had no idea why Jason was so smug about this whole thing. Batman wasn't going to save his Robin, and that was alright, because he was never supposed to.

But, you know what? Jason wasn't exactly fond of dying, even if he was going to get resurrected. So he coughed out a bit of blood on Joker's shoe, looked the villain right in the eye and said, “This is one serious vibe check.”

Joker just stared.

And then he laughed like he always did, but this laugh was actually a little uneasy, because no one was supposed to be as unhinged as him. Joker even added in an extra whack of the crowbar that wasn't in the movie before giving his little goodbye address. But Jason didn't regret it for one single moment, because the look on his face made all of this alright. All of his fears melted away as he heard the door shut.
It was almost time.

The bomb ticked in the background.

He let his gaze wander to it for a moment before gently closing his eyes. He had been Robin for years. If he could do that, he could survive getting blown to smithereens. Death would feel like a reprieve from the chaos his life had devolved into, and he could only hope that his death wasn't nearly as catastrophic as it had seemed when he first read that comic years ago. Bruce would survive. Tim would make sure that. Dick and Alfred, too. And Joker was going to Arkham for his murder, so take that stupid killer clown! Crowbars and explosions weren't going to keep him down-

His eyes shot open.

“Oh fuck,” he got out, just as the bomb ticked for the final time. “Jason dies from suffocation from all the smoke, not the explosion-”

The bomb exploded.

And Jason, frustratingly, was still clinging on to the very last bits of consciousness as it became increasingly harder to breath.

...Sometimes, Jason really did hate his life.
Waking up naked in a watery pit was not Jason's favorite way to wake up.

It was his least favorite way to wake up, actually. He hadn't ever done it before, but the Lazarus Pit officially sucked. It was cold, and disgusting, and he really wished someone was smart enough to give him clothes instead of wrapping him up in bandages that made him look like a mummy. Come on, Talia and Ra's. At least one of you should have had the brain cell that made you realize that this was a bad idea, and not just because the victim of a very traumatic murder was probably going to have some mental health issues after being brought back to life without warning.

But Jason was prepared for this.

There was a panic and a rush of terror as he popped back into the world of the living, but he reigned it all in. He could breath again. His body didn't feel like it was on fire. And he was totally going to freak out the villains by acting as crazy as he could, because he had to make them think that Jason Todd was just a pale, possibly dead imitation of his original self.

He leaped out of the water and lunged for one of the guards lining the pit. The guard tried to dodge, but he never stood a chance. He had been trained to be Robin since he was a kid – Jason's limbs had reflexes that most could only dream of at this point. A little graceful kick in the face here, a wild jab in the throat there (just meant to temporarily incapacitate, not meant to kill) and a mad, frantic scramble for the nearest exit. The bandages obscured most of his face, but he kept a crazed expression on his face. Alfred, thankfully, had never gotten why he practiced that look so much in the mirror.

Talia and her dad were too stunned by his escape to really send any after him for those first few minutes that followed. Jason knew that they weren't really doing it out of their kindness of their hearts; they knew Bruce would be pissed if he found out the two of them were involved with his death at the hands of Joker, and this was just an attempt to save their skin when Bruce inevitably put two-and-two together.

Batman: Under the Red Hood hadn't really given a floor plan for this place, but Jason let instinct guide him. It was how he had tried to take the tires off of bat-mobile when he had first ended up like this; he hadn't had any idea how to go about doing that in his last life, and still wasn't entirely sure how he did it in this one. And, like then, instinct didn't fail him. He found himself standing in front of a window that was a perfect replica of the one that Jason had jumped through in the movie, and all it would take was a little jump through it for canon to be on the right track.

He looked out the window.

...It sure was a long drop.

And it did look cold outside...

He glanced down the hallway.

As long as they thought he was lost to the wilderness, things would be alright. Plus, he could feel that his body had changed since being dumped in the pit: he felt like he was on the verge of being a meta, something he definitely wouldn't let Bruce know about once he made his appearance as Red Hood. That would bring up an entirely different set of angst that he didn't even know how Bruce would deal with.
Jason grabbed the nearest piece of furniture he could find – a chair up against the wall – and swung it right into the window. The glass shattered into millions of little pieces, and the chair was swiftly returned to its rightful place. He had to move quickly now. The noise was definitely going to set off some kind of alarm, and he was sure that they would come running when they realized he had escaped.

He turned to dart away.

And found himself looking at a little boy.

A very, very familiar looking little boy, with features that he knew all too well. The boy had his face, and his hair, too, even though the only pictures of Bruce that he had been able to dig up were hidden in the corners of the very expansive attic and with Alfred. Jason wasn't good at putting ages to faces, but the kid couldn't have been much older than five or six. He stared up at him with wide, green eyes – eyes that were as green as his own had become, though he currently hadn't realized that yet.

“Mummy,” the boy said, with all of the fear he expected from someone that little. Jason froze up. Meeting Damian this early was never part of the plan. He wasn't even supposed to know that he existed, right? Talia was good at hiding him, and he wasn't supposed to spend enough time lurking in this building to see him no matter what the continuity was.

His eyes, though Jason didn't know it, glowed bright green.

And Damian's eyes widened a little more in response.

Torn between comforting Damian and finishing up his escape, Jason came up with a compromise: he'd make things seem just a little bit better by hamming things up. Damian wouldn't remember him years from now if he did things right. He'd just remember that he met a mummy when wandering around his old home. That was something he could handle.

Jason stuck his hands out in front of him, some of the bandages slipping off of his wrists and dangling in the air above the floor below. Damian just kept staring. He let out a low moan, inching towards Damian with a slowness he really couldn't afford at this point. Part of him hoped that Damian would run off or even faint, but instead, he just kept staring right where he was standing.

Jason let out a groan that felt perfectly in character at the moment.

It was time for a change of plans.

He kept shuffling right past Damian, the boy's gaze never leaving him as he turned down the next hallway. When he was finally sure he was out of view, he booked it, running towards the first room he could find. He need some kind of outfit to wear. Sneaking around wasn't really a problem, though part of him did want to go with the cliché and wear some of the outfits the villains here wore. But those clothes definitely weren't going to help him in the cold outside. He needed something thick and cozy.

It took a little bit of searching, but he managed to stumble onto Ra's room. The villain was still presumably out looking for him – his room was entirely unguarded. Jason wasn't sure his outfits looked much better than the bandages Jason had taken off and stuffed into his pockets, but he was already feeling warmer. All he needed was to sneak by a room where the grunts had to store their winter clothes, and he'd be all set for his escape into the cold.

He slipped back out into the hallway, lurking in the shadows like he had seen Bruce do as Batman
a hundred times before.

(And as Bruce, too – there was more than once that Bruce had surprised him by popping out of seemingly nowhere when he thought he was alone. Part of him was convinced Alfred had taught him that trick, since the butler could do the same thing, but Jason had been too afraid to check.)

He tracked down that room just as quickly as he had discovered Ra's room, and he quickly dressed himself in a thick winter coat and a pair of sturdy winter boots. He had no idea how long the trek to more civilization was going to be, but this was definitely a good start.

He headed for the door.

And that was when he realized he was being watched.

He turned to see a pair of green eyes peeking into the room, their owner's little hands clenching the wall. Damian and Jason stared at each other. Neither one moved. Jason hadn't expected to get caught again, and Damian apparently hadn't expected to find someone in this part of the mansion. Part of him wondered why someone so little would be so content with just wandering the mansion, but he didn't really ask. He didn't have the focus to.

"Who are you?" Damian asked, innocence in his voice.

Well, he couldn't answer that. Damian was just going to blab to his mom. But Jason really wasn't good with coming up with aliases on the spot, so he froze up even more and just stared helplessly at Damian. Damian must have been told to call for help in the case of something like this – it was a threat to both him and his mother's side of his family.

He faltered.

"I'm..." He looked around for some sort of inspiration. Clothes weren't really that much help, but there was a spider in a corner of the room. It wasn't that big, but it gave him an idea for a name.

"...Peter."

"Peter?" Damian repeated, sounding a little wary.

"Peter," Jason confirmed. "Peter...Parker."

Damian just stared.

And then he proudly informed him, "I'm Damian!"

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"You should go back to bed, little guy," Jason finally said, his voice getting a little strained at the 'guy'. He was usually pretty good about keeping calm under pressure, but that was because he had a script to follow. This was all improvisation. The comics, the wiki and the movie had never prepared him for something like this. "It's late out, and I'm sure your mommy doesn't want you up this late."

"Mommy's out there," Damian replied, raising a little finger and gesturing at the door. "With all of the big men."

...Jason didn't like where this conversation was going.

"I was actually heading out to help her," he lied. Damian hesitantly left his hiding spot by the
doorway. He was still several feet away from him, but Jason crouched down so they were closer in height. He didn't want to seem like a threat to Bruce's son. Not yet, anyways. That wouldn't happen until Damian became the new Robin. Then he would threaten him left and right, because canon Jason was definitely jealous of him – or, at least, that was the vibe he had gotten when doing some digging into Jason's story. “We're looking for a mummy.”

Damian stared up at him.

“But you're the mummy,” Damian said.

...Shit.

Damian pointed up at his face.

“You have the same funny green eyes,” he said, “and you have really silly hair.”

Jason glanced up.

He couldn't see much of it, but he could just barely make out a little bit of white dangling in front of his face – that hadn't been in the movie, but the white streak was something Jason said he got from the Pit in the comics. He would have been elated to have a cool look like comics!Jason, but Damian recognizing him ruined the moment.

“I might be the mummy,” he admitted, his voice jumping an octave at the last syllable. Damian gave him a look that said he knew that he was right, and that was when Jason saw more of the Wayne side of Damian's heritage. “But if I was the mummy, why wouldn't I be wearing my bandages?”

Damian just raised a finger again and pointed right at the bandages peeking out of his pocket. “Your bandages are right there,” he said. Damian mulled over the question as Jason wished he could be anywhere but here right now. There was a pause, and then, “Maybe you're cold!”

Jason didn't say anything in response.

Damian crossed his arms. “But mummies are old and wrinkly, and you're just old. So maybe you're not the mummy.”

An offended noise slipped out.

“I'm not old,” Jason protested.

“You and Mommy look like you're the same age.”

“I'm fifteen.”

“So you're not one of the big men?”

Jason froze.

“Did you just-” He paused, looked a little closer at Damian, and sat down on the ground with his legs and arms crossed. “...That was a good one. I'll give you that much.”

Damian beamed.

Then he mirrored Jason's position – the only difference was that his hands were resting on his knees. “Were you in the pool?” he asked. “I know Mommy goes in there all the time, but she never
lets me into it.”

...Pool?

Oh.

He meant the pit.

Jason shifted uncomfortably. “I haven't-”

“Your eyes are the same color,” Damian interrupted, with the smugness of a little kid who had outsmarted someone much older than him. “And Mommy's glow like yours do, too, sometimes.” Jason raised an eyebrow.

“I thought you weren't allowed in there,” he commented. “How do you know what color the pool is?”

A sly smile danced across Damian's lips, and the glint to his green eyes was downright mischievous. “I never listen to what Mommy says.”

...That was a very good point. He had never done that with Bruce, either, although that was a combination of wanting to stay in character and being an adult treated like a child. Damian's only excuse was that he was an actual child, but that seemed like a very in-character response for Damian Wayne. Jason didn't actually know too much about Damian, but he did know a lot about Bruce, and he could definitely see the family resemblance with that.

“You got me,” he relented. “I was in the pool. But you shouldn't ever do what I did, because it feels absolutely disgusting.”

Damian nodded sagely.

“I won't ever go in there,” he promised.

He hesitated, looking Jason over with an uncharacteristically nervous expression. “...Where are you going now?” he asked. Jason felt a twinge of something he couldn't quite describe when he heard the question, but he pushed aside his growing doubt as he looked Damian right in the eye.

“I'm going to go outside,” he said. “I live very, very far away, and I need to go back to my home.”

Damian faltered.

“Can I...Can I come with you?” he asked, looking up at him. “I don't want to stay here.”

Jason didn't know much about children. He thought he had, but that was because he had been a few months into adulthood when he died the first time around – childhood was something he knew a lot about back then. But it had been several years since he had truly been a kid, and he had never known little kids like Damian as well as he had known kids his age.

What he did know was that it was bad if a kid was asking to leave their home. That meant there was some kind of problem. And given that Damian was the kid of a bad guy, it wasn't that hard to draw the line. Abuse might not have been an issue, but who knew what he must have seen when sneaking around?

“You barely know me,” Jason pointed out. “You should stay with your mommy-”

“I don't want to,” Damian whined. He scooted closer to Jason and pouted. Jason got the feeling he
was seriously being manipulated here, but it was hard to argue with a face like that. “It's scary here! And Mommy's scary, too, even when she tries being nice!”

Jason knew regret.

This wasn't the existential regret he faced after ending up as Jason Todd. It also wasn't the existential regret he faced right when Joker snagged him. *This* kind of regret was more like when Alfred or Bruce had caught him doing something he shouldn't have done, or when he knew he had done the wrong thing but they had never caught him for.

At the very core of his being, Jason knew that it was his responsibility to preserve the story. He had been telling himself for years that he needed to do it to make sure that all future Robins got their promised home in the Batfam. But he had never really thought about where the Robins originally came from, and it was hard justifying leaving Damian when he realized just how bad it would be for a kid to grow up in a place like this.

This was going to be a regret.

A very, very big regret.

But Jason knew he'd regret it more if he backed out right now.

“Okay,” Jason finally said. “I'll let you come with me. But you have to do everything I say, okay? And if anyone asks, your last name is Parker and you're my little brother.”

Damian grinned and gave him a big nod.

Jason gave him a look, sighed, and then held out a hand as he got back to his feet. “Come on, Damian,” he said, “it's time to get you all bundled up – then we can head back to my home.”
In retrospect, impulsively taking Damian with him might not have been Jason's smartest idea. There was, of course, the whole problem with potentially messing up the plot in ways he couldn't even begin to imagine, but the most pressing issue was one that he should have immediately thought of.

Jason had prepped for dying and coming back to life since his first night in the Wayne Manor. It was definitely a bit obsessive, but it served as a good distraction during those first few terrifying nights, and made him feel less anxious about the whole dying in a fiery inferno thing. He figured out exactly where he would be taken after he died, and figured out numerous ways that he could get back to Gotham from that place. And that part of the plan went great. Damian was surprisingly cooperative through the whole slipping-onto-a-plane unnoticed thing, and they easily stowed away. They even managed to sneak out when they landed in America, and a little bit of hitchhiking got them to Gotham.

The hard part was what came after.

Jason had slowly been saving up money over the years. Some of it had been from the allowance that Bruce had given him, but the majority of it had been funneled out of Bruce's own accounts. He felt horrible about it, but he didn't have any other source of income – and it wasn't like Bruce needed all that money, anyways. The money that he had gotten was just enough for him to buy an apartment tucked away on the edges of the city, and just enough to support him until he could get into the whole drug business as Red Hood.

But having another person there had never been part of the equation.

Especially someone as young as Damian.

They were standing outside of the door, Jason fumbling for the key he had hidden what felt like an eternity ago, when he came to the horrible realization that he didn't even know how he was going to support Damian while running around Gotham as Red Hood. Maybe he should just drop Damian off on Bruce's doorstep-

No, that would ruin the continuity even more than he already had ruined it! Tim needed longer, and Stephanie needed her run as Robin, too. Ahh. What had he gotten himself into?

“Peter?” Damian suddenly asked, tugging on his sleeve. “Are you okay?”

...And there was also the fact that Damian thought his name was Peter.

Maybe that was for the best. Damian couldn't slip up and reveal his secret before it was relevant, and maybe – just maybe – wouldn't realize who had taken care of him years from now if he acted as little like Jason Todd as he possibly could. He had already been playing that role for ages. What was another one on top of it?

“I'm fine,” he said, giving him a smile that he really didn't feel. He was this close to a panic attack, and he still hadn't found the-

Oh.
There it was.

Grabbing the key from its hiding spot, he unlocked the door and led Damian into the apartment. The cleaning service he had hired had done a good job of keeping the place nice while he was gone. He could barely find a speck of dust, and everything was so organized.

“It's so tiny,” Damian whispered.

Jason turned, a retort dancing on the tip of his tongue. But Damian didn't look moody and mean – he was marveling at the apartment in front of him with wide green eyes. Jason watched him run from one corner to the other, testing out everything he could possibly get his hands on: the sofa, the counter, the drawers and all of the random nick-knacks that Jason had hidden in the room were all fair game for Damian's pudgy little fingers.

“I get to live here?” Damian asked, eyes alight as he turned back to Jason.

Jason nodded.

Damian gave a little excited squeal of delight before throwing himself down on the couch. “I'm hungry, Peter,” he abruptly announced, looking upside down at him with his head on the arm of the couch. “I want food.”

Jason glanced over at the fridge.

...Which would be empty if he actually tried to open it.

“Well,” Jason said – knowing he'd regret it when he had an empty wallet later, “I'm hungry, too. Want to go out and get something to eat?”

Damian shot up just as quickly as he had sat down.

“Yes!” he agreed.

xXx

...Jason was starting to wonder how long he had been dead.

Theoretically, it hadn't been that long, but it felt like he was walking through an entirely different world. The seasons had changed since he had died, and so had the people – all of them were clad in fuzzy scarves, warm coats and gloves that hid just how much their fingers shook in the cold. The threat of violence still hung in the air like it always did, but it wasn't in the forefront of people's mind.

And with Damian's little hand in his own, it wasn't on Jason's, either.

“Where are we going?” Damian asked, looking up at him with big, round green eyes. He was swinging his arms around while they walked, just enough for Jason to notice that he was doing it to begin with.

“We're going to a special little place,” he said. Memories flashed in his mind as he approached the building. It felt like Dick had just brought him to the cafe a few days ago. They had been joking about Jason's taste in food. Dick had been disgusted by what he had ordered, but Jason had stubbornly eaten it anyways. He hadn't tried enough things in his old life, and Jason was very much a free spirit – what was the harm in ordering something seemingly disgusting like a mac and cheese burger and finding out it tasted wonderful?
Damian looked unsatisfied with the response, but he didn't push Jason for more answers. Not that he had to. They were just a few feet away from it when Damian posed his question, and it was only a minute before Jason was holding the door open for the youngest member of the Batfam. Damian awkwardly lingered in front of the door before Jason followed him in – hood up – and only looked excited about the cafe after Jason led him to one of the tables.

A waitress came and gave them menus. Jason already knew what he was going to have, but Damian looked very conflicted about what he wanted. Jason peeked over it, and then resisted the urge to laugh. He was looking right at the burger section, pointing at each one before shaking his head and moving onto the next.

Jason leaned over the table and grabbed onto the menu.

Damian, in response, made a very offended noise.

“I was looking at that!” he protested.

“You were looking in the wrong place,” Jason said. He turned the menu over and pointed at a section in the back. “That's the kid's menu right there.”

“...Oh.”

Jason closed up his menu as Damian kept studying his. After another minute passed, Jason realized that picking something to eat wasn't going to be as easy as expected. He crossed his arms and leaned back. As a final touch, he adopted the wisest look he could muster – remembering how Dick used to do the same thing for him.

“From my experience,” he said, a scholarly tone to his voice, “the chicken tenders are the best.”

Damian raised an eyebrow. “They are?”

“Definitely,” Jason confirmed. “I'm a master of the kid's menu here. Chicken tenders are your best bet – they taste really good with the fries, and you won't believe how good they are with a vanilla milkshake.”

Damian went back to looking at the menu.

A few minutes later, the waitress returned. He was met with a feeling of déjà vu when he looked at her, but he couldn't figure out why. Something about her ponytails and her face just seemed so familiar.

...Huh.

“Do you just want to start with drinks, or do you want to order?” she asked, pen poised above her little notepad. She glanced between the two of them, but her gaze eventually fell on Jason. He shifted a little in his seat and held up his menu, desperately hoping that she didn't recognize him.

Then he peeked over the menu at Damian – still hiding his face partially behind his makeshift protection. Damian hesitated for a moment before nodding and quietly saying, “Could I have chicken tenders and a vanilla milkshake?”

The waitress smiled.

“Of course,” she said.
Then she turned to Jason.

“What can I get you?” she asked.

Jason faltered at the question – it was so weird being the technical adult in this situation instead of being the kid in it. Usually Dick was the one who ordered last. Had been the one who had ordered last. Little escapes to hidden corners of Gotham weren't going to be a thing anymore that he was back. Once he took up the name Red Hood, his relationship was Dick was going to be very different.

“I'd like a mac and cheese burger and a coke,” he said. He paused, then hurriedly added, “Please.”

Another smile – this one with a hint of something else to it that he couldn't quite name – and the waitress was gone with their menus in hand. He caught a glimpse of her name tag before she left. It was hard to make it out with her moving so quickly, but it looked like her name was Hayley.

Now that he could no longer hide behind his menu, Jason realized that Damian was staring at him. His lips were pulled into a thin line, and his eyes were narrowed in suspicion. Jason froze a little at the look. Had Damian figured out that he was hiding stuff-

“That burger sounds disgusting,” Damian informed him.

He couldn't help but give a relieved sigh.

“It tastes amazing,” Jason protested. “Mac and cheese is great on its own, and so are burgers. Put them together, and you have the best possible burger mankind will ever know of.”

Damian stared.

“...Besides,” Jason added, a smirk dancing on his lips, “it's not like I'm putting ketchup on it. That would be disgusting.”

A giggle escaped Damian's lips.

“It would,” he solemnly agreed. “...Can I try some of your burger when you get it?”

Jason grinned.

“Definitely,” he promised. “I need to convert you to my dark and evil ways.”

Giggling again, Damian looked down at the coloring sheet that Hayley had left when she first came to the table. He grabbed a crayon out of the little cup she had brought over and started coloring with gusto. For someone so little, he was surprisingly good at staying in the lines. Jason still couldn't do that, and he had been a child twice.

As they waited for their food, Jason let his focus wander. He hadn't really had a chance to sit down and think since he had been killed by Joker. He needed to come up with some kind of plan to take care of Damian, but he didn't even know where to begin. Maybe he could swing by Gotham's library and check out a parenting book or two? Not that he was going to be like a parent to Damian in the short time they'd be together, but he knew nothing about how to take care of someone so young. And then maybe he could get to work on making some false documents for himself...

“You're going to get a stomachache if you eat that much,” a familiar voice said, floating over from one side of the cafe to the other. Jason shook himself out of his thoughts. He knew that voice. Getting a sinking feeling in his gut, he slowly looked over to its source.
It was Dick.

He was with a boy that had to be Tim. Comics weren't the best indicators of appearances, but he definitely fit the description that Jason had going in his head right now.

“I'm a teenage boy, Dick,” Tim said. Jason was both horrified and intrigued by the amount of food that Tim had out in front of him – he had gotten one of the biggest burgers, an extra plate of fries and an absolutely enormous chocolate milkshake. Tim took a sip from the milkshake and a large, hearty bite out of the burger. “I'm going to eat everything on this table, and you can't stop me.”

Dick leaned back and crossed his arms. “Alfred is going to be disappointed.”

“Alfred doesn't have to know,” Tim replied, pointing at him with a fry. “As far as he knows, I ate very healthy today, and I'd be very upset with you if you told him otherwise.”

A small smile flickered across Dick's face. Jason remembered reading Harry Potter years ago and not understanding what Harry meant when he was describing the monster in his chest when he saw Ginny with someone else. Dick and him didn't have that kind of love – because, ew, they were brothers and he had always hated people who shipped characters with sibling bonds – but he finally got that feeling just then: a gnawing, growling sensation in the very depths of his chest as he stared at a brother who could never truly be his brother again.

Dick had smiled at him like that not too long ago. It was his smile. Not Tim's. Tim could get smiles from Dick, too, but that was the smile he had always given Jason when he was tired of his antics. How could Dick so easily pass it off to someone else?

Dick suddenly lowered his fry.

"Any news on you-know-who?” he asked. He studied the fry for a moment, took a bite out of it, and then discarded it on the side of his plate as he gulped down more of his milkshake.

“You don't need to use that name,” Dick pointed out.

Jason shifted in his seat.

Nonexistent spider senses tingling, he got the feeling that this conversation was something he needed to listen into. If Dick (currently Nightwing) and Tim (currently Robin) were talking about some so vaguely and away from Bruce, this had to be big. And he had a sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with the villainous side of the world, especially when their heroic pasts and presents were the major thing tying them together right now.

“It feels more dramatic,” Tim said, his voice cool and disinterested. If someone just overheard parts of it, they would never want to listen in – it was the sort of conversation about things like office jobs and cloudy days. And maybe taxes, but Jason had always thought those were more stressful than boring. “But have you?”

Dick nodded. “You do realize what this means, doesn't it?”

Tim stared down at his plate.

"...Yes,” he quietly said. “I do.”

He pushed his plate away.

"Gotham's going to change,” Tim said.
“It's going to be dark,” Dick agreed. “Darker than its ever been.”

There was a moment of hesitation on both of their parts.

“...Gotham's always been dark,” Tim relented. Dick, after another pause, gave a nod in agreement – something that Jason, had he been part of the conversation, would have done, too. Whatever they were talking about, it sounded **bad**, but at least he had some kind of heads up. And, hey! He was going to be Red Hood eventually, and he could definitely handle a threat like that if he was careful enough-

A red crayon suddenly hit him in the face.

He spun around to face Damian, whose arms were currently crossed in a disturbingly good impression of Dick a few tables over.

“**Peter,**” Damian said, not looking the least bit sorry. “**You're not listening to me at all.**”

"Sorry,” Jason apologized. “I was, uh, daydreaming?”

Damian just narrowed his eyes more.

“...What were you trying to tell me?” he hesitantly asked.

Damian gestured down at the table with a nod of his head – it took him a second to realize that Damian had not only finished coloring in the picture, but had gotten bored enough to draw a few empty games of tic-tac-toe in the corner of the paper. “Can we play?” he asked. He sat a little straighter in his seat, green crayon now poised in his hand.

Jason scrambled to find the crayon that Damian had thrown at him. Once the red crayon – which was buried in the booth cushions – was in his own hand, he pulled the paper so it was in the center of the table.

"Let's do this,” he said, grinning.

Damian mirrored his expression.

“I'm going to win,” he declared. “I'm the **best** at tic-tac-toe.”

“Try your best, young padawan, but you're **never** going to beat this Jedi master.”

Thirteen green wins and a single, questionable tie later, an amused Hayley brought their food to their table – leaving Jason to miserably eat his burger while Damian triumphantly scoffed down his chicken tenders.

**Chapter End Notes**

You can blame my younger brother for the mac-and-cheese burger - it's a restaurant we go to, and I was reminded of it when we went there last night. He almost always gets that burger, and I thought it was a very fitting food for Jason. :)}
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Before you start reading this chapter - and before we get /too/ far into this fic - I just wanted to give a quick disclaimer. While Jason's story is mainly taken from what I've seen in Batman: Under the Red Hood, the universe as a whole is a mixture of my different favorite DC story lines/elements. I'm still pretty new to DC, and I'm currently picking what works best for what I have in mind - like combining that animated movie with the knowledge I've gotten from the wiki and a few episodes of Young Justice.

But, other than that, enjoy the chapter!

It wasn't a long walk from the cafe to the apartment, but Damian still managed to grow increasingly more tired in the short amount of time. Jason had to keep squeezing his hand to stop Damian from nodding off while they were walking. By the time they only had a block left before reaching the apartment, Jason had given up on letting Damian walk beside him – he scooped the boy up in his arms and held him close. Part of him expected Damian to protest, but he just snuggled up against Jason's chest, eyes fluttering shut after struggling to keep them awake for one last minute.

After being the one that had been babied for years, being the one doing the babying felt bizarre in ways he had never really expected. Jason wasn't really supposed to be a caregiver, and he had never really had to be one in his past life, either. Jason didn't really mind it. It felt good knowing that someone was relying on him like that. Bruce hadn't really relied on him in that way; if anything, he had done the relying there. He had to be responsible, even though he was physically only a teenager, and he honestly didn't mind it.

He maneuvered his way into his bedroom after letting himself into his apartment. Damian was quickly but gently placed down onto his bed. Jason hadn't really slept much since coming back to life, but he found that he really couldn't when he laid down on the sofa. Adrenaline was still pumping through his veins. There was already a sense of exhaustion creeping in, but it wasn't enough to lure him into sleeping.

He got back up and started moving around the apartment.

First things first: he needed to get his act together. Jason Todd was going to be forgotten for the moment. Same thing with the Red Hood. Damian needed him to be Peter Parker – God, why couldn't he have come up with a better alias on the fly? – and he would be. But Damian couldn't be Damian Wayne. He couldn't be Damian Ghul, either. Damian had to be someone other than Damian if they were going to do this right, and he had to come up with a name that Damian would easily remember.

...Parker was already good. The comment about pretending to be brothers had just been during the initial escape, but them being brothers would deflect some suspicion. Damian would need a new first name, though – Damian Parker just didn't work, and he was sure Talia and Ra's were on the lookout for their missing family member.

What kind of nicknames were there for a kid named Damian?
Dami was one, but Dami Parker didn't sound too good. He hadn't even met someone with that name before. But Ian Parker, on the other hand? That sounded like a name, and an identity that he could easily forge. He already knew how to forge his own. He had been planning it for years. He just had to figure out what he was going to do with the newly dubbed Ian.

And what he was going to do with himself.

He couldn't get into the drug trade just yet. He needed more time, and he needed more of a plan. For now, he had to support himself and Damian. That was what mattered the most. Supporting Damian would mean more money. He could try to take more money out of Bruce's accounts. He hadn't caught him before.

Jason wandered over to the window and stared out into the city beyond.

Bruce might not have caught him before, but he could catch him now. Getting caught at this stage of the plan would be even worse than getting caught before – Bruce wasn't even supposed to know he had come back yet. No, there had to be another solution to this, and Jason was already getting the idea that he knew what that solution was.

“...I need a job,” he realized, leaning up against the windowsill.

...But who would hire a fifteen year old, and how much money could he make on a fifteen year old's wages?

He needed something more than a kid's pay.

He needed an adult's.

He wandered away from the window and into the bathroom. There was a mirror that hung long on the door – he observed his reflection with interest. He was already pretty fit from his time with Bruce, and he wasn't as small as he had been during his early days of being Robin. His tuft of white hair was unusual, but that could be explained as a fad. He really didn't want to dye it.

He thought.

And he thought.

And while he was thinking of what to do, a memory emerged from the depths of his mind. It was from just a week or two after he became Robin and started living in the Wayne Manor. Bruce was out for the day, and Alfred was busy off in the kitchen. It gave him just enough time to sneak down into the Batcave on his own and find some of Bruce's spare uniform parts – especially the cape. He had stood in front of the shiniest surface he could find, cloak draped over his shoulders and hood pulled up over his head, and childishly did his best impression of Batman. And even though he had the voice of a boy who hadn't gone through puberty yet, the impression had been pretty good.

(And then Alfred had come into the Batcave looking for him, and he had to hide in the Batmobile so he couldn't be seen wearing something so sacred, but he didn't focus too much on that part right now.)

But that impression had been good.

So had every voice he had pulled after that – when he was mocking Bruce and imitating both the deep growl of the Batman voice and a regular, adult voice, when he imitated various crooks to distract their friends, and even when he was just trying to goof around in his classes. They were almost always meant to be over the top, but his voice had potential.
He straightened a little bit.

Jason Todd was fifteen.

But if he looked just hard enough, had the right documentation, and did a good enough job with his voice, he could totally pull off being older. Maybe not in his twenties, but he didn't need to be that far into adulthood to get a job. He didn't even have to be twenty.

Eighteen was good enough.

A story was already forming in his head. Peter and Ian Parker were brothers. Their parents had died just a few months ago, and Peter was worried about taking care of his little baby brother. He dropped out of his college career to work full-time to support him, occasionally taking classes – a convenient, future excuse for any time he needed to be Red Hood – but mostly just focusing on himself and Ian.

Now it was time to get that documentation done.

Needless to say, Jason didn't really sleep that night.

xXx

When Damian wandered out into the main room the next morning, Jason was sitting at the kitchen counter with a cup of coffee he had gotten at the coffee place around the corner. He knew he probably had bags underneath his eyes at this point, and definitely looked like he hadn't slept, but the coffee was doing a great job at convincing him otherwise. And seeing Damian added a nice little burst of adrenaline, because now he was going to have to convince Damian of the plan that he had spent all night working on.

Damian yawned and rubbed his eyes.

“Morning,” Jason said, giving him a smile.

Damian just yawned again.

Jason gestured for him to come over. The seats at the counter were a little high, but Damian managed to maneuver his way onto the one next to Jason – with a little help. Jason opened his mouth to tell him what they were going to do now, but then Damian's eyes traveled to the box he had been doing a terrible job of hiding.

“Are those donuts?” Damian whispered.

“The best in Gotham,” Jason confirmed. He grabbed the box and slid it in between them. Damian was practically beaming when he flung open the top. “I wasn't sure what you liked the most, so I picked some of my favorites—”

He stopped when he saw Damian stuffing his mouth with a glazed one.

“...I'm guessing you like glazed.”

Damian eagerly nodded.

He took another large bite out of the donut, sugar and glaze coating his fingertips as he looked expectantly over at Jason. Jason, meanwhile, got his hands on a Boston crème donut. It was even messier than Damian's choice, but Jason cared just as much about it as Damian did. Donuts were
always worth getting messy.

“So,” Jason said, his tone suddenly serious, “we need to talk.”

Damian stopped mid-bite.

He stared at Jason with wide, green eyes, skin pale as he gulped down what he had just eaten. The rest of the donut was placed precariously on the counter – completely forgotten as Damian quietly asked, “...Are you sending me back to Mommy?”

He couldn't come up with an answer for that.

Not because he didn't know what he was going to do next, but because he just hadn't expected a question like that to come out of Damian's mouth. The boy looked so scared. Jason couldn't help but wonder what he must have gone through in the time before they ran off to Gotham together – and if there was anything he could do to make things better for him now.

Tears started to well up in Damian's eyes.

That was one way he could make things better. Jason hurriedly shook his head in denial, hoping that it could stop the flow of tears. But Damian just started crying even harder, and Jason realized he had absolutely no idea how to comfort a crying child. It had helped when he was Robin – kids always got a kick out of him when they were being rescued, and having Bruce there as Batman had always made things even better.

But he didn't have Bruce, and he didn't have his Robin suit.

He wasn't even Jason Todd right now.

He was Peter Parker.

And Peter had just as much experience as he did with kids.

“You're not going back,” he said. “I promise. You're going to stay here with me, and I'll make sure your mom never ever finds you. Okay?”

Damian gave a tearful nod.

He grabbed some of the donut shop's napkins and held them out.

After a moment of hesitation, Damian took the bundle of napkins – and very, very loudly blew his nose with it. “I don't want to go back,” he wailed. “I-I want to stay here. I want to eat at the cafe, and-and eat donuts, and go on adventures like when we snuck onto the plane...”

“We'll go on lots of adventures,” Jason said. “We'll eat lots of donuts, too, and we're going to live out of the cafe.”

...Especially since he still hadn't gotten groceries.

Damian blew his nose again, sniffled and rubbed his eyes with his sleeve.

“If I'm not going home,” he quietly asked, hiccuping a little, “what-what do we need to talk about it?”

Jason grinned. “How do you feel about the name Ian?”
Damian crossed his arms.

“It sounds like you took it from my name,” he accused him.

He faltered. “...I might have.” He shifted in his seat a little, bringing the chair closer as his grin returned. “But what about Ian Parker?”

Damian's eyes immediately lit up.

“Is that my name?” he whispered.

Jason gave a big, exaggerated shrug – with an absolutely mischievous look to his eyes. “I don't know,” he said. “I heard that someone might be getting the name Ian Parker, if he's cool with having a certain Peter Parker as his older brother-"

Damian gave a squeal of delight.

That noise definitely hadn't been expected, but he wasn't going to question the excited look on his face – he was just happy that Damian apparently wasn't too attached to his actual name. Jason hopped out of his chair and stood in front of Damian.

“It'll be like you're a superhero,” he said. “Only you and I can ever know that you're really Damian, but we both know that you're just as cool as Damian and Ian. I still need to finish the paperwork, but you'll even be enrolled in Gotham Academy as Ian.”

He waited for some kind of excited reaction – or any kind of reaction – only to realize that Damian didn't know the significance of Gotham Academy. What it was varied by continuity, and Jason only had a vague idea of what it was like outside of his life as Jason Todd. But his version of Gotham Academy was a prestigious private school that ran K-12, and offered boarding to all of its students. Dick had gone there. He had gone there. It just made sense for Damian to go there too.

“Gotham Academy is the best school in all of Gotham,” Jason explained.

Damian just kept staring at him.

“It's a super fancy and cool private school,” he added. “Everyone wears really cool uniforms, the food is great, and it's safer than any other school in Gotham. I actually used to go there, so I'm speaking from experience.”

When Damian still didn't say anything, he seriously started getting worried. Damian had been a bundle of energy right up until he mentioned school. Had it been something he said? He thought he was doing a good job selling it, and he knew he had been amazed when Bruce said he was going there.

But Damian was a rich kid on both sides of the family, so maybe it wasn't as cool to him as it was to Jason.

Damian crossed his arms.

Jason perked up a little. At least that was something more than a stare!

“...Can I get glasses?” Damian finally asked. “Ian definitely would wear glasses.”

He blinked.

“Uh, sure-“
“And does the uniform have a bow tie?” Damian interrupted, eyes alight with *something* that he couldn't quite name. When Jason managed to shake his head a second later, not entirely sure where he was going with this, Damian visibly deflated – his shoulders slumped, he let out a sigh, and he slowly climbed down the chair.

“Glasses are good, then,” he said. He looked up at Jason. “Are you going to school too, Peter?”

He shook his head.

“I'm a big kid,” he said. “I have to do some big kid things, but I'll always be home when you're home, okay?”

Damian nodded.

Jason's gaze traveled down to what Damian was wearing.

“...Now that we've taken care of *that,*” he said, “want to go on a shopping trip? We need to get groceries, but we'll definitely stop by a clothes store and get some new outfits.”

“And my glasses?”

He smiled. “And your glasses.”

“Then let's go!”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

It's been awhile since I've regularly put author's notes in fics I've written - not since my old days back on FF.net - but I wanted to provide an explanation for the sudden explosion of chapters. I'm not /technically/ doing NaNo, but I'm using it as motivation to write at least 500 words a day. I'll probably up it to 1,000 words later in the month, since I'm already churning out that many. So consider this both a warning and a blessing - I'm usually pretty bad about updating regularly.

Enjoy the chapter!

It was a dark and stormy night.

And, yes, he did know that was a little cliché, but there really wasn't any other way to describe the night that had rolled into Gotham. A thick cover of clouds blotted out the stars and moonlight, and rain was beginning to fall down from the skies above. It was really a terrible night for a walk like this, but he still was determined to make his trek from one side of the city to the other. He was someone who kept to his promises, and this was a promise he couldn't fail to uphold.

As the rain began to grow stronger, he pulled up the hood to his old, worn hoodie. It did little to keep out the water, but it cloaked his face in darkness as he stepped underneath a dull streetlight. It flickered in the hazy Gotham air. This area was certainly not a good place to be after dark, but sacrifices had to be made.

He pulled his phone out from his pocket and checked the time. It wouldn't long before he arrived. Shifting the case on his back, he slipped out of the light and back into the unlit alleyways. There had been a few new texts on his phone, too, but he would ignore them for now. He could text James back when he was finally at his destination. For now, his only focus was on the dark, penetrating cold of Gotham's streets.

xXx

Back on his first day of school in this life, Jason hadn't really understood Alfred's insistence on taking pictures. He just remembered squirming the entire time. Even in the life before, he hated standing around while dedicated photographers took picture after picture.

(Family reunions, of course, were the worst offenders of all.)

But today he wasn't the one going to school for the first time. It was Damian. Damian, who apparently had been homeschooled his entire life. Jason knew it was his responsibility to take as many pictures as he possibly could. When Damian eventually lived at Wayne Manor, he'd want those pictures. Or, at least, Bruce and Alfred would, and he couldn't ruin that for them.

Damian squirmed just as much as he did when he took pictures of him posing in front of Gotham Academy's gates. Going there was risky, especially with him having been a student at the school before his death, but he could negate some of it if he just kept his most important features hidden. A hoodie over a somewhat nice dress shirt – for job interviews – jeans, sneakers and a hat to cover
up the notable white streak.

“Are you almost done?” Damian whined.

“Just one more,” he promised, giving Damian the briefest of glances before turning his attention to his phone. He just had to get the lighting right. Then everything would be perfect. He tapped the screen to focus the shot, stepped just a little to the right to catch the sun at the right angle, and took his final shot.

He looked at the picture.

Perfect.

“Are you done now?” Damian asked, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Damian had been wearing high-end clothes when they had first met, but it felt strange seeing him in the academy’s uniform. Damian, apparently, felt the same way about how strange it was, because he kept fidgeting with the collar every five seconds. “I want to go to school, Peter.”

Jason put away his phone.

“I'm done,” he confirmed.

He grinned and walked over to Damian. After a moment of hesitation, he gave the top of his head an affectionate rub. It definitely messed up Damian's hair, but Jason wasn't too worried. If anything, it would stop him from being too noticeable. Damian wiggled a little at the touch, but didn't really say anything. He just crossed his arms and gave Jason an expectant look.

“Sorry, sorry,” Jason said. “I just wanted to enjoy the moment.”

He glanced around.

No one was watching them.

Jason crouched down in front of Damian.

“Remember what I told you this morning before we left the house,” he reminded him, his voice quiet. “You're an orphan named Ian Parker. You live with your older brother Peter. You moved to Gotham because your brother had just enough money to get you a spot at Gotham Academy.”

“I know,” Damian said, rolling his eyes. “You've already told me five times.”

“I just wanted to make sure you got it,” he said. “And don't forget – don't trust anyone. You can make all the friends that you want, but you can't tell anyone who you really are, okay?”

“Okay,” Damian replied. He squirmed a little more. “Can I go now?”

Jason faltered.

Now that he was actually facing the moment, he was getting weirdly regretful about this whole situation. He messed with Damian's hair one last time, stood up and gave him a thumbs up. “You can.”

Damian's shoulders slumped in relief, and the boy started to head for the gates. He was almost inside the school when he turned back around and gave Jason a hesitant wave goodbye. “Bye, Peter,” he said.
“Bye,” he replied back.

And then Damian was lost among the gaggle of children.

Readjusting the cap to his hat, Jason turned from the school and headed back into the streets – prepared to do the one thing he had never really done back in this life or even in his first one. He focused on the interviews that lay ahead of him, and on the job he'd hopefully have by the end of the day. Doing that made it *much* easier to forget about how worried he was for Damian.

**xXx**

It didn't take long for him to figure out which boy he was supposed to find.

Ian Parker stood out like a sore thumb among the other students of Gotham Academy, and it wasn't just because he was gawking at the others. Everything about him just didn't *fit* the kind of kids that went there. Jason Todd had been like that, too, back before he died. He let himself pause at the thought of him. Of the legacy he had left behind, both at the school and away from it. He didn't let himself think too much about Jason. They hadn't ever really known each other. But both of them had gone to Gotham Academy at around the same time, so it was hard not to imagine him.

And when he looked at Ian, he saw the same thing. Ian might have been looking around with awe in the green eyes that peeked out from behind thick, black frames, but there was a defiance, too. He couldn't quite put his finger on why he was so sure of that, but Ian looked like he was ready to fight at any moment if the need to arose.

But Ian was tiny compared to most of the others lingering on the campus grounds, and part of him wondered why his caretaker would be so quick to leave him alone. Jason's certainly hadn't on his first day.

...He needed to stop making Jason comparisons.

Arming himself with the warmest smile he could muster and taking a swig out of a thermos filled with contraband coffee out of habit, he finally approached Ian Parker. Ian swiveled his head around to look at him when he heard his approach. He was shocked at the reflexes, but even more shocked at the way that Ian was looking at him. He was doing the studying, instead of the other way around, and he wasn't really sure how he felt about that.

The look in the boy's eyes faded.

“Hi,” he said. “Are you Ian?”

There was a pause, and then a nod.

“It's nice to meet you,” he said, smile still on his lips. This was all a script at this point; he was the go-to person for welcoming new students and showing them around, even when said students transferred into the school in the middle of the year. And he was *good* at following scripts. He played his role with finesse, making sure that not a single bit of his unease showed itself. “The headmaster asked me to show you around. We still have some time before the first classes start, so we can find where all of your classes are and get you used to the school—”

“How are you?”

He paused, *just* for a second.

That didn't follow the script in the slightest.
“I'm Tim,” he said. “Tim Drake.”

Ian studied him again.

Their eyes met for the briefest of seconds before Ian started fiddling with his collar, the calculating look on his face now replaced by one of childhood innocence. He was starting to get the suspicion that Ian was following his own script, too, but he couldn't figure out what that script was.

Tim didn't like not being able to figure out the script.

“...Can I call you Timmy?” Ian asked.

“If you want to,” Tim said. He was still giving the smile, but it was beginning to get a little strained. Ian might have been a small child, but children – Tim had learned – could often be the greatest schemers of all. Behind Ian's own warm smile, he had a sneaking hunch that there was an ulterior motive for the nickname.

“Thank you, Timmy,” Ian said, grinning.

Just for a second, he caught a glimpse of a smirk, but said smirk was quickly buried under overall excitement. Oh, the game was on. Maybe Tim shouldn't have been so focused on defeating Ian in an unofficial war, especially considering how young he was, but it was impossible to resist the temptation.

He would just have to bide his time.

“You're welcome,” Tim said. The smile returned in full force as he gestured at the school before them. “Let's get started on this tour. It won't take long, and we should be able to get you to your first class before the first bell.”

Their eyes met for one last time before they started walking.

And, in that moment, he was very sure that Ian had noticed the unspoken declaration and had agreed to its terms – especially when he saw the smirk that openly danced across Ian's lips.

“Show the way, Timmy!”
Finding a job in Gotham was both easy and hard.

There were a lot of jobs available in the darkest streets and forgotten blocks of the city. Jason knew that very well. He had, after all, spent the past few years beating up petty criminals alongside Bruce. Burglaries, heists, attacks, or even just to be someone's goon for the night – if it had shown up in any of the Batman stories, it was a job you could do for a living. But jobs like that weren't really livings, and Jason couldn't bring himself to do something like that.

He was a Robin, not a robber.

So that meant he'd have to look to more legal sources of income, and that was an entirely different story. Business was weird in Gotham. There was a fair share of shady ones, but the legitimate ones were much rarer. The big powerhouses were Wayne Enterprises and the places any city needed: fast food chains, grocery stores and gas stations. Those necessities, unsurprisingly, paid minimum wage and nothing more.

Wayne Enterprises, on the other hand? He'd do great working there. His skills were admittedly a little rusty after spending so many years as Jason Todd, but somewhere he knew how to put his skills to use. He had a high school education, and the beginnings of a college one, too. If the tech side of Wayne Enterprises had him, they would have been even more advanced than they already were.

But there was one little problem with that, and it was the kind of problem he really couldn't ignore: Bruce owned it. With his luck, Bruce would walk in one day while he was working, recognize him, and ruin every part of his mostly improvised plan.

He'd have to find another job.

But no one was hiring. They didn't have the money to hire, or the business to, either. He was sure most of the well-meaning groups had some kind of villain forcing them to give up revenue, or just had a hard time winning customers over if they lived in a more dangerous part of the city – Crime Alley was especially notorious for that.

He would have kept wandering the streets until it was time to pick up Damian if his stomach didn't start aching and rumbling. With a frustrated, tired sigh, Jason retreated to his favorite cafe. It was surprisingly empty. He glanced at the time on his phone; it was too late for breakfast, but just barely time for lunch. The little bit of worry gnawing at his chest melted away, and he made his way over to a lonely table by the window.

“Let me guess,” a familiar voice said, “a mac and cheese burger again?”

He looked away from the window.

It was Hayley again – her blond hair still in those strangely familiar ponytails. He stared at her, her hair, and her name tag for another few moments, trying to figure out why she seemed familiar. And why she knew what meal he was going to order, but the first part was the more pressing issue. Jason's nonexistent spidey senses were tingling again – or maybe it was just a healthy dose of paranoia.

He finally managed to give a nod.
“Your little brother looked disgusted when you ate it the last time,” she said. A small smile flickered across Jason's lips. *That* was definitely true, even if Damian liked it when he tried it later during their impromptu dinner. “But I think it's a perfectly good meal.”

“It really is,” Jason said, finding his voice. Why was he feeling so nervous about this conversation? Maybe it was the look on her face; she had been giving him that look the last few times he had been in here, too. She was studying him, but there wasn't the same confusion there had been before. She seemed to have *recognized* him, but that was impossible. He barely knew her-

His gaze dropped down to her name tag.

“What's bothering you, little bird?” she asked.

He stared at her and her ponytails.

“You—You're—” he started to say, stumbling over his words. He should have been more angry and defensive, but he just couldn't find the mental clarity he needed for acting right now.

He wildly glanced around, hands instinctively going for a utility belt that wasn't there. He frantically shoved them into his hoodie's pockets next, only to come to the horrible realization that he didn't have anything but his fake IDs, wallet and phone in them. *Nothing* that he could use as a weapon.

*Come on!* he thought. *This was Gotham.* Why did he think it would be a good idea to wander around Gotham defenseless? He didn't even have a knife. A knife would have been good in a situation like this. He could threaten her, dart out the door, and try to figure out how he was going to get out of *this* mess. But without any kind of weapon, he was forced to sit around and pretend like he was just some random, regular customer.

“I—I knew you were stupid, but I didn't realize you were stupid enough to make your alias so similar to your actual name,” he finally got out, a little bit of bravado to his voice that he didn't actually feel. “*Harley.*”

She looked down at her name tag, an amused grin on her lips. “It's actually a misprint, *Robin.*”

He stared at her.

She stared at him.

Then he immediately shot to his feet—

-only for her to push him back down into his chair.

“Calm down,” she said, putting her hands up in mock surrender. “I don't work for Mister J anymore – and I know what he did to you.”

Jason gave her a wary look, but stopped trying to get out of the chair. “So you're working in a...cafe now?” he asked. He was still looking for some kind of escape from this, but nothing was coming to him. The only idea he really had was breaking the window next to him, but he didn't want to do that to the poor cafe's owner. “Aren't you a doctor?”

“*Was* a doctor,” Harley corrected, a little bit of...*something* to her voice that he couldn't quite describe. Was it regret? Guilt? Something else? “The moment I fell in love with Mister J, I knew my medical license would be revoked – and I don't regret it in the slightest.”
“...Uh-huh,” Jason managed to get out. He shifted a little. “You're...not wondering how I came back to life?”

“It's Gotham, little bird,” she said, a little bit of an amused giggle slipping into her voice. This was the Harley Quinn he was more used to. Joking, lighthearted and not...whatever she had just been a second ago. “Do you really think anyone stays permanently dead?”

He faltered. “Good point.”

There was a pause.

Harley looked around, saw no one, and slid into the seat across from him. She had her little recording pad on the table in front of her, a doodle of a flower on it in the place of actual orders. “So, Robin, having trouble leaving the nest for the first time?”

He looked over at his resume.

“....Yeah,” he admitted. “I am.”

She nodded sagely. “No jobs available?”

He let out a sigh.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“It took me awhile to get this job,” she admitted. “Professional clown doesn't really look good on the resume.”

He looked back up at her.

Like her earlier expressions, he couldn't quite describe the emotions flickering across her face. But something about it felt comforting in a way he would have never expected from Harley Quinn – not goofy, not villainous and not even a little unhinged. Just...nice. Like they were old friends, and not a former sidekick and henchman.

“But, never fear, little bird!” she exclaimed. “I know just the solution.”

“If you're going to ask me to work for a villain, I'll have to decline.”

She smirked a little. “There you are.”

“...What?”

“You were a little out of it,” she said. “You weren't the feisty little boy ready to fight in his underpants-”

“I'm fifteen.”

She dismissed the comment with a wave of her hand. “Come back when you're an adult and then we'll talk about you not being a little boy anymore,” she shot back, barely missing a beat. She grabbed the pad, wrote down something on it, and slid it across the table towards him. “Go to the address I just put on there, and say that I sent you. You can get a job there, and the pay is good, too.”

He looked down at the address. “What do you get out of this?”
“Making sure you can put food on the table for your friend,” she said. “I *might* be a little morally compromised, but I'm not going to let a little kid be miserable when I can have a say in it. Now, how about that burger?”

xXx

Gotham's former Boy Wonder slipped out of the cafe, leaving just her in the middle of the empty room. She leaned up against the wall, looked down at her pad, and decided that a phone call was in order. Turning the sign on the glass door from open to closed, she dialed the number she knew by memory now – a downright mischievous smile dancing across her lips.

“Our little bird finally came alone,” she proudly announced.

“...Hello to you too.”

She frowned. “I think *someone* needs coffee.”

“I already had some.”

She gave a shrug that only she could see. “Not enough,” she said. “But that doesn't really matter – I finally revealed what I knew about him. Well, not all of it, but you know what I was planning on telling him.”

There was a pause.

“And how was he acting?”

“Different,” Harley said. “Just like I noticed the last times he was here. I *know* I'm right, Red. Something went *wrong* when they brought him back, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it.”

“Okay, Sherlock.”

There was a pause again.

“...Are we still meeting at the butterfly garden after work today?”

“Of course, Red!” she replied. “I wouldn't miss it for any baby bird.”
Despite Harley's promises that her solution didn't involve working for some sort of criminal, the address led him to a building tucked into one of the more dangerous parts of Gotham outside of Crime Alley. If it was just a bit closer, and just a bit more dangerous, it could have easily been a part of it. The building itself was unassuming, and faded into the background of the landscape.

Jason fingered the pocketknife he had shoved into his hoodie's pocket. He had been too far away from his apartment to get one from there, but there had been a store on the way that sold some. A small, unassuming building, in a small, not unassuming neighborhood. If this didn't scream trap, he didn't know what did.

But he was in need of a job.

He looked up at the faded sign dangling above the entrance.

“Grimm,” he read. He stared up at it for a moment, studying the font and the word itself. If it had been spelled a different way, he would have thought it was cliché. But this spelling was another story – he let go of his knife and opened up the door.

A bell jingled throughout towering aisles, signaling his arrival.

His suspicion was right.

Harley had sent him to a bookstore.

This could still go horribly wrong, but Jason was going to try being optimistic. Maybe, just maybe, Harley really wasn't out to get him? That would be a nice change. He tried scanning the shelves for a glimpse of anyone, but even the front register was currently unmanned.

“Hello?” he called out. “Is anyone here?”

There was a noise from the back of the shop that could almost be considered a response, but it was too quick for Jason to clearly make it out. Taking his hoodie off and slipping his pocketknife into his pants instead, he wandered down the narrow alley that bookshelves formed. He eventually caught a glimpse of a figure tucked away in the bookshelves: a woman with black hair and green eyes.

Something about her seemed familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on what. Hand going for the pocketknife in his pants, he carefully approached her. She didn't seem to notice him – she had a pair of earbuds in as she pushed the cart towards another aisle. In retrospect, he should have seen what happened next coming – the books were all piled precariously on top of each other, and it was only a matter of time before they went crashing down to the ground.

A loud crash rang throughout the shop.

Jason immediately moved to pick up the books that had fallen, scooping several into his arm at once to clean up the mess. When he popped up, he found himself staring down at the woman. “Thank you,” she said. There was almost a purr to her voice, which wasn't something that Jason was used to describing voices with, but something about her voice was oddly familiar. He couldn't put his finger on what that thing was, though, and settled for putting the books back in place instead.
“You're welcome,” he said.

He leaned down to grab more of the books, but he stopped when she put a hand on his shoulder. “Have we met before?” she asked. He faltered, wondering the same exact thing. “Oh, never mind – what can I help you with?”

Shaking away his own confusion, he put away the remaining books. “…Harley sent me,” he said.

She looked him over. “She did?”

He nodded.

“She-She knows I need a job,” he managed to get out. It wasn't that he was getting flustered from the woman; he was getting flustered from having to request a job, and, more importantly, not knowing how he was supposed to go about doing that. Knowing Jason Todd's story really didn't help him here. “Do you... Do you have one for me?”

“I have been needing help around the shop...” the woman mused. Why did she seem so familiar?

“What's your name?”

“Peter,” he managed to get out. “Peter Parker.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What's your real name?”

He blinked. “That is-”

“You're a terrible liar,” she said, an amused tone to her voice. She leaned up against the cart. “I trust Harley's judgment, but I want to know a little bit more about who you are – from those eyes of yours, you must have some kind of secret.”

He blinked again, glancing down at his phone screen to see what she meant. He was horrified to see his eyes glowing bright green in his reflection, especially when they suddenly brightened even more. Shoving his phone away in his pocket, he tried – and failed – to make the glow disappear.

“It's funny,” she commented. “The only people I've heard of with eyes like yours are Ra's and Talia Al Ghul, but that would suggest you've bathed in the Lazarus Pit like they do. Or that you are one of them, but I doubt that last option.”

He stared.

“Who are you?” he whispered. Running away sounded like a great idea right now, but his body had spent the past years learning not to run at the sign of danger. It didn't really want to stop after so much practice. And part of him knew that this woman could track him down no matter where he ran – she could, theoretically, even find his apartment.

She could find out about Damian.

Terror gripped his heart. He couldn't explain why he was so sure of her abilities, but if she was friends with Harley, why wouldn't she be down for harming him? It didn't matter that she wasn't with Joker anymore. She had joined him it in the first place, which meant she didn't exactly have the best judgment when it came to people.
“You can call me Selina,” she said.

A little bit of the terror faded.

“...Selina Kyle?” he asked.

She nodded. “That's my name.”

He glanced around the shop, gaze eventually returning to Selina. “You're my da-Bruce Wayne's girlfriend, aren't you?” he asked. Bruce had mentioned her from time to time, but they had never been able to meet. The relationship wasn't constant, and there was something about it that he was forgetting. Like some sort of argument they always got into, or another kind of conflict-

“Someone's been reading the tabloids,” she said, a mischievous smile dancing across her lips. “Or maybe he just remembered his father mentioning my name before – am I right, Jason?”

He stiffened.

“You know who I am,” he somehow got out.

“I know a lot of things,” Selina replied, that same amused purr to her voice as she left the cart behind. She bridged the little distance between them. “I know your dad's idea of father-son bonding involves dressing up in tights, that you died and were brought back to life, and that you're struggling to adjust to Gotham because it's changed so much since you've been gone.”

His hand went for his pocketknife.

He started to pull it out, but stopped when he saw the look on her face. He knew he should have been feeling threatened by both her knowledge and her connection to him, but it was hard when her expression was so kind. “I'll admit that it's unfair of me to know so much about you when you don't seem to remember me.” She gave him a warm, reassuring smile. “You remember Catwoman, don't you?”

He looked at her again.

If he thought long and hard enough, he could imagine her dressed in the Catwoman costume – sleek, black and feline – instead of the more modest clothing she was wearing right now. “So that's why the two of you always broke up,” he said, a joking tone that he didn't really feel slipping into his voice. He was trying to hang onto his character, but he was beginning to realize that Jason Todd just wasn't meant to deal with something so different than the plot of his usual Red Hood origin stories.

He paused.

“If you know my name, why did you ask me?” he questioned.

“I wanted you to say it yourself,” she said. “And to prove a little suspicion of mine – which you did wonderfully, I'd like to add. So Harley thinks you'll be good at this job...”

She crossed her arms, seemingly lost in thought.

“If you, er, don't mind me asking, what's the job that both of you are thinking of?” he asked. “I'm not going to rob some bank with you, if that's what the 'job' is-”

Selina cut him off with a laugh.
“Don't worry, Robin,” she said. “I'm not looking for a partner-in-crime right now – I'm good with myself, and occasionally Harley and Ivy. What I'm really in need of is an assistant in this bookshop. I've had some in the past, but none of them stayed for long because of the crime in this area. Bruce might have a new Robin now, but I still trust your skill.”

She returned to behind the cart.

“I'm sure Harley thought the same thing when she suggested you come here,” she said. “And Bruce did mention how frequently you liked to go to Gotham's libraries...”

Jason immediately perked up.

“How soon can I start?” he asked.

Selina smiled. “How does right now sound?”

He tied his hoodie around his waist, a grin beginning to dance across his lips. “Right now sounds great.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This isn't really a note, but I thrive off of validation and love seeing what people think of my stuff, so please leave a comment as you can!! Kudos and bookmarks are awesome, but it's the comments that get me pumped for writing more - and let me know that people really are enjoying the story I'm telling.

Thanks for reading this short little message!

By the end of the afternoon, Jason had a brand new appreciation for the complex morals of both Catwoman and Harley Quinn. Both of them were technically the bad guys, but any good Jason Todd fan should have known that there were gradients to everything.

Still, getting a job from Catwoman with the help of Harley Quinn was something that Jason was still struggling to get his head around by the time he went to get Damian from school. The walk did let to help clear his mind. If anything, it made things worse. It gave him far too much time to think about everything that had happened in the last few days – getting brought back to life, impulsively taking Damian with him, sending Damian off to school with an alias, and getting himself a job from his dad's on-and-off girlfriend. In the back of his mind, he could see that the divisions between himself and Jason Todd were starting to form.

Jason Todd wasn't supposed to be like this.

He wasn't supposed to be taking care of Damian Wayne, spending all of his money on the best schooling he could get for the kid he was supposed to hate on principle. He was supposed to be dead-set on vengeance. He should have been training furiously for the day he'd take down Joker – or try to, at least. Not working an actual, morally right job. The only drug wars he saw at work that day were in the pages of a book detailing Gotham's history with them; he had snuck a glance at a few of the pages when Selina was on a bathroom break.

He had been so busy running around and doing things for Damian that he hadn't let himself question just how much he had screwed up the plot. And, looking back at everything that had transpired, he realized that there was no easy return from this. Taking Damian had altered the plot in ways he couldn't even begin to fathom, and, for once in his life, he'd be going in completely blind.

“Peter?”

He blinked.

The world came back into focus around him.

He had made it to the front gates of Gotham Academy. He must have been standing there for a little bit, lost in his own thoughts – otherwise, Damian wouldn't be giving him a look like that from behind his glasses while tugging on the sleeve of Jason's hoodie.

Jason fixed the rim of his hat, effectively casting his face in shadows to hide it from any prying
eyes – the plot might be partially ruined, but he could salvage some of it if he laid low enough. He'd make his return as Red Hood. He had to. It was the one, canon thing he had left for himself at this point, and he didn't know what else he was supposed to do if he wasn't Red Hood.

“Peter,” Damian repeated, his tone even more impatient than before. It was more forceful, too, and the annoyed look on Damian's face easily explained why.

“Sorry,” he apologized. He held out a free hand to Damian. The boy studied it for a moment, glanced behind him at someone Jason didn't dare look at for fear of being recognized, and then grabbed onto it. Jason gave Damian's hand a tight squeeze – to remind himself what he was doing this for, and to remind Damian to play it cool – before they headed down Gotham's streets.

“I made a new friend today,” Damian announced the moment they turned onto a new block. He sounded both proud and smug as he tore his hand away from Jason's, instead stuffing it into his uniform's pocket. “He's nice.”

Jason looked down at him. “What's his name?”

“His name's Timothy,” he said, “but he's letting me call him Timmy.”

The name rung a bell, somewhere, but Jason didn't pay much attention to it. He was too busy ducking his head down when he saw an all too familiar face turning around the corner. He didn't question why Dick was heading in the direction of Gotham Academy; questioning it would make him want to look, and he just knew that Dick would recognize him the moment they passed each other.

“What's Timmy like?” he asked – only speaking when the sudden, tense fear of being discovered left his body. He raised his head again and glanced over at Damian, who was watching Dick as he walked away.

Damian mulled over the question.

“I think he's smart,” he said. “He's a worthy adversary.”

There was a pause.

Then a laugh slipped out of Jason's lips.

“What?” Damian demanded.

“It's just-” He bit back another laugh. “That's a big word for someone your age – it throw me off.”

“.Oh,” Damian replied. He looked away. “Well, I am smart.”

“I know you are,” Jason reassured him. He reached a hand down and patted Damian on the shoulder. It was only when Damian flinched at the touch that he realized what he had been doing – he quickly drew his hand away. “I just forgot it for a moment there. But besides Timmy, how did you like your first day of school?”

Damian let out a sigh.

“It was boring,” he said. “I figured out all of the math problems, read faster than anyone in my class, and already knew everything they were teaching in science.”

As they maneuvered around a few people heading the opposite direction, Damian finally looked
back at Jason. Something about him seemed hesitant, but Jason couldn't figure out why. There was a long, drawn out silence as they turned down yet another street.

And then Damian spoke again.

His gaze immediately dropped back to the ground, all of his previous confidence gone like it had never been there to begin with. “I-I want to skip my grade. Can I skip it, Peter?”

Jason stopped.

Damian did, too.

“You want to skip a grade?” Jason questioned.

Damian hesitated, then gave a small nod. “My tutors taught me everything that the teachers showed me today. If I'm going to Gotham Academy to get the best education I possibly can, it would be better for me to skip a grade – or maybe several – because then I would be learning new material.”

He glanced up at Jason.

Jason got a pit in his stomach he couldn't quite explain at the thought. It was only Damian's first day. Requesting that Damian move up a few grades would draw attention both Ian and Peter Parker. Was he really ready for something like that?

Did he even have a choice?

“I can look into it,” he finally relented. “Can you stay in your grade until the end of the week?”

Damian gave a solemn nod.

“Okay,” Jason said. “I'll do that, then.”

He glanced at the road ahead of them, then stopped when he noticed the building they were walking past. He gestured towards it with the hand he had offered to Damian when he picked him up – a smile beginning to spread across his face. “Want some ice cream?”

Damian's eyes lit up.

“I always want ice cream,” he very, very seriously said, only to dart into the ice cream shop a second later – something he would deny when Jason teased him about it that night.

xXx

Tim watched as his peers flocked to expensive cars and the occasional city bus, but his gaze mostly remained on Ian Parker as the boy joined the man who had to be his brother. Ian had mentioned him during the tour. Something about him had seemed familiar, but there was only so much he could see with between the hoodie and the hat. He studied both of them until they disappeared into the bustling afternoon streets.

Then he turned his attention to the man who had emerged from the crowd.

“Hey Tim,” Dick Grayson said, a warm, friendly smile on his face.

The classmates that had remained on the school grounds and near the gate all collectively turned their heads. Their reactions were almost comical at this point – first there was the staring, and then
the pointing, and then there was the whispering. At a school that was primarily composed of rich kids, someone like Dick shouldn't have been the phenomena that he was. But Tim had to admit to himself that not everything fell into a neat, predictable pattern, and that sometimes being the attractive son of the most influential and rich man in Gotham was enough to gain the adoration of the teenage masses.

“Hi,” he said.

He didn't glance back at his classmates as they walked down the street together. He'd let the rumors stew like they always did. He was used to them at this point, and honestly was more occupied with the enigma that was Ian Parker.

Once they were a good distance away from the school, the two of them fell into silence. He didn't ask what Dick was thinking about. Dick didn't ask what he was thinking about. The unspoken agreement to ignore the other had been forged on the very first day they had met, and neither one of them had broken it since. Tim was sure that breaking it would have led to repercussions; everything always did.

It wasn't long before they arrived on the doorsteps of Wayne Manor.

“So,” Dick said, opening the door for Tim, “how was school?”

“It was school,” he admitted. He slipped underneath Dick's arm – briefly cursing how small he was compared to him – and entered the house. He caught sight of Alfred on the phone a short distance away. He was presumably talking to Bruce. If he was remembering right, Bruce was away on some kind of business with the Justice League. Bruce hadn't exactly explained where he was going, but he had begged Dick for details – and Dick was very willing to give said details if he was pressured enough.

“I met a new student,” he said. With Alfred occupied on the phone, there was no one to guard the kitchen. Dick stayed on lookout in the doorway when they reached the room, watching Tim raid the cupboards for any kind of snack Alfred wouldn't approve of with a look of disbelief on his face. “Ian Parker. He's a third grader, but he's smart.”

“Smarter than you?” Dick asked.

Tim, in response, threw a glove that he had stuffed into the jacket of his coat last winter at him. Dick caught it before it could hit his face, but the message was definitely sent. “I'm not letting a third grader outsmart me.”

“That makes it sound like it's a competition.”

“...I'm going to throw my other glove at you.”

After eyeing the cupboard – and hearing the phone call end down the hallway – Tim grabbed a
forgotten bag of chocolate chips set to the back and joined Dick in the doorway. The two immediately made a beeline for the Batcave.

Tim had spent so long imagining what it must have looked like that it was hard to believe he now had the ability to go in it. It didn't matter how many times he had gone down there; he still stopped in the middle of the room and stared at the vastness of it all.

“Tell me more about Ian,” Dick said, leaning up against the side of the Batmobile. He was always leaning on something – Tim was beginning to suspect he was physically incapable of not resting against a wall, a piece of furniture, or the occasional high-tech piece of equipment when talking. “What's your competition like?”

Tim unzipped the bag. “First off,” he declared, grabbing a fistful of dark chocolate, “he's not my competition.”

“Oh-huh.”

He resisted the very strong urge to throw his other glove.

But then he paused, because Tim honestly wasn't entirely sure how he wanted to describe Ian Parker. They had only interacted over the course of a single day, and even those interactions had been limited by each having their own set of classes to go to. He had stuck with him in the morning, and had met with him that afternoon. It was admittedly more of Ian meeting with him than the other way around, but it was still important.

“He's...different,” he finally said. “I think he's not all he seems to be.”

Dick straightened a little. “What do you mean?”

Tim ate another handful of chocolate chips. “I'm not sure. There's just something about him that seems... off. And it's not just because he wanted to call me Timmy.”

“He's eight,” Dick said, giving him another look of disbelief. “You make it sound like a cute nickname is a nefarious scheme.”

“It is with him,” Tim said. “Stop smirking – I'm serious. He was getting a kick out of calling me Timmy. I could just see it on his face. I know I'm supposed to be the older, more mature one, but I think that eight year old is out to get me.”

“...I definitely see your point,” Dick replied.

Tim crossed his arms. “You're really living up to your name right now.”

There was a moment of silence.

The bag crinkled as Tim thrust his hand inside of it. As he dug around for the few chocolate chips that lingered at its bottom, his expression grew somber. Maybe it was too soon to be mentioning something like this, but he couldn't ignore the elephant in the room for any longer.

He took a deep breath.

“...Actually, there was something else about him,” he admitted.

Dick raised an eyebrow.

Tim let out a sigh. “He...he reminded me of Jason.”
Dick just stared.

He let his gaze drop down to the floor.

“Jason never fit into Gotham Academy,” he said. “You never really saw it. You were gone by the time that he arrived. But I saw the same look in his eyes when I showed him around on his first day. Ian Parker just doesn't fit there. He's good at acting like he does, but he's not meant to be at the school.”

He hesitantly raised his head to find Dick glancing around the room. When no one was in sight, his expression shifted from one of sorrow to one of something else – Tim never could put a name to that look of his. “You think something is wrong.”

Tim nodded.

“Someone sent him there,” Dick guessed.

Another nod.

Dick massaged his forehead. “Do they suspect you?”

“I don't know,” Tim admitted. “What is there to suspect? Timothy Jackson Drake is nothing more than a high-achieving rich kid – I've done nothing to raise any eyebrows.”

They both fell into a momentary silence.

Then Dick shifted, finally stepping away from the Batmobile and approaching Tim. “We need to look into him. We can't risk someone finding out the truth. I'm assuming you've already started to?”

“What do you think I do during my study halls?” Tim asked. “Homework?”

Dick let out a sigh. “Good point.”

“I'll talk to him more tomorrow,” he said. “And don't worry – I'll keep my guard up. In the meantime, I'll look into He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and share my findings.”

Dick just gave him a look when he used his nickname for the one in question, but he didn't question it – Tim had been relentless with using for the past month, and Dick seemed to have come to the very true conclusion that there was nothing he could do to stop him from using it.

Tim paused, then slowly glanced back the way they had came.

“...Do you think I can convince Alfred to make me coffee?”
Chapter 9

It didn't take long for Jason and Damian to fall into a daily routine of their own. Two weeks into Damian's late school year, and two weeks into Jason's unexpected job, Jason honestly couldn't imagine not living with Damian Wayne. It was a strange thought. If he looked far enough back in his memory, it wasn't even a month since he stopped living in the Wayne Manor. Even his body was beginning to forget it. Maybe it was because he had been dunked into the Lazarus Pit, or maybe because he was just in need of a growth spurt, but Jason had been growing. Not too much. It wasn't like he had become as tall as Dick overnight.

Still, it was a start.

A start to his anti-hero career, and a start to the defining arc of his story.

But he shoved away all thoughts of becoming Red Hood, and focused on the more important of his alter egos: Peter Parker. He made sure to beat Damian up every single morning, even when the teenager in him was screaming for just a few more hours of sleep. He made breakfast, even if his cooking skills were a little rusty and the food didn't taste the best.

(Damian never outright said it sucked, but his face gave it all away.)

He'd take him to school every weekday, go to work, and swing by the cafe Harley worked at during his break. Once or twice, Selina would even come with him, turning the sign from “open” to “close” on the door of the used bookstore before they headed towards the street. She asked about how he was doing, and he asked about how she was doing, but there was only so much they could talk about that intrude too much into their private lives. Harley was almost always there. And no matter if Jason was alone or with Selina, she'd swing by their table and chat longer than she probably was supposed to.

Jason knew he was going against canon more than he ever should have been, but it felt good chatting with Harley and Selina. They couldn't begin to understand what his life was like. He doubted anyone ever could. But they knew a thing or two about keeping secrets and pretending those secrets didn't exist, and it gave him a sense of kinship he would have never expected from two criminals he had fought against numerous times.

Even a few more hours of work didn't dash his euphoria. By the time that he'd leave the shop in the afternoon to pick up Damian, he'd be practically walking down the streets of Gotham with a skip to his step.

And then Damian and him would head back to his apartment, usually swinging by some little shop on the way home. He didn't have enough money to treat him every single day. So they window-shopped as much as they could, pointing out every funny name or strange-looking thing.

He didn't tell Damian a lot about his job during their walks. He was sure that he'd think it was boring, especially given how he had grown up. Instead, he'd listen to Damian talk about his day at school. Damian, he quickly realized, was a very vivid storyteller. He'd detail his great battles with Timmy, who was both a friend and an unofficial rival, and occasionally complain about classes, but he stopped with the last part when Jason reassured him – three days in – that the headmaster and him were working on pushing him up at least two or three grades.

They'd have dinner together at the apartment while Damian worked on homework that wasn't really homework, and Jason worked on drawing out the plans to the bookstore. He didn't really
Sometimes they read. Sometimes they played games. And sometimes they'd sit in front of the TV, watching Gotham's news channel. Damian always was asking who was who – who the villain wrecking havoc downtown was, who the masked vigilante was, and who various key players in Gotham were. Jason always gave more information than he should have known, but he couldn't help it. How could he ignore part of what he knew to be their stories, even if only Jason Todd and not Peter Parker should have known?

Out of all of the people on the screen, it was Robin that Damian couldn't take his gaze off of. Even his own dad – though he wasn't Damian actually knew that Bruce was Batman – garnered only the most basic attention. He couldn't ever describe the look to Damian's eyes when he saw Robin. It wasn't any clear emotion. But he could describe how straight Damian suddenly got when the news anchor described Robin's recent escapades, and how he moved to the very edge of his seat when Robin appeared in front of the cameras. It was like awe, but even awe didn't capture the expression that flickered across his face.

On the nights when Robin wasn't in the picture, Jason was never really surprised to find Damian suddenly curled up against him, his chest rising and falling as he slept. Jason felt like Robin the most on those nights – one wrong move, and Damian would wake up as he carried him back into his bedroom.

Jason usually fell asleep after that, but he rarely got a full night's rest. Getting killed by a crowbar, an explosion and a very annoying clown apparently had its downsides. Sometimes he'd wake up in the middle of the night, hair plastered to his forehead and sweat soaking his clothes. Other times he'd just open his eyes and feel a sense of dread he couldn't quite shake, even if he knew that everything was perfectly alright.

And on nights like those, Damian almost always would appear in his bedroom doorway – skin pale and hands shaking as he held them at his side. They'd make eye contact, Damian would stumble off towards the bathroom, and come back to find Jason sitting on his bed. Damian would always stand nervously in the doorway before rushing over to the bed and burying himself under the covers beside Jason. And after Jason just sat there for a few minutes, he'd feel Damian's little arms wrapping around his waist, trembling as nearly silent sobs left a boy who was too young to be so sad and scared.

Jason never talked about it the next morning. He already had his ideas on why Damian was so broken up. Part of him wondered if bringing him to therapy was a good idea, but he didn't how either one of them would begin to describe both their connection and how Damian had probably already killed multiple people despite still being in elementary school. And, even though he knew Damian needed help he couldn't really give, he knew Damian would never agree to something like therapy.

So he shoved the thought away, counted the days down to the weekend, and tried to make everything better with their weekend escapades. He took Damian to all of his old haunts – some dangerously close to Wayne Manor, but he was willing to make the risk if it meant Damian had fun. He showed him his favorite library, the ice cream place Dick had always taken him to after their occasional team ups, and the main park. He pointed out all of the little alleyways, told dramatic reenactments of the battles he had been a part of but pretended to have only seen on TV, and even brought him on the very outskirts of Wayne Enterprises – just close enough for Damian...
to see where his father worked, even if his knowledge of who his dad was still was questionable, but just far enough away that no one could recognize Jason.

A few more weeks passed.

Damian had his first major tests in his classes, and he passed with perfect scores. The headmaster, who had been understanding but reluctant to move Damian up at first, finally agreed to give him a few more tests to see what grade he really should have been. Jason kept growing taller and taller, until one day he looked into the mirror and realized he'd have to go shopping for more clothes. He was more than a little convinced by that point that the Lazarus Pit had something to do with it, but he didn't question the logic of a comic book universe. He was just grateful for the extra height.

Harley kept teasing him about it every time he went to the cafe now. They had gotten to the point where she was ruffling his hair – a feat made impossible when he stood up and almost smugly looked down at the woman who had been claiming that he was just a kid when he first came back to Gotham – and asking him questions about how Damian was doing at school. And even though she didn't know who Damian was, and even though he really should have been keeping “Ian Parker” a secret, he found he had no problem with telling her about his school life.

And when he got the news that Damian was moving up to eighth grade – eighth grade! – during his lunch break, Harley was just as ecstatic and as proud of Damian as he was. Maybe he should have expected what came next; it felt like they had been building towards something big for the past few weeks, and Harley and him had a relationship – a friendship – unlike anything they had before he died.

Right after he told her what had happened with Damian, she leaned up against the table, eyes bright and with a certain twinkle, and asked if he and his “little friend” would want to come over for dinner some night. He stammered and protested, but she, in turn, said that both her and her girlfriend had been thinking of inviting the two of them over for a long time. Jason was still thrown off and more than a little reluctant, but he agreed to the idea.

It was decided that they'd get together the night that Damian officially changed grades. There was that twinkle to Harley's eyes as she promised to make it a great night. At the beginning of all of this, Jason might have thought she was scheming something bad, but it was the very same look she had when she first suggested he get a job at Selina's bookstore.

And when he was walking back to the bookstore after lunch, a realization suddenly came to him – a realization that made him frantically wipe his tears away in the middle of the street, because he didn't want anyone to question why.

Gotham was his home again.
Chapter 10

It felt like the first day of school all over again.

Damian al Ghul, Damian Wayne, Ian Parker – the names were all getting jumbled up in his head as he stood in front of the classroom, just barely listening to his new teacher as she rambled to herself about what to do with her newest student. He had survived third grade. He could survive eighth. But the pit in his stomach wasn't agreeing with that in the slightest. Everyone seemed so big compared to him. It was the age difference. It had to be.

But they were all so big.

And he was so, so tiny.

Bunching his hands into fists, because it was time to be Ian Parker and not cause trouble – trouble could lead to this all falling apart, and he really didn't want to go back to living in a too-big house with a too-small family – he waited for the final decision. His gaze traveled from the teacher to the rest of the room, his expression both bored and not. And then, towards the front of the room, he saw it.

Or, rather, he saw him.

A tiny smirk danced across his tiny lips.

He turned to his teacher, made a request in the most adorable voice he could muster, and then promptly sauntered over to where Timothy Jackson Drake was sitting. Saunter sounded like the best word in his head – it was what a former third grader would do in a classroom filled with kids five years older than him. He could feel the gazes of all of his classmates on him as he slid into the seat right beside his adversary.

“Hi, Timmy,” he said.

Timothy Jackson Drake raised his head up from the notebook he had been furiously writing it and stared at Ian Parker. There was a pause, a look of disbelief, and then an eyebrow twitch that he did his best to hide.

“Hi, Ian,” he said. “...What are you doing in my class?”

“I didn't tell you?” he asked, tone childishly innocent. “I moved up to your grade! I'm really smart.”

There were a couple of awws from around the room. It was mostly from the girls, but a few of the boys gave looks that said what the girls had spoken. They all thought he was adorable, and he was going to use that to his advantage. For what, he wasn't sure yet, but he knew that their love and adoration would be helpful in the future.

“You forgot to mention it,” Tim said.

“Oh,” he replied. He scooted his chair a little closer to Tim, leaning up against the very edge of his desk. After studying him for a second, he asked with a gasp, “Is that coffee?”

Tim glanced down at his thermos.
“...It might be,” he said.

Ian looked around, eyes wide as his gaze landed on their teacher. She was in the middle of taking attendance, but it wouldn't be long before she turned her attention back to the class. “But coffee isn't allowed,” he whispered. “She might catch you. You might get in trouble.”

“I'll be alright,” Tim reassured him. He was giving him a comforting, warm smile, but Ian could see the strain at the edges of his lips. Tim was having trouble keeping up his act. And he reveled in that fact, because he had been trying to get Tim to break ever since they first met.

He adopted an unconvinced look, though it was quickly replaced by one of rapt attention as the teacher began listing off names. And when his name was finally called, he answered with a strong, confident voice befitting of any Wayne and smoothness befitting of any al Ghul, “Here.”

xXx

Tim had spent the past weeks playing a precarious balancing act. He had been friendly and welcoming to the school's new student, but had also kept enough distance to avoid giving too much away. The plan had been successful. They were close enough for the younger of the two to claim that they were friends, but far enough that Ian didn't even know who picked Tim up from school after the final bell rang.

His research hadn't amounted to much. Ian Parker, by all accounts, was normal for Gotham. His parents, John and Amy Parker, had tragically passed away a few months prior. Considering Gotham's rate of turning out orphans, Tim really wasn't surprised. He knew that his guardian was his older brother, Peter, who was just barely eighteen. The brothers had been homeschooled by their parents; it was why he couldn't find anything about them in the school databases.

Tim knew that he was hiding something. It wasn't just the way he looked when he spoke. Kids loved talking about their lives. A few conversations with Ian should have given him enough information to understand just who Ian Parker really was. But Ian was keeping surprisingly quiet for an eight year old. Any conversation just led to the same conclusion – he lived with his brother Peter, who he cared about very, very dearly, and missed his parents every single day.

A month in, Ian was beginning to sound like a broken record.

Tim was starting to seriously contemplate sneaking into the Batcave with a strand of Ian's hair to analyze his DNA. That, at least, would help him confirm Ian's family. But then a breakthrough – or maybe a curse – came in the form of Ian moving up a few grades. He wasn't really surprised. The boy had been talking about how bored his classes made him. But for Ian to end up in his grade, and in his classes?

That couldn't just be chance.

So he kept playing the role he had been playing since their first meeting: Timothy Jackson Drake, model student who struggled at keeping up the persona. As far as he could tell, Ian was falling for it – he hadn't acted any differently throughout their classes. He was his usual annoying, smug self. And when lunchtime rolled around, he wasn't surprised when he found Ian following him like a miniature shadow, chatting away with a thinly veiled disinterest about their last class.

“Where are you going?” Ian asked. He had to run to keep up with Tim. It wasn't intentional. Tim often forgot just how much his training to become Robin and his time as Robin was impacting his physical abilities, and Ian's height certainly didn't help.
But it didn't mean he was going to slow down.

“I'm going to a club meeting,” he said.

Ian's head bobbed in understanding as he reached Tim's side. “I didn't know there were clubs here,” he said. For once, his innocence sounded genuine.

Tim slowed down a little and glanced down at him. “Only sixth grade and up can join clubs,” he said. Then he paused, realizing that the limitation no longer applied to Ian. A sinking feeling formed. If he knew Ian Parker nearly as well as he thought he did, there was only way this conversation was going to go.

“What club are you in?”

Shit.

“Photography,” he said, giving him a strained smile. “Do you want to come to the meeting with me?”

Please say no, Tim desperately begged. He didn't know who he was begging to – maybe some god or deity, or just a force out of his control. All he knew was that Ian joining his club (his sanctuary) would be the final straw in a long line of miserably occurrences. But when he studied Ian's face, he could tell his hopes were in vain.

Ian was grinning from one ear to the other.

Tim didn't bother trying to tell if the look was faked.

“I want to come,” he agreed.

The feeling in his stomach became like a punch to the gut – something that Tim was very well acquainted with at this point in his life. He gave Ian another smile, kept walking like his life wasn't ruined, and led Ian down towards the room the photography club called their home. Clubs at Gotham Academy were more modeled after those that could be found in anime than most American schools. They did have a club adviser, somewhere, but Tim didn't even know their name.

The students were left to their own devices.

Almost no one was in the room when they arrived. The few members lingering around the tables with their cameras were mostly distracted by their current subject, and only offered Ian and Tim the briefest of glances. Tim normally reveled at the anonymity. Today, however, he wished that they were paying more attention. Someone should have objected to an eight year old's presence. He shouldn't have been left to fend for himself.

Ian looked around at the room, little eyebrow raised.

“Those cameras are expensive,” he commented.

“We get the best cameras we can,” Tim said. He placed his backpack down on the table and started reaching into it for his camera. He always left it carefully cushioned in the front pouch. But he still drew it out with a gentleness that probably wasn't needed, not wanting to risk damaging it. A lack of a camera, even for the short time it took to order one and have it deliver, was a major setback.

Ian studied his camera.
“Can I see your photos?” he asked.

Tim pulled his camera a little closer to him. “...No.”

Ian frowned. The look almost made Tim feel bad about not showing his photography, but then he saw the judgmental look to Ian's eyes. Ian was looking down on everyone in the room. He didn't outright express his feelings, but it was impossible to miss. He crossed his arms. He wandered around the room before plopping himself down in a chair at one of the tables. And then he stared intently at Tim as he went to take a picture of some random spot on the bookshelf in the corner – he didn't want to take the picture, necessarily, but he needed something to get his mind off of Ian invading his one safe space at school.

“Can I see that one?” Ian asked.

Tim resisted the urge to sigh.

“Will you stop asking if I show you?” he asked.

Ian nodded.

His lips drawn into a thin line, he walked over to Ian and presented his camera. He was surprised with the care that Ian grabbed it with, and was even more surprised when Ian slipped the strap over his head. It would have been too heavy for Ian to wear it and walk around with it. But Tim knew that wasn't why he was doing it; he was doing it to keep the camera from hitting the ground if it slipped out of his hands.

Ian looked at the photo.

He looked back up.

“...Did you even change your exposure?” Ian accused him.

Tim went incredibly still.

Ian tilted his head ever so slightly to the side. “Your ISO is too high for this room,” he said. He pointed at the bookshelf. “And for the corner. What were you taking a picture of?”

“Just the end of the bookshelf-” He paused. “You know what ISO is?”

“You don't?” Ian replied. He looked back down at the camera. “If you want the end to stick out more, you need to have more contrast between the wall behind it and the shelf. Just because you have a fancy, expensive camera doesn't mean that your photo is going to be good. You have to work for it.”

Tim opened his mouth to make some sort of retort.

But then he closed it.

The members of the club were all looking at the two of them now, their subjects forgotten. Ian didn't seem to notice. If he did, he didn't care. He just got to his feet, pushed in the chair that he was just barely taller than after placing the camera down on the table, and headed towards the door of the room.

“I'm going to get my lunch,” he announced. He turned to leave. Then he paused and looked back at Tim, adding in an almost uncertain, “...Timmy.”
Ian disappeared out into the hallway.

Tim just stared after him.
Chapter 11

When Jason met Damian after school that day, Damian was silent.

He waved at the school gates like he always did – at a friend that Jason didn't dare look back to see – and just fell into step beside him. Jason, for the most part, respected Damian's need for silence, but it was worrying seeing him so quiet. It was especially nerve-wracking when Jason remembered that this was Damian's first day in a new grade. He was surrounded by new people; all of them would have been years older than him. If he had been his shoes, he would have been just as silent leaving school.

But the farther they walked from the school, the more Damian seemed to return to his usual self. He raised his head up high, walked with a purpose, and even let his arms swing at his side instead of keeping his hands tucked into his coat's pockets. And by the time they were a few blocks away, Damian was looking right up at him.

“Peter,” he asked, “can I get a camera?”

Jason stared down at him.

Damian was interested in cameras? He didn't know much about Damian's lore outside of the basics, but photography was something he would have never expected the boy to like. Maybe Talia or Ra's had shown it to him as some kind of past time, or maybe Jason just didn't have a good enough grasp on Damian's character.

He shrugged off his confusion as quickly as it had appeared.

“Definitely,” Jason agreed. Cameras couldn't cost that much, right? He could probably find a cheap one online, or maybe in one of the thrift stores littering Gotham's streets.

For just a moment, a ghost of a smile flickered across Damian's face.

“I joined the photography club,” he said. His gaze traveled to the street before them. Jason followed his cue and looked ahead, too. In the back of his mind, he was trying to remember the directions that Harley had give him during his lunchtime trip to the cafe – just a few right turns here and a left turn there, and he'd be at the doorstep to their place. “Timmy's in it, too. But I don't have a camera.”

Jason gave a distracted nod. Was he supposed to take the left turn now or later? She had mentioned the turn was just past Selina's shop, but had also said that the turn wasn't the easiest to spot.

There was silence as he took a leap of faith and led Damian down a thankfully empty alleyway. They weren't in Crime Alley, but dark, abandoned alleyways were always risky in Gotham. Damian didn't really say anything. He just clung a little closer to Jason, tiny hand grabbing onto Jason's and holding it tight. Jason, in turn, pulled Damian a little closer to him.

They left the alleyway.

But Damian didn't leave his side.

They walked in silence for the rest of the way, Damian slowly moving closer and closer as they navigated streets he had never dared to take Damian down before. After they walked past a somewhat shady man on a worryingly empty street that bordered Crime Alley, Jason took the
initiative. He didn't even give Damian a chance to protest the decision – he just scooped Damian up and held him close.

And by the time they finally reached the apartment that Harley had said she and her girlfriend lived in, Damian had his arms wrapped tightly around Jason's neck. It was a struggle just to get a hand free to ring the doorbell. Jason was grateful for the little growth spurt that his dip in the Lazarus Pit had given him – he wouldn't have been able to manage the feat without it.

The doorbell rang.

For a moment, there was nothing. It was just Jason and Damian out on the front step, the former nervously eyeing the street for any sign of danger while the latter anxiously fiddled with the straps to his backpack. If he strained his ears, he could hear conversations floating out from the slightly open window. There was movement within the apartment and then-

Poison Ivy opened the door.

Poison Ivy, wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, and looking downright normal opened the door. And while it might have been hard recognizing Harley and Selina thanks to their changes in attire, Poison Ivy was barely doing anything to hide her identity. Her long hair cascaded down her back like it always did, green eyes bright, alert and strangely distant – like he wasn't really the center of her attention.

But then there suddenly was a focus as she looked Jason and Damian over. Her gaze lingered on Jason for the longest. It felt like she was judging him and every single action he had had done up until this point, and Jason didn't like that feeling in the slightest.

She turned back and looked into the apartment.

“They're here,” she said.

Harley almost leaped into view, a grin stretching from one ear to the other as she yanked Jason inside. Damian's grip on Jason immediately tightened as the door shut behind them. If it wasn't for Harley looking so bubbly, and Harley being Harley, Jason might have been as nervous as Damian was.

“Hi,” Harley said, grinning and waving a spoon with her free hand. “Did you find your way here alright? I thought I gave good directions, but Red says my directions suck-”

“They do,” Poison Ivy confirmed. “You're too vague.”

Harley stuck her tongue out.

“You're too vague,” she accused her, jabbing the spoon in her direction.

Poison Ivy rolled her eyes at the childish response, but didn't offer any verbal retort. She just crossed her arms and gave Jason a look. It was a strange mix of exasperation and adoration. Harley had never mentioned that her girlfriend was Poison Ivy, and Jason had never paid enough attention to their comics to know from canon, but he could just tell. They had an undeniable chemistry that Joker and Harley had never had.

Harley turned her attention back to Jason and Damian.

“So?” she asked. “How was the walk?”
“We got here,” Jason joked, cracking a small smile. He crouched down to let Damian down. It should have been a quick process, but Damian was refusing to let go. If anything, he just dug his fingers into Jason's neck more, clinging for dear life as Jason tried to wrench him free. “Ian, it's okay-”

“Peter,” Damian hissed into his ear, “that's Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy!”

...So Damian had been paying attention to the news.

Jason gently pried Damian's arms off of his neck. “Harley's not going to hurt you, Ian,” he whispered. “Neither is Ivy. They were the ones who invited us here.”

Damian gave him a very betrayed look. “You're friends with villains?”

“It's not like that,” Jason protested. “We're friends, but they're not-”

He let out a sigh.

They were villains, even if he wanted to deny it so they could win Damian's trust. He gave Harley and Ivy a hopeless, desperate look. They must have dealt with situations like this a million times before.

Harley gave Damian a warm smile.

Handing her spoon off to her girlfriend, she crouched down in front of Damian. Her expression was gentle and soft. Before, it had been hard to equate his former enemy with Harley when she looked like this, but it was impossible not to see this as the true Harley Quinn now. Jason watched as Damian nervously peeked out at her. At how hard Damian was studying her face and how she moved, like she was a threat he'd be willing to fight if backed into a corner.

“Hi, Ian,” she said. “Peter's told me a lot about you.”

Damian gave Jason another betrayed look.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” she reassured him. Damian tore his gaze away from Jason and went back to watching Harley, eyes narrowing in suspicion behind his glasses. “Pamela isn't, either. Peter told us that you were moving up a few grades, and we wanted to celebrate it with you. And Peter wouldn't have agreed to coming here unless he was sure you'd be safe.”

Damian hesitantly let go of Jason.

“...Okay,” he finally said. “I guess I'm okay with staying here for dinner.”

Jason breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

xXx

He was helping Harley in the kitchen when she posed the question.

Damian was working on his homework at the table in the main room. From the brief glances that Jason had taken, he seemed to be going through it just as quickly as he had gone through his third grade homework – but the sheer amount of it was making it a much more challenging task. Poison-Pamela was flickering in between rooms, alternating between helping her girlfriend and offering advice to Damian. And Jason had been assisting Harley in making pasta and meatballs, giving him flashbacks of when he had helped Alfred cook what felt like an eternity ago.
The entire scene was so domestic and normal that Jason could have never seen the conversation coming. As it was, he ended up dropping the spoon he was stirring the sauce with when it really registered. He recovered, like he knew he was supposed to, but still.

Harley had leaned up against the counter, taking a deep breath and letting it out as a sigh a second later. She had studied him for so long that he had started to get nervous. And then she had shifted, stared at hand as it went about in circles with the spoon, and said, “I think it's time to address the elephant in the room.”

Jason had stopped stirring.

He had turned, spoon in hand, to stare at Harley. “The elephant?”

“What are you going to do with your life, Jason?”

The spoon fell and clattered to the ground.

For the first moment, he just stared. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to answer that one. He knew the answer he was supposed to say. He ran through it in his head as he reached down to grab the spoon. He even opened his mouth to answer, absentmindedly cleaning the spoon in the sink.

But the words just weren't coming.

“When are you going to tell your dad that you're back?” she asked.

“I'm not going to,” he said. Everything in his voice said otherwise, but Harley just gave him a look. Like she wanted to help him, and wanted to give him advice, but just didn't know how. He returned to the sauce, staring at it instead of looking at her. “I have other plans.”

“Which are?”

He paused.

“I'm going to get revenge,” he said. “I'm going to make Joker pay for what he did. I'm going to get my dad-get Batman to pay too, because he should have killed Joker instead of throwing him in Arkham. And I'll deal with my replacement—”

“That sounds like a very dark life,” Harley said.

He looked over at her.

“If you ask me,” she added. She straightened a little. “I'd happily join you in hurting Mister J, but I don't think you really want to do it.”

His grip on the spoon tightened.

“Of course I want to hurt him,” Jason said. “He killed me. My brother, my dad – everyone I care about thinks I'm dead. I have to hide my face every time I think I see them so they don't realize I'm alive. And if I don't hurt him, who will?”

“Batman, probably,” Harley dryly replied. “They like doing that to each other – hurting, I mean. Unless you're planning on killing, but you couldn't kill Mister J. I can tell.”

Jason faltered. “I could kill him,” he said. He looked back down at the sauce, not really focusing on it as he stirred. “I should kill him.”
“You don't strike me as the type,” she said.

“The type?”

“The type to kill,” she clarified.

Jason stiffened even more at the accusation. He had killed before. There had been the criminal dangling at the edge of the building. Jason was supposed to let go. And he had let him plummet to his death. He was horrible, horrible person, and it didn't matter that Jason's hands were too tiny and weak to support the weight of a full grown man. He had made the choice to let him die.

Harley leaned over and turned the oven top off.

“I've studied people before,” she commented. “It's what I did, back before Mister J. And I know a thing or two about criminals, too – your brain doesn't work like theirs, Jason. Ever since you've come back to life, you've insisted on doing the right thing. Don't you remember how much you objected to your job until you knew what it was?”

“It's not wrong to kill a murderer,” Jason said.

Harley shrugged. “I never said it was,” she replied. “I'm just saying that it'd be wrong for you.”

She gestured out towards the living room.

“I'm going to go set the table,” she said. “But if there comes a time where you're thinking of pulling the trigger and you're not sure what the right thing to do is, I hope you follow what's in there.”

She pointed at Jason's heart.

And then she was gone into the main room, leaving Jason and his pan of sauce.
I actually finished writing this chapter last night, but I wasn't able to get all of the formatting done until this morning. I wanted to try doing a chatfic-style chapter at some point, and I was too wiped yesterday to write a regular style chapter. I'll admit this is my first chatfic, but hopefully you like it!

---

Peter → Ian

[Text]

7:21 AM

Peter
hey!! i hope you like ur new phone

Ian
I do.

Peter
yay :)

7:37 AM

Peter
have you traded phone numbers with anyone yet??
if timmy has a phone u should get his

7:39 AM

Peter
does he have one??
i hope he has one

7:41 AM

Ian
Peter, I'm in class.

7:42 AM

Peter
oh
sorry

7:45 AM

Peter
but does he have a phone??

harlequin  →  dead birdie

[Text]

8:31 AM

harlequin
hey
hey robin
you should come over for dinner again
red really enjoyed it

8:34 AM

dead birdie
u can't just call me robin harley
also aren't u at work??

8:37 AM

harlequin
then you don't want to see your name in my contacts
and i am
aren't you??

dead birdie
selina's taking a personal day
im free
but i wonder what she's doing??

harlequin
she hasn't told you yet has she

8:39 AM

dead birdie
no??
what was she supposed to tell me
harley what was it

harlequin
her personal days are the days she steals stuff

dead birdie
O.O

harlequin
she said it was a big one this time too

8:47 AM

harlequin
should I not have told you
are your birdie senses tingling

dead birdie
my what

harlequin
nothing
but should I regret it
are you going to try to stop her

8:49 AM

dead birdie
...she's the one who gives me my paycheck
harley she could rob the 2nd national bank
of all its 2 dollar bills
and i wouldn't make a peep

harlequin
that sounds more like a two-face thing ngl

dead birdie
yeah
it does
but sorry about not answering i was watching the news

8:52 AM

harlequin
you big adult
watching the news

dead birdie
look im trying to hide from my dad
the world thinks im dead
gotta keep an eye out for batman

S. → H.
[Text]

9:01 AM

S.
Are you free?

H.
i'm at work
but why
is that heist not going as planned

S.
I need help.
I think I bit off more than I could chew.
H.
sign me up
and sign the love of my life up too

S.
...I haven't even asked her yet.

9:02 AM

H.
bold of you to assume
that she wouldn't come just because she heard I was doing something dangerous

S.
Good point.

H.
just give me a minute to text her and tell my boss that my girlfriend is dreadfully ill with the worst possible illness
and that she needs me by her bedside

harlequin – juliet
[Text]

9:03 AM

harlequin
i've fallen dreadfully ill my lover
you have to leave work immediately
tell your boss capitalism can't stop our love

juliet
Are we helping with a heist again??

harlequin
you know me too well

9:19 AM

juliet
I'm heading to our apartment now.
But let me guess.
You said yes before checking with me.

harlequin
of course my juliet
i know how your brain works
and i know you hate me being unsupervised
even if our resident catgirl is there to protect me UwU

9:21 AM

juliet
Never do that again.
Ian → Timmy
[Text]

12:01 PM

Ian
hi timmy!!
i'm going to lunch now
but then i’m going to go to the club room
i forget to tell you earlier but peter got me a camera!!

12:03 PM

Timmy
So you are joining?

Ian
definitely!!
i want to take lots of photos with you~

Timmy
I'm glad you're adjusting well to being in eighth grade instead of third.
And you seem to be pretty popular with our classmates.

Ian
i guess i am!!
but no one invites me over :(

12:09 PM

Timmy
Maybe it'll just take some time.

Ian
i guess...

Peter → Harley
[Text]

12:12 PM

Peter
ur on ur lunch break now right??
i didn't want to text u when u were working

12:31 PM

Peter
harley??
are u there??
1:05 PM

Peter
everything's okay right??
i just want to make sure
gotham's dangerous
and i know u know that
but
just text me when u can
okay?

Ark → Lowki
[Discord]

1:12 PM

Ark
hear me out: there should be coloring books for musicals

1:13 PM

Lowki
why

Ark
because i want to make them gay lowki
why else
i’d amass a horde of coloring books
color them all rainbow
and hang them up on my wall like the proud artist I am

Lowki
valid

1:15 PM

Ark
in all seriousness i'd give them to my kid
have to indoctrinate them early

Lowki
you know how moms play classical music
when their kids aren't born
you'd be playing musicals outside the womb
jamming out to my shot
while their mom is like “ark pls stop why are u in my house”

1:16 PM

Ark
hamilton's a classic so it counts
don't judge me lowki

Lowki
but I lowkey am

Ark
stop

Lowki
never

harlequin → dead birdie

[Text]

1:45 PM

harlequin
jay I don't have much time
but do u have batman on speed dial

dead birdie
i have his number
why
harley what did u do

harlequin
red and I were helping selina
we got caught
got back our phones for a hot sec
but they're coming back
jay im pinging my location

1:46 PM

harlequin
i don't know how
but let batman know
he's the only one we can trust
tell him selina's in trouble

dead birdie
harley who caught u

1:47 PM

dead birdie
harley??
pls answer
who was it harley

1:50 PM

dead birdie
i got the location

Peter → Ian

[Text]
1:51 PM

Peter
is there anywhere u can stay for a bit after school??

Ian
I think the library is open.

Peter
just stay there then
something came up with work
i'll get u afterwards and then we can get something to eat at the diner :)

sonic → partner-in-crime
[Text]

2:19 PM

sonic
hey dick
i know we haven't talked in awhile
but I just want to see how you're doing

2:20 PM

sonic
i've been doing good
having lots of fun with the whole hero thing like usual
saving lots of people

2:23 PM

sonic
i got five cats out of a tree yesterday
it was nice

2:47 PM

sonic
if I did something to upset you
can you tell me what it was?
i've been trying to figure it out for the past year dick
but you never want to talk about it

3:03 PM

sonic
okay then
I guess this is just our friendship now
well
you know where to find me
if you ever want to talk
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

If it seems like Jason was brain dead at the end of this chapter, it's because I was brain dead at the end of this chapter, but really wanted to get it done and up. I've been waiting since this fic's inception to have a scene like this. It technically kills two very major birds with one very large, dramatic stone, but I'm happy with how it turned out regardless.

I hope you like this chapter, and please let me know what you think of it!

Jason turned his phone upside down on the counter.

Leaning up against the edge of the counter and running his hands through his hair, Jason wondered what had brought him to this point. When had he diverged so far from canon that he had to play messenger between Harley and Bruce? Or should have been playing messenger, if not for one very crucial detail that he couldn't explain to her through text.

Bruce was out of town.

He could try his best to hide his activities inside and outside of the suit, but the paparazzi were an undeniable part of his life. People knew that Bruce Wayne wasn't in town. And if Bruce wasn't in town, Batman wasn't in town. So even though Harley was desperate enough to beg for help from the man who would have put her in jail for her assorted crimes, Jason had no way of passing it on.

There was Dick, of course. Nightwing wasn't out of the picture.

But he knew that Jason Todd would have never gone to Nightwing for help in a situation like this – especially when he hadn't even made his appearance as Red Hood yet. He bit his lip in a poor attempt to hold back the tears forming in his eyes. When he glanced at his overturned phone, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the side of the toaster; his eyes were glowing a bright, bright green.

Jason took a shaky breath.

He couldn't leave Harley there, thinking that help was going to come when it wasn't. He couldn't leave Pamela, and he couldn't leave Selina, either. He needed to do something, and he needed to do it quickly. If he wasn't, they could-

Another shaky breath.

It's Gotham, he reminded himself. It's DC. People die all the time and come back. None of them could stay permanently dead.

But there was still the lingering doubt. After all, he had changed the story. He had taken Damian with him. He became friends with Harley and even met Pamela out of her Poison Ivy persona. And he working for Selina in her bookstore. What if they were going to die, and it was to punish him with some character arc, because Jason Todd wasn't ever supposed to be permanently happy-
He took a sudden, sharp breath.

*Focus.* There had to be some way out of this. He couldn't rely on canon. Canon hadn't gotten him here. *Jason* had gotten himself here. He had made the decision to trust Harley, to take Damian, and to work for Selina. And while that all was quickly became a hot mess, it had been good for awhile. He couldn't ignore that.

Maybe, just maybe, this was the life where he could do things right.

Leaving his phone on the counter, Jason drifted off into what would have been his bedroom. Damian, thankfully, wasn't too curious, and had never questioned the locked box underneath the bed. Jason Todd was supposed to be six feet tall; he was only five feet and ten inches. But it was just enough for everything to fit, if he rolled up the sleeves and tucked the pants into his boots.

He changed just as fast as he had when he was Robin.

Then he grabbed the assortment of weapons he had hidden around the apartment, running a mental checklist of what he had needed. He had wanted more time to prepare, but he had to face the facts.

Tonight was the night Red Hood was getting his debut.

And the first thing he'd do would be rescuing his friends.

**xXx**

The location was a seemingly abandoned warehouse. Jason, trying to quell his growing worry that he was vastly unprepared for something like this, found his initial assessment hilarious – *everyone* used the same warehouse. It was a decently sized one, looked vaguely ominous and was rarely checked by Gotham's police. Jason had lost track of how many times he had gone there with Bruce back when he was Robin.

So he knew exactly how to sneak in undetected.

There was an alleyway between it and an office building that was sometimes in use and sometimes was not. Windows lined the entire side of the warehouse, but it was the seventh one in that he went to. His mind flashed back to when he had first seen it – he had been with Dick that time; Bruce had been doing stuff with the League, and they had needed to stop some petty gang leader. Dick had broken it back when he was Robin, and had been slowly making it larger the more he grew.

Jason easily slipped inside.

The warehouse wasn't entirely empty. There was a little room off to the side, and that was the room that Jason emerged from. He slipped into the darkness. One of the men lingering in the warehouse should have noticed the figure lurking in the shadows, but they were all too busy either chatting among themselves or looking ominous.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Harley, Selina and Pamela were in the traditional spot for prisoners. The center of the room, bound with rope to chairs, and so close together that Harley could try untying her girlfriend's bound legs with her feet. Which she was doing, right up until the front doors to the warehouse ominously opened up.

Jason slunk back a little farther into the shadows. He watched as both the prisoners and the guards grew stiff. Part of him didn't want to look at the newcomer's face. It wasn't the Joker; this wasn't
his style. But whoever had caught them must have been fairly powerful, and Jason knew that he'd be sorely outmatched if he wasn't lucky.

The man was wearing nice shoes.

A little farther up, and he saw a plain, black suit.

Jason's heart dropped down to his feet.

Many people wore plain, black suits. Maybe he was a disgruntled business man, or a gang leader that Jason hadn't bothered to learn the name of. He hoped that it was something as simple as that. But the amount of respect the guards had for him didn't make any sense unless he was someone powerful. Someone who wouldn't threaten to kill them. Someone like-

He looked all the way up.

Someone like Black Mask.

Selina had stolen from Black Mask.

Jason had to resist the urge to give a nervous little laugh at that. Red Hood's first battle was going to be with Black Mask. And maybe he had built up to that point in canon, but it had never been a direct confrontation so early on. Jason shifted a little in the darkness. He barely paid attention when Black Mask started being threatening. All he could think about was how he didn't have a script to follow, because Jason Todd's approach to Black Mask had always been two-pronged. Take control of the drug trade and then murder him.

Was he supposed to murder him now?

Harley was making retorts. Jason was tuning them out. He was tuning out the command Black Mask issued to one of his subordinates, tuning out the revving of the power tool as Black Mask approached Harley, and tuning out the angry yells of Pamela. He was reaching for his gun instead, trying to focus on what Jason Todd would do in a situation like this.

Jason would make a scene. He'd strut out of the shadows, guns blaring, and he'd throw Black Mask off to the point that Black Mask would hesitate just long enough for Jason to take out most of his guards. The remaining ones would barely pose a problem for someone like Red Hood. And maybe he'd kill Black Mask, too, because someone had to do it, and that person wouldn't be Bruce or Dick or Tim.

But he couldn't bring himself to leave the shadows like that.

He tried another approach. If Jason Todd wasn't going to make a scene, he'd shoot him when he least expected it. When he felt safe. He was sure Black Mask felt safe now, holding the tip of that tool in front of Harley's face. Jason held his gun up high, pointed right at Black Mask's chest, and went to pull the trigger-

He lowered the gun.

He couldn't.

“Leave her alone!” Pamela suddenly yelled, her voice cutting through the fog in Jason's mind. There was an anger to her voice that Jason had never heard her use before – and a desperation, too. “If you hurt her, I'll-”
“You'll what?” Black Mask asked. He turned the power tool towards her. Now it was Harley screaming for him to leave her girlfriend alone, a furious, furious tone to her voice that was just as foreign as Pamela's. And there was the same desperation too, like she was actually scared. And not just of being drilled by Black Mask, but of something else.

He moved the drill closer to Pamela's face.

It was going to touch skin soon-

Jason didn't really think.

He just acted.

He raised the gun back up, aimed it right for Black Mask's arm, and fired a shot at him. The drill went crashing to the floor as Black Mask clenched his arm in pain, a noise nothing short of a howl leaving him. He hissed out commands to his men to attack the one who had harmed him, but they were all too shocked by the sudden gunshot to move.

“She'll call me,” Jason finished, stepping out from the darkness.

Black Mask's men had guns, but it was hard for them to shoot at him when he had taken out their good arms with shots from his own. The bulletproof vest he had added made sure those who got a shot or two in didn't have that much effect; it just made a hole in his leather jacket.

Still clutching his arm in pain, Black Mask surveyed the scene. Jason wondered what must have been going through his head then – his face was far from normal, but Jason could see the confusion and fear mixing behind his all-powerful mask. “And you are?”

“Red Hood,” he said. And then, getting a little too much into the role, Jason added a very cliché, “Also known as your worst nightmare.”

Black Mask stared as Jason bridged the distance between his hiding spot and the center of the room. He didn't even budge as Jason stood between him and his prisoners – the most he did was glance down at Jason's foot when he slammed his boot down onto the power tool.

Jason pointed the gun right at his head.

“You better leave these three alone, Black Mask,” he said, “or I'm going to make sure I don't miss next time around.”

Black Mask didn't say anything in response.

He just gestured for his men to follow him out of the warehouse, each one nursing their own arm wound as they meekly filed out. Only Black Mask stood tall and confident in his retreat, but Jason was sure he was just as panicked as the rest of his men were.

Jason turned back to the three.

Pamela and Selina both gave him nervous looks, but Harley was sitting straight up with wide, eager eyes. They had a certain glint to them that Jason very much recognized – that was the glint she had gotten when she was with the Joker. It was a glint he had come to be wary of, and one that he was grateful she no longer had in the cafe.

“Thanks,” Selina stiffly said when he untied her first. He gave a silent nod to show that he appreciated the gratitude, then moved onto Pamela. Pamela mirrored Selina with a softly muttered
thanks of own as she got to her feet. But when Harley got to her feet after being untied, she threw her arms around his shoulders and gave him a tight squeeze.

“You didn't kill him,” she said.

Jason hesitantly returned the hug.

“I didn't-” He paused, eyes wide and glowing behind his helmet as he stared down at her. “You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are,” Harley replied. She slipped out of his arms and gave him a big grin. “You're-”

“Harley,” Selina hissed.

Harley crossed her arms. “I'm right and you know it.”

“We shouldn't be talking about this with him here,” Pamela argued. Jason, who had just rescued all three of them and was standing just a foot away from Pamela, shifted uncomfortably at the comment. He knew he should have been feeling more offended, but all he could feel was the sinking feeling in his gut he knew all too well.

“I can just go-” he started to say.

“You're not going anywhere,” Harley interrupted, grabbing onto his arm and pulling him back towards her. “I've been waiting for proof for ages. And I think the way we got rescued totally proves it. Our little trio is a quartet.”

Jason blinked.

“...Proof of what?” he nervously said.

“Harley-” Pamela said.

“Rose,” Harley said. From the way that Pamela stiffened, the name meant something, but Jason didn't have the slightest clue what. “Jason's one of us. You can't deny that. Come on! Do you really think Jason Todd would let Black Mask get away like that?”

He looked at Pamela and Selina's faces, but neither one of them were meeting his gaze. They just kept staring at Harley. Jason wanted to do the same, too, but facing Harley would mean facing what she had just said. And with his head still pounding from all of the adrenaline, he wasn't really sure he could handle something like that right now.

“I'm Jason Todd,” he pointed out.

“Uh huh.” He snuck a glance in Harley's direction and immediately regretted it – she was giving him the same exact look she had given back in her apartment. “I read people well, remember?”

“...Yes?”

“He doesn't know,” Pamela insisted. “Harley, you just jumped the gun-”

Selina held her hand up.

“...I think she's onto something,” she admitted. Pamela fell silent, though it was clear she wanted to say more. “He didn't know who I was when he first started working at my bookstore. It's not a case
of him not knowing what we're talking about – I think you just confused him.”

“I'm right here,” Jason hopelessly interjected; he was beginning to realize that even though the conversation had everything to do with him, he was only meant to be the subject. “And what am I confused about-”

Harley let out a sigh.

When she placed her hands on his shoulders, it felt like he was a small child being educated on the workings of the world. It didn't matter that he easily towered over her, and didn't matter that she couldn't see his face past the helmet. Something told him she could tell exactly what his expression was without actually seeing it.

“My name isn't Harley,” she said.

No.

"Pamela's name isn't Pamela, and Selina's name isn't Selina.”

No, no, no.

She grinned at him. “My name's actually Hayleigh. It's spelled different, but, hey, you take what you can get. Pamela's real name is Rose, and Selina's really Sabrina. And, as you can probably tell, we're-”

“Just like me,” Jason whispered.

Her grin grew larger. “Welcome to the club, Not-Jason.”
Hello again!

I haven't been able to write more of this fic for the past few days, but I finally cranked out this chapter. I'm not entirely satisfied with the writing itself, but I'm really content with how this story is moving along. If all goes according to plan, this fic will be done by the time my winter break starts on the 11th. There's always the chance that something will come up before then, but I think I might actually be able to meet my own personal deadline for it.

After this fic is over, expect some mini-sequels and one-shots, because there's still a lot I want to explore in Jason's version of Gotham.

I hope this chapter clears up any confusion you might have about the revelation at the end of the last one. And, most importantly of all, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Maybe that had been a little too abrupt.

Rose wasn't exactly berating her yet, but Hayleigh could see that she wanted to from the look she was giving. Sabrina looked worried, too. But even though Hayleigh knew she should have taken things slow, she was just so excited. It had just been the three of them for the longest time. And now they knew that Jason was just like them – wasn't that a reason to get excited?

Not-Jason sat down in the chair that she had been tied to. In the back of her mind, Hayleigh wondered how old he had been when he died, and when he ended up as Jason Todd. He just seemed so little when he took his helmet off and rested it in his lap. If she wasn't so sure a hug would throw him off even more, she would have given him one.

“I don't understand,” Not-Jason whispered.

“That was our reaction,” Sabrina softly said.

“I woke up in Arkham,” Hayleigh helpfully added. “Right after dying. I saw my reflection in one of the windows, then saw Joker sitting in a cell nearby. If you think you're confused right now, imagine what my reaction was to that.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across Not-Jason's face. “I was about to steal the wheels off of the bat-mobile,” he said. He looked up at Hayleigh. “I went from being an adult to a kid – I think I have you beat.”

Hayleigh crossed her arms. “The jury's out on that one.”

There was an awkward silence.

Not-Jason sat up a little straighter. “Do you know why we're like...”

He trailed off.
“We're still figuring that out,” Rose admitted. She took a step forward, awkwardly crouching down in front of him. Not-Jason was taller when the two stood next to each other, but was just a little smaller than her when he was sitting. “The three of us were lab partners in our advanced chemistry class. We don't know exactly what happened, but something went wrong when we mixed the chemicals together. We each ended up as the characters you know us as now, right before something major was going to happen in the plot.”

Sabrina let out a sigh and sat down next to him. “We thought the connection was that we were lab partners and our characters were part of the same group.”

Not-Jason let out a sigh of his own. “But I’m the outlier.”

“Exactly,” Sabrina confirmed. “You weren't in the lab, and Jason Todd isn't one of the Gotham City Sirens.”

While Sabrina was talking to Jason, Hayleigh had started pacing around the area in front of him. Walking helped her think, and she definitely needed to do some thinking right now. There had to be some other tie – something else that they just hadn't seen because they had jumped to the easiest conclusion. Mid-thought, she realized she didn't know something incredibly important about the newest member of their group. Two somethings, actually, but she didn't know how much she could get him to say.

She skid to a halt a few feet away from him.

“...What's your name?” she asked. “I just realized I told you ours, but I completely forgot to ask you for yours.”

Not-Jason stared for a moment.

Then he ducked his head back down again, hands fiddling with the ends of his sleeves. The sight made her pause. He was looking small again, but he had said he was an adult when he died. Didn't that mean he wasn't a kid? “No one ever really called me it,” he said, “but my nickname was supposed to be Jay.”

Hayleigh exchanged a look with Sabrina and Rose.

“Jay?” she repeated.

He nodded. “I like going by Jason now, though.”

She guessed it wasn't that surprising. Her real name sounded incredibly similar to Harley. But for him to have the same name in both lives...

She shook aside her doubt with a literal shake of her head, confusing all those present in a single action. If Jason's name was Jason, then she'd just keep calling him what she had been calling him all along. Besides, he didn't seem to mind being Jason Todd. He seemed to be doing pretty good at it, right up until tonight.

“You didn't die from our chemistry lab, right?” Hayleigh asked.

Jason nodded, still fiddling with his cuffs.

He didn't offer an explanation of how he had actually died, but Hayleigh still let out a sigh of relief. They had been the idiots who made the mistake with the chemicals – it was good to know that Jason hadn't died because of them, too. The noise seemed to bring Jason out of whatever funk
the realization had gotten him into. He straightened in his seat, readjusted his helmet in his lap, and looked between the three of them with a certain glint to his eerily glowing green eyes.

Had they always done that?

He let out a relieved sigh.

“What?” Hayleigh asked.

“I finally have someone I can talk to about my problems with the plot,” he said. He got to his feet and tucked his helmet underneath his shoulder. “Have you...made any decisions that alter the story?”

They all exchanged looks again.

“...Do you know anything about our comics?” Sabrina asked.

Jason shook his head. “I know about you from my time as Robin,” he admitted. “I was a Red Hood fan. I only read what had him in it.”

“That, er, explains a lot,” Hayleigh replied. “The only reason I hadn't approached you before was because you hadn't called me out on being so out-of-character in the diner, but I'm starting to think that was because you didn't know what in character is for me.”

Jason rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand.

Rose looked him over. “It also explains how he didn't question you leaving Joker so soon,” she commented. Sabrina gave a wise nod from her chair, while Jason just looked plain confused at the comment. Which was understandable, considering that he didn't have the slightest idea of what Harley Quinn's story was supposed to be like.

“I was supposed to stay with Joker a lot longer,” Hayleigh explained. “I gave up after a year. Then I realized that Rose just had to be Poison Ivy, because puns and she was the love of my life in the last life, too, and Sabrina just kind of showed up on our doorstep one day. Every rift our characters were supposed to have was totally skipped, because the rifts don't really affect the overall story that much – and we like each other too much to do anything remotely cruel.”

Jason gave a little nod.

Sabrina got to her feet. “But you make it sound like you have your own problems with the story,” she observed. The obvious ones, of course, were that they were having this conversation in the first place, but Hayleigh was getting the same vibe from Jason. From the combination of guilt and relief in his voice, it was clear that he had really altered the story.

...And Hayleigh wasn't sure she wanted to find out how.

“I did,” Jason said.

His voice was worryingly quiet.

“You adopted Ian,” Rose realized.

Hayleigh's eyes widened. “Jason doesn't do stuff like that, does he?”

“It's...worse than that,” he muttered.
“You're only a teenager, so you didn't have a son,” Sabrina commented. Jason's eyes widened at the comment – mirroring the look on Hayleigh's face at the suggestion – but then immediately returned to normal as his gaze dropped to the floor. “How else could you have altered the plot?”

“Ian's an alias,” Jason admitted. “It's a shortened version of his name. I'm not good at coming up with aliases on my own...”

Rose stiffened.

And, a second later, Sabrina made a slight gagging noise.

Hayleigh glanced between the two of them for some indication of what they had just realized, but they were being just as helpful as Jason was with this whole Ian reveal. What could *Ian* be short for? That was a name on its own, not a nickname for another name!

“I don't get it,” Hayleigh said. “What's Ian short for-”

“Hayleigh,” Rose whispered, “he adopted Damian Wayne.”

All it took was one look at Jason for Hayleigh to know that Rose was right.

“Fuck.”

“*Language-*”

“I think now is a very good time to be swearing, Sabrina!” Hayleigh shot back. She started pacing again, though this time it was more out of her worry than anything else. “Is Damian even supposed to know who Jason Todd is?”

“He thinks my name is Peter,” Jason helpfully interrupted. When Hayleigh shot him a very panicked look, his gaze dropped back down to the ground. “And I don't think he is. There's headcanons in the fandom, but...”

Hayleigh groaned. “And I thought getting kidnapped was the worst part about today!” she exclaimed. “I can't believe you took *Damian*. That's even worse than me leaving Joker early!”

She continued to pace in front of Jason. In the back of her mind, she wondered if she could erode away the part of the floor she was walking on with her repetitive footsteps. The motions of going back-and-forth was the only keeping her from completely panicking right now, because she didn't have the slightest idea on how they were going to salvage the story and make it remotely resemble what it was supposed to.

Jason took a deep breath.

“Hayleigh,” he said, “you told me to follow my heart.”

She came to a stop. “...I did.”

“I tried leaving without Damian,” he admitted. “You didn't suspect that I was different until I came back to life. I've been following the plot as closely as I can. But I...I couldn't leave Damian. He said he didn't want to stay anymore. He's eight. And he looked so scared, and worried, and if he was asking a total stranger to take him away I...”

He looked back up at her.

“I knew I'd regret saying no for the rest of my life,” Jason said. “Damian needed someone then.
And you've seen how he is now. He's happy. He's actually being a kid. Maybe...Maybe I'm being selfish, but I'll destroy the story if it means making my little brother smile.”

She studied him for a very, very long minute. She studied how strong his eyes were glowing, how his voice was confident even when it faltered,

Then she sighed.

“I can't argue with that,” she said. “So that means we're without any kind of guidelines now, doesn't it? Damian's not going to become Robin in the way that he was supposed to.”

Jason nodded.

“And Red Hood already made his debut,” he added. “And I don't think I'm following how morally gray he's supposed to be.”

“That's alright,” Hayleigh reassured him. “None of us have been.”

There was a pause.

And then the four all glanced at each other, understanding dawning on them simultaneously – Jason included. There was a very easy connection between their characters, even if it was one that wasn't most people would make. It was just a fluke that Hayleigh had brought it up. But none of their characters weren't meant to be perfect little angels, and they definitely were all supposed to have done something morally wrong at some point.

“We're all morally gray,” Rose realized.
I actually wrote the first half of this chapter yesterday, but wasn’t able to finish it until today. I also was able to get another chapter done, so I hope you enjoy this little double update! It won’t be long until this fic finally reaches its conclusion, though I definitely plan on one-shots and sequels set in the same universe.

Rose’s revelation resonated in a way that Jason hadn’t expected. He knew it was cliché to think, but it felt like a metaphorical weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. There had never been any answers to why he had ended up as Jason Todd after dying. He had just accepted it for years, even when the question continued to gnaw at him. But now he had an inkling of an idea. And even if it was just the start to an explanation, it was still something.

Jason wanted to stay longer, but a quick glance at his phone reminded him that he needed to pick up Damian soon – the library could only be open for so long. He left the warehouse with a completely different feeling than when he had entered it. That feeling then had been desperation; this was hope.

When was the last time that he had actually felt truly optimistic about being Jason Todd?

He didn’t try to answer the question. He just continued on his way, grinning underneath his helmet in an almost childish delight as he slipped by forgotten, dark alleyways. In retrospect, he should have known that a carefree stroll through Gotham's streets could never end well, but even a wary feeling failed to cross Jason’s mind.

He was almost at his apartment when the trouble started – he could hear muffled panicked cries coming from one of the alleyways that branched off from the main road. He came to a stop at its mouth and peered into its depths with an alertness honed by countless missions as Robin. There was a group of men towards the back of the alleyway, cornering a young woman. One of the more intimidating men was covering her mouth with a piece of cloth as another raided her purse. Jason didn’t want to think about what would follow.

Not that he had time to.

His body switched to autopilot. He had already fought Black Mask's men. It was time to commit to this story line – he was going to be a vigilante.

He slid into the shadows and walked alongside the alley wall. The men didn’t notice him. They were too busy assaulting the woman. She was the only one who noticed him when he emerged from the darkness. She started struggling even more, her whimpers growing more desperate and fearful. He tried his best to calm her down by putting a finger to where his mouth was underneath the helmet, but that only made her look more terrified when she abruptly fell silent.

He knocked out the man going through her purse with a swift kick to the legs. The man gave a startled cry as he went tumbling down to the ground, alerting his fellow criminals to Jason’s presence. Jason quickly adjusted his approach – he outmaneuvered one as the man swung a punch, twisting his arm behind his back before sending the man down alongside his fallen comrade. Jason
swung a punch of his own at the next man over. And then the man holding the woman captive finally joined in the fight, surprising Jason with a knife to the neck from behind.

Jason didn't like knifes.

And he didn't like where they could cut so easily.

Panic set in. He wasn't ready to die this time around. He still had so much left to do. And while his aversion to knifes was certainly a cause for terror, he didn't freeze up. His body did the opposite. His hand had already been on his gun when he was punching the second-to-last attacker. He pointed the gun at the man's leg before he could even react, shooting him and then knocking him unconscious with a swift whack to the head with the butt of his gun.

He turned to the woman.

She was clutching her purse close to her chest, eyes wide as she watched him approach her. “Pl- Please don't hurt me,” she stammered. Her cheeks were red and wet, Jason realized, and tears were still falling even though he had just saved her. “I'll give you anything you-you want!”

“I'm-” He caught himself, knowing that his voice was going to give away just how young he was. Deepening his voice, he hurriedly finished, “I'm not going to hurt you.”

The woman looked unconvinced. “You just shot a man,” she said, voice still shaking as much as her hands were. “And-And you're not Batman or Nightwing-”

She fell silent, eyes somehow widening even more.

That was when Jason felt something press up against his neck.

Something cold, and metal, and with a very, very faint shock.

Now it was Jason who started panicking, because he knew exactly who had just appeared in the alleyway. The woman, seeing the newcomer's arrival as a chance to escape, scrambled to her feet and running out of the alleyway – leaving just Jason and...

“Dick?” Jason whispered, taking a step back and turning around.

It was Dick Grayson.

And, more importantly, Dick Grayson as Nightwing.

Who little fledgling Red Hood wasn't theoretically supposed to know, even though Jason Todd definitely did. Jason's mouth went dry. He gaped. He stared. He tried to come up with what he was supposed to do – what he was supposed to say – because all he wanted to do right now was run up to Dick and telling that it was him, that he was alive, that he missed being with him and Bruce so, so much-

He shook the thought away.

Dick was giving him a look. Dick had always been good at giving unnerving looks when he needed to, but Jason had never been on the receiving end. And Dick had never looked like this. Something was wrong. Maybe it was him mentioning Dick's name. It probably was. But even that didn't explain why Dick's confident smile didn't reach his eyes, or why his eyes just looked so cold.

Jason had to recover.
“Dick,” he repeated, with much more emphasis and volume. It was the benefit of Dick's name having multiple meanings. He could play it off as an insult and not an accidental mention of real name. “I was in the middle of something, Nightwing – couldn't you wait until I was done to creepily materialize out of the shadows?”

Dick didn't give him an answer.

He just kept giving him that look.

Then his gaze traveled down to the four unconscious men on the ground behind him, and the pool of blood steadily forming around one man's leg. Whatever was wrong with Dick seemed to fade away when he saw that. He raised his ecrisma sticks up, the smile that should have never been turned on Jason dancing across his lips as he approached the vigilante he didn't know was his younger brother.

“I didn't want to see what would happen if I let you finish,” Dick retorted.

This was so right and so wrong. Nightwing was supposed to see Red Hood as a threat. As an enemy. But Jason wanted Dick to see him as him. Had canon Jason felt the same way, too, back when he first faced off against his family? Was that why he had been so eager to leave clues for Bruce to put together the pieces, because he wanted those he cared about to know that he was alive and well?

The ecrisma sticks burst to life with electricity.

Jason gripped his gun tighter.

“I was just taking care of some would-be robbers,” he said. “Is it a crime to stop crime here in Gotham? If it is, I think someone needs to let Batman know.”

Dick took another step forward. “You shot them.”

“I shot one,” Jason clarified, somehow preventing his worry from slipping into his voice. “He'll survive it.”

“You don't seem like a hero to me,” Dick said.

“I'm a little new to it,” Jason admitted. He followed Dick's hand movements with his eyes, trying to keep track of where he was putting his ecrisma sticks. Dick was going to use them on him. He couldn't ignore that. But if he could just avoid them, or at least expect the shock when it came...

“Who are you, then?” Dick asked. “You have to have some kind of name, going with that outfit.”

Jason frowned. “That's hypocritical.”

“How?”

“You're attacking me for my outfit choices,” he said. “The leather jacket looks good. You're wearing a spandex suit.”

Now it was Dick who was frowning. “I look good in spandex.”

An awkward silence fell on them as Dick took another step closer. The air hummed with electricity as he raised his ecrisma sticks up a little more. Jason, in turn, readied his gun. He didn't know what he was going to do with it, but having it in his hand made him feel like he could face whatever
Dick was going to try doing to him.

“That's questionable,” Jason said. “And, as for my name? You can call me Red Hood.”

Dick just stared, the unfamiliar cold and the familiar warmth mixing in his eyes. His stance—though just for a second—faltered. Jason pretended like he didn't see it.

“Red Hood,” he repeated.

“Red Hood,” Jason confirmed.

There was another awkward silence.

“And you're supposed to be a hero?”

Jason blushed in embarrassment underneath the helmet. “It's supposed to be symbolic,” he said, false indignation and irritation lacing his voice. “You wouldn't understand.”

Dick gave him a long, hard look.

“No,” he said. “I wouldn't.”

Before Jason even had a chance to come up with a reply, Dick thrust one of his ecrisma sticks in his direction. Jason just barely managed to dodge it, ducking down and popping up a few feet to Dick's left. It didn't seem to deter his opponent—because Dick was his enemy now, whether he wanted to accept it or not—as Dick quickly regained his footing and tried another attack.

They kept repeating the same pattern of Jason dodging and Dick attacking until Jason found his back pressing up against the back wall of the alleyway. The panic that had been steadily growing throughout the encounter blossomed into an almost paralyzing terror, but some part of Jason still managed to think of what he was supposed to do next if he wanted to win this.

Dick readied his ecrisma sticks.

Jason knew he didn't stand the slightest chance at beating Dick on fair terms. Dick had more experience at being a vigilante than he did, and Jason had lost the advantage of being smaller like he had been when they sparred what felt like an eternity ago.

So Jason wasn't fair.

He gave a swift, sudden thrust to where it would hurt the most. And when Dick stumbled back, pain clearly written across a face that was usually so good at hiding it, Jason whacked him with the butt of his gun.

Dick sprawled across the pavement.

Jason left before he could wake up.
Chapter 16

Jason was tired.

He was so, so tired.

Being Robin was easy compared to being Red Hood. Bruce had always been good about organizing his life in a way where being Robin was never too much for him to handle. If he needed a day or two off, Bruce would subtly suggest he take a break. Whenever that plan failed, he'd bring Alfred in, because it was nearly impossible to say no to Alfred.

But Jason just had himself now.

And he wasn't nearly as good about balancing his life as Bruce had been. Between spending time with Damian, working at the bookstore, fighting crime as Red Hood and meeting with Hayleigh, Rose and Sabrina to update each other on how the story was progressing, Jason barely had enough time to sleep – much less relax. And God forbid he ran into Bruce, Dick or even Tim while on his own patrols; then he'd be avoiding them for the entire night, sometimes literally outrunning them through Gotham's streets and rooftops.

It was Friday afternoon, and Jason couldn't even find himself excited for the weekend. The weekend meant more time with Damian, who Jason very, very dearly loved, but weekends were still special outings – and special outings meant more people. Jason was an introvert at heart. He wasn't ready for dealing with people so often.

He let out a sigh and leaned back against the couch.

Hearing the sigh, Damian raised his head from his phone – he was leaning up against the other arm of the couch, attention wandering between his phone and the news station on TV. “You have bags under your eyes again,” Damian accused him.

“It's been a very tiring week,” Jason admitted.

Damian put his phone down on his lap, giving Jason a very critical look.

“That's what you said last week,” Damian pointed out. “And the week before. And the week before that.”

Jason let out another sigh. “It's been a very tiring month.”

Damian studied him for a moment before turning his attention back to his phone, an expression that Jason couldn't quite name flickering across his face. It looked like a combination of worry and disbelief. Damian, at least, just thought he was tired. He had no reason to suspect that anything else was going on. But before Damian could make any more comments about Jason's current state, Damian's gaze traveled to the TV.

The phone was immediately forgotten.

Damian sat at the very edge of his seat, alert as he stared at the somewhat familiar scenes being depicted on the screen. Jason didn't think much of it – he was too tired to be focusing on a news report. But then Damian started nudging him with his foot, and Jason snapped back into focus.

“Peter,” Damian said, “look.”
The image was grainy, and the video that soon followed was just as low quality – clearly shot from someone's smart phone – but it was clear who the focus of both were: Red Hood. Memories of the previous night flooded Jason's mind at the sight; he had stopped a few muggings, and even taken care of a minor villain. This was from one of the muggings. It must have been the teenage boy he had rescued – he hadn't been paying attention to how the boy was reacting.

And he hadn't been paying attention to how...controversial he was.

He hadn't said anything offensive. But he had gotten a little too into character, and had been making quips about Batman the entire time. And the video, bad as the quality was, had caught all of them. It had also caught the seemingly excessive use of bullets and violence, even though it wasn't nearly as bad as it looked on camera.

Red Hood had come up in the news before, but always as a footnote. Not with his own section.

“...It looks like Gotham has a new villain,” Jason quietly said, mirroring what the newscaster was stating on the screen.

Damian shot him a look.

“He's a hero,” he said, indignant.

“...I think that's questionable,” Jason argued – both to agree with his previous statement and because calling him a “hero” negated the moral complexity of his character.

“He's a hero,” Damian insisted. He went to turn back to the TV along with Jason, but both were interrupted by their phones vibrating. Damian immediately perked up – he even opened his mouth to say something when he saw what he must have been texted.

But Jason didn't get a chance to hear what it was; his phone was vibrating because Hayleigh was calling him. He held up a finger, gave Damian an apologetic look, and quickly returned the call.

“Are you free tonight?” Hayleigh asked.

Jason glanced over at Damian. “Why?”

“I'm in desperate need of help,” she said. “Rose and I had plans for tonight, but something came up.”

Jason immediately stiffened. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, she's fine,” she was quick to reassure him. “She's just got a cold. But it's bad enough that she can't help me with something, and I really need someone to come with me. I'd ask Sabrina, but she doesn't like doing it. On the other hand, she does like babysitting, and I might have asked if she could babysit if you said yes, so...”

His gaze returned to Damian. Damian was sitting so stiff and straight that he almost looked like a statue – if Jason so much as poked him, he was sure he'd go crashing down to the ground beside the couch.

“Just give me one second,” he said. He pulled the phone away from his mouth. “Would you be okay if I did something with Harley tonight?”

Damian gave him the same hard look from before. “...Yes.”
Jason put the phone up against his ear again. “I can do it.”

He listened as Hayleigh told him where they were meeting up and what to wear. It must not have been anything too serious, or else she would have requested that he come dressed in his Red Hood outfit. He didn't think that the call was too long, but Damian was pacing around the room in front of the TV when he finally hung up.

“Timmy texted me,” he abruptly announced. “He wants to know if I can come over on Sunday.”

Jason immediately perked up. Damian's friend wanted to hang out with him outside of school? That was great! He still didn't know that much about Timmy, but Damian was always talking about him. If Timmy was inviting Damian over, he had to say yes.

“If you want to, you can go,” Jason said.

Damian stood a little taller. “I can?”

Jason nodded. “I can bring you to his house on Sunday.”

A ghost of a smile flickering across his face, Damian turned his attention back to his phone and started texting back – walking into the depths of his bedroom and closing the door behind him. Jason couldn't help but smile when he heard Damian give a muffled cheer from inside of the room.

xXx

He checked the address on his phone.

Jason wasn't sure what to expect, but the building before him wasn't it. It wasn't exactly in Crime Alley; it was a good block or two away. It was still a dangerous area of Gotham. There was no denying that. But the purpose of the building didn't fit the area in the slightest. Jason stared at the posters plastered up outside of it, at the people milling around the entrance, and at the glimpses of tables he could see through its tinted windows.

“Hey!”

Before the sound of Hayleigh's voice could even register, he felt her pull him into an embrace from behind. He turned to find her dressed in an outfit that wasn't entirely Harley Quinn but was entirely Hayleigh: a black top with thin straps, short dark green shorts, combat boots and a thick, dark red winter coat.

“Hi,” he said. He glanced down at his own outfit, suddenly very self-conscious of what he was wearing compared to her and the other people there. It was just an old pair of jeans, a faded t-shirt and his Red Hood jacket – he liked the leather jacket too much to not wear it when he got the chance to. “...What exactly are we doing tonight?”

She grinned.

“I'm glad you asked!” she replied. She gestured towards the open doors. “I brought you here tonight to show you the wonder that's karaoke night. I've been going here since...well, since as long as I've been me! It was an escape from You-Know-Who then, but now it's become a tradition to come every Friday night when this place runs it – they also do open mics every other night of the week, but that's not really my thing.”

She looked back at him.
“I could have come on my own,” she admitted, “but it's not as much fun.”

He glanced over at the doors.

...Karaoke night, huh?

“I've never done a karaoke night before,” he said, “but I've always been interested in doing something like it.”

“Perfect!” Hayleigh interrupted. She grabbed onto his arm and started bringing him towards the door. He didn't resist in the slightest – he was happy to be led along. This was just what he needed to take a break. He could get all of his frustrations by belting out lyrics to completely unrelated songs, just like he did back before in his dorm room-

He shoved that thought away.

As they entered the building, they were each handed a slip of paper. Jason didn't think much of it. He saw the number – thirteen – and slipped the paper into the pocket of his jacket.

“So how does it work?” Jason asked, following Hayleigh over to a table towards the front of the room. There were other tables, too, but most of them already had people at them. “Do we just go up and sing...?”

“Basically,” Hayleigh confirmed. “Whoever gets up there first gets dibs on the song. We're at an advantage because we're at the front, but you're not supposed to sing too many songs in a row. Got that, little birdie?”

He nodded.

“Oh!” she said. “Sometimes they do something special – like pick people in the crowd, or have some kind of theme. I forgot to check what they're doing tonight, but it's always a blast.”

That made sense. He just hoped that the theme wasn't anything too strange. He felt like he had a good grasp on how the karaoke night was supposed to work, but any major change would make him lose the little understanding he had.

It wasn't long before the lights dimmed. Jason straightened in his seat. Hayleigh and him were still the only ones at their table; he was grateful that he could just be himself around her, and not have to put on a persona for any stranger that decided their table was a good place to sit. Not that he could really see the faces of anyone else in the room – all the light was focused on the center stage.

The first song was announced – Jason had never been that good with song titles before, so he had absolutely no idea what Borderline was supposed to sound like. But Hayleigh jumped to her feet immediately at the title, and not a single other person in the audience stood a chance at beating her to the stage.

Jason eagerly waited for her to start singing.

And when she did, he wasn't disappointed. Hayleigh had a great voice. It easily filled the room. But it was more than that – something about the way that Hayleigh performed made her entire presence fill up the room. She took the microphone out of its stand as she sung, strutting across the stage as she sung the lyrics. From the little glances he made at the rest of the room, it was clear that her opening performance was already a hit in its first minute.

“Excuse me, sorry,” a voice suddenly said from behind him. He turned to see a girl pushing her
way through the tight aisles between the tables. When he realized that she was coming for the table closest to the front – his – he scooted his chair in a little to give her enough room.

He couldn't make out a lot about her in the darkness. All he could catch was a glimpse of blond hair as she sat down next to Hayleigh's coat. She didn't ring any bells, so he didn't dwell on it too long. But then another person started to slip past the other tables, and Jason quickly realized that their table wasn't going to remain empty.

This person wasn't nearly as apologetic as the girl had been; he just slipped past the tables without so much as a word of apology when he bumped into Jason's chair. And then he sat down right beside Jason, the light from the stage only illuminating his black hair and the miniature ponytail he had thrown it into.

Jason returned to watching Hayleigh.

The song concluded.

As Hayleigh descended from the stage with a fervent applause from the audience, the next song was announced. Jason found himself getting to his feet before the full name of it was announced. He caught Hayleigh's eye as he stepped onto the stage, giving her a grin as he took the microphone from its stand. This was his song. He had listened to it all the time in his past life, and he still listened to it when he got the chance to in this one.

At this point, he knew all the lyrics by heart.

Not that they were too hard to memorize.

He took a leaf out of Hayleigh's book, already moving across the stage as he yelled out, “C'mon boys!” as the drums played in the background. His gaze swept across the audience as the first lyrics started up. He could tell Hayleigh was watching him, even though he couldn't see her face clearly. He got through the first few lines before he was standing in the very front of the stage, foot resting on the speaker they had placed there – part of him wondered if that was why it was there instead of on the sides of the stage.

And then the chorus finally came.

“I,” he started, “wanna rock and roll all night, and party every day, I~ want to rock and roll all night, and party every day!”

He air-guitared. He shouted out every little holler that came in the song, because he knew every single note of it by this point. And when he finally returned to his seat at the end of his performance to an enthusiastic applause, he was so hot that he had to take off his winter hat – which he had completely forgotten about removing in the excitement of the past few minutes.

“That was awesome,” Hayleigh whispered, leaning over to him. “I didn't realize you were a Kiss fan.”

“I'm not,” he whispered back. “I just really like that song.”

He glanced over at her.

“You did great, too,” he said. “Your performance was a good confidence booster.”

The two of them grinned.
Then they both fell silent as the next performer came onto the stage. The rest of the night practically flew by – one singer emerging from the depths of the crowd to replace the other. Hayleigh and Jason even got in a duet together; they beat several pairs onto the stage to sing “You’re The One That I Want” while completely hamming it up – how else were you supposed to do a song from Grease?

The coordinator (and owner of the venue) stepped onto the stage one last time.

“For our last performance, we'd like to do something a little different.” For reasons he couldn't quite describe, Jason got a pit in his stomach. It was the tone that a villain might use before enacting their evil plan. Seeing Hayleigh at the edge of her seat didn't really help, either – she was wrapped up in villainous things thanks to being Harley Quinn.

The coordinator pulled out a hat full of what looked like little slips of paper. Suddenly remembering his own, Jason pulled it out and laid it on the table. He could hear everyone else in the room doing the same.

“Gotham is a community frequently under threat of conflict,” the man continued. “We like to bridge that divide here with our music, and tonight is no exception. Because of it, we want to invite two potential strangers up to the stage. You were given a slip of paper when you walked in. I'll pick two numbers from their hat, and whoever has those two numbers are going to be doing our final performance.”

He reached into the hat.

Jason watched him dig around, clutching his paper slip tighter and tighter the more he had to wait for the reveal. He had enjoyed this karaoke night more than he would have ever guessed. He just had to get that last song.

The coordinator pulled out two slips.

He carefully unfolded them and looked down at the numbers before his gaze returned to the room full of attentive people. “Could the two people with numbers seven and thirteen come to the stage?”

Jason immediately stood up.

He scanned the crowd for who had seven, and was shocked to find that it was the person who had been sitting next to him the entire time. Slips of paper in their hands, they both headed for the stages – Jason letting him step onto the stage before him.

“Because you've presumably never met before,” the coordinator said, turning to the two of them, “we'll let you two pick whatever song you want during a brief break.”

He turned back to the rest of room.

“As a reminder, there's food and drinks to the back...”

Jason, somewhat distracted, watched as Hayleigh got to her feet alongside the blond girl. The two were chatting as they approached the food table, leaving Jason to wonder if they had met before or if Hayleigh was just that friendly.

...It was probably just Hayleigh.

“I liked your performances earlier,” the boy beside him said. “I could see you were passionate
about them—"

Jason finally looked over at him.

He had been glancing at him throughout the night, but it was only now that he could really see what the boy looked like. A feeling of horrible, horrible dread washed over when he saw just who he was performing with. Who he had been performing in front of – who had seen him hamming things up, hanging out with Harley, and existing.

He was standing right next to Tim Drake.
We're only a few chapters away from this fic's conclusion! I'm not sure how long it'll take me to finish writing it, but it should be done by the end of next week if all goes according to plan. Right now I have four-six chapters planned, depending on how certain events space themselves out, but that could change when I'm actually writing the fic.

I hope you enjoy this chapter!~

“Thanks,” Jason said, his voice stiff, and awkward, and terrified, though he was hopefully doing a better job at hiding that last one. His gaze swept over Tim. He looked very similar to how he had back when he first saw him in the cafe: his black hair already somewhat long, dressed in civilian clothes that made him seem downright normal: just a hoodie, a pair of jeans and sneakers. If he looked a little closer, he could see a little device in Tim's ear. If someone thought it was an airpod, they wouldn't have been at fault – he knew that was how they had been designed lately.

So Tim was here for some vigilante-related thing.

That definitely made Jason feel better.

He took a quick, unnoticeable breath before failing to adopt Jason Todd's much cooler persona. His appearance was memorable, but he just had to pull what he had been pulling with Damian: he needed to tie it to someone who was decidedly not Jason Todd.

He sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck.

“It was my first time doing something like this,” he admitted. “My friend wanted me to come with her. She's the one I did the duet with earlier.”

“I would have never guessed – you're a natural,” Tim said, giving him a smile. He was still studying him, but Jason didn't know if that was because Tim normally did that or because he was suspicious. “Do you have any ideas for what we can sing?”

Jason mulled it over. “It doesn't have to be a normal duet, does it? We could always just sing something together...”

“That's true,” Tim agreed. He rested his chin in his hand, deep in thought.

As Jason waited for him to come up with some kind of suggestion – because he honestly didn't have the focus to come up with one of his own right now – Jason tried to think of what he was supposed to do. He already knew how to act, but the person he was supposed to be right now had never known what to do in a situation like this. That was why he had always hid away in his dorm room instead of going to events around campus.

He just had to imagine that he didn't know Tim.

He could do that, right?
“What's your name, by the way?” he asked.

Tim momentarily broke out of his thought. For a moment, Jason caught a glimpse of panic – Tim hadn't been prepared for that question. But then the calm expression returned, and he said, “Alvin. Alvin Draper. What's yours?”

“I'm Ja-” he started to say, catching himself when he realized he couldn't just blurt out Jason Todd as an answer. Tim would have known what Jason Todd was supposed to look like, and would have known that it was him. “Jaylin. Jaylin Cope. Do you, um, have a favorite song?”

Tim faltered.

“It's 'Hey There Delilah',” he said.

Jason stood a little straighter. “We could sing that-”

“I'd enjoy singing another song more,” Tim interrupted. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. He didn't say anymore. He just stood there, looking so small. Tim had to be in eighth or ninth grade, but something about him made Jason's brotherly side kick in.

“It's a personal song to you, isn't it?”

Tim stared.

“Let's think of a different one, then,” Jason suggested. Tim didn't say anything. He didn't even nod. He just looked at Jason with one last, long look before relaxing his posture. “What about 'Don't Stop Believin'’?”

Tim mulled it over.

“I think I can sing that one,” Tim said, giving Jason a smile that made his heart soar.

xXx

Tim was rich.

The expensive camera had given it away back when he first joined the photography club, and so had going to Gotham Academy in the first place, but Ian hadn't really expected just how rich he was. The al Ghuls weren't exactly hurting for money, but this was a different kind of wealth. A very American kind of wealth, and one that Ian had thought he had a good grasp on but apparently didn't.

He was rich enough to have a servant open the door when Peter dropped Ian off – Peter, who was even more wary and alert than usual, and was all too happy to leave the doorstep of the mansion – and rich enough to think that his collared shirt and dress pants was a good combo for a play date.

(Ian denied that he was jealous. He wasn't. His hoodie, jeans and old, beat-up sneakers were all very nice, even if they had come from the thrift store because Peter had spent all of his savings on Gotham Academy.)

...Could he call it a play date if Tim was in eighth grade?

He pushed the thought away as Tim emerged from the depths of the house.

“Hi, Timmy!” he chirped.
“Hi, Ian,” Tim replied, giving the strained smile he always gave when Ian called him by that nickname. “Did you bring your camera?”

He nodded. With a very awkward turn, Ian patted the top of his backpack. It didn't have much in it, but his camera was one of the few belongings he had decided to take along with him. Tim nodded, gave him another, more regular smile and started heading down a hallway that seemed to go on for eternity. Ian hurriedly followed. Tim's legs were frustratingly much longer than his, but he was proud of how quickly he caught up.

(There was a very, very clear separation between Damian al Ghul and Ian Parker, but he wasn't willing to part with the athleticism he had from before he came to Gotham.)

They came to a stop in what Ian was pretty sure was a kitchen. It had all of the traits of a kitchen, but was several sizes too large. Tim, unsurprisingly, was unfazed by the sheer scope and emptiness of it – he just made his way over to a cupboard filled with numerous snacks, grabbed an absolutely gigantic box of goldfish, and poured the two of them a giant bowl.

“Want to go up to my room?” Tim asked. “We could figure out what we want to do up there.”

Tim was rich, he reminded himself. That meant Tim probably had a wide array of toys, board games, video games-

...Was it too optimistic to hope for virtual reality?

Ian gave a very enthusiastic nod.

Tim brought him down another seemingly endless set of hallways, even going up an impressive flight of stairs during their trek from the kitchen to his bedroom. Ian couldn't help but gape at everything he saw. It was so big. And so grand. Something like this couldn't possibly be real. Even Tim's bedroom looked out of the ordinary. It was twice the size of Peter's, and everything in it had a new shine to it – like it got replaced the moment it started looking just a little too old.

Tim placed the goldfish down on his massive bed.

A second later, Ian joined the bowl and plopped himself down on the mattress. There was even a little bounce when he sat down – though it wasn't anything like the water bed Ian had before Gotham.

“I just have to use the bathroom first,” he said. “Feel free to have some of the goldfish without me, but please don't move things around in here. Everything has a special place to it, and I don't want to lose the little order it has.

Ian nodded. Even before Tim had closed the door behind him, Ian was on his feet with a handful of goldfish. If only Tim knew what opportunity he had just presented him with! His gaze swept across the room. Most of it was surprisingly bland. He had a few of his photographs on his walls, alongside ones of Batman and Robin.

(A different Robin than the current one, going off of the lack of pants and the different hairstyles.)

None of it was worth the warning. He needed something more. Something that deserved him breaking the one rule that Tim had laid out, and something that would really give him a glimpse into the life of Timothy Jackson Drake. He wanted to understand what it was like to live in a place like this – to live in a life like this – and digging through Tim's room was the best possible way.

He glanced at the closet.
Grabbing another handful of goldfish, he approached the closed doors. The closet, Ian realized as he opened it, wasn't really a closet. It was more like a small room. It was the size of his room, if he tried comparing the two in his head. Shaking the thought away with a literal shake of his head, he stared down the array of belongings Tim had shoved into it. He had a plethora of school supplies, what looked like a guitar case to the very back, and a stack of boxes.

The boxes warranted further investigation.

He pushed past a few stray coats and scarves until he could finally slip his hand under the top of the first box. He didn't either bother to check the label on the side. He just stood on the very tips of his toes, grabbed the first thing he could wrap his fingers around, and jerked it free from its makeshift altar.

He looked down at his find.

It was bag full of photographs. Making sure not to crinkle it too loudly, Ian carefully reached inside to see what Tim was hiding. He was finally getting a chance at seeing Tim's forbidden photographs. His photography skills might have been questionable, but they still had to be good-

Tim had taken a picture of a boy.

A familiar boy, with familiar dark hair and green eyes. He was standing outside of the academy's gates on an early morning, talking with someone who easily towered over him. He flipped the photo over, hoping that whatever it said on the back was something that would justify it all. But all he saw was his own name – Ian Parker – in Tim's impeccable handwriting, followed by a date, a time and a location.

He started leafing through the photos.

They were all photos of him. Photos of him at the cafeteria, in the school's grounds, in the club room, in the classroom – when had Tim even taken all of these pictures? And why had he never wondered why an eighth grader would so be interested in someone five years younger than him?

He shoved the pictures back into their bag.

His gaze traveled to the box.

It was labeled with his name.

He reached his hand back in and wildly started trying to grab whatever was within his reach. His hand closed in around a spine of a book. He grabbed that, flipping through its pages to discover something that really wasn't surprising: intricate, detailed notes on everything Tim had caught Ian doing. Ian's hands shook as he took a step back. There were two boxes he could easily see right now. Were both of them his, or did the lower one belong to someone else?

He glanced down.

It said Jason Todd.

His eyes widened.

He tore open the top, grabbing onto the first thing he could – he could hear Tim coming down the hallway. It was a long hallway, and he had good hearing, but he couldn't risk getting caught when he had discovered what Tim had been doing. He jerked the notebook free from the weight of the box above it. With one last glance at the two boxes, Ian emerged – disheveled – with the
photographs and the two notebooks.

Both were quickly shoved into his backpack.

Tim started to open the door.

Ian slipped the straps to his backpack on.

Tim stepped inside.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

Was it really that clearly written across his face?

“Peter said I need to go home,” he said. He was trying to keep up Ian, but he was slipping back into Damian al Ghul. He wanted to slip back into Damian al Ghul so badly now – wanted a sword, wanted something that he could use against Tim because he felt so scared and angry at the betrayal of trust-

“Is he already here?”

“He's waiting at the door,” he said. His tone was cold, and wasn't anything like Ian Parker anymore, but he didn't really care. “See you in school tomorrow, Timmy.”

He grabbed one last handful of goldfish.

Then he calmly made his way to the entrance, calmly made his way to the the driveway, and calmly made his way up to the very top. And when he finally reached the street, his composure failed. He ran and ran and ran, tears blurring his vision as he stumbled through mostly familiar Gotham streets, trying to remember how he was supposed to get back home. He could have gotten his phone out. He should have gotten his phone out. But he was far too distraught to even think of it.

And he was far too distraught to watch where he was going.

He was vaguely aware he was in an alleyway. He was vaguely aware that he was running near a bunch of unconscious, somewhat bloody men with guns. But what failed to register was the person still standing, who easily towered over him when he went barreling right into their legs.

He bit back a sob.

“Hey, it's alright-” the man – no, boy, because he knew that warm, comforting voice anywhere – said, crouching down and looking right in his eye. There was a pause as realization dawned on the vigilante. “Ian? I thought you-”

He faltered, like he remembered that he wasn't supposed to know him as Red Hood. Like Damian hadn't caught onto it the first time he had seen him on TV, because he knew the way that he moved and spoke. Damian knew a lot about him that he never realized. That his real name was Jason Todd, that he was the last Robin. He had just been playing along because he knew that was what Jason had wanted, but that didn't matter now.


Before Jason could even so much as ask what he meant, Damian dropped his backpack onto the ground and pulled out the photographs and notebook. He shoved them into Jason's gloved hands
with his own shaking ones, looking up at him through tearful eyes.

“This one has your name on it,” Jason managed to get out. “And these are pictures of—Where did you get these?”

“His closet,” Damian said. “And it's even worse than just obsessing over me— you're ignoring the one on you!”

Jason stiffened. “What do you—”

“Your name is Jason Todd,” Damian interrupted. “Jason Peter Todd. You're the last Robin, and you're the newest Red Hood. You were murdered. I—I heard you were coming back to life, and when I saw your eyes I—I knew that you were him. Because everyone who goes in the pit has them, and I—I—”

He let out another sob, balling his little hands into little fists.

“I tricked you,” he admitted. “I—I knew that you'd take me. The—The pit might have made you crazy, but you're—you're good. You wouldn't leave me there. So I pretended like I didn't know who you were, pretended that I believed your name was Peter Parker, and—and—”

He shook his head.

“It doesn't matter!” he said. “What matters is that Tim was keeping record on us, Jason! That's really, really bad. He'll figure out who we are, and he must have some reason for it, right? Because why else—”

Jason had been silent throughout his rant, but it was now that he finally cut him off. Putting his hands on Damian's shoulders, and presumably looking right into his eyes, he asked, “Damian, what's Tim's full name?”


Jason let out a very, very quiet sigh.

Seeing Jason so calm while Damian was so distraught didn't help in the slightest, but it still made him pause and try to understand Jason's reaction. He stifled back another sob, blinked away some of his tears, and tried to get another word out through ragged breaths.

But Jason didn't give him the chance.

“You can't let anyone know this,” Jason said, “but Tim's the current Robin.”

Damian stared.

“He's paranoid and obsessive,” Jason continued. “I don't think he's trying to stalk either one of us for any reason besides that. He probably figured out that I'm Red Hood but hasn't figured out where I am, and probably knows that something's...”

“Something's what?” Damian insisted.

“Different about you,” Jason awkwardly finished.

“...Oh.”

Jason got to his feet. He didn't protest when Damian clung to his side, even though he tried his best
to shield him from the bloody, unconscious men behind him. In the back of his mind, Damian appreciated the thought – even though he had seen his fair share of them before Gotham. “We just have to keep doing what we're doing. You keep being Ian, I keep being Peter, and they'll never be the wiser.”

Damian managed a nod.

This wasn't what he had expected from a trip to Tim's house, but somehow it felt right. He had always been fascinated by Robin, and intrigued by Tim – fascinated by the possibilities of Robin, and intrigued by the personas that Tim put on in the classroom. Tim and Robin just seemed to go together in his head.

He glanced up at Jason as they left the alleyway together.

Jason and Robin just seemed to go together, too.

“Peter?” he asked.

He slipped his hand into Jason's as he spoke, noting how Jason hesitated - as if pleasantly surprised - when he felt Damian's touch.

“Yeah?”

“...Can you tell me about when you were Robin?”

Even though he couldn't see Jason's face, something told him he was smiling underneath his Red Hood helmet. Jason cleared his throat – ever the dramatic storyteller – and began with, “Well, it started when I was trying to steal the wheels off the bat-mobile...”
I won't be able to get another chapter up for the next few days, so I apologize in advance for the major cliffhanger at the end of this! I can only hope the content of the next chapter will make up for it, whenever it comes out.

(Just as a warning: there is some swearing in this chapter, if that's not really your cup of tea.)

Tim noticed what had been taken twenty minutes after Ian left.

After trying – and failing – to track Ian down, he had resigned himself to a missed opportunity. Contrary to what Dick had guessed when he had told him about it, he wasn't trying to keep an eye on Ian. He had just felt bad about Ian not having anyone to spend time with outside of school (excluding his brother) and thought a day at the Drake estate might have made him feel better.

But Ian had left.

And when Tim finally accepted that fact, he did the next thing that came to mind: he went up to his bedroom, slipped into his closet, and went to grab Ian's latest notebook so he could jot down what had happened.

Ian's notebook wasn't there.

Neither were his latest set of photographs.

He had panicked, a little, but told himself that it was just because he had left them at school. There was no reason for Ian to have gone into his closet, even though he knew there was every reason for an eight year old to go against the rules he had been given, and he would just have to wait for the weekend. So he tried to get his mind off of the whole situation by reading through his notes on Jason with another thermos of coffee from downstairs.

But Jason's top notebook was missing, too.

That was when Tim started to really panic.

He somehow managed to barely convince himself that he had left Jason's notebook at school. He slipped out when it became dark outside, like he always did, and he returned before anyone could even notice he was missing a few hours later. Then he went to bed, miraculously managed to get a good few hours of sleep in, and rushed out of the house first thing the next morning.

He went everywhere he could think of.

He went to the club room. He went to his desk in homeroom. He went to his locker. He went to his favorite haunts around the campus. But the books and the photographs weren't anywhere to be found.

Tim had to face the truth.
Ian had taken them.

Ian had not only found his notes on Ian Parker, but, perhaps even more worryingly, he had founds
the notes on Jason Todd. Notes that were very, very specific on sightings of Red Hood, mentions
of his time as Robin, and even included pictures that showed exactly what Jason looked like in and
out of costume up until he had died.

So he did the first thing he could think of.

He called Dick.

“I screwed up,” he said, before Dick could even get a word in. “I just made the stupidest mistake I
ever made, and we're never going to be able to fix it-”

“Calm down,” Dick interrupted.

“I can't!” Tim replied. He was pacing around the club room now, running his free hand through his
hair as he desperately tried to come up with some magical solution. “Ian got into my closet. And he
took things from my closet. How am I supposed to be calm about that?”

Dick was silent for a moment; Tim was on the verge of ranting some more when he finally spoke.
He took a quiet, deep breath. “What did he take?”

“My notes on him,” he said. “A thing of photos. And my notebook on Jason. No one's even
supposed to know he's alive! And now Ian Parker of all people knows it, and I'm pretty sure he's
going to bring those notes to whoever he's working for, and then we're fucked. And don't say that
we're not, because I know that you know we're fucked, too.”

Dick let out a frustrated sigh. “If you hadn't kept them there-”

“Oh, I know I shouldn't have kept them there,” he said. “I've been thinking about that ever since I
realized Ian took them! But they're gone now, Dick, and we have to deal with the fact that someone
is going to find out that Jason's alive before even Bruce knows.”

“We have to be able to do something-”

“That's why I'm calling you! There isn't anything for us to do. Ian's had those notebooks for a day.
A day's long enough to read through Jason's. And if they read through my notes, we're going to be
in a lot more trouble than just having our secret identities revealed-”

“Tim-”

“These past few days have honestly been the shittiest days of the past year, and that's saying a lot. I
thought it was bad enough when I saw Jason at karaoke when I was supposed to be keeping an eye
on Harley Quinn, but this? This is even worse-”

"Tim-"

"And this is on top of everything with Red Hood, too! On top of Jason fucking Todd deciding to
run around Gotham and run right into you when he shouldn't even be here, and on top of him not
following his tactics at all-"

“Tim,” Dick hissed. “Shut up.”

Tim faltered.
“Where are you right now?”

“Does it matter?”

He could practically imagine Dick giving that look of his on the other end of the call. “Where are you right now?” he repeated. There was an impatience to his voice. It also sounded like he was moving around as he spoke – almost frantically – but Tim was too distraught to figure out why.

“I'm in the club room.”

“Go to the window.”

Frowning, Tim did as requested.

He peered out through the glass when he finally reached it, glancing down at the school grounds below. He was standing on the second floor, and that gave him a very good view of the grounds below.

“Shit,” he whispered.

Talia al Ghul was standing near the gate, flanked by members of the League of Assassins. Students, faculty and the very rare parent were fleeing from the group, but not everyone was lucky – a group of younger kids had been pushed off to the side by some of the league.

Today had just managed to become even worse.

He turned from the window.

“Are you on your way?”

“I am,” Dick confirmed. “I don't think I'll make it in time. Do you have a spare Robin suit with you?”

“I do,” Tim said. “I'll try to distract them until you can get here.”

Ending the call and slipping his phone into his pocket, Tim darted down the hallway.

xXx

One of the most useful skills that Tim had ever learned was how to hide in the shadows. It wasn't something that Bruce technically taught, but it was difficult not to pick it up after working alongside him. Tim made sure to use it now, lurking in the shadows until he had a good opportunity to go on the offensive.

Not that he knew when that would be.

He knew he was sorely outnumbered, and knew that he could very easily be beaten by the league members alone. Talia probably could beat him, too, but he didn't want to cross that train of thought until he absolutely had to.

“Where is he?” Talia demanded. “Where is my son?”

Her hostages cowered. Tim's gaze swept across them, searching for injuries or any other sign of violence. Most of the kids had their heads ducked down, and a few of them were crying, but it seemed like she had left them unharmed.
“I know he’s here,” Talia continued. Tim raced to fill in the gaps. Some sort of misunderstanding must have happened somewhere along the way. Why else would she be asking that while standing on the grounds of Gotham Academy? He knew who her son was. Bruce might not have, but he was sure he could have recognized him if he had been walking around the school at any point.

One kid let out a loud wail. Tim's gaze immediately shifted again. Talia looked furious, but in a calculated sort of way. Still, it was the kid who he was the most worried about – the girl couldn't have been older than six or seven.

The boy next to her rubbed her back and whispered soothing promises of safety into her ear. Tim couldn't make out the words, but he didn't need to in order to recognize the boy. Ian was the one doing the comforting, his face surprisingly calm for a situation like this.

“If you don't bring me my son, I'll-”

Ian shifted.

Tim shifted in the shadows, too. Talia was going to hurt the children. He just knew it. That was what villains did, and it didn't matter that they were children. He had no way of winning a battle like this, but.

Ian got to his feet.

Talia's gaze turned sharply.

Tim started to step out of his hiding place, but then Ian took off his glasses.

He carefully maneuvered his way around his cowering peers, eyes focused solely on Talia. He moved with a confidence that Tim had never expected, but just fit so well with Ian Parker. Talia didn't move as Ian approached. She just stared, an expression that didn't make sense flickering across her face: relief.

Ian reached a hand up.

He pushed down the blade of the sword she had pointed at the children, green eyes calm and mature. Green eyes that looked back down at him from a face that undeniably looked like his now that he didn't have his glasses on. And even before he opened his mouth, Tim knew exactly who Ian Parker was.

“Hi, Mom,” Damian quietly said.

Talia's expression softened.

“Damian,” she said, joy and relief and warmth radiating off of her voice in waves as the sword fell to the ground. She knelt down before him and gave him a hug. All of the kids were too afraid to really register what was going on, but Tim registered it all too well. “You're alright.”

Damian stiffened in her grasp.

They stood like that for a few more moments before Talia finally – reluctantly – pulled away. She still knelt before her son, but there was something different. Maybe she noticed the tension; maybe she just wasn't sure how to interact with him.

“Who were you with, my son?” she asked.
“It's not important,” Ian said. **Damian** said. “It's good to see you, Mom.”

His voice said otherwise.

“It is important,” Talia insisted. “Who were you with?”

“It really isn't,” Damian was quick to reply. “I just wanted to explore Gotham for a time, and took advantage of an opportunity-”

“Damian,” Talia interrupted. Tim didn't sense any hostility on her part, but he still prepared to emerge from his hiding spot – Damian was looking dangerously close to an outburst of some kind, and he doubted it would be good given his upbringing. “I need to know who you were with-”

“Why?”

Talia faltered. “...Why?”

“Why?” Damian repeated. He crossed his arms. “You're just going to send me away here, anyways! I heard you talking about it to Grandpa – maybe it wasn't going to happen when it did, but I **know** you don't care, Mom!”

Talia's green eyes widened in horror, glowing softly in the morning sun.

“I do care,” she said. “I'm asking because I do. How am I supposed to know if who you've been with was trustworthy? I could never leave my son with someone I didn't know-”

“Oh, you know him well enough,” Damian replied. Tim moved a little closer to the light, watching as Damian's eyes glanced between his mother and the sword. “You know him well enough to throw him into the pit and bring him back to life – which I'm assuming means you trust him, because you didn't even let me go in there when I was bleeding and bruised after training!”

“Damian, that's not-”

“Stop it,” Damian said. “Just **stop**, Mom. I like it here in Gotham a lot more than I ever liked it back there, and I'm not going back. You can't make me!”

Talia opened her mouth, but she didn't get a chance to reply to Damian's response. He was already out through the academy's gates by the time she got to her feet, and long disappeared by the time she turned to the league members that had awkwardly witnessed the entire family feud.

“What are you doing?” she said. “Go after him! And, while you're at it, find Jason Todd and bring him to me – he'll wish we didn't put him in the pit.”

The line was so hopelessly cliché, but Tim was too busy staring to really think about it. Talia and the league turned, storming out into the streets of Gotham. As the school started returning to some degree of normalcy, Tim joined the villains in the streets – still lurking in the shadows.

He called Dick.

“Ian's Damian,” he said. “He's been with **Jason** all this time. Talia sent the league after them. Don't bother coming to the school – it's a waste of time. We need to get Damian before he can get to Jason, and before Talia can get to either one of them.”

Dick didn't say anything.

Tim didn't expect to him.
He ended the call and hurried through Gotham's streets.
So I originally wasn't going to have time to work on this fic today, but I woke up earlier than I needed to and didn't feel like getting out of bed to start doing what I needed to do. Instead, I spent the past hour and a half typing away on google docs on my phone. My hands hate me now, but at least you get to read this chapter - which has been in the works for a /very/ long time. It's actually one of the first chapters I had an idea for, even though that idea has changed multiple times since I first came up with it.

Enjoy!

Jason was in the middle of patrolling Gotham's streets when Damian came running around the corner.

Sabrina had caught Rose's cold; the bookstore was closed for the day, and both Sabrina and Jason thought Red Hood would do a better service to the city than Jason trying to run the store on his own. It already felt strange walking around as Red Hood so soon after dropping Damian off at Gotham Academy, but the sight of Damian made Jason realize just how unusual today would be.

It wasn't the sight of Damian that was first, though - Damian was running so fast that he apparently wasn't watching where he was going, and went barreling right into the back of Jason's legs.

He turned and looked down.

"Damian-" he started to get out, but Damian wasn't even listening. He was wiggling a knife free from where Jason had hit it, studying it when he finally had it in his hand.

He looked up at him. "Do you have any bigger knives?"

"No?" Jason asked. Damian sounded calm, but there was still an underlying current of terror to his voice. "Damian, what's going on?"

Damian looked up from Jason's knife. "My mom came to the academy."

Jason stiffened.

"I said I wasn't coming back," Damian continued, "so I'm pretty sure she's sending the league after me. And I might have mentioned that you were the one I've been staying with, so she probably sent them after you, too."

His eyes widened behind his helmet.

There was a noise from the front of the alleyway they were in. Jason, who was already standing in front of Damian, spun around with his gun raised. Damian peeked out from behind him, knife already in his hand.

But the figures at the front didn't look like the league.
It was hard to tell any defining features - it was a dark, cloudy day, and the buildings surrounding them cast them in shadows. One of them was about Jason's height; the other was much smaller. It was when he saw the glint of the bo staff in the smaller's hands when the ecrisma sticks burst to life in the other's that Jason put two-and-two together.

It was Dick and Tim.

And they looked like they were ready to fight at the worst possible time.

(In the back of Jason's mind, he wondered where Bruce was right now - and why Tim was with Dick instead of him.)

"Can we take a rain check on this?" Jason asked. "I'm in the middle of something here."

"Let the boy go, Red Hood," Dick said. He had that cold look to his eyes again - and he wasn't even trying to hide it. Jason shouldn't have felt more scared of Nightwing than of the league, but he honestly didn't know how to deal with his brother when Dick was like this.

"No," Jason growled.

And then he stopped and paused for a moment, because the growl hadn't really been him trying to fit his character - it was entirely genuine.

"You're not taking him," Jason insisted. "I have a handle on this, Nightwing. Just leave me alone and let me take care of this."

"This?" Tim asked. "What do you mean by this? I just see a scared little boy with a knife-"

"I just see a scared little boy with a bo staff," Damian quietly said from behind Jason. Jason glanced back at him, Dick and Tim following suit as Damian took a few steps forward. "The Robin costume doesn't hide your fear, Timmy."

Tim gaped at him.

Then he nervously glanced between Jason and Damian, as if he was trying to figure out if Jason already knew who he was. Jason, of course, already did, but he was more than a little shocked that Damian was so willing to go there.

Dick took a step forward. "Red Hood-"

Damian turned around and pointed the tip of his knife at him. "Leave him alone, Dickwing. He's not doing anything wrong."

Now it was Dick who stared.

"Damian, you don't understand," Tim pleaded, trying to walk over to him but faltering when Damian pointed the knife in his direction. "It's not safe with-"

"You make it sound like he forced me to come with him," Damian said. "I chose it on my own-"

Jason suddenly jerked Damian back, gun raised at the mouth of the alleyway. Damian squirmed in his grip, but he refused to let go.

Dick started heading towards him with his ecrisma sticks, and Tim came towards him with the bo, but both stopped when they heard Jason fire his gun - shooting on the league that had just appeared.
There was movement from behind.

Jason turned.

They were surrounded on both sides by the assassins. Jason's eyes widened behind his helmet. This was even worse than getting cornered by Dick and Tim - he'd never be able to fight them off while trying to keep either of the other Robins from taking Damian.

Then Dick stunned one of the league with his sticks as Tim swept another off his feet.

Jason took that as a sign that they'd hold off on arguing about Damian until after they defeated the assassins. He shot another one, this time in the arm, leaving Damian to lunge forward without warning and plunge his knife into his leg.

It was sudden, and a little eye opening, but Jason appreciated the help.

There was unsurprisingly a lot of people to defeat, but that made sense - Jason would have done the same if his position was reversed with Talia's.

As the fighting continued, Jason, Damian, Dick and Tim all kept moving closer and closer together. It wasn't long before the four of them were back-to-back, each fending off members of the league.

One lunged for Damian, but Tim fended her off with a swift thrust from his bo staff. The woman went stumbling back just far enough for Damian to stab her in the side - not deep enough to kill, but deep enough to hurt.

Damian jerked the knife free.

He glanced around at the members getting up, and at the members they had yet to face. When Jason saw the look of terror and worry flicker across his face, he wanted to drop everything and hug him.

"This wasn't in the Tumblr post!" Damian suddenly exclaimed, ducking down to avoid a poorly aimed swing of a sword.

"You have a Tumblr-" Jason started to say, then caught himself when he realized it wasn't really in character. "You saw posts about the league on Tumblr?"

Tim groaned. "Please don't tell me the league has fangirls on Tumblr."

Dick kicked back another one of the assassins, whacking him across the face with the ecirma sticks. He didn't say anything; he just kept fighting.

And when they finally defeated the last fighter two minutes later, he grabbed Damian from Jason's side and backed up to the front of the alleyway - jerking Tim over a second later.

"Let me go, Dickwing!"

"It's Nightwing."

"I know what I said!"

Dick gave a very, very tired sigh. "Damian, we need to talk-"

"You're really living up to your name, you dick!" Damian announced.
Jason had been trying to sneak over to Dick's side while this conversation was going on, but found he was blocked by Tim sticking out his bo. Even if he hadn't been, he still would have stopped in his tracks at Damian's sudden fondness for that word.

"Red Hood, help!" Damian said, though it sounded more irritated than afraid. "Your brother is acting-"

Dick slammed his hand over Damian's mouth.

And was surprisingly unfazed by the reveal that Red Hood was his brother.

Jason, though he knew he was being stupid, took his helmet off and tucked it underneath his shoulder. He took a step forward, gently pushing the tip of the bo away, and looked Dick right in the eyes.

"You already knew?"

The cold look faded from Dick's eyes. "I did."

"But..." Jason faltered. Dick wasn't supposed to know yet. How could he have figured it out so soon? "What gave it away?"

Dick's expression softened even more. "I know you-

He was cut off by Tim giving a nervous little laugh from behind him. When Jason glanced over at him, he saw there was a wild, panicked look to his eyes - like he was on the verge of tears but was miraculously holding it in.

Dick gave him a look. "Robin-

"We're so fucked," Tim whispered, voice shaking as he ran his fingers through his hair. Jason was torn between panicking about Damian hearing the swear and worrying about Tim's mental breakdown, but he didn't even know why Tim suddenly was having one. "I-I tried so hard. You promised, Dick. You fucking promised. So why are you doing that?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Dick said.

"Oh, yes," Tim replied. "Telling Jason Todd that you know he's Jason is definitely the smartest thing you could be doing right now!"

He ran his hands through his hair again, letting out another nervous laugh.

"What did I do wrong?" Tim asked, his voice suddenly going quiet. "What stupid shit did I pull? I should have taken better notes, or-or-not snuck out. Or not invited Damian over. Would that have solved this? Or was the problem something I should have dealt with long before Damian came to Gotham?"

"Tim, calm down," Dick said, his voice much more confident and collected than Tim's. "Damian is like-

Damian, ironically, was the one who didn't let him finish the sentence - he bit into Dick's hand, startling him so much that he was able to get free and run over to Jason's side.

"I'm like what?" Damian asked.

Dick glanced over at Jason.
And that was when it clicked.

Jason glanced down at Damian and just stared, because everything was suddenly making sense even though he wasn't sure he could handle the implications. Tim's breakdown, Damian's actions and what Dick was saying all made sense if he scrapped the theory he come up with earlier.

He took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I was having trouble following canon, so I think I might be the one responsible for all of this...this..."

Damian stiffened.

Tim paused mid-nervous laugh and stared.

And Dick just looked him with an emotion that Jason couldn't quite describe.

"Wait just a second," Damian said. "Did you just say canon?"


"How long?" Dick asked.

Jason faltered. "What do you mean?"

"How long have you been Jason Todd?"

"Since I met Bruce-"

He was cut off by Dick suddenly bridging the little distance between him and pulling him into a surprisingly tight embrace. It wasn't until Dick spoke again that he finally understood why.

"I've been Dick since his parents died," he said. His grip tightened a little, and he felt what had to be a teardrop on his shoulder. "You're my Jason."

After a moment passed, Jason returned the hug.

"You're my older brother, then," he quietly said, and Dick didn't object to it in the slightest.

"I thought you acted different," Dick said. "But I wasn't ever sure. And when you died, I..."

"I missed you," Jason finished.

Dick looked up for a second, then nodded.

Jason gave a small smile. "I felt the same way," he said. "You never felt like just a character."

They finally pulled apart.

Jason turned to see Damian and Tim staring each other down. "So you acted the way you did because you knew that Tim Drake was Robin," Tim guessed.

Damian shrugged. "I just needed someone to mess with," he said. "You were an easy target."

Tim opened his mouth to speak, but Damian cut him off when he turned to Jason. "...Sorry about tricking you," Damian said. "...Again. In my defense, I didn't know you were like me, but still. I
just had to get away from M-Talia. She really does try, but…”

Another shrug.

"I don't think the pit is the best for her mental health." After an awkward pause followed, Damian clapped his hands together. "So! Names are probably in order, right? Timmy, you go first."

"My name's not-" Tim sighed and rested the tip of his bo on the ground. "My name is Jack. But I've been trying to stay in character, so I'd appreciate if you called me Tim instead."

Damian grinned. "Timmy it is, then! What about you, Dickwing?"

He blinked at the nickname, but didn't protest like Tim had. "My name is James," he said. "I was also using the name Dick for the same reason that Tim was, but I'm starting to realize the story is already past the point of being fixed."

"James," Jason quietly repeated. "It fits you."

James gave him a small smile.

Damian glanced between the two before he looked up at Jason. "What's your name?"

"I used to go by Jay," he admitted, "but I'm more comfortable with Jason now."

Damian nodded. "That's valid." He placed a little hand on his chest. "I'm Alex. And since it looks like all of you were lucky enough to be your gender, I hope you're not too surprised that I'm a girl...woman?...Age is weird."

Jason, James and Tim all stared.

"...How long have you been Damian?" Tim asked.

Alex shrugged. "Since he was born. Which, let me tell you, being born is not fun. Take it from someone who actually remembers the experience. I'd list it in my top ten most terrifying moments of my lives."

She glanced around at the three of them.

"So now what?"

"We need to talk," James said "We can't keep talking about it here."

"...But wouldn't the league follow us?" Jason asked.

Alex shook her head. "We're good for now. This is everyone Talia brought over with her. I've lived with her for the past eight years - she won't want to, but she has to retreat and regroup. That gives us plenty of time to go somewhere."

"We could go to my house," Tim suggested. "No one would be home, but Alfred or Bruce might spot us."

Jason looked their group over.

"...I think I know a place," he said, giving a smile.
Hey there! I'm finally back with another chapter. I've had a busy past few days, so writing my fanfiction wasn't something I really had time for. But I'm planning on writing more of this story tonight - expect another chapter either late tonight or early tomorrow!

And, if everything goes as planned, we have three chapters left. One for today, one for tomorrow, and one for Friday. Things are about to get a little hectic, so I hope you're as excited as I am!

Jason led the group through Gotham's familiar streets. To an onlooker, they would have looked strange - three of Gotham's vigilantes seemingly escorting a young boy through dark alleyways and deserted streets. But Jason didn't feel all that out of place walking about Tim, James and Alex. He barely knew Tim, but James and Alex felt familiar in a foreign but comforting way. He hadn't known them as themselves, exactly, but he was starting to figure out where their characters ended and where they began.

"This street looks familiar," Alex commented. When Jason looked down at her, she was glancing around at the streetlights and buildings that towered above her. He had to keep reminding himself to stop thinking of her as Damian - even when all he wanted to do was see her as the child he had taken care of for what felt like an eternity.

He gave a smile behind his helmet.

"It should," he said.

"That's ominous," Alex grumpily commented, crossing her arms. "I can't tell if that's a reference to canon or a reference to something I should know."

"Something you should know," Jason clarified. He looked ahead. "We're almost there."

"...Are you sure where we're going is safe?" James asked. He had thankfully put his escrima sticks away, but he seemed more than a little wary. "This is one of the more crime-ridden areas of Gotham."

He nodded. "It's safe."

"...I don't recognize this area from the comics," Tim protested from behind him. He was scanning the streets with a hardened eye, bo staff resting awkwardly in his hand. Jason wondered in the back of his mind how long Tim had been Tim Drake, and if it was him or Jack looking out at the world right now. "There was never anything important here."

Jason stared at him from behind his mask. "There isn't?"

"You sound surprised," Tim commented. "...You weren't a comic book fan?"

"I was," Jason corrected. "But I mainly focused on Red Hood."
Tim’s gaze returned to the street. “Comics were my everything.”

Jason didn’t miss the way he paused before he spoke.

And he didn’t miss the way that Alex faltered, too - an almost guilty and nervous expression flickering across her face. He might not have known Alex as herself for that long, but he had known her as Damian. And that was a look that Alex-as-Damian had been very fond of.

But he didn’t get a chance to wonder more about their reactions. When he turned back to see how close they were to their destination, he found they were right in front of the path that led up to the front door.

They turned onto the path.

Jason was surprised when both James and Tim joined Alex behind him. They both seemed uncertain, and their hands lingered over their weapons. Maybe he should have given them some kind of warning for who was about to open the door, but he wasn’t exactly worried about the apartment’s owners.

He knocked.

“Coming!” a voice shouted from inside. Tim and James stiffened; if he had glanced back, he would have seen Alex looking similarly tense.

A moment later, the door swung open to reveal Hayleigh - blond hair in two messy ponytails, and an oversized black shirt with Batman’s symbol on it on as a makeshift nightgown. Even before he saw Rose lounging on their couch behind Hayleigh, the little red lipstick mark on her cheek gave away what she had been up to.

Hayleigh blinked.

“Jason, what the fu-”

“Is that Harley Quinn-”

“No, it’s alright. Jason says she’s okay-”

“Jason, why are we standing on Harley Quinn’s doorstep-”

“She’s Harley Quinn! How can she be okay? And is that Poison Ivy-Nightwing, get your escrima sticks out and don’t just keep staring-”

“Harley, what’s going on?

“Jason’s here and he brought some friends-Oh, uh, Robin, please put down your bo staff-”

“Don’t attack each other,” Jason said, his voice cutting through the chaos that had erupted on the doorstep. Before anyone could get in a word, or attack, or whatever they were about to do, Jason grabbed Tim and James and jerked them inside. Alex, thankfully, just followed them in without prompting.

Tim and Dick raised their weapons as the door shut behind them.

Hayleigh, in a burst of inspiration and desperation, grabbed a vase they had on a table near the door. Rose, when she finally joined her girlfriend in the entrance, was quick to make a vine snake its way through the doorway that led in from the kitchen.
“It’s not what you think,” Jason said.

“I’m thinking a lot of things right now,” Hayleigh said. “And the top one is ‘Jason got forced to bring his not-so-nice brothers here after he accidentally revealed his secret identity’-”

“Does Tim even count as a brother?” Alex interrupted. “He’s a baby Robin, right? Wait, do I count as your brother? Because I’m pretty nice-”

Jason cleared his throat.

“Jason,” Tim hissed, taking a step forward, “you better have a good explanation for this.”

“I do,” Jason said. “I just need everyone to be quiet so I can actually say it.”

There was a long, awkward silence.

“...And for you all to put your weapons down.”

The three who had grabbed some kind of weapon reluctantly put them down, and Rose made her vines disappear back into the plant she had grown them from in the kitchen.

Jason took a deep breath.

“Hayleigh and Rose, meet James, Jack and Alex. And James, Jack and Alex, meet Hayleigh and Rose.”

Hayleigh stared.

“...I’m going to need a drink,” she said.

“And I’m going to need a cup of coffee,” Tim said, “because I’m pretty sure I have to be dreaming right now.”

xXx

A few minutes later, the group was sitting in the apartment’s living room. James and Tim had taken the couch, while Alex awkwardly perched on the edge of the armchair Jason was sitting on. There were so many of them that Rose had brought in two chairs from the kitchen for her and Hayleigh to sit in. The last member of their group was there in spirit and digitally - Hayleigh had called Sabrina up on Skype the moment she got over her initial shock.

Introductions were passed, explanations were given, and the group had fallen back into an uncomfortable silence.

“...So,” Hayleigh said. “I guess that rules out our theory of people like us being characters who are morally gray.”

Alex gave a solemn nod. “It’s like anyone could be from the real world.”

James faltered.

“...Couldn’t Bruce be from the real world, too?” he suggested.

There was another pause. Looks were exchanged between all parties, and expressions of deep contemplation appeared very briefly on everyone’s faces.
“No, he’s too much like Bruce Wayne,” Tim said with a shake of his head.

“I have to agree with Tim,” Sabrina said. She sniffled, taking a quick break to blow her nose before popping back up in front of the camera. “Everything he does is something that Bruce Wayne would do - and no one could be as good as appearing and disappearing into the shadows as Batman.”

James glanced over at Jason. While there had been almost a joking tone to Tim and Sabrina’s voices, something about the look that James gave Jason was much more serious - Jason found himself sitting nervously in his seat before James spoke. “...When we buried you, he cried the entire time,” he softly said. Jason shifted a little uncomfortably. “If he wasn’t Bruce, he would have known that you were coming back.”

Silence once again fell on the group. Jason had been trying not to think about what this conversation meant for him - and meant for his connection with the man who had raised him for the past few years.

“I think the whole thing about Bruce is besides the point,” Alex suddenly argued. She scooted closer to the end of the armrest. “We’re not the only ones, right? I think we all thought we were, but this conversation proves that we were wrong. There has to be other people.”

“Not necessarily,” Rose said. “We have the Gotham City Sirens and four of the most popular Robins covered.”

“We don’t have Duke Thomas,” Tim quietly pointed out. “We don’t have Stephanie Brown, either.”

“Or Carrie Kelly,” Alex said.

The group stared at her.


“I don’t think Carrie Kelly applies to this continuity,” Tim pointed out. “Because I’m Jason’s replacement, and Bruce never retired. But why would you…?”

James raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean by ‘sort of’?”

Alex took a deep breath and let it out as a very loud sigh.

She hopped to her feet, noticeably smaller than everyone present in the room. “I’m not really a DC fan,” she admitted. “I know close to nothing about the Batfam. I just saw a Tumblr post about it before dying - and I remember Jason Todd because of the whole resurrection rule. Oh, and Carrie Kelly because I thought she looked cool, but that’s not really the point.”

“...Resurrection rule?” Jason asked.

She stared at him. “I would have guessed you’d know it,” she said. “The only people who stay dead in comics are Bucky Barnes, Jason Todd and Uncle Ben. It’s just the last one now, but I stand by my point.”

“But you know comic book deaths without being a DC fan?” Tim said, a suspicious tone to his voice.

Hayleigh gasped.
“Don’t tell me,” she whispered. “You’re a Marvel fan?”

Alex stiffened. “Maybe.”

“I think that’s a yes,” Sabrina said.

“Alex, I trusted you,” Hayleigh said, shaking her in disappointment. “I should have known you were a Marvel stan!”

“It’s not my fault I died and ended up in DC,” Alex protested. Her cheeks grew increasingly more red in embarrassment. If that wasn’t a sign of her discomfort, the way she looked away from everyone present would have given it away. “I should have ended up in Marvel, because that’s how stories like this always go in fanfiction, but no. I had to end up as Batman’s son!”

A round of laughter erupted from around the room - with Hayleigh being the main culprit. But even James smiled and Tim smiled a little at Alex’s outburst. Only Jason didn’t laugh or smile; Alex’s comment had made him think of the one thing he had been avoiding this entire conversation. If Alex had already changed the canon by going with him away from Gotham, didn’t that mean that they weren’t held by it anymore? Even this meeting changed how their stories were supposed to go.

“Jason?” Hayleigh asked. The joking and laughter had stopped, but he hadn’t even noticed. He shook himself out of his thoughts and looked over at Hayleigh. “What’s wrong?”

“We don’t have to follow canon anymore,” he pointed out.

The group exchanged looks.

“I’m still following it,” Tim said. “I’m not going to risk entirely destroying the plot.”

“Besides Tim,” James clarified, glancing over at him. He looked back at Jason. “But that’s not the problem, is it?”

Jason’s gaze dropped down to his lap. “I was avoiding who knew me before Joker killed me because it was what Jason had done,” he admitted. “I’m not really Jason Todd - I can’t do half of the things that he can. Doesn’t that mean I can…”

He faltered.

“…Doesn’t that mean I can see Bruce again? As me, and not as Red Hood?” he asked, his voice quiet.

The group was silent.

Somehow, Jason wasn’t surprised.

“I don’t know if we’re the best ones to be answering that,” Hayleigh finally said. “That’s more of a you question. How much of Jason’s story do you want to follow?”

When the group left an hour later, Jason still didn’t have the answer to that question.

All he had was Alex following alongside him - Tim and James had gone their separate ways. Jason wasn’t entirely sure what would come next, so he just focused on what lay ahead of him: taking one step after another as he and Alex headed towards their home.

He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to interact with her, now that they were alone. It had been
easier in the group. Now he was forced to face the fact that Alex only looked like eight year old Damian on the outside; she had to have been older than that when she died, and had to be technically older than that now going off of how long she had been him.

“What do you want to do?” he asked her.

“About what?” she asked. “Lunch? The cafe sounds nice, even if Hayleigh’s have a date day with Rose and won’t be working there—”

He cut her off with a shake of his head.

“About Bruce,” he said. “You’re supposed to live with him someday.”

“...Oh.”

They walked down another street.

Alex let out a sigh.

“I’m not really sure,” she admitted. “I’m happy with whatever we’re going to call what we have right now, to be honest. Talia...Talia was different. She’s kind of like an actual mom to me, but I haven’t even met Bruce. And dads and I really don’t have the best track record.”

She looked up at him.

“What about you?” she asked.

Now it was Jason who sighed.

He awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck, fingers brushing up against the bottom of his helmet. “I don’t know,” he said. “Bruce and Jason don’t have the healthiest relationship in the comics. I think it might be because Red Hood goes against Bruce’s no killing rule, but...”

“You’re worried it’s because Bruce and Jason aren’t meant to get along,” Alex guessed.

He nodded.

“Huh,” Alex said. She looked at the sidewalk ahead of them. “But you’re not really Jason, right?”

He stiffened. “What do you-”

“You don’t really act like Jason Todd,” she said. “I couldn’t really get that until I saw you interacting with James and Tim, but you’re...warmer. I mean, you took me along when I begged you hard enough, and you haven’t actually gotten into a fight with Bruce yet, right? I’ve been watching the news. You just keep running away.”

His gaze fell towards the ground. “So you think I should go and see him.”

“Jason, I have absolutely no idea,” she declared. After a moment passed, he suddenly felt her holding onto his hand - giving it a tight, comforting squeeze. “You just look sad, and I feel sad when you feel sad because we’ve been unofficial roommates for the past few months, so I’m doing my best to lighten the mood.”

They came to a stop in front of a building that wasn’t their apartment, but was one that Jason desperately needed right now. Alex glanced between him and the storefront, eyes narrowed in confusion and suspicion.
“...Jason, I’m not a little kid,” she argued. “I was just going along with it before-”

He gave her a smile underneath his helmet, momentarily forgetting that she couldn’t see it.

“Giving you a treat was an added bonus,” he admitted. “The real reason I wanted to go to it with you was so I had an excuse to go there in the first place.”

Alex relaxed.

“In that case, I’m totally down for this,” she said.

The smile grew. “Same order as last time?”

“Of course,” Alex confirmed. She gave him a grin of her own. “That was all Alex right there, and absolutely none of Damian. Let’s go!”

The bell to the ice cream shop rang as the two pushed open the door.
“You really need to talk to him.”

“I know.”

“Then why haven’t you?”

“...I’m scared that he’ll hate me.”

“You did a better job with him than he ever did.”

“You know that doesn’t make my fear go away.”

“I do. But I also know you’ve been obsessing about this for months now, and that you’re going to do something stupid if you don’t get your act together.”

“...Easy for you to say.”

“Is that supposed to be an insult?”

“...Maybe.”

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to be impressed or disappointed.”

xXx

Jason and Alex had spent the past few months carefully building up routines as Peter and Damian. Peter and Damian, to some extent, were just Jason and Alex with different names. But in the week that followed the reveal, Jason often felt like he was walking on eggshells. He knew how to act around an eight year old. He didn’t know how to act around a girl who had been only fourteen years old when she died - she told him on the second day post-reveal - and had been stuck in a body far younger than her actual age for eight years.

He didn’t know if he was supposed to spoil her rotten like he had done with Damian. He didn’t know how to react when he woke up in the mornings and found her curled up against his side on the couch, tears staining her cheeks like they had back before he had found out the truth about her. He didn’t know how much independence he could give someone who was physically eight, and didn’t know how much he needed to protect her when her body clearly had limitations.

When he became too overwhelmed by whatever Alex and him were now, he’d sneak off as Red Hood. He wondered if Bruce ever did that, too. James and Tim might have as well, but he knew their superhero personas were all about the character. There was something that felt good about sneaking onto a rooftop, gazing out at the city below and knowing that you were the one protecting it at the end of the day.

So that was what Jason was doing now.

He sat on the very edge of the roof, staring down at the streets below. They were mostly empty. It was unsurprising, given how late at night it was.

(Alex was with Hayleigh, Rose and Sabrina for a girl’s night at Hayleigh’s apartment. Jason tried not to worry about her, but it was hard not to worry after everything they had been through as their
false selves.)

Jason let out a quiet sigh, resting his helmet in his lap.

James was busy. Tim was, too. With Alex preoccupied with the few other people he could consider in his circle of friends, he had no one to meet up with. It was just him, Gotham’s streets, and the longing for something more.

He rubbed his wrists.

It had been a long time since he did that.

As he kept watching the street below, he caught a glimpse of movement - there was a flash of blond among a sea of suits, and then a sudden loud yelp as the owner of the blond ponytail was jerked into an alleyway. The would-be kidnappers tried to muffle the noise, but it was a failed attempt. Jason was already getting down from his rooftop perch.

He got to the ground in record time, but it wasn’t quick enough. The girl was already surrounded. They were threatening her, but he wasn’t too focused on the threats. He was more focused on why this alleyway suddenly felt so familiar. Why did it stick out in his mind?

And why was there someone else in the shadows?

The recognition and shadowy figure were quickly explained by said figure bursting from the shadows and taking out the nearest man. The girl - who couldn’t have been older than Tim appeared to be - stared at the figure with wide, blue eyes. Jason also stared with wide eyes, but he didn’t have the same adoration that the girl had.

The figure had been Bruce.

And the alleyway, now that he saw Bruce in it, was all too familiar.

Jason wasn’t paying attention as Batman took down the last foe. He wasn’t paying attention as the girl and him exchanged a few short words. The girl hurried off. Bruce tied up the men with care that Jason failed to give his own enemies. And then Bruce turned and looked right into the shadows, eyes landing directly on Jason.

“Red Hood,” he said.

He had been so good. He had been so careful. He had avoided Bruce as both Batman and himself at every turn, and done everything in his power to stay under the radar so Bruce wouldn’t seek him out.

So why did he have to run into Bruce now?

“Batman,” he replied. He took a step out of the shadows. He opened his mouth to say more - to say a name that wasn’t Batman and yet was, because it was hard to draw the line between broody vigilante and billionaire father. But he couldn’t find the right words. He didn’t even know where to begin.

And Bruce just kept standing there like he always did, silently judging him from behind his cowl.

“What are you doing here?” Bruce said. There was a wariness to his voice. He was waiting for
Jason to lash out. And Jason knew he should have, but he couldn’t come up with any of the wise 
comments Jason Todd would have made in this moment.

“Patrolling,” he said. He was good at deepening his voice and not making it sound like him, but the 
answer came out as little more than a squeak. He cleared his throat and tried to sound a little more 
like an anti-hero and less like a son hiding from his dad. “Is there something wrong with that?”

“Your methods are questionable.”

“No one’s died,” Jason positively pointed out. He had just shot them in places where it would hurt, 
and places that might put them out of commission. But they were hardened criminals, so did a 
bullet to their arm really hurt them in the long run? Gotham’s criminals got creative.

“Yet,” Bruce countered.

Jason faltered.

“If they die,” he weakly said, “they deserve it.”

There was a silence that Jason didn’t know how to fill.

Maybe he was supposed to attack him. That was what Jason Todd would have done, right? He 
would have wanted to egg him on. If not that, he would have dramatically started running away. 
And Bruce would have given chase, but Jason would have outrun him, because his time as Robin 
had taught Jason all of Bruce’s little tricks.

But Jason couldn’t even find the strength to move.

And Bruce hadn’t attacked him yet.

He had changed the story. He knew that. Everyone kept reminding him that he wasn’t really Jason 
Todd. And while that was a great comfort to his morality, it meant he had no idea how this new, 
strange Jason Todd he had accidentally created would react to the man who should have killed his 
killer.

He took a quiet, deep breath.

He couldn’t face Bruce right now. He wasn’t ready. He had to do this on his own terms, but... He 
started heading for the mouth of the alleyway.

Bruce didn’t stop him - even though Jason desperately wanted him too.

And then words that he had been planning on saying for years but just felt wrong now came 
slipping out of his mouth. And maybe the reason he said it wasn’t because canon Jason was 
supposed to taunt Bruce into figuring out the puzzle, but because he just wanted Bruce to know 
that it was him. That even if he couldn’t express the knot of emotions in his chest, Jason was really 
alive and didn’t want Bruce to keep being so sad and angry and everything canon Tim Drake had 
seen when he became the next Robin.

“You’ve lost your touch,” he said.

Bruce didn’t say anything.

Jason started to turn the corner, but paused with one foot out on the street.

There wasn’t a train to cut him off this time. There was nothing to add suspense and drama when
he shouted out Batman’s real name. They weren’t even in the right scene for the movie’s confrontation.

But there was Jason, hiding behind Red Hood’s helmet, knowing that he could never shout out Bruce’s real name in the same way his canon counterpart had. He lingered in the entrance of the alleyway for an eternity before whispering in a quiet, hesitant voice, “Dad.”

And then Jason went running down the streets of Gotham, too scared to see if Bruce had followed him.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I was originally going to make this the last chapter, but I decided when I got to the end of it that a chapter break was needed to feel its full effect - but expect to see the final chapter of this fic later today!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Something’s wrong.”

Jason paused as he took a bite of his pancake, looking over at Alex. Her arms were crossed and her eyebrow was raised as she studied him. It might have been a totally unrelated statement, but the way she was looking at him made him think he was the problem. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “What’s the something?”

“I don’t know,” Alex said. She drew her lips into a focused, straight line. “You’re the one with the something wrong, not me. What happened last night? You’ve been pouting ever since I came home, and you were probably pouting before it, too.”

Jason sighed in defeat, resting his fork back down on his plate with the bit of pancake he was going to eat.

“...I saw Bruce last night,” he admitted. “He was Batman. I was Red Hood.”

“...Oh.”

He rested his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. “We didn’t fight.”

“That’s good, then?”

He shook his head. “I made a mistake. I tried saying one of Jason’s lines from his movie, but I...”

He faltered.

“I called him Dad instead of Bruce,” he whispered. He stared down at his half-eaten pancake, watching the syrup cascade down its sides onto the plate. “And I know I should feel guilty, because Jason Todd would have never done that, but Bruce is the closest thing to an actual dad that I ever had.”

They were both silent, gazes lingering on the table instead of each other.

“...Talia’s the same way for me,” Alex finally admitted. “I’m guessing Damian’s probably closer with her in canon than Jason is with Bruce, but she’s not really supposed to be my mom. My actual mom wasn’t ready for being a parent, and none of the foster homes ever really...I don’t know, clicked? So, yeah. The closest thing I have to a mother figure is a woman in a league of assassins.”

He looked over at her. “What about your dad?”

An expression flickered across her face, but for once Jason wasn’t able to read it.
“I don’t really like to talk about him,” she said.

He gave a little nod.

Alex let out a sigh. “We have some pretty messed up lives, don’t we?”

Jason gave a tiny smile. “Maybe that’s the requirement for ending up like this.”

A tiny smile began to grow on Alex’s face, too. “So we’re in Angel Beats then, and this is our weird second chance?” She shook her head. “Never mind. You probably won’t get the-”

“You’re an Angel Beats fan?”

“You know what I’m talking about?”

“Of course I do!” Jason exclaimed, the smile quickly growing into a grin. “Angel Beats was one of my first anime. I didn’t realize you were an anime fan.”

“I didn’t realize you were one, either,” Alex said. She sat a little straighter in her seat, spinning her chair around so she was looking right at him instead of facing the counter and the kitchen. “I never thought I’d say this, but I think we need to hold off on talking about my fandoms for a bit so we don’t forget about the main problem.”

His grin faded.

“Bruce and I,” he said.

She nodded.

“There has to be something that we can do,” she said. “You can’t keep moping around.”

“...I could try interacting with Batman more as Red Hood.”

She shook her head. “That doesn’t feel right.”

He faltered.

She had a point - it really didn’t. He stopped staring at the counter and started staring at her instead, trying to come up with exactly what they needed to do. The problem wasn’t with their alter egos. It was with who they really were. And if that was the problem, then he could only come up with one solution.

It was the solution he had been trying to avoid this entire time, because the only way he could truly reveal himself was by revealing what he had been up to since he came back to life.

He took a deep, nervous breath.

“...Alex?” he asked. “How do you feel about meeting Damian’s dad?”

xXx

Jason Todd had never done something like this, so Jason didn’t try to guess how his canon counterpart would have dressed and entered the house. Knowing him, he would have just snuck in wearing his Red Hood outfit and crashed on one of the couches. But Jason couldn’t bring himself to do something so abrupt, so he did what he would have done. He dressed in an outfit that was undeniably his: his Red Hood jacket, a faded t-shirt, an old pair of jeans and a pair of combat
boots.

Alex, meanwhile, was dressed in a t-shirt, gray hoodie, jeans and sneakers. It wasn’t something Damian would have worn in such an important moment, but it was definitely something that fit Alex.

The two of them awkwardly stood on the doorstep together. In the inside of the house, Jason could hear conversations - little bits of familiar voices floated through the air. Neither Alex or Jason made a move for the door. But then Jason pulled himself together and raised his hand to knock, knowing that they’d just have to deal with whatever happened when someone inside opened the door.

He knocked.

The talking momentarily paused. A minute later - the conversation resuming - the door opened up to reveal the person Jason had both hoped to see and had wished wasn’t there.

It was Bruce.

He looked Jason and Alex over. Jason had never been as good at reading Bruce’s expressions as he should have been, but the look he gave the two of them was especially hard to comprehend. He wasn’t shocked. He hadn’t expected him to be, after their confrontation the night before. But it still was a little unnerving to see him give such an unfamiliar look, and not the look he had been anticipating for years.

“Hi, Dad,” Jason awkwardly said.

The conversation inside stopped, and the two people who had been continuing it after Bruce went to get the door both appeared farther back in the doorway - it was James and Tim. James’s face was just as unreadable as Bruce’s, but Tim’s face was all too clear: his eyes were wide and his skin was pale.

Bruce looked down at Alex.

Then he looked up at Jason again.

“You’re not Jason,” he said.

Jason opened his mouth to utter some kind of protest, but then Bruce gently grabbed him by the arm and brought him inside. Alex, naturally, followed, and the door was softly shut behind them. A flood of confusing emotions overwhelmed Jason - worry, grief, confusion and maybe, just maybe, a little bit of hope.

“What do you mean?” James said. He walked over to where Bruce and Jason were standing, looking between the two with a very well hidden panic. “He looks like Jason, Bruce.”

Bruce gave James a curious look. “You’re taking this better than I would have guessed.”

James faltered. “It’s Gotham-”

“But since when have people been able to come back from the dead?”

James didn’t have an answer.

He just stared at Bruce, mouth slightly agape at Bruce’s dismissal.
Tim, meanwhile, kept staring at the exchange like he was on the verge of an anxiety attack, and Alex just kept looking between everyone that was standing in the doorway. Her gaze finally settled on Bruce. While the most everyone else could do was stare, Alex marched right up to him and said, “I bet you’re not Bruce Wayne.”

Tim uttered a panicked squeak from behind Bruce.

Jason just stared.

Bruce held Alex’s gaze for a second before letting out an almost amused sigh.

“Chris was right,” he said, shaking his head. “None of you are the originals, are you?”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t usually do end notes, but I wanted to give a quick explanation for the reference to Angel Beats. Angel Beats is an anime where the protagonists are all dead; each died when they were teenagers in horrible, horrific ways. They end up in this academy with countless NPCs, and the goal of the series is for them to confront whatever regret they have following their death. Alex says their lives are like Angel Beats because most of the kids have terrible home lives - I can only think of one or two that don’t follow the rule.

I hope that makes sense, and see you next chapter. <3
I apologize for taking so long to write this chapter. I caught a bad stomach bug over the weekend, and I wasn't able to write between it and the end of the semester work I've been doing. But I finally had some free time this afternoon, so I decided it was time to finish this fic once and for all.

I was going to save the sappy author's note for the end of the chapter, but I wanted to get it done now so Jason could get the last say in how this story goes. Thank you /so/ much for all of the support! I was astonished by how many kudos, bookmarks, comments and hits this fic has been getting. I can only hope my future fics are as popular as this one. <3

Jason's story may be coming to a close, but it's not the only story I want to tell in this universe. As I've mentioned before, I fully plan on writing more fics for this story. If you haven't already seen it, this fic is now part of a collection: it's the first part in the "not quite canon" series. I'm not entirely sure how many stories it will include, or how long it will take for me to write them all, but I can't wait for you to see what I have in story for this au.

And, on that note, it's time to end /this/ story.

When Jason had first realized he had become Jason Todd, he wondered if there was anyone else like him. There had been a few moments where he thought that Dick wasn’t Dick, but Bruce had been the person he had always been sure was Bruce. Bruce - who was more of a dad than his own dad ever had been - had always acted in the way that he had expected him to. He had been exasperated when Jason caused a little too much chaos, proud of him when he did something good, and quick to reprimand him when he did something bad. He had comforted him when he was feeling sad or sick.

Maybe Jason had always loved Jason Todd because he had the life he didn’t have, right up until the moment he died. Bruce was simple and easy to understand. But this? This wasn’t easy to understand. Discovering that Bruce was like them should have come as relief, but all that Jason could feel was grief.

If Bruce was like them, everything he had done would have been an act.

Part of him knew that the same logic applied to James, but his heart was only ready for one heartbreak right now.

“How long?” Jason whispered.

Bruce’s gaze swept over the others and landed on him.

“Since I died?” he asked. Jason managed a nod. Jason wasn’t the only one staring at him now - James was giving him the same, attentive look - but Jason was only aware of his own nervousness. He already knew the answer, but he needed confirmation. He had to know that he really had never
had Bruce Wayne in his life.

“I became like this when Bruce’s parents died,” he said. His tone was soft; he could seemingly sense how much what he was saying was breaking Jason and James. “Were you Jason when we first met?”

Jason gave another tiny nod.

He turned his attention to James. “How long have you been Dick?”

“The circus,” James whispered. His face was a neutral mask, but Jason could see the tears forming in the corner of his eyes.

“I should have known you weren’t the originals,” he said. His voice was just as quiet as their own, a regretful tone that Jason didn’t quite get creeping into his words. Jason’s hands immediately went for his wrists, rubbing them almost methodically as his gaze lingered on the stranger of a man standing before him. It felt like he couldn’t easily breath. He tried telling himself that wasn’t how he had died - he didn’t need to feel this way. This wasn’t tied to his death in the slightest. But Jason just felt so alone. He had lost Dick. Damian. Bruce. Everyone he had ever considered himself close to during this life had all been acts. Every interaction was just them filling in a role.

Would they have even wanted to know him if he hadn’t been Jason and they hadn’t been their characters-

A strong, muscular arm suddenly wrapped around his arms and pulled him close. Jason stiffened. But then he realized that it was just Not-Bruce pulling him and James into an embrace, and his posture hesitantly loosened.

“How old were you when you died?” Not-Bruce softly asked.

“Eighteen,” Jason hesitantly answered.

“Twenty,” James replied.

Not-Bruce gave a nod, his grip on them tightening a little. “So I’m still old enough to be considered your dad?”

Jason’s eyes widened.

And though he couldn’t see it, James’s did, too.

“But I’m not really Jason,” Jason protested, “and you’re not really Bruce.”

Not-Bruce gave him a small smile. “When this life began, I was grateful that I had a chance to be a father again.” His expression softened when tears began to stream down Jason’s face; even James was starting to cry harder, too. “And something tells me you’re both grateful to have the chance to be someone’s son.”

He didn’t give a response.

Jason’s only confirmation was throwing his arms around him - something that James quickly did a moment later. Jason wasn’t really sure how long they stood like that. He didn’t really care. His worries faded away, and he forgot about his wrists when the embrace finally ended. He was too busy trying to wipe his tears with his hands to even think about it.
Bruce - his dad - turned to look at Alex and Tim. Even before he could pose the question, both of them were hurrying to give responses.

“I’d like to pass on the whole dad thing,” Alex said. She dismissed it with a wave of her hand. “Stranger danger and all of that jazz.”

“I want to keep our relationship as canon as it can be,” Tim replied. Some color had returned to his cheeks by this point, but it was still clear that he was more than a little wary of the situation. Jason watched as Alex and him made awkward eye contact. Both looked away as soon as their eyes met, but the damage had been done: their aversion to Not-Bruce had become even more awkward.

“That’s understandable,” Bruce said. He sounded vaguely disappointed. Jason had always seen jokes about Bruce Wayne impulsively adopting new members of the Batfamily - it seemed like his Bruce shared that trait.

“What do we do now?” James finally asked. His voice was a little unsteady after all of the crying, but he quickly regained his cool as he glanced at the others and leaned up against the wall.

“We should probably call Hayleigh,” Jason suggested. “She could tell Rose-”

“I think telling Sabrina’s a little more important,” Alex pointed out. “Aren’t they dating or something?”

Bruce blinked.

“...Sabrina?” he slowly said.

“Selina,” Tim offered. He hadn’t moved from his spot in the hallway, but he had crossed his arms since Jason had last glanced over at him. “Harley Quinn, Poison Ivy and Selina Kyle are all like us.”

Bruce stared at Tim for a moment, only to shake his head with the same amused sigh and smile from before. It was a look that Jason recognized, but he couldn’t figure out why. He had that look sometimes after Justice League meetings, didn’t he? It had been so long since Jason was last in the manor, but he could remember Alfred questioning the look in the past - Alfred, who must have been out on an errand, or else would have been eagerly welcoming the entire group into Wayne Manor.

“It looks like I was the only one who was wrong,” he said. “Both Joan and Chris won their bets. After the double date, I should have known…”

“Joan and Chris?” Alex asked. “Don’t tell me there’s more people running around in Gotham like us. Eight is enough!”

“There are more people like us,” Bruce confirmed, “but don’t worry - they rarely come to Gotham.”

“But if they’re not from Gotham, where are they...?” Jason started, stopping before he could finish the sentence - they had to be from some other part of DC comics, but he couldn’t begin to guess where.

His dad gave an amused and almost smug smile, like he had been tricking him for a very long time and Jason had been too oblivious and naive to notice. It was at a moment like this where Jason really wished he had branched out from Red Hood and looked into other comic book characters. Then he wouldn’t have to rely on the hint that was sure to follow.
“Haven’t you noticed lack of Kryptonite in the Batcave?”

Jason’s eyes widened and glowed a soft, soft green.

“Clark is like us?” James managed to get out. “So Joan would be…?”

“Lois,” Bruce answered. The smile grew a little more. “Joan was the one who suspected Selina, and Chris was the one who suspected any or all of you.”

Jason, James and Tim all just gaped, because how had they managed to hide that secret for so long? Jason was pretty sure Batman and Superman hated each other from what he knew before he died the first time, and the two had acted like they had a rocky relationship during Jason’s time as Robin.

“I go back to my earlier point,” Alex said, crossing her arms. “Anyone can be from the real world. I was going to say that it was just us in Gotham, but doesn’t this mean any series is fair game?”

“There has to be some kind of rule,” Tim insisted. “Things like this happen for a reason.”

James glanced over at Jason. “Maybe it doesn’t have a reason.”

Alex shrugged. “Whatever the case is, it doesn’t really matter,” she argued. “We’re here, we’re the characters, and there’s not a lot we can do about it. It’s up to us to figure out what to do with our stories.”

Tim looked unconvinced, but didn’t offer any more objections. None of the others did, either. They all just fell into an awkward silence, none quite sure how to continue now that all of the big reveals were out of the way. But then Bruce suddenly made a move down the hallway, and the rest of the group just automatically followed - all glad for some kind of direction.

“Alfred should be home soon,” Bruce said. “I’m sure he’d be happy to make us all something to snack on while we catch each other up on our stories. In the meantime, do you want to come down to the Batcave? We just installed a flat screen TV last weekend, and I haven’t had a chance to test it yet.”

“That was the secret you wouldn’t tell Tim and I about-”

“When did you even put in there-”

“I take back my earlier comment - you’re definitely not a stranger now-”

“I was in the cave all of last weekend; you couldn’t have snuck it by me-”

“I have my ways-”

“...I missed HD so much these past months...”

“I can’t believe my first time in a secret hero lair is going to be spent watching TV-”

“Did you sneak it in while I was using the bathroom?”

“...No comment.”

“I can’t wait to see the cave again-”

The chaotic, loud conversation continued all the way down into the Batcave. And while Alex was
understandably shocked at the sight of it, and Jason had to try his best not to cry at the nostalgia, it wasn’t long before they were sprawled in front of the absolutely enormous TV. Tim had to sit on James and Alex had to sit on Jason for all of them to fit on the couch when they were too stubborn to move another one over, but it didn’t feel remotely uncomfortable. It felt right.

And sitting there among his family - though they weren’t a family in a traditional sense, they were a strange, unusual family all the same - Jason realized that he really was home.

The End

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