Not even death was going to keep him from his family.
They just came to collect their grandson. Unfortunately he had a different idea.

Chapter Notes

This whole story takes place between Batman Incorporated #8 to Batman&Robin #38

“It’s time to go, Damian.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Yes,” the boy turned to the young couple standing behind him. “It means I respectfully decline.”

The man smiled slightly as he sighed and cocked his head to the side. “I don’t think you have a choice.”

“Says who?” Damian responded, throwing his chin up as he crossed his arms. “I don’t see any sort of god down here enforcing said lack of choice.”

“He sent us to do it for him,” the woman said softly. She reached out her gloved hand. “Now come with us, child. It’s time for you to rest.”

“I’m not tired.” Sarcasm dripped from every word. The man let out a chuckle.

The woman continued. “You’ve led a hard life, darling—”

“Hard?” Damian snapped. “You want to talk about hard, Grandmother? Try being your own son. You left him, he grew up alone. He lost everything at age eight. And you want to talk about my life being hard? Compared to Father, my life was a stroll in the park.”

“Damian,” the man said gently, putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Yes, Bruce’s life was difficult. But without those hardships, he would have never been able to help so many people. Without him, where do you think your brothers be, hm?” The man smiled again. “Through our loss, he gained so much. He gained so many powerful friends and family, who Martha and I knew could keep him safe. He gained you.”

Damian scoffed, looking away, back towards the Manor. “Oh yea, he gained me. And look where that got him.”

Thomas followed Damian’s line of sight towards the large window that housed the study. Bruce could be seen inside. He was sitting at the desk, his head in his hands, his body convulsing as sobs exploded through him. The three of them were across the grounds, by the entrance of the cemetery,
but they could still hear his anguished cries, muffled only by the manor’s thick walls.

“He loved you,” Martha whispered. “Do not feel guilty for that.”

“Kind of hard not to when he looks like this,” Damian shrugged his grandfather’s hand from his arm.

“Is that why you don’t want to come with us?” Thomas asked.

“Regardless of if I feel guilty or not, I still decline your invitation,” Damian stated, hearing a door to the manor open.

Martha and Thomas looked at each other before Martha said, “Why?”

“Because someone needs to take care of them,” Damian said as he watched Dick and Tim come around the side of the building. No one spoke as the two neared them, and silently stared as they passed between their group, Tim accidentally going through Martha’s shoulder.

“Son, I don’t think you can-”

“I can still touch things. I can still feel,” Damian cut in. “I have retained all of my senses, I can do the things they’re too stupid to do for themselves. I can watch over them while they are in battle, I can be there when they need comforting because God knows they won’t ever go to each other.”

The Waynes didn’t respond as they watched Dick and Tim move to their grandson’s grave. Martha felt her throat tighten as Dick collapsed to his knees, trying to keep himself steady by gripping the tombstone itself. Thomas grimaced in empathy as Tim bent over, wrapping his arms around Dick’s neck, tears flowing from his eyes.

Suddenly Damian was standing next to the brothers, staring at the other souls, his arms still crossed. “Do you really expect me to leave them like this?”

“You don’t understand, love,” Martha said, stepping forward as Dick suddenly punched the stone. “They won’t be able to hear you, see you. It will drive you crazy.”

“So I’ll make them,” Damian said as he crouched next to Dick, wiping away some of the blood that was now dripping unnoticed from his knuckles. “Even if I can’t, it’s a small price to pay.”

Thomas opened his mouth to argue, but decided against it, and turned it into a sigh as he rolled his eyes. “Stubborn, aren’t you? Just like your dad.”

Damian looked away from Dick and Tim, and back at his grandparents with a grin. “Stubbornness must run in the Wayne family, then.” He paused. “…You two did the same after your murder, didn’t you?”

Martha nodded. “Like you said, Bruce was alone. And we couldn’t leave our baby alone.”

“How long did you…stick around?”

“Years. We even stayed here in Gotham with Alfred while Bruce went around the world doing all that training,” Thomas said. “We stayed even after he returned. We crossed over, though, I can’t remember what made us decide to. Do you, honey?”

“Of course I do, Thomas.” Martha smiled. “It was when Richard came to be a tenant at the manor. We felt Bruce finally had someone who would take care of him. Someone who would be able to
battle the darkness that seemed to consume his life. Once Richard became a permanent fixture in Bruce’s life, we knew…well, we knew he was going to be okay.”

“Then I will do the same,” Damian said, standing. “I will remain until I am no longer needed. By any of them.”

“That day might never come, you know,” Thomas said as he and Martha made their way towards him. It seemed they were giving in to his demands.

“I know.”

Martha leaned forward and kissed Damian’s forehead. “I’m so proud you,” she whispered as she hugged him. “I cannot wait until I see you and Bruce again one day.”

“But hopefully not too soon,” Thomas said quickly. Damian looked at him as his grandfather put a hand to his face. “We’ll be waiting for you, kiddo.”


There was no giant white light. No thunderbolt or large wind. Thomas and Martha Wayne were laughing as they simply faded from view. Damian looked back down at his brothers, who were now both sitting in front of his grave, trying to dry the tears that refused to stop. Dick has his arm tight around Tim’s shoulders, while Tim cradled Dick’s newly injured hand, assessing the damage. Damian merely sat down next to them.

Until he was no longer needed.
Where

Chapter Summary

Everyone has been acting weird, and Titus just wants to know where his boy has been.

He ran through the house, claws clicking on the wooden floors. As he continued down the hall, he didn’t notice his speed increasing, his claws leaving scratches in the wood. Every room, empty. Every hallway, quiet.

Where was he? Where was his boy?

“You do this every day,” The cat yawned, trotting behind him as he changed tactics. He would go in search of Master. His boy always seemed to be with Master.

“Of course I do. I have to find him. He’s never been gone this long,” Titus responded. He stopped outside another open door and peeked in. Still nothing. He looked back at his small companion.

“You should be looking for him too, Alfred.”

Alfred lowered his ears, hissing, “You think I’m not?”

Titus didn’t flinch. “I would understand if you weren’t. You do not know him as well as I do.”

“I am looking for him in my own way, dog,” Alfred snapped. “Just because I am not running through our home like our wild relatives does not mean I am not looking for our boy!”

“I am sorry, friend,” Titus lowered his head for a moment before continuing down the hall. “I am just…concerned. Something is wrong. Master is not himself. My boy is not here.”

Titus walked to the end of the hall before looking back behind him at Alfred. The cat had not moved. In fact, he had just sat down in the hallway, unblinking. Titus cocked his head to the side. “Titus, have you explored the idea that Damian might not be returning?”

“No,” Titus said quickly, but followed it with an involuntary whimper. “No. Do not talk like that. Damian always comes home. Sometimes he is not well when he does, but he does. Always.”

“There will be a time when he doesn’t.” Alfred said softly, curling his tail around him as he lowered himself to the floor. Slowly, he closed his eyes, suddenly not looking like the kitten he was. “There’s always a time when they don’t come back…”

“No!” the dog growled. “Have you asked the cow? She has been in Master’s dark shelter much more than you or I. Surely she knows something.”

“The bovine knows nothing,” Alfred said, eyes still closed, still in stuck in a painful nostalgia. “And if she does, she has not told me. Though she seems…different. Much like Master and the one who gives us food-”

He stopped as footsteps echoed through the house. Titus immediately stopped growling, head perking towards the sound. It was not one human, but two. None of the steps he could hear were those of his boy, but that was no matter. Master sometimes carried him. Titus could not keep the grin
from his face. “Master! Hear that, Alfred? Master is here! Let us go find him. He will tell us where our boy is!”

Titus did not wait for Alfred to respond before bounding down the hall. This time was different, he could feel it. Damian was at the end of this journey. His boy would be there, standing next to Master like he always did. And his boy would smile, happy to see him.

The dog flew down the stairs and rounded the corner to see the food-giver standing outside of a closed door, a white glove over his eyes as he breathed deeply. Titus stopped to stare for a moment.

“Master is behind that door,” Alfred said from underneath him. Titus had stopped questioning the speed of his small, young friend long ago. “Tread lightly, Titus.”

Titus moved to the door. Food-giver did not look at him, which was odd. Food-giver always looked at Titus when he came by. He put his nose to the bottom of the door; he could smell Master inside. Titus slammed his paw against the door, hoping it would open. It didn’t, so he kept hitting it, alternating between that and sticking his nose against the floor, whining.

“Master! It is only me!” he called as Alfred sat next to him and stared up at their food-giver, letting out light mews. “Please let me in! I just wish to see my boy!”

The door never opened. His master never said anything from inside. Titus huffed in annoyance, flopping to the floor, keeping his nose pressed against the door’s gap as he let out a few more whines.

The food-giver sighed as he leaned down and plucked Alfred from the floor, “Titus, stop. Master Bruce does not wish to play with you at the current time.”

The man reached for Titus’s collar and, for once, Titus went on the defensive. His body tensed as he bared his teeth at his master’s friend. “No! I do not want to play! I want to find my boy, and I want to find him right now!”

His language did not translate to something the humans could understand, he knew that. But he was angry, and he wanted Food-giver to know it. The elderly man jumped back, clutching Alfred to his chest as Titus continued to shout.

Titus was scared. He was scared Alfred was right. He was scared something happened to his – their – boy and there was nothing he could do about it. He was scared he was all alone. That his boy was scared and hurt and all alone.

Suddenly, he had to find him. He would not stop until he had found Damian once more. He took off through the manor once more, up the stairs, through the halls, in rooms, out of rooms, onto the balconies, through the gardens and by the cars.

Where is my boy?

“Damian!” he cried, collapsing on the driveway. He’d been running for hours. He could barely move any more, his legs hurt too much. “Damian, where are you? Please come home! Please! I…I do not wish to be alone!”

He lay there, watching the sun dip behind the trees. Neither Master nor Food-giver came to get him. Only Alfred. Poor Alfred who only knew their boy for a short time and already cared so much. The cat did not say anything when he appeared in front of him. He merely licked his forehead before curling up into a ball at Titus’s side.
Darkness settled over the grounds, and the two animals remained on the driveway. No lights flicked on in the Manor or outside the house. The only light Titus saw that of the moon and a spotlight from the city. A spotlight with a strange shape in it, waving around the sky. He only noticed it because his boy always pointed it out, getting excited when he saw it. That strange spotlight always made his boy happy, so it made him happy too.

But his boy was not here to see it. He was not here to be happy about it, so Titus could not be happy about it either. He began to whimper once more as the light went out, and that whimper quickly turned into howling. Alfred did not scold him. Neither did Food-giver when he finally came outside with a bowl of water and some treats. Master did not come, and Titus began to panic. What if Master went missing too?

“Titus, enough.”

The dog immediately stood, relief washing through his system as he spun around. That was Damian! That was his boy! He kept turning, not able to find the source of the voice. He let out a few barks as his eyes searched the darkness of the house.

“It came from over there,” Alfred muttered, also on his feet. The cat looked over the area once before darting across the yard, towards the far end of the driveway. Titus was already following before the cat called, “I see him!”

Titus did not. At least, not until they were right next to the boy. He was standing in the grass next to a motorcycle that had appeared earlier in the evening. Both Titus and Alfred had ignored it, but they both knew it belong to the one their boy called Grayson.

Something was different. Their boy was different. For one, Titus could see through him. Was this a new skill? Had that Grayson person taught him this? And his touch was different. After Titus rammed into the boy’s stomach, he could barely feel his tiny fingers scratching his ears. He also noticed Alfred’s fur did not ripple as Damian pet his back.

“Alfred, quiet,” their boy muttered as the cat began to purr loudly. “You’ll bring Father or Grayson out here.”

Titus snorted. No they would not. Neither Master nor the Smiling Man had noticed them for weeks. But he didn’t care about them. His boy was here. That was all that mattered. Titus surged forward into Damian’s stomach again, knocking the boy to the ground. He then threw his front legs across his torso, pinning him to the ground as Alfred rushed to Damian’s face, licking him.

Damian laughed slightly, pushing Alfred back with both hands, running his fingers along his whiskers. Contrary to the earlier demand, Alfred’s purrs got louder. Titus huffed in satisfaction, lying his head down on Damian’s stomach. But there was no feel of his boy’s shirt under his chin, no rise and fall of his stomach as he breathed. How…unusual.

Damian sighed, lying there with his animals, one hand petting Alfred, the other on Titus’s head. He didn’t say anything, just stared up into the sky. After a while, the front door to the manor opened, the Food-giver and the Smiling Man both standing there.

“Titus, here boy!” the elder man called. Titus just glanced at him, before focusing back on Damian.

“Is the cat out there, too?” he heard Grayson ask.

“Yes. It seems the two of them have...bonded over the loss of...” his voice disappeared as he closed the door once more. Loss? What was he talking about? No one’s lost anything recently. Unless he
was talking about the squirrel that hopped the fence right as Alfred almost caught it a few weeks ago.

“Titus,” Damian whispered. The dog immediately began thumping his tail. “You’ll watch out for them, won’t you? You and Alfred?”

Damian sat up, so, in turn, Titus did too. He leaned forward, licking Damian’s face, pawing at his arm. Alfred mewed, leaping between the boy’s legs. Damian reached up and grabbed Titus’s face in both hands, leaning his forehead against the dog’s. He and Titus stared into each other’s eyes for a moment before he closed his. “Promise me, Titus. Take care of Father. Pennyworth. Grayson, if – when – he stops by. Todd and Drake, too.”

Damian’s voice became a little shaky as he spoke. It took everything Titus had to not to whimper in concern.

“Make sure they’re eating. Make sure they sleep – and I mean actually sleep. Not an hour on the couch, then a half hour in the car. Sleep in a bed, for extended periods. Don’t let them stay in that cave all the time. Force them out, if you have to. Bark, howl, whine, bite for all I care. Get them out of that cave, out of the house. And in the daylight.”

Titus licked at Damian’s face in agreement. His tongue hit him, he saw it, but the flesh didn’t have the same taste it always had.

“Make Grayson smile again. You and Alfred.” Damian’s eyes opened as he glanced down to the cat next to him. “Listen when Father speaks. Get him to understand that he is not alone, just because I am not here. He still has the two of you, if nothing else. And Bat-cow. Can’t forget her.”

Titus jerked back and tilted his head. Not here? What does he mean ‘not here’? Damian ignored his confusion as he tapped Titus’s nose. “I’ll still be around most of the time. But no more fits like today, got it? You upset everybody doing things like that.”

Titus lowered his head, ashamed. He doesn’t like upsetting anyone.

“Just…wait for me, okay? I’ll always come back. You know that, Titus.”

Titus thumped his tail against the ground as he looked down at Alfred with a grin. Even the cat couldn’t help but look content at that news.

“So no more howling at the Bat-symbol.” Damian said. Titus looked back up to lick his boy’s face, but found he was no longer there. “Now, go on, you two. Go get them.”

At first, Titus took a step towards the bushes. Surely his boy was playing hide and seek. Then he shook his head. No, his boy said to go take care of the family. And Titus is obedient to his boy.

A whistle broke through the silence. Both Titus and Alfred spun towards the house to see their master standing there. Titus immediately noted how haggard the man looked. His shirt was crinkled and dirty. There were multiple bandages sticking on his skin. Even in the darkness, the dark bags under his eyes stuck out.

“Keep them alive, Alfred. Titus.”

His boy’s voice was unnecessary motivation, as he and the cat were already racing across the yard. As they reached the man, Titus jumped up, trying to lick his face. Alfred ran a few feet ahead, stopping and meowing until Bruce and Titus were following. Once inside, Bruce tried to shake the animals, turning towards the study. Titus grabbed his sleeve in his teeth, pulling him towards the
stairs. Alfred was halfway up, again stopped, calling loudly.

Bruce finally caught on, and began to follow the animals willingly as they led him up the stairs. They passed Damian’s room and Titus paused, seeing the Smiling Man inside. He moved towards the room before shaking his head.

One at a time. Grayson comes after Master.

They finally coaxed Bruce into his own room, where Titus body-slammed Bruce onto the mattress and then laid on top of him. Master tensed, moving to push Titus off of him, but Alfred hissed, needling the man’s arm with his claws. Titus growled as well, until his master relaxed.

“Sleep!” he barked as Bruce’s hand came up and pet his head gently.

“I miss him, too…” His master muttered. Alfred snuck underneath the man’s arm and began to purr lightly. Bruce sighed sadly as he clamped his eyes shut, refusing to let any more tears fall.

It wasn’t instantaneous. His master took a while to fall asleep. But he did eventually, his arm still wrapped around Alfred’s tiny body. Titus didn’t move until he heard – and felt – a light snort come from the human. Even then, he didn’t go far, moving from Bruce’s torso to his legs. As the sun slowly began to rise over the city, the Food-giver snuck into the room and closed the blinds, giving Titus a quick pat on the back on his way out. As the elder closed the door, Titus felt his ear twitch as Alfred gave a soft mew. He looked over towards the window to see his boy standing there. He beat his tail against the sheets in greeting as a warm smile spread across the child’s lips.

“Good boys.”
Little Talks

Chapter Summary

Damian observes the wreck of a human his brother has become.

Chapter Notes

Inspired/Based on 'Little Talks' by Of Monsters & Men

Damian would have been amused if it was someone he didn’t like. Actually, he probably would have still found the situation funny if it were someone he liked, just not these two. With these two, the situation was annoying.

He sighed as he sat cross-legged in his secret cove, high above the main floor of the Cave, watching as his father and brother occupied the same space, but lived on separate planes.

Bruce was at the computer, typing away at some file, like always. Dick was just walking around the Cave, first checking up on the cars, then over by the lockers and was now doing a long, slow pass by the memorial cases. He could have left a long time ago if he really wanted, but was helping with a case that involved the entirety of Gotham, thus needed information that only Bruce had. Bruce insisted he came by, implying he wouldn’t give the information unless he did. That man sure knew how to manipulate.

Damian smiled as he heard a soft cry beside him, followed by a furry face rubbing against his knee. He smiled as he absently rubbed the cat’s head. “So, what do we do, Alfred? Force them to talk about something other than the case?”

That would have been a challenge in itself. His father had shut down any and all emotions since his death, and barely spoke even when he needed to. Grayson’s feelings of sadness and despair and betrayal all seemed to melt together, turning into a form of anger that Damian had never thought the man capable of. He had to admit that it…

Grayson’s anger scared him.

“Bruce, do you have anything or not?” Dick snapped. Damian glanced over at him and immediately bit his lip. Grayson was standing at his memorial; hand on the glass, eyes glued to the green domino mask, as if someone might glare back. It didn’t take long to figure out that, when it came to Damian, Dick became most agitated.

“No, it seems I don’t.”

Dick spun around to face his mentor, “Are you going to let me look?”

Bruce didn’t look at him. He didn’t want to. He knew where his eldest was standing. “Why do you need to?”
“Just have to make sure you aren’t withholding information or anything.” Dick spat as he walked across the floor to his bike. “But you probably have like, twelve firewalls on that computer system of yours, right? So why even bother.”

Titus, who had been lying by Bruce’s feet, raised his head as Dick walked by. After a few seconds, he jumped up, following the man over to his bike. Dick looked down as the dog sat next to him, happily wagging his tail. He crouched with a smile and began scratching Titus’s face as Bruce spoke. “Check into channel two on your communicator every so often just in case I-”

“Have you fed Titus recently?” Dick interjected, nuzzling his nose against the Great Dane’s. “Or the other animals?”

Bruce did finally look at this comment. “Yes. I fed all of them a few hours ago.”

“Good,” he stated. “I don’t think Damian would ever forgive you if you let his pets die, too.”

Bruce instantly tensed, but didn’t allow himself any other movement. Damian leaned back against the rocks, closing his eyes and muttering, “Don’t do this, Grayson. Not now…”

“Dick-”

“Stop.” Dick ruffled Titus’s ears as he stood up, firmly placing his mask across his eyes. He swung his leg over the back of the bike and revved the engine. “When you get the evidence results, call Red Robin. He’ll know how to reach me.”

His father didn’t say anything else as Nightwing drove away. He looked over at the memorial cases quickly before turning back to the computer. Titus lowered his ears as he glanced up to where Damian and Alfred were sitting. Damian shrugged before nodding towards his father as he stood. Titus huffed as he trotted back to the computer, placing his head on Bruce’s lap.

“Give him one more hour, then force him upstairs, okay?” Damian said as he gave Alfred one more pat on the head. Titus barked quietly in reply, gaining a confused glance from Bruce, and Alfred purred as Damian began to fade away. “I should be back sometime tomorrow.”

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The apartment was dirty. Damian had never been to the location while he was alive, but he couldn’t imagine it was like this before Dick’s emotional tailspin. There were empty soup, soda and beer cans on all surfaces – tables, counters, nightstand and entertainment center. Napkins and tissues mixed together between couch cushions as dirty dishes were starting to pile up on the floor. And the dust.

Due to his ability as a spirit to disappear from one place and end up in a completely new one, he returned to the hardly-livable flat long before its tenant did. He couldn’t just sit and wait, though. He’d become too restless. So instead, he tried to clean. While he could still touch and feel things, he couldn’t exactly carry much weight. If he tried to pick something up, more often than not his hands would just go through the item. So he attempted small tasks, kicking a few cans out from under the couch, moving plates one by one so they were stacked on the table, where Grayson wouldn’t be able to trip over them.

He was in the bathroom, tossing some tissues into the small trashcan, when he heard the door open and slam shut. It was moments like this he was relieved that no one could see him. They’d never have proof that he had jumped at the sound. Grayson was already slumped on the couch when he emerged a few moments later, hand over his face as he audibly inhaled.

Instantly, Dick’s foot lashed out, kicking at the coffee table. Cans rolled off, clinking against the
wooden floor, while the plates just shifted.

“What’s happening, Damian?” the man whispered, not removing his hand from his face. “Everything’s gone to hell.”

He always did that – talking out loud in an empty room, tacking Damian’s name on the end to make it into a conversation. It was weird, Damian thought, but it was better than his father’s alternative: not saying his name at all.

“No, not everything, Grayson. I do believe it is just you,” he sighed, moving slowly towards the sofa and sitting next to the older man. The cushions didn’t shift. Grayson didn’t move, save for letting his hand fall from his face. “And even then, I do not believe you’re in any sort of purgatory. You’ll get over this, just like everything else. It might just take some time.”

Dick let out a humorless laugh as he focused on his knees. “You’d probably say something like, ‘Grayson, pull yourself together. You’re being stupid. Like Drake.’”

“I would not,” Damian pouted, crossing his arms. “But even if I did, I would only say it because it was true.”

“Yea, well. You try losing your little brother, Damian,” he muttered as he stood, moving towards the kitchen. “Then tell me to pull myself together.”

Damian rolled over, leaning over the back of the couch, watching as Dick searched his fridge, standing up again when he had found a beer. “You can’t blame me for your current state just because you won’t go talk to Father. Or anyone else, really. I get that he lied, I wasn’t happy about it either, but I think that is the least of anyone’s worries at this point, don’t you think? It’s dangerous to hold in your emotions, that’s what you always told me, remember?”

“I got that game, you know,” Dick said as he twisted the bottle cap off. “Showed up about a week after…well, you know. I took it to your gravesite. I couldn’t…I can’t have it around here.”

“Figured,” Damian replied. “You’re just lucky Pennyworth found it before Father did. Otherwise you would have been getting some unwanted visits, I’d bet. Regardless of what you think or feel, Grayson, Father is concerned for you. He’s concerned for all of you.”

“I should ask Alfie if Titus got a hold of it. That’d be pretty bad, probably,” Dick said quietly, the conversation suddenly becoming with himself.

“Damian, he didn’t. It’s in Pennyworth’s quarters.” Damian sighed as Dick sat back down next to him, taking a long swig of his alcohol, flipping on the television. He stared at his mentor for a moment, taking in the stench of alcohol, the 5 o’clock shadow and half-on-half-off, still bloody Nightwing uniform that he had yet to change out of. “You can’t let this go on much longer, you know.”

Dick did not continue the conversations, instead opting to flip through all of the channels twice before stopping on a marathon of black and white films. Damian sat with him throughout, watching as multiple calls and texts went unanswered on the phone sitting on the loveseat, apparently thrown there earlier in the evening. After a few hours, Dick drifted off to sleep, slowly falling to his side as he did. When he let out his first snore, Damian stood up, immediately pushing the empty bottle from his brother’s hand, letting it bounce on the floor and roll towards the window.

Damian then went to the front door, pushing the many locks into the correct positions. Grayson seemed to have developed the habit of not locking his door at night anymore. As he did so, the
phone on the loveseat went off again. As soon as he felt the door was secure, he retrieved the phone, going through the messages. Multiple calls from Gordon and Todd, texts from various female names that Damian did not recognize and two voicemails from Drake.

“Father might deserve being ignored by you, but none of these people do,” Damian said to the sleeping man, frustration and concern growing. He pulled at the blanket hanging on the loveseat and turned back to his brother. “They merely wish to help you, Grayson. And remember, many of them have also gone through similar heartbreak as you recently. Don’t make your scorn be another burden they have to bear.”

Before Damian reached him with the blanket, Dick suddenly sat up, his bloodshot eyes open wide. “Damian!” he screamed. For a brief second, the child wondered if, for once, he had gotten through. That his brother could hear him. The hope was dashed instantly as Dick’s eyes flicked through the room, never focusing on him or anything else, before he collapsed backwards once more, his drunken eyes becoming misty. Just a dream, nothing more. “Damian…”

“Shut up, you idiot,” Damian sighed, draping the blanket over the blubbering man. Dick didn’t seem to notice the change as his eyes slowly began to close. “I’m right here.”

Once Dick was snoring once more, Damian turned back to the phone, grateful that somehow, the technology still reacted to his touch. He pressed a few buttons and smiled when the phone vibrated, a sign that the signal had been sent out. He then sat on the floor next to Dick’s head and waited.

It didn’t take long. Batman never wasted time when he received a distress signal from one of his birds.

He came through the entrance to Nightwing’s secret bunker, a batarang already in hand. After scanning the room for any immediate danger, his gaze locked onto Dick asleep on the couch. He sighed sadly as he pocketed his weapon and moved forward, cape smearing the top layer of dusk. Damian stood while his father removed his cowl, gently rolling the most recent alcohol bottle towards the man’s feet.

“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you his diet isn’t much better,” Damian said as Bruce looked down at the bottle. “Do something about this, Father. Preferably before he kills himself.”

There was a light static in the air, and Bruce put his hand to his ear. “Is he alright, Master Bruce? Did you find him?”

“Yes, he’s fine, Alfred,” Bruce said gruffly, covering up any emotion that might have manifested. “Phone just malfunctioned. I’ll take a look at it and then be on my way back.”

Damian smiled. There was absolutely no way for that phone to malfunction, and his father knew that. Bruce had built it himself after all. There was another explanation for the call, it was only a matter of time before his father figured out the correct one. Hell, maybe he already had.

Bruce gently put his hand on the side of Dick’s face, wiping away a few of the tears that leaked through before kissing his forehead. He then turned to the coffee table, picking up the stack of plates and the bottles and cans that had yet to fall off, and walked into the kitchen, placing the dishes in the sink and tossing everything else in the trash. As he walked back to the entrance of the bunker, he pulled the cowl over his face, glancing back into the room. He gave a quick nod before hitting a button on the other side of the wall, the bunker entrance closing.

“Well,” Damian breathed, lifting a can as he looked back at the sleeping bundle. “That’s a start,
right?"
Retrograde

Chapter Summary

Drake likes to talk walks in big cities. Damian often finds himself following. They’re both in for a surprise they never expected.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by ‘Retrograde’ by James Blake.

Drake liked to take walks.

Whatever city he found himself in, whether by himself or with that team of his, he would just disappear. Regardless of weather, time of day, present danger, he would slip away and not be heard from for hours. Damian watched over and over as his team – the Teen Titans? – became frantic when they would find him missing, calling his phone but never getting an answer.

Idiots. Do they know nothing of their so-called friend?

Though, to be fair, Damian wasn’t watching his brother close enough once on a solo-mission either, and the elder boy somehow got out of the hotel and a mile and a half out of town before the spirit found him again.

And he was just…walking.

That’s all he ever did.

Walked.

He never took headphones, never spoke unless spoken to first, never even looked at a map – before or during his treks. He would just go. If he got to a crossroads, he would pause for a few seconds, looking at all possible directions and then just pick one. There was never any thought to his decisions, as evident in the one occasion where he ended up at a crack house that doubled as a strip club, and no explanation as to how he found the place when threatened by the bouncer’s gun.

At first, Damian would wait for the boy back where his hotel room or the team was. Everyone needed alone time. Not even Damian was going to invade every moment of his loved ones’ lives. But after a while, he couldn’t do it anymore. Any alone time at Grayson’s, he’d clean the apartment. At the Manor, he’d play with his animals. There never seemed to be downtime around Todd, but Drake? With Drake, the downtime was always there. There was nothing to clean, no animals to entertain. As he waited for his brother to return, it would be him and a room. The darkness would take over.

And his mind would wander. Memories, flashbacks mostly. The flash of that sword, his last words to Pennyworth. Dick’s smiling face under the cowl, distorting immediately to an image of the man
crying, sobbing, screaming for everything to go back as it was. His father’s breakdown, Titus scared and confused…

So he went with Tim. Sometimes he’d float above his brother, watching him move from street corner to back alley to large city parks. Most times he’d walk next to him, chatting away.

Because…it was odd. But Drake…he must have been more perceptive than the others. More in-tune with the spiritual realm. He did see Damian once. They had a conversation. A full conversation, complete with hugs that neither of them could ever have done when the child was alive.

He didn’t know if it was a fluke. Had Tim been ill at the time? Tired? Drugged? It seemed he never heard or saw Damian again, but that didn’t stop the boy from trying. He would talk at his brother, poke his arm, dissipate from one place to another, always trying to be in his line of sight. But Tim never acknowledged it.

It was the same on this night. Tim had shown up in some nameless big city on a solo. He was distracted from the get-go, Damian knew, after a recent run-in with the Batman. Damian didn’t know the details – he had been monitoring Todd at the time – but it had something to do with an attempt at his resurrection. Drake had stopped said attempt, and was currently suffering the consequences.

If their family wasn’t completely broken before, it was damn near shattered now.

After settling into some fancy, penthouse hotel suite, Tim had raided the mini-fridge, pouring himself a glass of whiskey before going out and sitting on a chair on the balcony. He wasn’t of age yet, but the burn on his throat helped ease the pain of everything else. And it’s not like he was paying for it.

The sun set behind the skyscrapers and bridges, and Tim stayed on the balcony, rocking the glass loosely between his thumb and middle finger as the sky changed from red to black. Damian sat comfortably next to him for the duration, watching the blinking lights on the tallest buildings, listening to cheers and groans from the sports stadium a few blocks away. It had to be about midnight when Tim moved again. He cleared his throat as he set his glass on the floor and stood up, walking stiffly back inside. Damian followed, waiting next to the door as Tim grabbed a dark coat from his suitcase and slid it slowly over his shoulders.

Even though the seasons were shifting from winter to spring, the night air was still cold. Near freezing if you counted the wind chill. As soon as he walked out the hotel door, Tim popped the collar to his coat and stuffed his hands in his pockets, hoping to have as little exposed skin as possible. Damian walked next to him, deciding tonight wasn’t one for words. Tonight was one for sticking near his brother, and getting his ass out of trouble when he stumbled down the wrong alley.

Tim was walking slowly, though. Not to say he was normally a speed-walker on theses excursions, but he seemed to be talking the phrase ‘out for a stroll’ a little too literally. Damian was finding it hard to not get too far ahead.

At the first crosswalk, they stopped, along with the group of about ten already standing there. After a few seconds, the lights changed and the group moved forward. Damian did too, but immediately found that Tim was not following suit. Instead, Tim was still standing on the corner, hands in his pockets, staring upwards, almost like he was in awe, his eyes darting back and forth. As Damian returned to his brother’s side, a harsh wind suddenly blew through the intersection. A few nearby citizens let out squeals of amusement and annoyance. Tim merely closed his eyes, letting his hair whip around his face.

Damian rolled his eyes. What a drama queen.
The wind died, and Tim moved forward. He weaved in and out of the groups of nightclub-goers and homeless, ignoring taunts from criminals and whistles from prostitutes. The only person he paid any attention to was an old woman who came bumbling out of a church as he walked by. She seemed like she was drunk, or not all there mentally. Tim only slowed his already sluggish pace to make sure she didn’t fall flat on her face. When she made it down the stairs safely enough, Tim continued on.

“I’m sorry!” she called. Tim turned, an eyebrow raised. Damian crossed his arms, but did the same.

“Pardon?” Tim asked.

“For your loss,” she breathed. Suddenly she looked down, making direct eye contact with Damian. “I’m sorry.”

“Get out of here, lady,” Damian mumbled as Tim immediately turned and continued to walk. He hated the mediums and the psychics, always thinking he needed their help. Please.

Tim seemed unfazed. Which was good. That’s progress. Better than his father and Grayson.

They continued through the streets, about an hour later ending up in a park. Tim made his was over to a walking bridge that connected the city’s North and East sides. About halfway across, Tim stopped, leaning on the railing, alternating between staring up at the lights or down into the dark waters. Damian mimicked the action, spending most of the time staring into the water, wishing he still had a reflection to stare at.

Like everything else Timothy Drake did, he stood there for over an hour in silence, patient and calculating, much like he used to do when Dick was Batman and their father was dead. That had changed after Bruce returned. He became more social, more sure of himself and what he was doing. He was his own person, with a support system never far away, and he was happy with that.

But then the Joker happened. Leviathan happened. Stopping Batman from resurrecting his child happened.

And suddenly that old, unsure Tim Drake was back.

He was second-guessing himself. After all, not too long ago, he was ready to give up everything for those who he had lost. The Kryptonian boy, Brown, his father. He had fought Grayson over it. What right did he have to stop a father from trying to do the same for his son? For his baby?

“You did the right thing, Drake,” Damian murmured, kicking a branch into the water. “One day, Father will thank you for what you did.”

Damian looked up at the city then. He’d forgotten how beautiful urban areas could be. The neon lights blinking all sorts of colors, the buildings of all shapes and sizes – each with a story of their own to tell. A history that no one knows, save for those who might have lived it. The mixture of people and music, coupled with those dark corners where it’s too silent and too empty for such a big place.

That seemed to be a description of Drake as well. Such a history, no one would believe him, in or out of costume. Always sociable, always smiling, always the center of a large group of people. Always trying to ignore those dark areas of his mind.

Drake was a human city.

His older brother would have stood there all night, Damian figured, if it hadn’t started to sprinkle rain. Tim sighed as pulled his coat collar tighter around his neck, heading back the way he came. Damian smiled at the annoyance while he trailed behind. It was a good thing Tim was intelligent.
Damian would have never been able to find their way back to the hotel. But alas, his elder brother navigated the streets as if he lived there his whole life, like it was Gotham.

They passed the same prostitutes and drug-dealers, none of which remembered seeing Tim not two hours before. They even passed the same weird corner church, the strange old woman now sitting on the steps. Unlike the others, she did remember Tim, and opened her mouth to speak as he came up to her. Tim ignored her though, walking at a faster speed until he was two blocks away. Damian didn’t blame him.

Once again, they were stopped at a crosswalk, along with the masses of late-night partiers. This time, Damian walked anyway. He never liked being stuck in big crowds. And Tim could deal with the two women currently trying to flirt with him for a few seconds. As he stood on the other side, waiting for his brother, he heard a bell being rung in the corner business. Seconds later, a group of people stumbled out the door, grumbling about something entitled ‘last call.’

The group began to disband at the street corner. Some stood there, waiting to cross, others walked around the corner. It was a cluster of people. For a few seconds, he forgot it was the middle of the night, as the mob seemed the size of a noon lunch rush. Damian looked towards the sign. It still screamed ‘DO NOT WALK’ but some of the braver souls were taking their chances. No cars were coming anyway.

Damian looked through the surging crowds for Tim, hoping he was one of said braver souls who was too tired to waste time at a crosswalk for cars that weren’t there.

Oh, Tim was one of the braver souls, alright.

So brave, he had stopped in the middle of the road and was staring ahead, his eyes wide and his mouth open in surprise.

Damian watched him for a moment, waiting for him to continue forward. When he didn’t, Damian began to tap his foot on the ground in annoyance. After another moment or two, the child sighed loudly, rolling his eyes.

Mid-roll is when it hit him. He shifted his eyes back to Tim, realizing that his brother wasn’t just staring ahead...at him.

Tim could see him.

It was like in the movies. The two of them stood there as people walked around them. Some people ran into Tim, jostling him this way and that, while others just walked through Damian. He wasn’t actually there, after all. But neither of them noticed. The whole world was tuned out at that point. It was just the two of them.

When the crowd finally disappeared, Tim remained in the middle of the road, Damian still on the street corner. The rain had stopped, but the unnatural wind blew through the buildings once more, the only sound. Should he move? Say something? “Hey, thanks for stopping Father from bringing me back to life! It probably would have been awful!”

Yeah, that wouldn’t sound sarcastic at all.

Drake seemed to be having the same struggle. His mouth was moving slightly, Damian could see his tongue trying to make sounds against his teeth. But there were no words that either of them could say. The situation was what it was.

The wind blew harder, enough for Damian to actually feel it himself. As his hair fluttered slightly, he
looked down the road, wondering how he would save his brother if a car actually came through. Tim
watched him the whole time, not even blinking, afraid that if he did the child would no longer be in
front of him.

Damian looked back at him and narrowed his eyes. “Get a move on, Drake.”

He turned and began walking back towards the hotel. Within seconds, Drake was in step with him.
Even though he kept his head straight and facing forward, Damian knew Drake was watching him
out of the corner of his eye. That was fine. If that’s what Drake wanted to do, then he could.

This meeting was much more tame than last time. Last time, Drake had been crying, yelling about
how Damian should have never been in the costumed-lifestyle, should have never been appointed as
Grayson’s or his father’s partner, should have been kept safe and protected because none of this was
his war but the adults were too stupid to see that and act on it.

This time, Drake seemed…content with the company. They just walked. Nothing else. Side by side,
the two brothers walked through the silent city as though it were a normal occurrence. As though the
younger of the two wasn’t dead. With every step, it seemed all the built up tension was slowly
melting from Drake’s frame. Damian’s unexpected presence was reassuring him that he had made
the right decision with their father, regardless of how the man acted afterwards. No more second
guesses.

They made it back to the hotel. Tim was greeted by the receptionist and he nodded back as he
walked into the elevator. Damian stayed nearby. He didn’t know how long Drake was going to be
able to see him, but he was going to milk it for as long as possible. Drake was too, only looking
away from him for a few seconds if he could help it. Up in the suite, Tim didn’t take his jacket off,
instead going to the bar and grabbing the whole bottle of whiskey, taking his place back on the
balcony.

Tim poured himself another glass while Damian sat in the chair next to him. Again, silence reigned
as the two watched over a city that wasn’t theirs. Tim sipped at his whiskey as the sky began to
change from black to light blue to a pale yellow. When the sun peaked over the horizon, Tim looked
at Damian and smiled, holding up his glass in a mock toast. Damian returned the smile and inclined
his head. On that cue, Tim brought the glass back to his lips, downing the rest of the liquid in one
gulp. He leaned back in the chair and rocked his head to the side to look at his brother, but found he
was no longer there.

And Tim just laughed.
Figment

Chapter Summary

Dreams are weird. Jason would know.

The nightmares never stopped.

See, that’s what they didn’t get. Jason’s anger? His ‘craziness’? It wasn’t reserved purely for his waking hours. Oh, no. Comparatively, his waking hours were tame.

The dreams were different enough that he couldn’t claim them to be reoccurring, but he always knew what to expect. Laughing. Fighting. Blood. Yelling. A death or five – that was always the variable, it seemed. Who died.

Everyone in his life – good or bad – had been the victim more than once. On good days, it was the Joker who kicked the can, and they all celebrated with a giant chocolate cake in the park. But on most days, it was someone he cared for. A family member. Tim. Sasha. Bruce. Kory. Alfred. Roy. Barbara.

It had been Damian for the last three months.

What a little shit. Had to go and save the world in real life. Had to go and die in real life too.

Asshole.

But there was a silver lining to these nightmares. Lucid dreams, that’s what Roy called them. Dreams where you know it’s a dream. You know it’s not real. Doesn’t mean you stop doing anything in the dream, but Jason likened it to an escape button. Don’t like what’s happening? Simple. Somehow realize its lucidity. Makes the situations a lot less scary.

But Damian had to go and make everything difficult, just like always. How Dick put up with him all that time, Jason would never know.

There was no escape button to Damian’s scenarios. Once the narrative became dire, Jason would begin his mantra, “This isn’t real. This isn’t happening. This isn’t-”

And he’d have to stop. Because it was real. Damian was dead in reality as well as his subconscious. There was no ‘wake up.’ So, every dream, every nightmare, just kept getting worse. To the point Jason would wake up with physical injuries. Ones that weren’t there the night before.

Dandy.

He sighed. It would be a lot to take in, for a normal human being. Good thing he wasn’t one of those. Jason just wished he could remember all of this when he needed to. Like right before he fell asleep, or perhaps right when the dream started.

Like now.

He was in a desert, it looked like. Once again, separated from his team. Isn’t that a shocker. So, like
every dream he could never remember at the start, he began to walk forward.

“That’s your problem, you know,” a voice came from the side. Jason turned to see a leafless tree. Since when was there a tree there? Never mind that, since when was a snotty ten-year-old boy sitting in it? The boy was hanging upside down, like an obnoxious trapeze artist they both knew. “You always start moving.”

“What?” Jason sighed. Jesus, where was Alfred when you needed him. It was not Jason’s turn to babysit this brat.

“Every dream starts out the same. You end up somewhere, you look around, then you move around. If you just stay put for the duration of the dream, none of those bad things would happen to you,” Damian replied, crossing his arms. He was trying to look tough, but it was kind of impossible. All the blood rushing to his head just made him look sunburned. Or embarrassed.

Jason started to smile before the boy’s words sank in. “Wait, I…how do you know this is a dream?”

“Multiple reasons. One, this species of tree doesn’t does not grow in desert habitats. Two, the Bat symbol on your chest is green. And three,” Damian flipped out of the tree, landing expertly on his feet as he put his hands on his hips. “I’m dead.”

Jason looked down at his chest, seeing the proof of the kid’s words. It wasn’t green, it was lime green. Talk about a fashion faux pas. Then he looked back up at his brother, instantly seeing blood pour from the child’s chest, an arrow sticking out of his shoulder, torso and calf. Dried tear tracks ran down his cheeks, a sudden anomaly against the blood and dirt on the rest of his face. Jason could feel his eyes widen as they flinched from wound to wound, taking it all in. What happened? Why did no one save him? How could Bruce not - !

Jason blinked. And it was all gone. It was just Damian standing before him once more.

“You’re…dead,” Jason said slowly, taking a step forward.

Damian smiled, but it was sad, like he’s dealt with this before. Of course, Jason mused, maybe he had. “Yes, Todd. I am. But it’s okay. Really.”

Jason snorted, “How on Earth is this-”

“No. No questions. Not until later,” Damian said as he held his hand up to Jason. “You always seem to ask stupid questions in the early moments. Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Jason asked, but followed his younger brother anyway.

“To your destination. It’s right over there, if I’m correct,” Damian said. “After that you can ask your questions.”

“Okay…” Jason said. They walked in silence for a few minutes, passing the strangest landmarks. Tim in a ballerina costume. A cat with a Joker mask. A dancing hot dog. Bat-cow. “So, if I can’t ask questions, can I make statements?”

“If you wish.”

“Will you inform me if I’m wrong or right?”

“Yes.”
“Alright,” Jason said as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. He pursed his lips as he thought. “We’ve
done this before.”

“Correct.”

“Many times.”

“Yes.”

“But dreams suck, so I don’t remember.”

“Most of the time, no. But sometimes.”

There was a screech up ahead, followed by screams. Jason immediately took off towards the sounds,
Damian trailing closely behind. It was instincts for both of them. As they neared, they broke off, each
beginning their own battles with the unknown enemies, but never hesitating to interfere with each
other’s. Neither of them so much broke a sweat, though they both carried grins as they continued
their conversation.

“You keep dying in my dreams.” Jason said as he ducked a punch, watching as Damian flipped over
him, kicking the demon-looking monster in the throat.

“Recently, it seems.”

“For…months. Three months, if I have it right. You’ve been the only casualty every time.”

“True.” Damian suddenly had a sword. Two, as he tossed one to Jason, who began beheading
monsters himself.

“It’s some sort of…guilt. Coping.”

“Perhaps. You did not attend the actual…event, so I can’t say.”

Jason stabbed a winged creature, turning to look at his brother as he pulled his sword back. There
was something growing in his mind, his last statement had been proof of that. Where did he get three
months? It was fuzzy, but…

“Grayson was there.”

The child threw out a kick before stopping, staring at the ground. “Yes. In a way.”

They were in a field of defeated monsters now, victorious. Two children of war, two warriors –
who’s only bond now was that they both died for a cause. Batman’s cause.

“Bruce was there.”

Damian looked up, plopping the tip of his sword against the ground. “No. Not until…after.”

Jason winced. “You…you died alone.”

“Yes.”

“We know who-” As he began to speak, it was like his brain had been electrocuted. Suddenly, he
remembered. He remembered everything.

“Oh God.”
Damian continued to stare at him, smiling slightly again. A grim smile this time, though. “There it is.”

Jason felt his head shaking. Not possible. There’s no way that she would…!

“Talia killed you.”

“Indirectly.”

“The family’s a mess.”

“I know. That’s why I stuck around,” Damian said with a soft laugh. He looked into the sky as he sighed. “…I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For…everything, I guess. For causing all of you such pain, both in life and death.”

“Please,” Jason waved the statement off. “Pain? Getting hit by you was like getting hit by an angry kitten.”

Damian smiled again, and suddenly Jason could see Bruce standing there. A sad lonely human, feeling the need to take the world on his shoulders. “You can take your helmet back by the way. It’s on the shelf by the fireplace in my room.”

“Don’t need it,” Jason said as he slowly made his way forward. “So. Three months. How many times have you told me that?”

“Whenever I’m here,” Damian shrugged, ignoring Jason’s progress towards him. “However, that isn’t as often as I would have liked. Father and Grayson are in need of more attention than I previously thought. Not to mention Titus and the animals.”

“You say that as though…” Jason scrunched up his face. Nah, that couldn’t be the case.

“As though what?”

“As though you’re not just a repetitive figment of my imagination.”

“Well, to be fair, I never said I was in the first place,” Jason scowled as he saw Damian trying to suppress the manic grin that threatened to take over his face. “And the others’ dreams aren’t nearly as violent as yours. Where else would I keep up with my training?”

Jason stared down at his brother, who had given up pretending to brood. Jason couldn’t help but mirror the boyish grin as he latched his arms around the child in a tight hug, laughing as Damian tried to get away. “You’re an idiot, kid.”

Damian stopped struggling after Jason spoke, instead giving in to the gesture, leaning his head on Jason’s chest. He didn’t hug the man back; he just stood there, letting Jason have his moment with the dead. And Jason knew what that was like.

“Three months. Every night, you’ve died,” Jason muttered. It was a surreal thing to say. He hadn’t even quite accepted that this was a dream yet. Not when the blood and guts on the sword looked real. Not when the weight of the ten-year-old in his arms felt real. The weight of a living, breathing ten-year-old. “Will you die again this time?”

“I do not know. It would be a first if I didn’t,” Damian said.
“How many times have we had this conversation?”

“Never.”

Jason looked down at the boy. “What?”

Damian glanced up, “You normally wake up as you’re walking towards me. Or a monster we missed pops up as you’re doing so and kills me. We’ve never gotten to this point.”

“…Oh.”

“So, at the risk of one of those outcomes, could you please let me go now? I do believe you’ve been hugging me for two hours.”

“Right,” Jason released the boy and took a step back. Damian cracked his neck and stretched his arms as Jason wiped suddenly dried gore off of his clothes. It’s a dream world, of course a few minutes would be two hours. “I’m sorry. For all of this. Not just the hug. Just for… all of it.”

“Not your fault. Not much you can do about it at this point anyway.”

Jason shrugged. “…Well, I haven’t exactly perfected the art of waking myself up without fear and death and weird emotional distress so… what do you want to do?”

“You know that tea Pennyworth always gives us? That tea we never actually drink because it’s disgusting anyway?” Damian asked. Jason nodded. “I want that. Let’s go find some.”

“Sounds like a plan.” And the two set off, going farther into the desert. Jason glanced up as they walked, and saw Bat-cow jump over the moon, then start grazing on a cloud. “Hey, Damian?”

“Hm?”

“Will I remember this one in the morning?”

“I don’t know. Do you want to?”

Jason slung his arm around the boy’s neck. “Yeah, kid. I think I do.”
The former birdboys find each other on the mountain, with no idea who called them there.

It wasn’t *always* doom and gloom, at least not for his brothers. Grant it, those days were very few and far between, but they were there. And maybe that’s what made them special. Made Damian’s after-life mission all worth it.

The archer and the alien would stick close to Todd. Roy would take him to a pub and they would drink the night away. Kory would be their designated care-taker, mothering them when it was clear they’d had too much. But they would laugh and shout together, switching from playing pool, watching sports on the large screens at the bar, or sometimes even dancing with each other.

Drake would continue his late-night walking, but had recently been following it up with a single glass of whiskey, sipping on it for hours before raising it in the sky and gulping it down. Much like the last time he saw his little brother. It was a comfort, and it was no danger to himself, so Damian allowed it to continue. That along with his phone calls to Grayson.

The two had always been close. Damian found that after his arrival, Grayson and Drake’s relationship became strained, but the love was always there. They had begun to somewhat reconcile with each other after Bruce returned but had never quite reached the closeness they had before. Damian was never sure as to why, maybe it was due to that fact that Drake was coming into adulthood, still riding the reality that he could be his own man if he wanted to be.

Drake knew how much Grayson cared for Damian. And Drake knew better than anyone how much losing the child – both to Bruce as a partner and to death – had broken him.

So he called his older brother almost daily. They talked for hours, most days about nothing. But that was okay, because at least Grayson would smile. At least Drake could get him to laugh. To *speak*. To not hold it all inside like their father was doing.

Damian always enjoyed being present during these calls. They were relaxing. Stupid. Educational. Emotional. But in a good way. Sometimes during a call, he’d even teleport himself between the line, going from Grayson’s apartment to whatever random country Drake was in and back again. Sometimes, the calls would go so long that Grayson would get drunk and sober up between the hellos and goodbyes. Sometimes, Drake called while he was in costume, tracking down bad guys.

“What’d you do this week, Dick?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Nothing?”

“Well, Babs came by on Tuesday. We went to the theatre downtown. Saw that musical they’ve been advertising on the news for the past month.”

“Yeah? Any good?”
“It was alright.”

“Let me guess, it wasn’t chock-full of ‘80s rock like you wanted, right?”

“…You know me so well, Timmy.”

Sometimes both of the men would cry, cursing the circumstances, cursing Bruce, cursing their lifestyles. Sometimes, the two of them would pick a movie and watch it together over the phone if they both had access to it. Other times Drake would read the local newspaper of wherever he was, and Grayson would just comment on the stories.

It was mundane, that’s what was so wonderful about it. Normalcy. That’s what they all needed. Something…constant. Something not life-threatening.

Damian would be mentioned at least once a conversation. And the day Grayson said his name as he was laughing, and didn’t immediately go into sad silence, was when Damian realized that this was their escape from it all. The magic of the simple.

But Damian was still concerned. For as much as Drake and Todd moved around with their teams, they still didn’t exactly go anywhere. Drake would only leave the base for business, never going out with the Titans for celebrations after the mission was completed. And even Todd’s drunken escapades only happened once, maybe twice, a month, when Harper couldn’t stand to see his best friend so…apathetic. Grayson only ever went out if the likes of Barbara or Victor Stone forced him to. They were still closed off. Still resistant to life outside the remnants of their family. And even that was iffy at best. Grayson and Drake only talked on the phone. They never visited each other, or even made a video-call. Todd was lucky if he ever got a text from them, and vice versa.

No one made contact with Bruce.

Damian continued to watch them. They needed a push, something to get the ball rolling. He wished he could just tell them that they were all being stupid, that they all needed to keep going with their lives, but he couldn’t. He had yet to figure out a way to have Drake see him at all times, and was afraid if he tried any sort of ‘message from the beyond’ thing with Todd and Grayson, then they would regress into their lingering despair and anger.

They needed that spark. They needed to see each other.

So Damian would make sure they did.

One night, after Grayson fell asleep on the couch for the fifth time that week, Damian snuck his way back to the Cave. His father wasn’t there, but that was nothing new. His Father was rarely around the grounds anymore. Even Pennyworth had a hard time keeping track of the man.

Titus was sitting by the computer when Damian appeared by the lockers. The dog raised his head and thumped his tail as the boy walked towards him, holding his finger to his lips.

“Hey, boy. How’ve you guys been?” Damian muttered as he pressed a few buttons on the keyboard. There was a low moo from the other side of the Cave. Titus barked. Damian couldn’t stop the smile from his face as he scratched the dog’s head. “That’s good to hear. Want to help me fix Grayson and the others?”

Titus stuck his tongue out as he jumped up to place his paws on the computer bank. Damian laughed as he continued to hit keys, not looking away from the screen until there was a loud cycle of beeps from the machine, indicating his mission accomplished.
Damian sighed as he leaned back in the chair. Titus looked at him curiously, nudging at his knee. The child looked at him. “Wanna go for a walk, Titus?”

Jason realized as he drove that, for all the years he’d spent in Gotham, he’d never been to this side of the city. Or, rather, he’d never been in this forest on this side of the city. But then again, it was the middle of the night and everything was pretty damn dark. So what did he know.

He was only here because Tim anyway. Kid had sent an assistance call earlier in the evening. Apparently some hikers were lost up here thanks to Two-Face and that weird coin of his. Also a few bricks of C-4. Lost hikers and C-4. Bad combo. Jason understood the request.

At first he wondered why Tim didn’t contact Batman or Nightwing for this. But then he remembered. Bruce was a lying piece of shit and Dick was in the middle of a mental breakdown over…that. So he was kind of the only choice. They didn’t call Tim a genius for nothing.

Still, he didn’t really want to be here. He didn’t know if they had caught on, but he was kind of avoiding the ‘family.’ But, knowing Tim, he knew that. It was probably another reason he called Jason.

But the kid was really pushing Jason’s patience. First sending out the signal, complete with coordinates of where to meet, but not answering any calls after that. Come on, Red Robin. Don’t be an asshole.

The GPS in his bike beeped, indicating he was about a mile away from his destination. Jason sped up, already deciding that if Tim wasn’t standing there waiting for him, he was immediately turning around and heading back to his safe house. Or going to Tim’s to punch him in the face whenever he showed up. He hadn’t quite gotten that far into Plan B yet.

As he neared the coordinates, however, he found that Plan B didn’t look like it was going to be needed. Someone was standing up there. But they looked a little too tall to be Tim. Hey, if it was one of the hikers already, then more points to Jason.

But it wasn’t one of the hikers. It wasn’t Tim either.

It was Dick.

Once Jason was in the clearly, he slowed his bike, watching as Dick – not dressed as Nightwing – slowly turned to look at him. Jason didn’t know what he would expect Dick to look like when he saw him, but it sure as hell wasn’t as a ridiculously hollow shell of himself. He looked thin – too thin. And the light of the full moon showed his eyes to be dark circles, like he hadn’t slept in weeks.

“Jason?” Dick called.

“Yup.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Could ask you the same,” Jason muttered, turning off the bike and heading over to his elder. “Where’s your gear? Your mask?”

“Why would I have my mask?” Dick asked. “Besides, I…don’t go out as much as before.”

“I’ve noticed. Why not?”

Dick grimaced, turning his head away. “Because last time I was…like this, I almost beat a few petty
thieves to death.”

“What stopped you?” Jason asked, crossing his arms.

“Damian.”

“Oh.”

“And with…with him not here,” Dick’s voice became shaky, a little unsure. “I’m afraid of what I might do.”

“And with…with him not here,” Dick’s voice became shaky, a little unsure. “I’m afraid of what I might do.”

“Yea, I get that,” Jason said quickly. He wasn’t going to put Dick through a conversation he’s clearly had many times before. “But back to the point. Why’re you out here in the middle of the night?”

Dick looked back at him. “Tim called.”

“Called? Little jerk, I only got a text.”

“Well, yea, okay. He didn’t call, I got a text, too. Said he was in trouble?”

“…That’s not what mine said. Something about lost hikers.”

“Uh-oh.”

Jason sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “Any idea what’s going on?”

“None.”

“Jason, there you…Dick?” a voice called from a nearby hiking trail. In the dim light, the two could see Tim walking towards them, also not in any sort of costume. “What the…what are you doing out here?”

“Why’d you tell us two different things?”

“I…didn’t?” Tim said slowly, holding out his phone. The message claimed to be from Jason, that his bike had broken down, and he couldn’t reach Roy or Kory to get him back to Gotham.

“You don’t think this is one of Bruce’s schemes is it?” Dick snapped, his voice immediately angry.

“Now, hang on, Dick. I’m sure it’s…something.” Tim said, whipping some sort of tablet out of his jacket pocket. As a reflex, Jason pushed his jacket back, pulling out one of his guns while he looked around the dark trees. “The IP address claims it’s from the Manor grounds, but I just spoke with Alfred about an hour ago. He said he hasn’t seen Bruce in two weeks. And I’m sure Alfred would have said if it was him, so…”

“Awfully specific to be a computer malfunction,” Jason said quietly, still surveying the trees.

“Others have access to that computer. Clark, Babs, Vic…” Dick trailed off as he stuffed his hands in his pocket, walking towards the cliff side on the far end of the clearing. His shadow was long and deformed in the setting moonlight. It was much later in the night than they all thought. “Just ask around. I’m sure it was one of them.”

“Dick…” Tim started.

“Look, if it was just a prank, then none of us have a reason to really be here. We can all go home,”
Dick said. Jason felt an air of uneasiness around the older man. He was suddenly acting twitchy and uncomfortable. Dick looked back over them. “I know you two aren’t really…based here anymore. So if you need a place to stay you can…come stay at my place. Or I can drop you at the Manor. Or whatever.”

Tim and Jason glanced at each other. Clearly Dick was a lot worse off than either of them thought. Jason sighed, “You don’t have to get over it, per say. I would never tell you to do that. But you can’t keep acting like this.”

“Get over what?”

“Don’t you dare play dumb with me, Dick.” Jason hissed. “Because I will punch you. In the face. As hard as I possibly can.”

Dick was silent for a few minutes. When he spoke, it was a whisper. “It’s more regret than anything.”

“There was nothing you could have done. You were unconscious…” Tim started.

“No, not…not then,” Dick quickly corrected. “Before that. I took him for granted. I didn’t spend the time I should have with him. After Bruce took him – I mean, after he rightfully went to live with Bruce, I never went and just…hung out with him. Not like we used to.”

“That was probably for the better, too,” Tim said, gently. “If you had been there all the time, he and Bruce would have never learned to get along. He would have never learned to adapt to new people and fighting styles. It was good for him. He never held it against you, I don’t think.”

“I never told him I loved him, Tim,” Dick answered. “I told you and Jay all the time. Hell, I told Bruce and Alfred all the time, too. Sometimes Damian was even there when I said it to them. But I never said it to him. How could I do that?”

“I’m sure he knew,” Jason said. “Otherwise he wouldn’t have put up with you.”

“But it’s not the same, and you know that,” Dick almost sounded like he was pleading.

“So why didn’t you?” Jason asked.

Dick looked over the city below them still bright and bustling, regardless of the hour. “Maybe because I developed that stupid parents’ mindset. Your kids are supposed to out-live you. Parents aren’t supposed to bury a child.”

Jason felt himself wince.

“I guess I just…expected him to always be there. And any time I saw him, he was either angry or ridiculously focused on something. And I’d always think, ‘I’ll tell him next time I’m over’ or ‘I’ll tell him on his birthday, Christmas, New Year’s, whenever.’” The acrobat sighed. “And I always thought, if for some reason I never did tell him, it would be because I kicked the bucket. Not him. Never him.”

The three of them stood in silence for a few moments of nostalgia. Damian waited from his perch right beneath the cliff side. He couldn’t risk just standing there, if for some reason God or whoever wanted to be a giant tool at that moment and let Tim see him. This needed to be a moment between three living brothers. And after Grayson’s admission, he didn’t want Tim to oust him as being around anyway. That could result in permanent damage.
“He was eleven. Jesus Christ, he was just eleven years old.”

Of course he knew Grayson loved him. The man was an idiot for thinking he didn’t.

“You said he stopped you from killing those criminals before,” Jason said slowly. Damian leaned his head up, hoping to see one of them if they came into view. “Do you think he’d be real happy with how you’re acting right now? How any of us are acting right now?”

Jason didn’t need to explain his statement. They all knew how differently they’d been dealing with life since everything calmed down. How distant. And they all knew it wasn’t good for them. They just couldn’t stop.

“I know for a fact he’d want to stab me in the chest. Multiple times,” Tim half smiled as he spoke. Dick couldn’t stop himself from following suit.

“And he’d have claimed the attack was justified afterwards,” Dick chuckled. “But to answer your question, no. He would be furious with me. And then he’d probably take it out on the two of you. But I am trying. I’m trying to be the person he wanted me to be again. It’s just…harder than I expected.”

“Then let us help you,” Tim said. “And then, you can help us too.”

“I never said I needed any help,” Jason replied. Tim and Dick just stared at him. “But I’m not saying I won’t take it if you two are going to give it.”

“It sucks, but we don’t exactly have Bruce to depend on anymore. We only have each other,” Tim said. “And right now, we have to make the best of what we’ve got, even though that’s not much.”

“It’ll take a while,” Dick sighed. “I’ll take a while.”

Tim smiled. “And we’ll stick with you every step of the way.”

Jason nodded. “Just like the demon spawn did.”

Dick laughed. A genuine, heartfelt laugh.

Jason walked over to him and slapped him on the arm. “See what happens when you leave your house, Goldie?”

Suddenly, a bark echoed through the clearing. Tim immediately ran to the other two, flicking on a flashlight as an animal’s whining took over the silence. He ran it around the clearing and, upon finding nothing, flashed it down the cliff. The light landed on a pair of large dark eyes.

“Titus?!” Dick called. The dog jumped up against the side of the cliff in recognition, but it was too steep. He couldn’t climb it.

“I told you to stay quiet until I gave the signal,” Damian scolded from his vantage point. The dog was to be a trump card of sorts, just in case his brothers were too stubborn to open up, it would give them a reason to bond. Save your dead brother’s dog, talk about your issues. Thus far, the tactic had been unneeded. At least Damian thought so. Apparently his dog didn’t. Titus ignored his words, continuing to whimper in the others’ direction as they moved to find a way down to him. “You were never in any danger, you big baby.”

Somehow, Damian had a feeling Titus already knew that.
He watched as Jason and Tim went back to the bike and took off down the road while Dick carefully made his way down the rocks. As he passed near where Damian was sitting, Titus let out another bark.

“Shush!” Damian said sharply. “If you distract him, he’ll fall. Stay focused, Titus.”

“It’s okay, buddy. I’m here,” Dick cooed as he continued his trek. When he was close to the bottom, he jumped to the ground, expertly landing the five-foot leap. Titus immediately ran towards him, licking at his arms and neck. “What’re you doing all the way out here, hm? Did you sneak away when Alfie wasn’t looking?”

Titus looked up towards where Damian was sitting. Damian pointed to Grayson, “Keep your attention on him. The mission is to take care of him and the other two, not me.”

Titus immediately leapt towards Dick again, throwing his paws on the man’s shoulder and launching at his face. Dick smiled as he tried to keep the dog back.

“Alright, Titus. I said take care of him, not eat him.”

Titus sat back slightly, but still wagging his tail so much his whole body was moving. Dick held his smile as he pet the dog’s face, staring into his big brown eyes. The smile became sad after a moment and he couldn’t stop his eyes from falling. Titus licked his lips as he hit Dick’s shoulder with his paw, trying to regain his attention. Dick didn’t look up right away, but when he did, the smile was back. He stared at Titus for a second before he leaned in to the dog’s face.

“I love you, Damian.”

Titus took the opportunity to lick Dick’s nose. Dick laughed again, wrapping the giant dog in a hug. As the two of them sat, waiting for Jason and Tim, Damian made his way down the cliff. For once, Titus didn’t immediately look at him. He kept his focus on Dick, attempting to lick the man’s ear.

“I know, Grayson. I know.”

Jason honked his horn as he and Tim came down the road, and was forced to slam on the brakes when Titus came barreling towards him. As Titus tried to tackle Tim from the bike, Jason looked over at Dick.

“Should we call Alfred and tell him we’ll bring the bear home soon?” he asked.

“Who said we had to take him back at all?” Dick said. “I’ll call him and tell him that Titus is with me. I’m sure he won’t mind if Titus visited my place for a few days.”

Jason smiled and rolled his eyes. “Does your offer still stand, Goldie? Because I really don’t want to drive back to the safe house tonight.”

Dick threw his arm around Jason’s neck as they watched Titus throw Tim off the back of the bike, and then run around to start licking his forehead.

“Yeah, it still stands,” Dick sighed, relaxing his weight against his brother’s shoulder as Titus sat on Tim’s chest, trying to lick his raised hands and face at the same time. “Let’s go home, Jason.”
The Broken One

Chapter Summary

The Waynes think about how much they needed each other. Hindsight is always 20/20.

Chapter Notes

Based on lyrics from ‘Stay’ by Rihanna.

~ ~

"It’s funny, you’re the broken one but I’m the only one that needed saving."

~ ~

Bruce paused in his typing. His heart was pounding, his chest ached. Breaths were short and staccato, barely enough to maintain his body. He was thankful he wasn’t standing, otherwise there was a high chance he’d have collapsed with the sudden light-headedness.

It wasn’t the first time this had happened, this feeling of his heart stopping or his body just shutting down. Nothing life threatening, he found, but it was happening with alarming frequency.

The wheels squeaked quietly as he pushed the chair back from the computer bank and spun it around to face the rest of the Cave. After a moment of attempting deep breaths, his heart rate returned to normal, and oxygen came easier to his lungs. But his chest still ached. Bruce sighed and closed his eyes, covering them with his hand.

He hoped for darkness. The ability to not see anything or anyone. Just…nothing. It never worked. When he closed his eyes, images would create themselves. The people he failed to save. Jason. Criminals who got the better of him. His parents. Blood, screams, agony. Darkseid. Friends looking at him with a mixture of pity and disappointment. Damian…

Oh god, Damian.

His eyes began to sting as his other hand came up to his face. How, how could he let this happen?!

His son. His baby. His light. His happiness.

Bruce’s breath hitched again. The ache rippled through his body as his heartbeat rose once more. Thinking about Damian caused this recent medical condition. Or really, thinking about the absence of Damian.

Others would disagree. They would say that Bruce was saving the boy. Making him a better human, protecting him from the fate that waited for him with his mother. But that wasn’t true. If anything, Dick had saved the child from that.
No. It was the other way around. Damian was saving him. Pulling him out of the darkness like none of the others could, no matter how hard they tried. Damian was showing him that Bruce Wayne didn’t have to be the mask. That he could be more than just the Batman.

And he’d let him down.

He let him die at the hands of a monster.

Alone.

“Alfred.”

The family shattered after the loss of their youngest member, and wasn’t that ironic? Considering half of them hated the child on a normal day, but maybe that was it. He was a child. An innocent bystander, who had no choice in his upbringing, no choice in his relatives. A child who was only doing what he felt was right. What Bruce told him was right.

Anything to make Bruce proud.

Bruce felt his fingers begin to shake in rage.

How quickly darkness can swallow the light. The light that’s dimming, but shouldn’t be, but it is because-

You killed him, Bruce. You killed your son. What a hero you are.

A breath shuttered through his lips as he felt a weight plop onto his lap. Bruce moved one hand away and glanced down at the small black-and-white bundle staring up at him with wide, yellow eyes.

“Alfred.” Bruce whispered as the cat waved its tail in the air. He dropped one hand onto the cat’s head, petting him slowly. “I’m sorry.”

He couldn’t go back. He couldn’t let the darkness back in. All those years of it…it was suffocating. But no one could alleviate this. No one but…

Jason came back. Connor Kent came back. Clark came back. Hell, he came back…

Bruce lifted the cat up to his face. Alfred blinked slowly at him before meowing softly.

“I’ll get him back. If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll get him back.”

~

Damian was less than pleased to find out that of all things spirits can’t do, crying was not on that list.

He sat on the empty side of his father’s bed, legs curled up to his chin, as the man lay next to him, only asleep because Pennyworth added a sedative to the IV drip currently attached to his arm.

It wasn’t fair.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Damian sobbed. “I’m sorry.”

The man was breaking. There was no other way to put it. He was being torn apart and it was all Damian’s fault. He’d left him. Without a family, without a partner.

Alone.
And after all his father had done for him, too. Gave him a family, a home, a purpose. Protected him through everything, absolutely *everything*. Damian was a monster, and Bruce loved him anyway.

This was different than the others. Different than Grayson. Both of his mentors had been crushed by his departure, but Damian never doubted that they would heal. Eventually, they wouldn’t feel the burdens of ‘what-if?’

But Grayson didn’t shun the help. He welcomed the comfort from his brothers and friends. Not like that was making him any better right now – he was still borderline reclusive, still rarely went out as Nightwing – but he was accepting those who wanted to try to fix him. His father, on the other hand, was barely even speaking to Pennyworth. He’d stopped summoning the others to cases within Gotham. Even the Justice League was starting to get the cold shoulder. While time was supposed to heal wounds, it seemed his father was slipping further into misery.

It was baffling. Damian was only one of the many lost boys rescued by the Batman, what made his life and death any different from, say, Todd’s? Yes, the biological relations, but he was forced into his father’s life, not chosen. And Damian had died ignoring a direct order. He had been defeated due to his own weakness and stupidity. If anything, Damian should be a wreck, being forcefully removed from his father, not the other way around.

Damian rubbed at his eyes, trying to dry the tears. His grandparents were wrong – being unseen and unheard would not drive him crazy. Seeing his family torn, his brother destroyed, his father broken potentially beyond repair and knowing it was all his doing. *That* is what would make him crazy.

His father twitched in his sleep, and his breathing became short, his body tense. He began to mutter incoherently, clearly distressed. Damian leaned his head on his knees, clenching his teeth. No more tears. He had no right to cry, not when he did this to the people he loved.

Bruce let out a choked noise and sighed, his body quickly relaxing. Damian watched him for a few moments, noticing his father’s eyelids twitching as tears escaped from them. Immediately, Damian uncurled himself and lie down next to his father, head on his shoulder, hand on his chest.

“It’s okay, Father,” he whispered. “I’m here. You’re all right. I’m not going anywhere. I’m here…”

*And I’ll always be here.*
Ignorance

Chapter Summary

A vignette on Colin, who was never told of his friend’s passing.

Colin was never told.

It made sense, in way. After all, everything happened so fast. But still, Damian couldn’t help but be a little annoyed at his family for the slip-up. It was his only friend outside of the family. Grant it, he’s not sure his father knew about Abuse, but he thought at least Grayson would have made his friend a priority.

But at the same time, Colin never asked questions. It’s not like he and Damian saw each other regularly enough that months between meetings seemed abnormal. Though Damian could tell he was starting to get suspicious. Not seeing each other was one thing, Robin not being seen by anyone was another.

In any case, the ridiculous little redhead continued with his daily routine, no earthly idea that his friend was killed, and brutally so. No clue that some of the heroes who inspired him were completely shattered.

And that’s what made Damian frequent his side of town. Sometimes his family became too angsty, even for him. The mood was starting to bring Titus, Alfred and Bat-cow down as well. (Damian didn’t even know cows could become depressed.) But that wasn’t to say Colin was always happy, the boy had enough problems of his own. Since the two had last seen each other, months before Damian’s death, he’d been in and out of three foster homes. Always considered too ‘messsed-up’ to be helped.

But there was always an air of positivity. Colin often explored the city during his free time. He’d hum stupid music as he moved through the crowds, saying hello to the street vendors, or popping his head into the dingy diner that he went to after his patrols as Abuse, always looking for the brunette waitress that Damian knew he had a crush on. He’d go to the park and sit by the edge of the pond, plucking up strands of grass, tearing them apart and then tossing them in the water. He would climb trees and take naps among the branches.

Normal things.

Damian would go with him while he did these things. Much like with Tim, he would talk at Colin the whole time. But unlike his brother, he knew there was next to no hope he would connect with his friend. Colin could fall into a daydream in the blink of an eye. He rarely heard the nuns when they were talking to him from three feet away; there’s no way he would hear a voice from beyond the grave. And, weirdly enough, Damian was okay with that. It’s not like he and Colin hung out because the conversation was great. They just…liked each other’s company. Damian was better than the nuns and Colin was better than Batman.

Colin knew where Grayson’s apartment was. He even knew where one of Todd’s safe houses was, too. Sometimes he would pass them and just stare up into the windows. Hoping, maybe, that someone would look out the window and spot him. Recognize him? That would give him the
courage to go ask them. Make sure his friend was okay.

But Colin would always bail. Damian would sigh in annoyance as Colin began openly voicing his reasons not to go through the door while he ducked around the corner and made a beeline for the orphanage. They didn’t know him well enough. Nightwing might not remember him at all. Did he ever actually meet Red Hood? That woman with green eyes was…decidedly terrifying.

Damian didn’t know how Colin would react when he found out. Because one of these days he will. Would he cry? Would he stop being Abuse, or would it make him fight harder for his cause? Would he blame Batman? Would he blame the man he believed to have saved his life twice?

For now, though, Colin Wilkes didn’t know. And Damian wasn’t sure if he wanted to keep it that way or not. Because Colin was his friend. Colin was his best friend. He didn’t want to hurt him. But he didn’t want to lie to him either.

In the end, Damian never made a move to help Colin find the truth. He never caused an emergency at Grayson’s apartment or forced a back-alley meet between Abuse and Red Hood. Colin was orphaned, not stupid. He would figure it out eventually, or when one of his brothers decided to man up and tell him themselves.

All he knew was that Colin was the one person he didn’t mess up. Not yet. He didn’t feel guilty, following the ginger to the park to chase the ducks. He didn’t want to start crying while he sat across from Colin in his normal corner booth at the diner. The boy didn’t brood like it was going out of style. Didn’t blame himself for anything. With Colin, it almost seemed like he wasn’t dead at all. Everything was as it always was. Constant.

It was all based on a lie, of course, but he could ignore it. Because Damian missed what is was like to be happy. He had forgotten what happy even looked like on another human being. And Colin was great at reminding him.

He had to face it. Colin’s attitude was infectious.

Maybe he could make Nightwing rethink his policy on working with a partner? Damian would always smile at the thought. Grayson always cited it as a disease, his weakness for redheads.
Dick comes to Jason with a request. Jason isn’t happy about it.

“You must be out of your fucking mind.”

Jason looked ready to pull his gun right then, but Damian knew he wouldn’t. Not on Dick. Not right now, when they weren’t in costume and Dick looked like a wet puppy who’d been kicked a hundred times.

“Why the hell would you even call me about this?”

“Because you know how this all works.” Dick said calmly. “You know where they are.”

Lazarus Pits.

“I know where one is,” Jason spat. “And I only know how it works because Talia told me after the fact.”

“But you still know,” Dick pushed.

“So do you, asshole. Remember your little experiment that almost got the kid killed a year and a half ago?” Jason countered. He was getting agitated. But Damian had no choice. Drake was off-world with the Titans and Alfred was having a hard enough time swaying his father from the very same idea. While either of them would have probably been able to let Dick down a little more gently, the fact was Dick was beginning to show signs of desperation, there wasn’t time to wait for someone to be kind. Not when Dick had a full tank of gas on his bike, an anguish that could take him over the edge at any second and, like Jason said, a vague idea of how the voodoo worked.

So Dick called Jason. That’s what the Red Hood thought, anyway. Dick just assumed he dialed the number on accident. They were both incorrect.

“That was…kind of different,” Dick said sheepishly, ignoring the last part of Jason’s statement. “I want to make sure I do it right this time.”

“Are you asking me to help you?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck you.” Jason pushed himself out of his chair and into the kitchen. Damian pressed himself against the counter as Jason stomped by him, towards the fridge. He hated when the living walked through him. It left a tingle through his body that was ridiculously unpleasant. Jason rooted in the fridge for a moment before pulling out a beer and slamming the door shut. He didn’t offer one to Dick. “You know? Okay, the kid wasn’t my favorite person, but yeah, I miss him just as much as you and Bruce and Tim do. He didn’t deserve what happened to him.”

“So…is that a yes?” Dick asked hopefully.
“No.” Jason said, twisting the cap to his bottle off. “Because the kid might not have deserved to die, but Damian sure as hell doesn’t deserve the shit that comes with being thrown in a Pit either.”

Dick’s face fell. “But Jason, you don’t understand.”

“I do, Dickie. I do,” Jason’s anger was subsiding as he moved back towards the sofa, plopping down next to his brother. “Damian was…well, he was your baby. Bruce’s saving grace and your last connection to humanity when you didn’t have one.”

“I miss him,” Dick whispered. Damian grimaced as heard tears in his mentor’s voice. “I miss him so much.”

“Yeah,” Jason sighed. “But bringing him back to life, at least by way of a Pit, isn’t the way to fix that. In a way, it would hurt him. He wouldn’t exactly be the Damian you remember, at least not for a while. He would have these…problems that you wouldn’t be able to even begin to understand, let alone help him through.”

“You could,” Dick said.

“And as stupid as it is, I probably would. But it’s not just that, Dick. It’s…hard to explain.” Jason sighed. “Resurrection changes everything.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes and Damian moved to the chair Jason had previously occupied. Jason continued to sip on his beer while Dick stared at the table in front of him, blinking methodically. Damian assumed it was so he didn’t cry. Suddenly he huffed loudly, throwing his head back against the sofa and staring at the ceiling. Jason took one last gulp of his drink before looking at him.

“It’s too hard,” he said quietly. “I can’t do this.”

“That’s what Tim and I are here for,” Jason said. “Your own personal support system. But we’d work a lot better if you, you know, actually called us or something.”

“Are you saying you actually call Roy or Kori when you need to let your emotions out?” Dick asked incredulously.

“Sasha too, believe it or not.” Jason ignored Dick’s disbelief. “But if we’re not good enough for you, then talk to Bruce. He’s going through the same thing. Worse, actually, if what Ollie Queen told me was the truth. And you know as well as I do that it probably is.”

“I don’t…” Dick seemed to struggle with the words. “I’m not ready to talk to Bruce. Not yet.”

“Then you’re stuck with me and Tim.” Jason said, shoving the beer into Dick’s hand. “Deal with it.”

“Will you help me find a way to bring Damian back?” Dick asked, taking a small sip of the alcohol.

“Answer carefully, Todd,” Damian growled, knowing he wouldn’t be heard. Of course, that never stopped him from voicing his opinions before. “He’s still fragile.”

Jason pondered the question for a moment. “…maybe.”

“Maybe?” Dick sounded hopeful again. It left a strange feeling in Damian’s stomach.

“Maybe. One condition, though,” Jason said quickly. “No Pits.”
Dick let himself smile slightly, holding up three fingers in a mock scout’s honor.

“No Pits.”
Handprint

Chapter Summary

Being dead didn’t stop Damian from enjoying pranks. Too bad Titus is often the victim.

There were some days when Damian liked to pretend he wasn’t dead. That he could still be seen, could still annoy the living daylights out of people.

And he would make sure to get the dog blamed for the whole thing.

He played his pranks mostly on Pennyworth. Poor old Pennyworth, who seemed to have aged decades after his demise. The family was slowly slipping from his grasp. They all seemed less willing to open up to the grandfather figure, forgetting that the old butler still blamed himself for Robin’s death. Or maybe they didn’t. Maybe they blamed him too. Pennyworth got the shortest end of the stick in this whole ordeal.

So Damian followed him around the Manor. And because Damian followed Pennyworth, so did Titus. So did Alfred. So did Bat-cow, if Pennyworth was in the Cave. Framing the animals was never difficult when they always fell for the bait.

Once, Damian was sitting on the table in the hallway, cross-legged with Alfred sitting next to him, Titus on the floor, while Alfred vacuumed the carpets. When the phone rang, Pennyworth glanced into the study at Bruce, who was sitting behind the desk staring at family portraits, knowing he wouldn’t answer it. He shut off the machine and hurried his way down the hall. As soon as Damian heard him start to speak into the receiver, he gently elbowed the vase sitting next to him, opposite of Alfred. The vase’s contents of dying flowers and dirt poured out, hitting Titus before rolling off the table and smashing to the ground. When Pennyworth returned, Titus stood. Before the butler could get a word out, the dog began to shake himself clean, throwing dirt all across the floor.

Pennyworth’s glare matched that of the Batman’s. Neither Titus nor Alfred needed any help in shooing themselves away after that. As they scurried down the hall, Alfred stopped and turned, sending a vengeful look back to his master, who stayed on his tabletop perch, laughing quietly.

Damian was quickly forgiven by Titus, Alfred a day or two after. And that’s how it always was. His animals’ faulty memories were quite the blessing. He was even pretty sure that Alfred found it amusing when only Titus got in trouble, and vice versa.

But the best days were when Pennyworth didn’t get angry, like when it seemed Titus had somehow opened the washing machine mid-cycle, and ended up tracking soap and bubbles through the entire first floor and garage. He wouldn’t glare or even shout. Instead, he’d find the animal and get down to their level, or scoop them up in his arms. While petting their heads, he’d smile as he scolded, “Now what would Master Damian have done with you, hm?”

He would just stroke them, then. Talking as if the animal would ever answer back. (Bat-cow would try. She’d moo whenever Pennyworth asked a typically rhetorical question.) Then he’d give their fur one last ruffle, kiss them gently on the head or nose and set about cleaning the mess he believed them to have made, smiling all the way.
Today was no different. Damian was exhausted after dealing with Drake’s team of obnoxious superheroes for the past week and decided to head straight home in lieu of his normal rounds of Gotham to check on the others. He needed a break.

He was sitting on the island in the kitchen, or that’s what he would have told anyone who questioned him. He was really lying on his stomach, feet dangling off the end, an arm draped over the side while the other supported his chin, watching as Pennyworth set out ingredients next to him. Titus was sitting at the end closest to Damian’s face, staring up at him. He would bark anytime it looked like Pennyworth was about to sit a bowl or package anywhere near Damian’s transparent body.

“He’s going to kick you out of the kitchen if you don’t quiet down,” Damian muttered. Titus’s ears flattened.

“If you’re so opinionated today, Titus,” Pennyworth chuckled, placing a bowl of flour near Damian’s head. “Then perhaps you can help me in deciding what to make Master Bruce for lunch.”

“Something of health value,” Damian quipped. “Drake told the speedster that he believes Father to have not eaten anything yesterday. Again. But then he ate those strange appetizers at last night’s gala. I suggest a simple sandwich would suffice.”


Damian rolled his eyes before staring back down at his dog. Titus panted for a few seconds before licking his lips and cocking his head to the side. When Damian didn’t move, he huffed, jumping to his hind legs and leaning against the island, sniffing at the boy’s nose. Damian sighed and raised his head, resting it against his knuckles. Pennyworth glanced over at the dog and tsked, moving his food preparation to the counter next to the stove.

Titus craned his neck forward, tongue lapping out of his mouth to try and reach Damian’s face. When he couldn’t reach, he began to whine quietly. Damian let him struggle for a few moments before smiling and moving forward. Titus’s paws scrambled at the marble in happiness as he quickly licked Damian’s cheek. As the dog showered him with affection, Damian’s eyes wandered to the flour bowl sitting next to him, ready for Pennyworth’s next culinary project.

Well…why not.

He took a quick breath and exhaled over the bowl. Tiny white specks flew up into the air, hovering for a moment before descending to the floor. This caught Titus’s attention and he stopped grappling for Damian’s face, staring at the bowl instead. Damian glanced at him, smile still on his face as he backed away and shifted, putting the flour between him and the dog.

He blew on it again, and the white powder flew against Titus’s nose and muzzle. He huffed again, shaking his head in attempts to dislodge the flour from his face. It worked, but now Titus was curious. Damian glanced at Pennyworth before slowly pushing the bowl forward. Titus immediately stuck his nose in it, investigating this new substance.

Damian barked out a laugh. Titus made it too easy sometimes.

In a quick movement, Damian flipped the small bowl onto Titus’s head. The dog yelped in surprise, jumping from the counter and backing against one of the chairs at the table. Damian sat up and hopped off the counter as Pennyworth turned to investigate the sound. The cloud of flour was just beginning to settle as Titus merely sat down, staring at the now-white floor in awe.
Pennyworth took in the whole scene before a grin broke out on his face as he made his way over to Titus. He knelt next to the dog and took his face in his hands, inspecting it to make sure Titus hadn’t injured himself. As he turned Titus’s face back and forth, he hummed, “Dear Titus. If only Master Damian could see what has become of you now.”

Titus looked up as Damian moved towards him, giving new meaning to the term ‘puppy eyes.’ Damian had never seen a living creature look so betrayed. Titus blinked as Pennyworth patted him on the neck and stood, a puff of white immersing from the black fur.

“Stay right here, okay Titus? We’re going to clean this up.” Pennyworth slowly made his way out of the room in direction of the cleaning supplies. Damian crouched next to Titus, scratching his back. “No need for Master Bruce to know. This’ll be our little secret.”

And surely it was the butler’s imagination, that perfect little flour handprint on Titus’s side he saw when he returned to the kitchen. Just an interesting splash pattern, nothing more.
Demons

Chapter Summary

In which Damian meets his clone.

Chapter Notes

Based on 'Demons' by Imagine Dragons

Whatever he was expecting, it wasn’t this.

But that was the contradiction. A person’s physical presence didn’t portray their soul or their mind. Himself, for example. He was four feet tall and, ‘adorable’ by society’s standards (said Brown and Supergirl) but was a ‘strong little fuck’ that didn’t fit that profile (said Todd).

So he shouldn’t have been surprised, when he saw the child in the graveyard, next to his grave, in fact. Legs curled to his chest, tears streaming down his face – and they were tears, the rain wasn’t affecting him – looking lost and confused and unloved.

Titus spotted him first. Damian had decided to take his dog for a walk around the grounds, regardless of the weather. They were passing the family resting place when Titus took a defensive stance around Damian’s knees, growling. Damian put his hand on the animal’s head as he looked across the way. Titus barked and the child jumped, looking up with wide, fearful brown eyes.

And Damian knew.

The child cocked his head to the side, eyes darting between Damian and the still-growling Titus. Damian wanted to be angry, he wanted to lash out. After all, it was all this thing’s fault. Everything was because of him. But for as tough and unforgiving as he wanted to be, Damian always had a soft spot for children – especially the ones who had no choice in what happened to them.

The word clone was on the tip of his tongue, but what came out of his mouth instead was, “Brother.”

The child’s face scrunched up, clearly trying to put on a brave face. “She…Mother used me.”

Damian’s killer had died, he’d found that out later. Murdered by the woman they called their mother, beheaded because he was no longer useful. Because he was starting to question.

“She killed me. I think because…because I killed you?” the child’s stare shifted to the ground as he tried to concentrate, tried to understand why everything had happened the way it did. Damian shushed Titus, sending the dog to go keep dry under a nearby tree, before slowly making his way forward. The boy looked up, his voice quiet. “I…didn’t know where else to go.”

Damian crouched next to him, taking in the smaller boy’s appearance. He couldn’t have been older than four years old. Dark hair, big eyes, narrow face. An air of superiority and entitlement that had
been shattered by their mother’s betrayal. This was the mind of the monster who had stabbed him. This was the real being behind the giant body and bat-shaped helmet.

A four year old who just wanted to please his mommy.

“I know you didn’t.” Damian said, wiping a tear from the younger’s face. “But…you can’t stay here.”

The younger’s face contorted into anger. “You have!”

“Not really. I travel.” Damian said, pulling his hand back. Do not reward anger, that’s how Father and Grayson dealt with him. That is how he would deal with his brother, then. “But that’s not what I mean. I mean you need to…cross over.”

“…what?”

“I’m not sure of the term, but you cannot let your soul remain on Earth,” Damian explained. “There are much better things for you elsewhere in this universe.”

The child pouted. “Like what?”

“Among other things,” Damian said slowly. “You will meet our grandparents.”

“I already have,” he said. “Mother had Grandfather imprisoned.”

“Our other grandparents. Ones who would love and care for you, whether you met their standards or not.”

The child – Damian figured he should ask for a name, but realized Talia probably did not care enough to give him a proper one – stared up at Damian, hope and excitement in his eyes. He hadn’t been with their mother long enough to be brainwashed into thinking meeting standards were all there was to life. If things were different, his younger brother would still have had a chance at a semi-normal life. The boy’s gaze moved over to where Titus was sitting, still watching, and then to the manor. “Is this where Batman lives?”

“Mhm,” Damian hummed, standing. “Would you like to go look?”

“Yes!” the boy jumped up, tugging at Damian’s shirt. Titus growled slightly at the gesture, and the child looked over at him. “Will the mutt be with us?”

“Of course Titus will be accompanying us,” Damian replied as he snapped his fingers. Titus shuffled over as Damian lifted the boy into his grasp. Tiny arms immediately latched onto Damian’s neck. “He will not harm you.”

“Then why is he making noises at me?” he asked, making faces at the dog as Titus fell into line beside them.

“Because he knows what you di…” Damian paused. “He knows what our Mother made you do.”

It was easier to lie. He was this child’s older brother, and suddenly he felt a need to act like it. To protect him from that cold truth: He and Damian had both been doomed from the start. The child didn’t need to know that.

Suddenly, Grayson’s mannerisms and attitude made a lot more sense.

“I am sorry for that…brother.” The boy said, leaning back in Damian’s arms so he could look into
his eyes. “If I could take it back, I would.”

“I’m sure,” Damian sighed. “But ‘what-ifs’ and regrets are pointless at this stage. So let’s not go there.”

They were silent for a few minutes as Damian moved across the grounds. Might as well finish Titus’s walk while they were at it. Rain continued to pour as they did, but both spirits remained dry. The boy in his arms never questioned it. As they turned a corner, Damian noticed the glow of the fireplace in his bedroom. Father was holding his vigil once more, it seemed.

“I don’t recall ever being this small,” his brother quipped, holding his hand out in front of the two of them.

“Because Mother had you grown unnaturally, so you’d be a formidable enemy.” Damian said, turning so the younger wouldn’t see the firelight.

“Hm. I like this better, I think.” The boy said, leaning his head on Damian’s collarbone. “It’s nice.”

The desperation for love came off the boy in waves, and Damian couldn’t help but think of a conversation Grayson once held with Drake, one he wasn’t supposed to hear, about Damian’s own need to be accepted. He shifted his hand to rest on the child’s head. “You’re in luck. You’ll be staying within these proportions, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Will our grandparents like me this size?” Damian hummed an acquiesce. “…my father’s parents, correct?”

Damian felt his teeth grind together in annoyance. Clearly Talia had taken a different approach when raising her mutant second child. Damian was given the luxury of watching his father from a young age, of knowing, at least vaguely, who he was. The monster was not.

No wonder he was given the name the Fatherless.

“Yes, our father’s parents.” Damian said as they reached a door. He nodded to it and Titus moved forward, jumping against the handle and shoving the barrier open. “And I assure you, little one, they are much kinder than Ra’s al Ghul ever could be.”

Damian kicked the door closed and began to wander the halls. His charge stared at the high walls and works of art in awe – and Damian found himself faintly remembering that he shot the monster’s eye out in that final battle. Of course, wounds don’t translate in death.

“The Batman beat me, for what I did to you,” the boy said absently as they stopped in the study. “So did that man with the sticks and the woman in the armor, though I think she beat me for a different reason.”

“Nightwing and Knight were emotional at the time. Don’t hold it against them. You were their enemy, after all.” Damian mused as he glanced over to the door. Titus and Alfred were watching. Damian narrowed his eyes and Titus ducked out while Alfred took it as an invitation, sauntering into the room and jumping on the desk. “And I guess you shouldn’t hold it against the Batman either.”

“I don’t. I killed his partner. I expected him to react as such.” The boy looked at the floor. “I didn’t expect Mother’s reaction to be the same.”

Damian exhaled, not sure what to say. In truth, he wasn’t expecting his mother’s reaction to be what it was either. When he disobeyed Talia, he was merely disowned, not executed at her hand. His brother didn’t ask for comfort, though. He didn’t lay back on Damian’s shoulder or start to cry. He
held his head high, trying not to look weak or vulnerable, just like Damian had always done himself.

He opened his mouth to respond when the child suddenly pointed. “That is you?”

His finger was pointing at an old portrait, the biggest on the wall. It was of Thomas and Martha Wayne, both with an arm around a young Bruce. Damian smiled, but shook his head. Alfred suddenly meowed towards the door, where Titus was sitting again.

“Titus, go to Father.” Damian ordered. Titus lowered his head. “Don’t worry, Alfred will protect me. Go on.” Titus dragged himself out of the room and Damian turned his attention back to the boy in his arms, only to find him staring accusingly. “er…what?”

“Father?” the boy asked. “Brother, you claimed this was the home of the Batman.”

“It is.”

The younger’s eyes narrowed as he looked from Damian to the old family portrait and all of the other pictures around. After two straight minutes he looked back at Damian, his voice barely above a whisper. “The Batman is our father?”

“I never said he wasn’t.” Damian shrugged.

Anger and hurt began to flash across the little boy’s features as he began to huff and choke out noises, not knowing what to say. “Mother was fighting Father? That’s what this whole thing was about?”

“Unfortunately so.” Damian said, moving back out to the hallway and towards the staircase. Alfred yawned and followed. “It appears, also, that this battle was the only reason you or I ever existed.”

“That…doesn’t seem right.” The child sighed.

Damian smiled. “You are your father’s son after all, it seems, if you have a tinkling of what is right and wrong.”

The younger gazed up the stairs, seemingly already knowing where they were heading. “Do you think…” he started. “…he would have fought for me like he did for you?”

Damian thought for a moment as they reached the top of the stairs. Alfred darted ahead of them. The Fatherless glanced down at him, and the kitten began to purr. Damian hoisted the child up on his waist, “You have been raised an al Ghul, but you carry the blood of a Wayne. And Father has always aimed to protect whatever family he has. So yes, little one, I do believe that, given the chance, Father would have fought to the death for you.”

“Oh,” he muttered as they reached the open doorway leading to Damian’s room. Damian stood there for a moment, glancing in. His Father was sitting on the stool by the fire, flipping through Damian’s sketchbook, with Titus lying at his feet. He wasn’t crying, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to later. “Brother, I request you put me down now.”

Damian complied, setting the child gently on the floor. “Do not be too harsh. With enough effort the living can feel when we touch them. So do not push or kick or anything else you are used to doing when you want to be noticed. I will not hesitate to remove you from the area if I see fit.”

The boy nodded as he moved into the room. Titus let him pass, still watching him suspiciously. He stopped in front of Bruce as the man closed the sketchbook and tossed it to the nearby mattress. Bruce stared into the crackling fire as the four year old leaned forward, putting his hands on his
father’s knees.

“Hello, Father.” The boy said. “It is very nice to meet you.”

Damian watched from the doorway with the cat. His younger brother was quiet in his words, head turned with curiosity as he stared at the man he never knew in amazement. Completely opposite of the immense war machine they had battled a few months before. It was mind-boggling to think they were the same person.

“Apologies, Father.” The boy said, turning his eyes to the fire as well. “I took my brother from you.”

Bruce leaned forward on his knees, hands dropping between his legs. If Damian had to guess, there was a case on his father’s mind, and he had come into this room to clear his mind, think of all the possibilities. He’d always done that; whenever he was concerned about a problem that he couldn’t seemingly solve, he’d roam the manor, often coming to Damian’s room to check on him, or fix his blankets if he were asleep. The practice kept up and multiplied after his demise. The clone reached out, hanging onto Bruce’s hand, comparing the sizes.

“I hope you can forgive me for that one day,” the boy whispered, leaning up and kissing Bruce’s cheek.

“Oh my word,” a voice from Damian’s left said softly. He wasn’t surprised. “He looks exactly like you.”

“That’s the point of a clone, Grandmother,” he laughed quietly, looking up at the woman next to him. “Where is Grandfather?”

“Previous engagement. Being dead can be quite busy, you know?” Martha grinned. “What’s his name?”

“He doesn’t have one, as far as I’m aware.” Damian responded, watching as the younger climbed up on the stool Bruce was sitting on. “Mother didn’t find a reason to give him one.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Martha sighed. “Do you think he’ll be as stubborn as you were?”

“No,” Damian smiled. “He didn’t have the ties to others here like I did. Nor does he have as much guilt, I suppose.”

“He killed you,” Martha whispered, putting her arm around Damian’s shoulders. “And that friend of Bruce’s. Cyril. That’s something.”

“And I killed dozens more.” Damian responded. “Besides, I told him you were nice. He’s excited to meet you.”

Martha laughed and the child looked over. Once again, curiosity took over his face. Damian shook his head and waved away. The boy leaned into Bruce’s side, staring back into the fire.

“Will you forgive him, Grandmother?”

Martha paused, watching as Alfred purred and rubbed against her legs. “Of course, Damian.”

“Good.” Damian nodded. “Brother.”

The child looked up, and Damian inclined his head toward the hallway. The younger returned the
gesture and hopped from the chair, running after them. “…Damian? Who is this?”

“Little one.” Damian knelt beside him, looking up at Martha. “This is your grandmother. You’re going to go with her, and she is going to take care of you.”

“Hey, sweetheart.” Martha crooned. The boy took a step towards her. Martha ran her fingers through the boy’s hair.

“Brother…?” he called. Damian hummed. “You said there were better things waiting for me.”

“Mhm.”

“Aren’t there better things waiting for you, too?”

“Potentially.”

The child turned back towards him. “So why do you stay?”

Damian smiled at him. “Because I do not deserve those things.” He said. “I have done many bad things, brother. Things far worse than your crimes. It’s about time I try to make up for them.”

“I…understand.” He nodded. “Will I see you again?”

“If you like,” Damian said, thoughtfully. “I’m sure Grandmother could arrange it.”

“Okay,” the boy said, raising his arms. Martha scooped him up, immediately kissing his cheek.

“Two grandsons!” she breathed, nuzzling her face against his. His face scrunched up, but Damian heard him give a little laugh. “Who’d have thought it!”

“Goodbye, Brother.” The boy said, giving a slight wave as he and Martha began to fade away. Titus appeared in the doorway and watched the scene for a few seconds before coming to Damian’s side, nudging his hand. Damian scratched Titus’s head with one hand, raising the other to wave back.

“Goodbye, little one.”
“Hi.”

Damian’s eye twitched as he cringed. Whoops.

Tim looked up from his plate, a large bite of chicken bulging in his cheek. “Um. Hi.”

Damian didn’t turn towards the voice. Stupid, this was really stupid. He should have checked what diner this was, or at least what side of town it was. He should have made sure. He would have any other time! Since when did he ever just blindly follow Drake around? Never, that’s when! And this, right here, was the reason. He sighed, resisting the urge to smack his palm against the table. Death was making him soft.

He didn’t want to deal with this. Not now. More than that, he didn’t want Drake to be the one to have to do this. As much as he enjoyed making Drake suffer in life, in death he was realizing how hard the older man worked to keep everything together, even if he put himself on the backburner. He was already caring for Grayson, and his father to an extent, he didn’t want to burden his brother with caring for someone else. Actually, this should be Grayson’s job. Hell, Todd’s. Anyone else but Drake at this point.

“You…don’t remember me, do you?” The voice was smiling. Damian heard Colin shove his hands into the pocket of his oversized jacket. Tim slowly chewed and swallowed before shaking his head. “Figures. I don’t think we ever actually met. Dam…er…uh, I mean. Um…you’re…you’re Red Robin, right?”

Tim didn’t move, but Damian saw his muscles tighten, getting ready to defend himself if necessary. Damian couldn’t suppress the need to roll his eyes. Really Drake? You’re scared of a redheaded midget twelve-year-old?

“Why would you think that?” Tim asked politely, busying his hands so the boy standing in front of him wouldn’t notice the tension. He shoved all of the papers he was looking at into a pile and aligned them with his plate.

“Well,” Damian finally glanced over at his friend, who seemed to have lost his original confidence. “Because my friend Damian told me you were.”

Damian looked back at Tim just in time to see all the color drain from his face. His eyes widened, but he quickly blinked, looking down at the table to hide his shock. After a few seconds, Tim cleared his throat and coughed, trying to regain his composure as he set the papers next to him on the booth seat. “Sorry. I-ahem…uh, why don’t you sit down, mister…”

“Colin.” The boy said. Damian slid over to the wall as he sat down. “And you’re Tim, right? Damian’s brother?”

A small smile appeared on Tim’s lips, “Really? He told you we were brothers?”
Colin shrugged. “Only recently. And only your first name. He said you, Nightwing and Red Hood, Dick and Jason, are his brothers. Batman is his dad.”

“Recently?”

“Like, six months ago.”

“Colin…” Tim tilted his head. “Go by anything else?”

Colin grinned, showing off a gap in his teeth that Damian didn’t remember being there before. “Yeah. Abuse.”

“Ahhh…” Tim drawled, “Yeah, I’ve seen you around. Funny, you seemed bigger.”

“Hah, yeah. That’s what Batgirl said once.”

“You also definitely didn’t – don’t – seem to be the type to befriend Robin.”

Colin frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He…isn’t the easiest guy to get along with.” Tim sighed. He raised his hand and waved over to the waitress, pointing at Colin. “I know from experience.”

Damian reached over the table, gently flicking a speck of barbeque sauce at Tim’s neck. Tim didn’t notice.

“We went through some stuff with Zsasz a few years back.” Colin explained, like it was no big deal. The waitress appeared, giving him a menu. “But that kind of brings me to my point.”

“Oh? And what is that?” Tim asked as Colin eyed the menu suspiciously. “And get anything you want. My treat.”

The waitress stood there and waited while Colin decided. In the end, he picked a grilled cheese and tomato soup with a coke. “My point is…well, like I said. I haven’t seen Damian – or Robin, for that matter – in six months. In over six months.”

“So?” Tim muttered, looking back down at his own food. Damian could tell he was having a debate in his head. Because this kid, he didn’t know. He had no idea what happened to Robin. He hadn’t been there, hasn’t seen the aftermath. Was Tim supposed to tell him? Obviously he and Damian had been close, close enough that he’d come looking for answers. The truth was going to destroy him. Did Tim really have to…? “I’ve gone over six months without seeing Damian before too.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t seen Robin in those six months either.” Colin argued. “No one has. There’s been a lot of rumors…”

Tim looked up, locking eyes with the boy in front of him. Colin suddenly felt his stomach turn. He sat back, slumping against the booth. Maybe he didn’t want the answer after all. Damian had said that, while obnoxious, Red Robin was good. But surely Colin would be able to see if he was lying, right? Because right now, that’s what it looked like he was doing; trying to figure out some lie to make Colin go away.

“Tim…” he said slowly. The waitress suddenly returned with Colin’s order. He wasn’t feeling really hungry. “Where’s Damian?”

“Eat first,” Tim said, cutting back into his chicken. “You look famished.”
Colin paused, looking to press the issue. After a minute he leaned forward, taking one of the triangles of sandwich and dipping it into the soup.

“Call Grayson,” Damian said, leaning across the table. Maybe this would be one of the few times Drake could see him, sense his presence. It would be beneficial. “Call Todd. Hell, call Father. You don’t have to do this, Drake. You’ve done enough. You don’t have to care for Wilkes, too. It’s too much.”

“Damian…saved the city,” Tim mumbled. Colin stared at him as he drank his soda.

“That doesn’t answer where he is.”

Tim looked back up, the mask he attempted to hold up earlier completely shattered. Grief shined in his eyes. “He died doing so.”

Colin froze, hand stuck to his glass. “What?” He whispered.

“A few months ago,” Tim said quietly. “Leviathan.”

“Oh.” The boy’s voice was soft. His hand on the glass had begun to shake. Damian couldn’t tell if he noticed or not.

“I’m sorry, Colin. I didn’t know that you two were friends.” Tim said, reaching out. He put his hand over Colin’s. “If I did, if someone had told me, you would have known sooner. I would have told you right away.”

Colin was silent, staring down towards the table, at the space between their meals. Tim didn’t say anything, just continued to hold Colin’s hand, even after he felt the boy’s shaking stop. After a few minutes, Colin glanced up, “That…explains a lot.”

“Like what?”

“Why I don’t see Nightwing anymore. Damian said they were close. He’s taking it really hard, isn’t he?” Tim nodded. Colin’s gaze drifted back down “And Hood…most of the time when I pass where he and those other two people stay I hear him shouting. I’ve heard Damian’s name a few times. It never occurred to me that Damian might have…been killed. He called you all misfit brothers; I thought there was some family thing going on, that Damian was involved in. One time I passed by as Abuse and Hood was outside. I think he was drunk, but he recognized me. Told me to go home. That I shouldn’t be out there, that Gotham didn’t need another dead kid. Another dead hero. I didn’t know what he meant but I guess now…”

Colin finally looked up, his eyes filled with unshed tears. Tim didn’t think he’d ever felt so terrible.

“Colin…”

“Is…ah…is there a bathroom in here?” His eyes searched the diner. “Um, you know, never mind. I’ll just…um…I’m going to step outside. I just need a second.”

Colin tore his hand from Tim’s and moved towards the door. Tim followed. Damian sighed, phasing through the wall.

He found them in the alley. Colin against the wall, his hands on his knees, breathing heavily. Tim was watching him from the street, an attempt at giving him privacy. After a few minutes, Colin choked out, “What happened?”

“Nightwing was unconscious, I was trapped. Hood was indisposed and Batman was elsewhere.”
Tim said. “Robin decided to take on our enemy by himself. He saved lives when he did, but…he lost.”

A sob escaped Colin’s mouth, but he was otherwise silent as he shook his head back and forth trying to dispel the tears and emotions. “He was…my best friend.”

Tim moved forward as he saw Colin’s hands tightening on his knees. “He might hurt himself. I don’t know how the Venom will affect him with the emotions.” Damian called, leaning against the opposite wall of the alley mouth.

“I told him…I told him I wanted to help people, like the Justice League. Like you guys. And he gave me a way to do that.” Colin continued as Tim knelt in front of him. His red hair was falling across his face, but even from a few feet away, Damian could see a few tears gathering at the tip of Colin’s nose. Tim put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I never thanked him for that.”

Tim tried to smile. It looked wrong. “He’d never have wanted you to.”

Another sob wracked Colin’s body and Tim immediately gathered the boy into his arms. Colin accepted the affection, wrapping his arms around Tim’s neck, staring blankly at the wall in front of him. Already the tears were beginning to dry. Damian snorted. Colin never was one for crying anyway.

The diner bell rang and Damian glanced over to see the waitress coming out the door, two plastic boxes and Tim’s papers in her hands. She peeked around the corner, spotting Tim and Colin, and walked towards them. Colin didn’t notice her. Tim did. He moved to pull his wallet out, but the waitress shook her head as she placed the boxes and papers on the ground next to them.

“On the house,” she mouthed, pointing to Colin, as if that answered all Tim’s questions. Damian remembered: this was Colin’s favorite diner. Of course the staff would recognize him. She extended her hand, quickly stroking Colin’s hair before kissing his temple and disappearing back around the wall and into the diner. Tim smiled again, a real one this time. Damian smirked, knowing ‘on the house’ to his brother really meant ‘pay it back triple anonymously later.’

After a few minutes, Colin released himself from Tim’s hold, taking one last deep breath. “I’ll be okay, I think.”

“You’re a tough kid. I know you will.” Tim said, still perched on his knees, looking up at Colin. “But you don’t have to be right now. If it ever gets too much, or if you ever just need anything, don’t hesitate to call me, okay?”

Colin nodded as Tim handed him a card. “I’d like to…see where he’s buried. One day, not now, if that’s cool.”

“Of course,” Tim said warmly, picking up the boxes and papers and standing. He put an arm around Colin’s shoulders as he led him out of the alley. “Now, let’s get you home.”

Damian pushed himself off the wall, following closely behind. “Thank you, Drake.”
**Assistance**

Chapter Summary

It’s crazy, Dick knows it is. But it was worth a try anyway.

For the millionth time that night, Nightwing forced himself to take a deep breath. This was wrong, all wrong. He didn't want to be out here. He didn’t want to be in this stupid suit, wearing this stupid mask. He didn’t want to risk running into Bruce. That would just make everything worse.

He glanced up from his position on the fire escape as he heard the van door open. Soft voices, a yellowish light illuminating a pair sitting at some computer monitors. The female of the two standing outside the van pointed at one of the monitors, and someone inside set to work, evident by the suddenly blinking screen.

This was a stupid idea. There was no way this was going to work. But…there was nothing else he could do. He was going crazy. He couldn’t go to the manor anymore, he just burst into tears walking in the door, knowing what wasn’t there. Who wasn’t there. And Jason, that asshole. He’d promised to help find a way to bring Damian back. He knew how much Dick needed that, that reassurance if anything, but anytime the subject was brought up, Jason would divert the conversation to something else entirely. Dick even noticed that his brother was starting to ignore his phone calls most of the time, leaving Tim to dish out excuses for his absence.

Well, fine. If he wasn’t going to get help in raising the dead, maybe he could at least get help in talking to them.

Dick didn’t realize he was holding his breath until he felt his chest deflate in exhale. He leapt from the fire escape onto the roof of the van, steadying himself as the vehicle bounced under his weight.

The woman outside the car gave a shriek and her male partner took a step back as one of the men inside poked his head out. “W-we didn’t do nothing!” he shouted. “We got permits to be here, I swear it!”

Nightwing smiled, but he knew it didn’t look as charming as it normally did. “I have no doubt that you do, though I would like to see them just to make sure.” He said gently. “I’m actually here for… for something else.”

A third man hopped out of the truck while the one who spoke disappeared back inside, and Dick could instantly hear papers being shuffled. He went and stood by the couple who were still staring up in shock, spitting on the ground before speaking. “And what would this something else be?”

“Your trade,” Nightwing said. “Ghost hunters, right? Paranormal investigators. You go places and speak to the dead? Rumor has it you guys are some of the best in the business.”

“I don’t like to toot my own horn or anything but…” the man paused, giving Nightwing a look over. Nightwing returned the gesture, taking in the man’s slight beer belly, five o’clock shadow, bald head. “Why, who you looking for?”

A hand stuck out of the van, a few multi-colored sheets of paper crinkled among the fingers. “Right
here, mask-boy! Permits for everything from the parking space to the electric chord powering the monitors.”

Dick took the papers, inspecting the legality of the clauses. He could feel the eyes of all four citizens were stuck on him, but he ignored it. He was almost finished checking through the signatures when the bald man spoke, “Maria, go with John. Check out that third floor hallway again, yeah? Then head to the master bedroom of the penthouse, try to recreate the experience Franco claimed he had. Toto, you cool staying with the van?”

“Sure,” Toto said. “But where you going to be, Boss?”

“Private consultation,” he said, turning away and heading down the alleyway. “Follow me, Nightwing.”

Nightwing obeyed, walking behind the man as they entered the building next to the van through a side door. He could tell immediately that it was a former apartment complex. Run down now, though, mainly makeshift housing to the homeless or an office to drug dealers. Graffiti littered the walls they passed and quick peeks into a few of the rooms told of looting.

The man – Dick had a feeling he wasn’t going to be giving his name anytime soon, so he’d stick with the moniker of ‘Boss’ – motioned into one of the open doors and waited while Dick moved in first. Half of the carpet was ripped up, and a few of the bar stools and a love seat were broken, strewn across the floor of the living room. “There’s been rumors about you masked kids, too.” Boss said as he closed the door. “Who’d you lose?”

“What kind of rumors?” Dick countered.

Boss paused, seemingly sizing Nightwing up again. “Word on the street is the bird died. Robin. No one’s seen him.”

Dick found himself unable to hold eye contact. He turned away, shifting towards the dirtied window. The stain on the glass looked like blood; he didn’t bother trying to think of where it might have come from. “He was just trying to do what was right.”

Boss seemed to take that as a confirmation. “What was he to you?”

Nightwing turned. “Pardon?”

“Robin the Boy Wonder.” Boss explained. “It ain’t Nightwing and Robin. Everyone knows birdboy belongs – or, I guess, belonged – to the Bat. Then again, everyone knows all you vigilantes work together. What was Robin to you?”


“A child?” Boss asked. “Or your child?”

Nightwing didn’t answer. “Think you could find him?”

Boss took it in stride. “If he’s around, I can try.”

“If not?”

“Then it’s a wild goose chase, most likely.” Boss unhooked a bag that Dick didn’t realize was across his chest and began pulling out machines. “You can ask favors of other dead spirits. You know, ask them to go find him and what not, but that doesn’t mean they will. Doesn’t mean they’d be able to
communicate it if they did.”

“Oh…yeah, right.” Dick mumbled. Boss made another motion, telling Dick to sit down. Dick complied as the man came over and sat in front of him, lying a few machines out between them. “You’re not going to…I don’t know, ask me any personal information about him, are you?”

Boss chuckled. “I’ve worked with you masks before. I get the whole secret identity thing, even when you’re dead.”

Dick sighed, leaning his face onto his hands, running his fingers through his hair. “Of course you have. I got the recommendation from Arsenal.”

The hunter glanced up. “You okay? You seem…jumpy.”

“I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t even be trying this. I just…”

“Nightwing, I get it.” Boss interjected. “I lost a kid in my family once too. It’s not something you just…get over. No matter how hard you try. Me? This was way back, before I got into the ghost business. But I did the same. I went to psychics, mediums, the whole nine yards to just get a glimpse of the kid. Or a word from her.”

Dick nodded, still feeling apprehension, steeling himself for the disappointment of potential failure.

Boss finished tinkering with the machines and sat back. “You ready?” Dick leaned forward. “Okay, is there anyone in this room with us?”

Dick watched the machines for any movement or change. He’d never dabbled in the practice but it was easy enough to understand. The skinny thing by his ankle would light up if there was some sort of paranormal energy. The thick thing next to Boss’s hand seemed to measure a sort of electromagnetic field. There were two flashlights between them, obviously set a certain way, so if anything even brushed by them they would blink on. An audio recorder sat between them.

Boss continued. “I’m looking for a kid. A boy who goes by the name Robin.” After a moment, Boss looked at Dick. “The kid have any other nicknames?”

“Redbird.” Dick thought for a moment, and couldn’t keep the smile from his face. “Dami. He loved when people called him Dami.”

“And to think, Nightwing, I thought I actually liked you.” Damian spat from his perch on the windowsill. He’d been glued to Dick’s side since getting the intel that Nightwing would be on the prowl tonight. And seeing what his brother’s target was actually made him almost happy to have tagged along. After all, it wasn’t going to just please Grayson to speak to him. This was a two-way street. That didn’t change the fact, however, that Damian didn’t trust the likes of anyone who called themselves hunters of the paranormal.

Boss suddenly tilted his head, listening into the silence. His eyes shifted around the room before landing back on Nightwing’s mask. “I think I heard something.”

“What? What did you hear?”

“Can you say it again, Robin? If that’s you?” Boss called to the empty room. It took everything Dick had to not spin around in search of his brother.

The one thing that really bothered Damian about these ghost hunters was that they seemed to think once you died, you became an idiot. That didn’t stop him from enjoying any chance to mock them to
his full ability. Damian slowly floated over next to the man, leaning down right next to his ear.
“Nightwing, you simpleton. I said Nightwing.”

The machines on the ground all went off. The one closest to Dick began blinking while the other’s readings began to rise. “He’s here,” Boss breathed. “He said Nightwing.”

And Damian hated it. He hated that pathetic look of hope that appeared on his brother’s face at just the thought that he was still around. “Robin?” Dick whispered. “Is that really you?”


“The recorder is running,” Boss muttered. “We’ll check it when we’re done here.”

“Okay,” Nightwing said slowly. His face contorted slightly. “This doesn’t make much sense, though.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Why would he be here? I think I would have known if this building had some sort of meaning to him.” Instantly, he smiled. “Not that I’m complaining about it, though. If it’s really him.”

“Little known fact I guess. Ghosts and spirits don’t only haunt places. They can haunt people as well.” Boss said. He reached out and touched both flashlights. “Now, Robin. Dami. We’re going to do something here, okay? I’m going to ask you some yes or no questions, or Nightwing will, and depending on your answer, touch one of the lights. It’ll turn on.”

“This is a stupid game. I could probably throw that chair in the corner if I really wanted to,” He muttered, lying on his stomach next to the flashlights. “But fine. If it is helpful to him, I will do it.”

Boss smirked, and Damian wondered how much the man actually heard. He glanced at Dick, who didn’t seem to hear anything. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do.” Boss explained. He pointed to the light at his left. “Hit this one for yes, and this one for no. Do you understand? Can you demonstrate for us?”

Damian hesitated, staring at his brother. Slowly, he reached out and tapped the one for yes. Even behind the lenses of the mask, he could tell Dick’s eyes lit up as soon as the flashlight did. He leaned forward, clutching his knees, glaring at the torch as if Damian would manifest from it himself.

“Good. Turn it off?” Damian complied. “Alright, I’m going to ask you some questions, Robin. Think of it like those interrogations you and Batman did all the time, only less violent.” Dick chuckled at Boss’s attempt at humor. Damian just rolled his eyes. “They’ll mostly be yes or no, but if there could be different answers, I’ll specify. You ready, Nightwing?”

Dick gulped, but nodded. “Yeah.”

“Ask your own questions at any time.” Boss said, pressing a button on one of the devices. “So, Robin. You died. Are you stuck here on Earth?”

Damian hit the light for no. Two seconds later, he touched it again to turn it off.

“So, you could leave at any time you wanted?”

Yes.

“You have reasons to stay?”
Yes.

Dick interjected then. “Were you in pain?”

Damian didn’t answer.

“When you died,” He continued. Boss waited quietly. “When... when it happened, were you in pain?”

Still no answer. Because he knew what would happen. If he said no, Dick would know it was a blatant lie, and feel terrible. If he said yes, Dick would blame himself, and feel terrible.

“Please, Dami.” Dick whispered. “I just... need to know.”

Damian sighed in annoyance. He never could stand Grayson’s tendency to wear his heart on his sleeve. He hit the flashlight hard enough that it rolled slightly.

Yes.

“Yes.” Dick said after a moment. “I’m sorry, Robin. I should’ve-”

No.


Boss couldn’t stop his eyes from widening slightly. A spirit had never been that... vehement about an answer before. He watched as the torch rolled quickly back and forth and for once, felt that they were in danger of the object being thrown into the air. The bursts of light were quick, and... there was a feeling of anger suddenly in the room.

Nightwing seemed to sense the same, but actually understood what it meant. “The ‘what-ifs’ are always going to be there, kid. For me and Red, because he was there too. We needed to be there for you, be strong-”

The machine next to Boss’s hand shot across the room, smashing into the wall. Boss twitched in surprise, but kept his eyes glued to the flashlights and Nightwing. The masked man seemed oddly calm, oddly okay with the sudden tension in the room.

Damian was standing now, his hands balled into fists, glaring at Dick. “Stop it, just stop it!” He shouted. “What happened was nothing of your doing! It was me, Nightwing. My decision, my choice! The battle was getting out of hand, you and Red Robin were compromised. Did you really expect me to just hide? Let that... that monster keep attacking you?! Give him a chance to finish off Father or Todd?! Let Mother win?!”

“You know throwing a tantrum is never the way to get what you want,” Nightwing said quietly. His voice was light, almost amused. “I thought we talked about this.”

“You are insufferable,” Damian was exasperated, slumping back onto the floor, face sliding into his hands. “You can’t even hear me and you manage to be this obnoxious in retaliation. I don’t... I can’t even...”

“May I ask?” Boss said, fixing the flashlights back to their off positions, ignoring the thrown device.

“If I had to guess?” Nightwing glanced over at him, his shoulders slumped, but a content smile ghosting his lips. “Robin doesn’t blame me for what happened.”
“…And?”

“And he’s upset because I still do.”

“Ah. Understandable.” Boss shrugged, feeling the tension dissipate from the room. “Mind if we continue, Robin?”

Damian slapped the yes-light.

“Cool. So. Objectively. Was it Nightwing’s fault you died?”

No hesitation. No.

“No.”

“Red Robin’s?”

No.

Dick spoke again, “Batman’s?”

Hesitation.

“Hit this one for maybe, and this one for if you don’t know.” Boss said.

More hesitation.

I don’t know. Maybe.

“Okay. Back to yes or no. Your reason for sticking around. A good one?”

Yes.

“Would anyone ever believe you?”

Damian snorted a laugh.

No.

Boss stopped, looking up at Nightwing. “Anything you want to say, Wing?”

Dick was staring at the machine against the wall. “I miss you, kid. I don’t know how else to say it. It’s…tough. Really tough, you not being here.”

Boss nodded absently. “What about you, Robbie? I can’t guarantee we’ll hear you, but the recorder might pick it up for later.”

“Naturally,” Damian snapped. “Nightwing, you cannot dwell. If you do, I will have no choice but to send Titus and Bat-cow after you. Trust me, you don’t want that.”


“Robin liked animals.” He said. “And there was a certain cow he was very fond of.”

“Interesting.”

Damian shifted towards his brother. “It was painful to die, yes. But you know, Nightwing? It is more painful to see what you and the others are doing to yourselves. If I wasn’t already dead, I’m pretty sure it would be killing me, seeing the lot of you so…not yourselves. Unnerving. I don’t…I don’t
Suddenly, the door burst open, and the one called Maria was standing there. She looked between them before focusing on Boss. “You’re going to want to see this.”

“Can it wait?” Boss said coolly, clearly annoyed by the interruption.

“Not really.”

“Fine. Give me two minutes.” Boss waved her away. “I’m sorry to cut this short, Nightwing.”

“I understand. You’ve got a business to run. Can’t do that by helping out a mopey vigilante.” Dick smiled, standing and watching Boss retrieve the machine by the wall.

“Don’t sweat it. It’s my pleasure. Believe it or not, I was going to try and find your bird soon anyway. Or at least see if I could figure out if the rumors were true.” Boss moved over to his bag and began shutting down the equipment. “Robin saved my wife about a year or two ago. I never got the chance to thank him. Maybe this was a way I can, then. To let him speak to you again.”

Nightwing shook his head, “I don’t think—”

“I know my job is a little nutty, but don’t take me for a fool, Nightwing. I can tell just by looking at you that this kid was something to you. Something important. And whatever happened to him knocked you back about fifty pegs on a ten-step ladder. Here,” Boss held out the two flashlights and the recorder. “I got about fifteen of these in the truck. You take ‘em, you’ll put ‘em to better use.”

“Don’t you want to dissect the audio, though? Could be breakthrough for you, as an investigator.” Nightwing returned, slowly reaching his hands out.

“Doesn’t matter. Whatever that spirit said means more to you than it ever will to me. If it was picked up on the recorder at all, mind you,” Boss said, shoving the items into Dick’s hands. “It’s like you, in a way. You and your band of mystery heroes. I don’t do this job for the money or the recognition. I do it because it’s what I think is right. I do it because it might help people.”

“…Thank you.”

“Not a problem. Now just basically do what we did here. Find a quiet area, dark if you want, but doesn’t need to be. Be relaxed, have the flashlights turned just so. The recorder doesn’t necessarily be there, but if you want it, put it between the lights.” Boss explained, hefting the bag across his shoulder. He held out his hand again, a card between his fingers. “If it doesn’t work, or if you just think you need me again. Don’t hesitate to call, cool?”

“Yeah,” Dick took the card, staring at it for a moment before slipping it into the pocket on his sleeve. “And I hope you don’t need me. But if you do, Gordon at the police station should be able to get me real quick.”

“Deal.” Boss turned to the door. “See you ‘round, Nightwing.”

Dick waited until he heard the outer door close again before putting the two flashlights on the counter. “This one for yes, this for no. Are you still here, Damian?”

Damian rolled his eyes once more. Yes.

Dick smiled, but it was a broken one. Damian could tell he was seconds away from shattering. Again. “Were you…did you say something about Bat-cow?”
Yes.

“I haven’t seen her in a while. Think I should go visit?”

Yes.

Dick chuckled, but it was a sad sound. “Want to come with?”

“…You think you’re so funny, Grayson.” Damian muttered as Dick plucked the no-torch from the counter and turned it off, making it a non-option. Regardless the fact that he deemed it ridiculously immature, Damian tapped the remaining light anyway.

Yes.
Bruce cringed, slamming his eyes shut as he crumpled to the ground. It wouldn’t stop, it just wouldn’t stop.

“Father…? Why didn’t you…didn’t you come for me?”

He threw his hands over his ears, but it did nothing to stop the noise, the voice thick with tears. He began to cry himself.

“Wasn’t I…worth it?”

His breathing became short. Good, that’s good. Surely if he passed out, it would stop, right? His heart wouldn’t have to be torn out and over and over and over again. He wouldn’t have to see the blood pouring from his son’s chest, matching the tears falling from his face. Wouldn’t have to see that fear, that betrayal. The sight of a scared little boy, whose father, the one he looked up to, didn’t get there in time.

“Father?”

“I was, Damian, I swear. I was coming for you. I was on my way.” He was shouting. Maybe if he was louder than the voice, the voice would stop. It would leave him alone, stop tearing through his soul like a runaway train.

“I never believed you weren’t,” the voice changed. There were no tears in this tone, no fear. Very little pain. Footsteps moved towards him. Bruce hiccuped and opened his eyes, staring at the dark ground for a moment before looking up. Damian was striding towards him. Not Robin, not Brucie Wayne’s bastard child, just Damian. Jeans, a red hoody, sneakers. He seemed genuinely surprised at his father’s state as he continued forward.

Bruce didn’t hesitate. He lunged, taking Damian in his arms and squeezing him, almost as if the world would stop if he let go. The boy was limp for a second, confusion overtaking his muscles, before he returned the gesture. He cried into the boy’s hair, mutterings completely lost.

The voice was still there, but quieter now. And every time it sounded off, Bruce hugged Damian tighter. Damian was concerned, patting his father’s back every few seconds, but otherwise did nothing. “You hear it, don’t you, son?”

“Afraid not, Father.” Damian returned. “But…whatever it is, whatever’s happening, whatever you
hear, it isn’t real. Okay?”

“It is. Oh my god, it is…” Bruce continued, his shoulders beginning to shake.

“No, Father, it’s not. You’re in a dream,” Damian responded, lightly attempting to free himself from the hold. “A nightmare.”

“A…what?” Bruce loosened his grip, but not by much, and stared down at his child. Damian was leaning against his chest, staring up with owlish blue eyes.

“A nightmare.” He repeated. “And it’s only logical. You’ve barely slept since your return from Arkham four days ago. That mixed with overexertion, small amount of food you’ve eaten and the alcohol you drank at that museum opening last night? Bound to happen, I guess.”

“Arkham…?”

“What happened to you in there, anyway? Pennyworth told the Kryptonian that it was a routine test of some sort.” Damian said, slowly unwinding his father’s arms. “No one seemed concerned, and Abuse and Batgirl were going to bust Poison Ivy, so I opted to go with them instead of you. When I returned, Pennyworth seemed fidgety, the animals were nervous, and you had already locked yourself in your bedroom.”

Damian’s other voice was filtering in and out, in the background, still getting mixed with the sounds of Lincoln March, of *Thomas*, making it hard to concentrate on the here and now, on *this* Damian and his words. This Damian had escaped the hug, but kept his hands firmly on Bruce’s arms, demanding all attention. Any time Bruce began to look away, to get distracted by something in their surroundings, Damian would shake him slightly, until his focus came back.

“It…she…was in my mind. Reliving…everything…” Damian watched as his father failed to make a complete thought. Bruce was looking straight at him, but seemed to be seeing, or looking for, something else, his eyes sweeping up and down.

“Who was?”

Bruce opened his mouth to form a response when a loud sob echoed through the air.

“Didn’t I…wasn’t I good enough?”

Damian watched as his father’s eyes widened as he began to shake his head. Grief flowed from him as his knees started to buckle. He leaned forward, grasping Damian’s shoulders, trying to keep himself upright.

“Wasn’t I worth it?”

“Of course…you are, Damian. You are. I was coming. I swear, I was coming for you. If I had known beforehand, if I hadn’t been caught, I...” Bruce looked up, gaze landing on something behind Damian’s head. All the color drained from his face as tears began to fall from his face again. “Oh…no…please, no…!”

Damian turned. It wasn’t hard to see what his father was painfully focused on. In the blackness of the nightmare, his colorful body stuck out like a sore thumb. He seemed to be suspended in the air, stabbed through with a sword once more, only this time from the back. Blood poured from his chest, running down his leg and dripping into oblivion. The hood of his Robin costume covered his head, but his face was still visible, contorted into a look of agony and fear.
“In the end, why didn't you…didn't you…come for me?”

“Ah. That.” Damian muttered. Bruce had all but collapsed on him at this point. Damian watched as Robin continued through his pattern, saying the same phrases over and over, both blood and tears never ending. Before Bruce could react, Damian pulled away completely, watching as the older man sunk to the ground. Once he was sure his father wasn’t going to follow, breakdown or tackle him again, he moved towards himself, watching his dying muscles spasm and twitch.

“Fa…ther…”

“I’m coming, Damian. I…I’m coming…” Bruce called from behind him.

“Didn’t I…wasn’t I…” Damian walked up to himself, locking eyes. Robin couldn’t see him though. He wasn’t looking back. As expected, Damian mused, it was just a figment of his Father’s worst thoughts.

“Oh, shut up.” Damian snapped, waving his hand through Robin’s torso, the body instantly fading away around his fingers, the voice along with it. Damian turned back towards his father, sighing as he moved. “Annoying thing…”

Bruce looked up as Damian neared him. “You heard it?”

“Yes, I’d just tuned it out. It’d been going on like that for hours.” Damian crouched in front of the man. “It’s gone now, though. You’ll be alright.”

Bruce glanced around, as if he didn’t believe him. Satisfied that there was nothing else hiding in the darkness, he sat up a little, reaching a hand out to hold Damian’s face. Damian permitted the touch.

“I miss you,” Bruce said, running a thumb over Damian’s cheek.

“I miss you too, Father.”

“The others…don’t come by anymore.” He sighed, dropping his hand.

“I’m aware,” Damian nodded, shifting to sit at Bruce’s side. “It’s regrettable, but not unsurprising.”

“I know.” Bruce agreed. He let out a breath that was shaky and uncertain. Damian looked up at him as he leaned into his side. A smile appeared on Bruce’s lips as he put his arm around his child. “You are, you know.”

“I am…what?”

“Good enough. Better than good enough. More than worth it,” he sighed, resting his head on Damian’s. “You are worth more than the world, Damian, and not a day goes by that I don’t wish I could go back in time, find a way to save you, to keep you safe.”

“Interesting way to spend your time. I hope Gotham isn’t jealous,” Damian smirked. Bruce chuckled, giving the boy’s shoulder a sharp squeeze.

“I don’t think I ever thanked you,” Bruce muttered after a short pause.

“For?”

“For finally pulling me out of the dark.”

“It was the least I could do, I suppose. After all, you did that for me and then some.” Damian
grinned. Suddenly he looked off to the side and his grin grew wider. “Now you might want to wake up before Pennyworth gets to your door. He’ll be very cross if you don’t at least attempt to eat the ridiculously large waffle breakfast I believe he just made for you.”

Bruce turned to look in the direction Damian was and found himself staring at his bedroom door, sounds of Titus scratching and Alfred scolding filtering through the wood, smells of maple syrup and eggs accompanying them.

How…?!
Partners

Chapter Summary

Jason receives a visit from an old friend, and Damian is cautious about it.

Abuse slammed into the wall, sliding down it with a groan. “You bitch!” Damian cursed, gliding to a halt next to his friend. “I swear, if he’s hurt, I’ll—”

“You’re not all flashy like the Bat, so you might actually be able to help me,” the voice from the roof called. Damian looked up, only able to see her silhouette. Medium height, caped, vicious blades in her hand, dripping with Abuse’s blood. “Can you do that for me, mister?”

Abuse coughed, gripping the brick in an attempt to stand. His breathing heavy, he said, “Most people…ask first.”

“Sorry,” she purred, jumping down the fire escape, landing a few feet away, but remained in darkness. Damian’s instincts kicked in. He knew there was nothing he could do, but he stood protectively in front of his friend anyway. “But I’m a shoot first, questions later kind of gal.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you around here,” Abuse observed, pushing off the wall. Damian felt his anger rising as he noticed blood began spreading underneath the trench coat. “What can I help you with?”

The girl stepped forward. No mask, but an alarming shade of red hair. She was prettier than Damian remembered, but then again, she had disappeared two years prior, and was never mentioned after. For a time, he thought she had died, or given up the lifestyle.

“Where is the Red Hood?”

Abuse huffed in annoyance, spitting blood against the pavement. “How the hell would I know?”

“Don’t give me that, you little twerp.” She snapped. “I’ve seen you with the Bats. You may not be an official member of their posse, but they trust you.”

“Tell her nothing, Wilkes.” Damian barked.

Abuse paused, seemingly to weigh his options. After a few moments, Damian dropped his position, turning to his friend. Abuse sighed. “Why?”

“Hood’s a friend of mine,” she said, almost sadly. “We lost touch a couple years ago. Some intel brought me back through Gotham, though. And I want to compare notes.”

Abuse nodded, chewing on his lip in thought. Damian exhaled, crossing his arms. His friend was such a pushover. “Fine. If he’s here at all, the apartment above Frankie’s Bakery, halfway down First Avenue, in the older part of the city.”

She smiled. “Now was that so hard?”

As the woman turned away, Damian cringed as Abuse’s hand shot through his body, clutching her
arm. “Don’t hurt him,” he growled. “You hurt him, or anyone else, I will hunt you down and return the favor.”

She immediately tugged her arm away. Her voice low and threatening as she warned, “Careful, tiger.”

Damian jumped up, catching the niche that allowed him to float, and followed the woman, glancing back only once to see Abuse lean back against the wall, examining his wounds. “Call Nightwing, I think he’s closest to here. It’ll give him something to do.”

As the redheaded woman turned the corner, Damian made a mental note to check on Colin in the morning.

~~

It would be Harper to answer the door.

“Can I…help you?”

“Jason Todd. The Red Hood. Is he here?” The woman was not subtle. Damian studied her posture. She was tense, furious almost. She hadn’t put her blades away yet. Colin’s blood had dried on the metal.

Harper immediately became defensive. “May I ask who’s-”

“Scarlet.” She said. “Tell him it’s Scarlet, and that I need to talk to him. Alone.”

The archer stared at her for a moment before nodding and closing the door. Damian debated just phasing through the wall, but decided against it. The sight of both Harper and, no doubt, the alien badgering Todd about the late-night arrival is something he really didn’t need to witness.

Todd and his redheads. He was getting almost as bad as Grayson.

(Not that Damian was one to talk.)

The door reopened to the Tamaranian pulling a now coated-Harper out. She regarded Scarlet with a critical eye, silently giving the woman the same warning as Abuse had. As she continued to tug the grumbling man down the stairs, she said, “He is just getting out of the shower, and will be in the bedroom farthest from the kitchen.”

Scarlet nodded a thanks and went inside, pocketing her knives. Damian followed behind, seeing the anger roll off the woman. He wondered what had happened. He tried to think back to the days of Professor Pyg and when that organization kidnapped her to get back at Todd. She didn’t have any other family that he knew of, or many friends outside of the former Robin either, which is what made the two-year hiatus even more mysterious.

The hallway was short, but all the doors were open except for one. Scarlet moved quickly towards it, not even bothering to knock. Instead, she kicked it open and stood in the doorway, hands balled into fists. Jason stood there, a strange mixture of shock and expectation covering his face. He seemed to know he didn’t have time, opting to put his trousers on first. He had been reaching for a shirt when the door was slammed into the wall.

“Sasha…” he muttered, abandoning the t-shirt. “Long time no see.”

“You didn’t tell me,” she hissed. “Why didn’t you tell me? How could you not tell me?!”
Her voice rose with every question, each one letting out a little more anger. Jason watched her for a moment, glancing away only once to measure the distance to his guns. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Robin!” she screamed.

“Hrm,” Jason mumbled, turning back towards the closet. “Didn’t know you two were so close.”

“Close has nothing to do with it. He was a good kid. Good soldier, and those are your words.” She walked into the room, stationing herself at the window. Damian tensed when he saw her put a hand on one of her blades. “He saved my life at least once. More, depending on who you asked. He was my partner for brief moments and both our teams kept tabs on each other.”

“None of this justifies you busting into my nice little apartment here and scaring my friends…” he trailed off as his phone beeped on the nightstand. He read the message and frowned. “…or attacking another Gotham costume. Really, Sasha? Abuse?”

“Couldn’t find your buddy Nightwing.”

The frown deepened. “Look, whatever grudge you have against me on this topic, you take it out on me, got it? You leave Batman alone, you leave Red Robin alone, and you sure as hell leave Nightwing alone.”

Jason’s tone finally made Sasha flinch. “After all we’ve been through, you and me, you thought I wouldn’t want to know that a guy we teamed up with had been killed in action?”

“You’re not exactly easy to find,” Jason sat on the end of the bed. “Remember, when we parted ways, we made sure to cover every track you had. Well, we did an awfully good job of it, because unless you call me I can’t find you. And believe me, I’ve tried. Pretty dumb in the long run, but it’s safer for you. And that’s all that matters.”

Sasha sighed, sitting next to Jason. “It’s more than that, Jay. It’s…well, you knew him, right? Better than you let on. He was a weird sort of family to you, right? Him and that Batman we fought. Not the one running around now, but a different one.”

Damian moved around the bed, flipping the volume switch on Jason’s phone to silent. This sounded like a talk that maybe needed to happen. He then stood next to Sasha, pausing to make sure the girl didn’t notice his presence.

“Yeah, you could say that.” Jason’s laugh was dry. “He was like the little brother I never wanted.”

“And you didn’t tell me he died.” Sasha repeated. The anger was still there, but subdued. Gentle. Like a mother scolding her child. “And I couldn’t help you.”

Jason looked up at her, confused. Sasha shifted, putting her hand against his face. Damian took the opening and lashed out, unclipping the knives from her belt and watching as they tumbled onto the comforter. He’d seen the two of them fight before. Jason was stubborn and Sasha was rash. If Jason didn’t listen to whatever message Sasha was trying to deliver, the whole situation could get violent quick.

“What?” Jason whispered.

“You will always be my friend, Jason. You know that, right?” she smiled, exasperated, as if she’s had to tell Jason this a million times. “And when I heard that Robin had been killed, yes I was sad for him, but somehow I suspect that’s what he would have wanted anyway, dying in battle.”
“Probably. He was a weird little shit about that kind of stuff.”

“But then I thought of you,” Sasha continued. “I know you’re in the Bat’s inner circle, but none of you are close.” She stopped for a moment, seemingly unhappy with how she was explaining things. “You’ve been there to comfort everyone else through the loss. You mentioned the other three earlier. Who’s been there for you?”

“No one needs to be there for me,” Jason moved away from her hand. “I’m not upset about it.”

“Really?”

“I’ve made my peace with what happened. I’m just watching to make sure the others can, too.”

Sasha full out laughed. “Jason Todd, you are the worst liar I’ve ever heard.”

“You’re just noticing now?” Damian murmured, continuing to push the knives out of reach.

After a beat of silence, Jason laughed too. Just once, and it was a soft sound. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Come here,” Sasha whispered, wrapping her arms around Jason’s bare shoulders. He allowed the embrace, leaning into her neck. As Damian completed his task of hiding the blades beneath the blanket, he looked up to see Sasha slowly start to stroke Jason’s hair. “The two who left, they don’t quite get it, do they?”

“Roy does,” Jason sighed. “He lost his daughter a few years back. Kori…I don’t know. Maybe. But they don’t…I don’t want them to do anything. It’s not their burden to think about.”

“I bet they’d be willing, though. If you let them.”

“Probably. Roy’s all about that kind of sunshine and rainbows crap.” Jason closed his eyes. “You know what the worst of it all is?”

“Hm?”

“It was his mother.” There was darkness in Jason’s voice. “His own goddamn mom. That’s who killed him. And don’t get me wrong, the woman was a bitch, but of all the people in the world who I thought might off the brat, it was never her.”

“Poor kid.” Sasha muttered, leaning her head on Jason’s and staring out the nearby window. Damian shrunk into curtain he was now standing by. “What happened to her?”

“Shot, point blank.” Sasha looked down, trying to catch a glimpse of Jason’s face. “Not by me, though. Not by anyone who should have. One of Batman’s old flames. It’s…complicated.”

“As it always is.”

“To make things worse, someone stole the kid’s body from his grave. He had a shitty life and is apparently going to have a shitty death too. No one’s going to let him rest in peace.” Jason ran his hand down his face. “Jesus, I’m not even supposed to know that. Nightwing doesn’t know that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it would absolutely destroy him. And we can’t have that.”

“How’d you find out?”
“My old caretaker told me to keep an eye out during my travels. I don’t think he got authorization to tell me that, though.”

“Ah. My lips are sealed then.” They sat in silence for a few moments. Damian glanced out the window just in time to see Starfire flying across the sky. He looked back to see that Jason still had his eyes closed, hand resting on Sasha’s leg. Sasha, however, was staring at the window, and had no doubt seen the alien. “When are your friends due to return?”

“Whenever I call them. So probably not until tomorrow morning at the earliest.” Jason’s fingers twitched against her skin. “Would you like to stay?”

“Only if you want me to.”

“What if I need you to?” Jason countered. The walls were down, and it’d be a while before he would be able to put them back up. “It’s been a while, Sasha. If you came all this way to bitch at me about my repressed emotions, then we’ve got a lot more to cover than just the poor dead bird. Not to mention I want to hear what you’ve been doing. You can’t get away that easy.”

“Well, in that case,” Sasha said, unwinding her arms and standing. Jason made a small noise of disappointment. “Where do you keep your beer?”

Jason fell back against the bed. “Fridge.”

“Great. Find yourself a shirt and I’ll be back in a few.” She smirked. “Or don’t. I’ve already seen four new scars that I can’t wait to hear the stories behind.”

Damian followed Sasha back out to the kitchen, planning to leave. Todd was enough like Grayson that a night of talking and alcohol could lead to something he really did not want to think about. As he reached the door, Sasha cleared her throat.

“I wouldn’t have stabbed Jason.” She called. Damian spun around. She wasn’t looking at him. Instead, she was unfastening her cape, staring at one of the arrows Roy had left on the counter. “I would never physically wound him, no matter how mad at him I was.”

Damian narrowed his eyes. Sasha chuckled.

“I can’t see you, but I know you moved my knives. I can hear you too, but barely. Like wind or something. It started happening a while ago. Not just you, a bunch of weird voices. I saw a therapist once. He seemed to think it was an effect of that dollotron mask.” She moved around like she’d lived in the apartment all her life. “But I…just wanted to say I’m sorry. It probably sucked, dying. But don’t you worry about ol’ Red Hood, okay? You take care of Batman. Nightwing too, if you have the time. But leave Hood to me. I’ll take it from here.”

Sasha didn’t wait for a response. Not like Damian had one anyway. She grabbed four bottles from the fridge and glided back to the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Damian sighed as he phased through the door. He didn’t trust her and he didn’t really like her, but one thing was for sure. Sasha understood his brother better than he ever could. And she would be able to help him through his emotions and grief with much more ease than any of them. He wouldn’t stop checking in, wouldn’t stop making sure his brother was okay. But for now, maybe just this once, he could stop worrying. Because for now, a part of his family was okay. A part of his family was…

Happy.
For an all to brief, shining moment, one of them was happy. And that was more than enough.
Stray

Chapter Summary

Damian finds a kitten. Being dead, he can’t do anything to help it. But Drake can.

The kitten was hurt.

Thunder crashed overhead, almost drowning out the waning gunshots from two streets over. Closer, a prostitute and her client of the hour made disgusting noises from behind the dumpster. A glass bottle smashing and shouting echoed from the fire escape above.

But the kitten was hurt.

It was Gotham on a typical night. Every hero and ally Damian could think of was out on the town. Even Nightwing had been seen jumping across a few rooftops, angrily and viciously beating criminals he may not have otherwise. In fact, Damian was on his way to somehow stop his crumbling older brother when he came across the scene before him. It wasn’t hard to figure out what had happened, judging by the surrounding carcasses. People of Gotham City didn’t just take their rage out on each other, they took it out on the strays and furry too. Taking in all the other nearby sounds, he could only guess the argument upstairs was a break-up, and at one point the fight had been about the felines, since “Cleopatra isn’t even your cat!” was a repeating retort. Wasn’t hard to hypothesize, not when a cat with a collar and tag matching that name lay lifeless nearby, two bullet-riddled kittens next to her.

In a fit of anger, the mother and her babies had been thrown from the apartment two floors up. Then in a moment of cruelty, some backstreet badass decided to test his new gun on a target that wouldn’t fight back. Damian knew who they were. If he was correct, it was Nightwing’s current target, using the alleyways as a supposed secret passageway. And five minutes ago, Nightwing was right on their tail.

The kitten was hurt.

Damian could quell Nightwing’s anger another night.

He knelt next to the creature, which was mewing hoarsely, trying to crawl towards its mother and siblings on a broken front leg. “Shhh,” Damian cooed. The kitten turned its head slowly, crusty eyes blinking. “You’re okay now, friend. I will take care of you.”

Unfortunately, he found instantly, the kitten’s mass was too much for his ghostly hands. All he could do at this point was stroke the creature, who seemed to be taking to him rather quickly. It had turned from its family, now opting to cuddle between Damian’s knees.

A crash came from the rooftop, followed by some ridiculously fast words, and a sarcastic-sounding response. Damian looked up just in time to see the younger Kryptonian, a golden lasso, a speedster (briefly), and a green mountain goat hopping the gap between buildings.

Drake’s team.

Drake was in town?
He didn’t hesitate, dissipating from the ground to the roof and examining the group. Drake was, of course, in the middle of the battle with the enemy, a fat, half naked man with some sort of fire-based weapon. He seemed to be working alone and had no hostages, just there to cause general havoc, so surely could be handled by the rest of the team.

That kitten was hurt, dying probably, and right now that was all Damian cared about.

“Beast Boy!” he called.

“What?” the green now-gorilla shouted, annoyed. Clearly, he thought Damian was just one of the teammates behind him, not recognizing the tone. Relief flooded Damian’s system when his theory worked. Garfield Logan was animal enough to have that sixth sense.

“I need Drake. Can you handle this on your own?”

“…what?” Garfield started to turn, but at the last moment, saw Kid Flash needed his help. “You need Red...? What fo-”

“I said, can you handle this?!” Damian pushed.

“Yes!” Garfield snapped.

“Then do not be concerned. Red Robin will be in the alleyway below you when you are finished.” Damian moved towards his brother. At that moment, Tim flipped away from the man, perching expertly on the edge of the roof. Perfect.

“Gar, who’re you-” Tim started, but felt two hands hit against his chest. He teetered on the ledge, trying to regain his balance, when he felt a tug against his cape. All hope was lost then, and the only thing he could do was try to stick a landing that wouldn’t break his legs.

It wasn’t as graceful as he wanted. He landed in the dumpster, garnering a shriek and curse from a couple making out next to it. He groaned as he heard the tap-tap of the woman’s heels running away. Sitting up, he looked around. Surely, this guy didn’t have a partner, did he?

He did a sweep of the alley and saw nothing, though there was an incessant meowing somewhere close. Midway through his second probe, he froze. Damian was standing in front of the dumpster, arms crossed, face angry but urgent.

“Damian,” he breathed. The boy opened his mouth, speaking, but there was no sound. He shook his head. “I don’t…I can’t hear you…”

Damian sighed, arm stretching out in a point to the ground a few feet away. Tim followed the direction as he hopped out of the trash. He walked forward until he came upon the bodies of three dead cats, and one not far from the same fate. He was about to look back at Damian when the boy was suddenly kneeling in front of him, trying to push the still-living kitten away from the others. The animal meowed sorrowfully, nestling against Damian’s cupped hands.

The spirit looked up expectantly. “You want me…to save the cat?”

Damian nodded as if it were obvious.

A blast reverberated from the roof. “Damian, I would love to but…I’m kind of…busy…”

The little kitten seemed to only just realize Tim was there, and looked up in fear. Tim still couldn’t hear him, but could see Damian speaking. The kitten seemed to relax, shuffling slowly over to Tim’s
boots, mewing excitedly at him. Damian crossed his arms again.

Tim exhaled and rolled his eyes as he bent down to scoop the kitten up. Its fur was sticky with blood, the front paw was broken, and that stuff around its eyes looked none too healthy. And that was only a preliminary examination. Damian stood up, continuing to stare. Tim tried to think of a reason why he couldn’t, why he shouldn’t, do this menial thing Damian was asking of him, but it was futile.

“Red!” a shout came from above. Tim glanced up to see Kon floating above him. “You alright?”

“Peachy,” Tim said. “All done up there?”

“Yup.” Kon nodded. Other members of the team looked down from the roof or airspace around it. “Where to next?”

“…Home, for me.” Tim sighed. Damian smirked.

“Why?” Kon shifted. “What’re you got there?”

“Kitten.” The animal squirmed in Tim’s hands, but eventually began to rub its face against his thumb, curling up against the warmth of his gloves. “I think its family was killed by some gunners back here. It’s hurt but…I might be able to nurse it back to health. Enough to get it adopted or something, maybe.”

“What is it with you bat-folk taking up strays all the time?” Kid Flash called from the roof.

Tim glared at Damian, who was still whispering things to the kitten, with the kitten responding loudly. Damian looked up, his smirk softer as he mouthed a “Thank you.”

“It has been a long day, though…” Kon muttered, looking up at the team. “Maybe we should call it a night? Head back home ourselves? It seems your Gotham people have most things under control, and Gar, I know you got cut up pretty bad…”

“I agree.” Wondergirl called, starting to fly away. “And I’m dying for a meal. Like a real meal. None of that microwave stuff we’ve been forced to live off in Iceland for the past month…”

The team took off then, talking about food and other things they wanted to do that evening. Tim looked down at the cat who was quickly falling asleep. “You’re going to come check on it, aren’t you?”

Damian grinned.

“Who’re you talking to?” Kon called, apparently waiting for his friend.

“No one.” Tim said, gently putting the kitten in one of the bigger pouches on his utility belt. It wasn’t ideal, but it would be safer, and warmer, there. Damian didn’t object. The kitten didn’t either, judging by the little kneading claws against Tim’s side as he shot a line towards the roof.

“So…” Kon mused from beside him as he swung onto the roof. Damian was waiting for them up there. “What’re you going to name him?”

“She, actually.” Tim said, checking on the kitten one last time. She looked up, bright blue eyes accented by the fuzzy calico face. Kon laughed. “And I don’t know…I’m thinking Desdemona.”


Tim shrugged, glancing at Damian, who was rolling his eyes, but nodding with a smile. “It’s from
Othello. You know, the play? Kind of a family tradition for pets, Shakespearian names.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean…look at Damian’s dog.” Tim said, closing the pouch and shooting another line. He tried to ignore the flinch Kon gave at the mention of their fallen teammate. “His name is Titus – from Titus Andronicus? – and he’s pretty awesome.”

“KF was right,” Kon said exasperatedly, but following. “You bat-folk are weird.”

“Maybe,” Tim chuckled, looking back across the roof. Damian was gone. “But I have a feeling someone out there will appreciate it.”
Hope Torn Apart

Chapter Summary

In the midst of battle, Nightwing realizes he has nothing to be fighting for. Damian disagrees.

Chapter Notes

Lyrics at the beginning of each section are from: 'Bleeding Out' by Imagine Dragons, 'Mirror' by Justin Timberlake, 'Safe & Sound' by the Civil Wars and Taylor Swift, 'Fix You' by Coldplay, and then the title 'Ghosts That We Knew' by Mumford & Sons

Trigger warning: technical suicide attempt

And what was right is wrong

It was getting harder and harder to find a reason to fight anymore. Not when it didn’t matter. Yeah, justice. That’s what Bruce would say. But even then, what justice was there anymore? The good ones – the innocent ones – always ended up suffering in the end, no matter what.

Dick used to fight for the innocent. But then he lost one too many times.

The faceless villain hit him again, for the umpteenth time, raging about how easy the battle was. Nightwing didn’t even have it in him to make a quip back. He threw a kick – a hard one, he thought – but the enemy caught his foot and twisted it, throwing him off to the side, into a concrete wall. Air was immediately sucked out of his lungs as he slid down the wall, past the platform the battle had just occurred on, a trail of blood left in his wake.

They’d been fighting for at least a half an hour now, and it was clear Dick was losing. At this point, Dick couldn’t even stand up. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to dodge another blow, should his opposition feel the need to deliver one.

He wasn’t sure he wanted to either.

~

Close my eyes to my recent disgrace

“Apologies, Nightbat, or whatever you call yourself. But I forgot to mention that I had a previous engagement. Please don’t take offense that I will be unable to come find you and your beaten self at the current time,” the villain called. The lights to the warehouse suddenly snapped off. There was a sneer in his faraway voice. “That is, if you’re still alive at all.”

Dick almost laughed at that as he leaned himself up against the wall. Alive.

He hadn’t been alive for a long time.
Silence overtook the now empty building. He could feel himself smiling as his vision started to become fuzzy and dark. Relief. Maybe this time is would be permanent.

No. He couldn’t do that. Not to Tim. Not to Jason. Or Alfred. Bruce…

But.

Damian.

He could see Damian again.

And that would make it worth it. Make everything worth it.

He tapped his distress signal anyway.

He hoped they didn’t make it.

~~

Oh, they gave me such a fright

He couldn’t believe it. For the first time in his life (and death) he was speechless.

Damian had been snooping around Todd’s apartment when the call came in. Todd and Drake were having some sort of lunch-meet in the kitchen, though thus far all they’d done was watch strange internet videos and complain about Bruce. He knew something was wrong immediately, when both of their phones let out a high pitch shrill at the same time.

As he came back into the kitchen, he could hear Drake already listing out details. It was Dick, coming from the warehouses on the other side of town. Last any of them knew, Dick was on patrol alone, and the computers were showing his vitals as less than good.

Damian wasn’t too concerned, not right then. They’d all ended up almost dead once or twice on a routine case. It wasn’t anything new. But after he teleported himself to Dick’s location, he could feel that something was wrong, the panic rising in his chest. In the darkness of the rotting building, he could see Grayson across the floor, sitting slumped against the wall. His uniform was ripped to shreds, blood running down his arms and torso, dripping to the growing puddle around him.

Grayson’s mask was off, thrown a few feet away. Damian’s stomach churned as he noticed a sick smile on his brother’s face, blood mixing with the tears running down his cheeks.

This wasn’t routine anything. This was different.

“Grayson…” Damian mumbled. Dick’s eyes twitched towards one of the windows. Damian didn’t realize he was running until he was halfway across the floor.

“Grayson!”

~~

The vacancy that sat in my heart

He didn’t know when he started crying. But he could feel the change in density as the tears began to alternate with the blood bouncing off his neck. He couldn’t feel his wounds anymore. To be honest, he couldn’t feel much of anything anymore. All he knew was how happy he was going to be when he saw his little brother again.
He’d tried. Really, he did. He tried to be himself again after Damian was killed. He did it for Tim’s sake, who’d already lost enough for a hundred lifetimes. He did it for Jason, so he didn’t have yet another reason to be a murderer. He did it for Alfred, because no grandparent should have to bury three grandsons.

But he couldn’t. Richard John Grayson died when the eleven-year-old who only wanted to be good – only wanted to be loved – did. Sure, time heals all wounds, but it can’t completely fix them. Not when that last piece of the puzzle is six feet under ground.

It was an unconscious thing, he’d figured that out a few weeks ago. He’d shoot his grapple to less than stable anchors. He wouldn’t move as quickly during a fight. He’d haphazardly stitch himself up, sometimes not even using disinfectant. He wasn’t necessarily killing himself, but rather not stopping anyone else from trying. Accidental suicide.

It wasn’t just that he felt he had nothing to fight for anymore. He had nothing to live for either.

He didn’t tell the others when he realized what he was doing, not when Tim was trying so hard to cheer him up, staying close even though the younger man had enough on his plate as it was.

Maybe it was because he didn’t want them to stop him. It’s not like he was going to stop himself.

He just needed to see Damian.

He found himself smiling at one point, too, along with the tears. It was coming this time. He could feel it. He was going to win.

“You are, you are the love of my life

Blue eyes met.

Damian collapsed at his mentor’s side, hands held up as if he wanted to grab something, hang onto something, but there was so much damage, all he could do was drag his eyes across the wounds.

Not like it would have mattered. Ghosts couldn’t stop blood flow anyway.

“Just hang on, Grayson. Drake is on his way. Todd too, I think,” Damian began to speak quickly, not sure who, exactly, he was trying to reassure. “Just hang on, okay?”

Dick snorted. “Death is a nicer guy than I thought.” Damian looked up at his face. “Sending my little brother to pick me up.”

Damian narrowed his eyes. “What the hell are you thinking?!?

His eyelids fluttered as he frowned. “I’m thinking…that I miss you.”

Damian didn’t say anything. He didn’t completely expect an answer. Dick’s tears began to run faster.
“It’s too hard, Damian. I tried. I swear, I did.” He choked out. “I’d already lost one little brother. Did you really expect me to lose another and be okay with it?”

“No one did, Grayson,” Damian stated calmly. He rocked back and forth, watching as Dick’s eyes followed his movement. He could see him.

*Dick could see him.*

“But that’s part of our lifestyle. Death in battle was always a risk. *Is* always a risk.”

“Not for you,” Dick sobbed. “Not for you. You were a little boy, Damian! You were a little boy and I *loved* you.”

“I know, Grayson.” Damian said gently. It wasn’t hard to see the man was delusional. From blood loss, exhaustion, malnutrition – take your pick.

Dick coughed, blood sputtering out of his lips.

“My little boy,” he whispered. “It was hard enough when you lived with Bruce, you know? Did you know I would make up reasons to stop by? Jason laughed at me once. Told me I shouldn’t do that. I wasn’t your mother. I said of course I wasn’t. I’m *better* than your mother.”

Damian couldn’t help the small smirk on his lips.

“And when you died I…hell, I don’t even remember how I got home,” Dick said, reaching his hand out slightly to Damian’s arm. “Nobody gets me anymore, Damian. You were there after I lost Haly’s. But now, there’s no one there when I lost you.”

“You have Drake.”

Dick didn’t respond. Instead, he closed his eyes. Damian’s stomach dropped slightly and he leaned forward. He wasn’t going to watch his brother die. He couldn’t.

“G-Grayson…”

“Sometimes, I’ll hear something at my apartment and it’ll remind me of you. Other times, I’ll hear something and I’ll think it *is* you,” Dick’s eyes snapped open. His pain was palpable. “Do you know how awful it is to realize that it’s not? To realize that it’s not you, that it can never be you?”

“Grayson, you know you can-”

“I can’t stand you just being a figment of my imagination anymore,” Dick said, turning his head away. His voice monotone. “Death is proving be a lot less painful.”

“But I’m not,” Damian gritted his teeth as he leaned forward, taking Dick’s face in his hands, turning it to look at him. “I’m *not*. Richard, I’m *right here.*”

~~

*When all those shadows almost killed your light*

Dick didn’t think he could open his eyes any wider. Everything was suddenly sharp. And Damian was there – *actually there* – and his hands were so small, and so warm and –

“You can’t do this,” Damian said quietly, angrily. “I will never forgive you if you killed yourself, Richard Grayson. Do you understand me?”
His tears were uncontrollable as his sobs muddled his voice. “But I can’t do this without you, Damian.”

“You can.” Damian countered. “You will.”

“I won’t.” Dick felt his eyes wince, trying to blink. The tears were blurring his vision, but he wouldn’t blink them away, not now. Damian would disappear if he did. Damian wouldn’t be here. Not unless he woke up on the other side. Not unless…

“You have a hell of a lot more to live for than me,” the ghost boy said softly. And he was indeed a ghost. Dick’s heart still broke at the realization, even months after. The boy was transparent, his vivid features still there, but faded.

“No I don’t. You were my brother. You’re more than my brother.” Dick whispered. “It’s stupid, you were almost like my…”

Dick couldn’t finish the sentence. He had no right to claim the boy as his child. Not in a million years. But Damian seemed to know the word left unsaid anyway, as he smiled again. “Another lifetime, perhaps.” He said calmly, glancing backwards towards the warehouse opening. “We really were the best, weren’t we? I told you that.”

“I loved you,” Dick repeated, wishing he could reach up and ruffle the boy’s hair, but his arm couldn’t move. It hurt too much, to the point it was starting to go numb. He thought over his words and felt his scrunch up in distaste. Past tense, loved. He couldn’t say that when the boy was right here, sitting in front of him. “I love you.”

“You said,” Damian responded. “But do you know who loves you?”

“I don’t care, Damian. I don’t care. I’d rather…I want to be with you. I-”

“Robin has died before. I do believe the world would stop turning if Nightwing did too,” Damian said, dropping one hand from Dick’s face to reach for the communicator that had been thrown on the floor. As his fingers brushed the dented metal covering, Dick suddenly shifted his arm, pushing the device farther away. “Grayson!”

“Leave it,” Dick ordered. “I don’t want them to find me.”

“But I do,” Damian snapped, standing and going after the communicator. He felt Dick twitch and give out a small noise of despair as he moved away. “And I’m going to make sure they do, whether you want it or not.”

Dick huffed in a sulk. “Well, I broke it. So good luck with that.”

Damian moved behind the communicator and crouched next it, making sure he could still make eye contact with Grayson at any given moment. He could tell the man’s adrenaline was draining, he wasn’t ranting off his nonsense as much anymore, though after a beat of silence, Damian could hear the quiet repetition of “I love you, Damian. I just miss you. I tried, I really did. I love you…”

~~

**Hopelessness is sinking in**

He looked down at the communicator and frowned. Grayson’s delusions must have been worse that he thought. Grayson claimed to have broken it, but it barely had a scratch. Just the dent from the fall Damian assumed it encountered, judging by the blood trail on the wall. Everything was still in
working order, and, after pressing a few buttons, he could see two flashing dots quickly advancing to the location. A third one was coming from the direction of the manor, but was much farther behind.

“Why can I see you?” he heard Dick whisper. He sounded like a child. Frightened and upset.

Damian snorted as he kicked the communicator back in the direction he came from. “Perhaps someone up above loves you. Or hates you, depending on how you view the situation.” Dick’s eyes were following him, so he moved slowly as not to jar his mind anymore than it already was. Gently, he knelt next to his brother, looking over his injuries once more. “To be honest, I do not know how my paranormal abilities work, nor really what makes them do so. They are what they are.”

Dick tried to nod, but found it too exhausting. “Is it selfish of me to say that this isn’t enough?”

Damian looked back up at him. Grayson’s eyes were fluttering again. Not good. “Yes it is. I know you’re a true believer in the power of physical affection, but your sight and sound will have to suffice.”

“Oh,” Grayson sounded like he was pouting. “You never let me have any fun, Damian.”

His voice was light, barely even passing his lips. “Grayson,” Damian called as his head began to fall. Dick jerked back up, but his eyes were still drooping. He grabbed the man’s arm, giving it as tight a squeeze as he could, “Grayson, you need to fight it. Do you hear me? You cannot fall asleep.”

“Sorry, Dami,” he said, the smile reappearing on his lips as his eyes shut. “I’m going to be selfish today.”

~~

**Bury my heart next to yours**

“No, Grayson,” Damian heard the desperation in his voice as he surged forward once more. “Grayson, please.”

Dick softly hummed in response. Damian looked down at the blinking dots on the communicator. They weren’t close enough yet. If he lost consciousness now, they weren’t going to make it.

“I’m sorry I left you, Grayson,” Damian said quickly. “I knew you cared. I did. I just didn’t realize how much. I didn’t realize you’d go this far.”

Dick didn’t respond. Damian sighed, “Please, Grayson. Don’t do this to Father. Don’t…don’t do this to Drake. Or anyone else.”

Damian felt Dick respond to mention of Bruce. His body tensed slightly as he breathed quickly through his nose. His eyes opened a crack. “He didn’t protect you.”

“And you’re going to punish him like this?” Damian glanced back at the communicator. A diversion tactic, perhaps? He could work with this.

Dick huffed. “I’m not punishing him.”

“Well you’re sure not rewarding him either.”

He sighed as he closed his eyes. “This isn’t about Bruce, Damian.”

The familiar banter. The back-and-forth arguments that became renowned around the costumed world. Damian peeked at the communicator again. He could do this. Just a few more minutes.
“What’s this about then?”

“You! It’s about you!” Dick’s eyes shot open as he tried to shout, but with his injuries it came out as a strained cry. “You want to know why I want to die so bad? It’s because I don’t deserve to still be here. Bruce didn’t protect you and neither did I. And this is my punishment, being without you. But I want out. This isn’t punishment, it’s torture. And call me a coward, Damian, I don’t care. We can debate it for the rest of eternity if you want. I just…can’t take it anymore.”

The communicator beeped, but Damian didn’t look at it. He kept his eyes locked with Dick’s, whose were shining with unshed tears and determination. This wasn’t the blood loss talking. This was Dick Grayson thinking for himself, for the first time in a while. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be,” Dick said softly. “Than six feet under ground with you.”

Damian understood the pain, he did. He didn’t like being separated from Grayson either. He felt just as guilty for his passing as his brother did.

But he couldn’t.

The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one whose heart was still shattered.

“No.” Damian said.

Dick’s gaze broke as he blinked rapidly, his lip quivering. “W-what?”

“Grayson, I’m sorry.” Damian said, tightening his grip on his mentor’s arm as he tried to pull away. “I can’t let you.”

“Who said it was your decision to make?” Dick snapped, slumping slightly. “I just want to hold you again. Is that too much to ask for?”

“Yes, it is.” Damian smirked. “But it’ll be worth that much more in sixty, seventy years.”

“But I’m impatient.”

“Suck it up.”

Dick couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped. “Party pooper.”

~~

*Keep your eyes on me. Baby, keep your eyes on me*

“Grayson, look at me.”

Dick didn’t want to.

“Grayson.”

The floor was much more interesting to look at than the spirit child in front of him.

“Grayson, regardless of your current tantrum, I’m going to keep you alive until one of the others get here. To do that, I need to keep you conscious. And to do *that*, I need you to look at me.”

He’s lying, that little shit.

“It’s rude not to look at the person you’re holding a conversation with.”
“I’m tired.” Dick stated.

“I know you are,” Damian said gently. “Just a few more minutes, I promise.”

Dick coughed and suddenly he could feel it. He’d hit his limit, he didn’t have enough blood to circulate, and his organs were starting to panic. Forget a few minutes, he didn’t know if he was going to last a few more seconds.

“Damian…!” His knee jerked and his arm spasmed as he reached out for the wraith.

The child seemed to understand. He held Dick’s face in his hands once more. “Look at- Grayson, look at me!”

Dick did. The boy – his boy – was serious, but calm. He would get him through this. He wasn’t going to let his big brother die. More than that, he wasn’t going to let his big brother destroy their family. Even in death, he was protecting others.

“You’ll be okay. Just keep breathing and keep looking at me.”

“O-okay…” He blinked slowly. Damian was still holding his gaze. “I’m sorry, Damian.”

“For?”

He wanted to look away, he needed to. But he knew Damian wouldn’t let him now. He would just invade Dick’s line of sight, wherever it went. So he didn’t bother fighting. “For not being as strong as you thought I was.”

It was a loaded statement. He was sorry for not being strong enough to protect him in the first place. Sorry for not being able to handle his death. Sorry for not being strong enough to live on, or even try to.

“You were as strong as you needed to be, Grayson.” Damian said, smiling in an attempt in comfort. Dick was annoyed that it was actually working. “That’s why I’m still here, to take care of everything else.”

Dick didn’t hear the motorcycle until Jason flew through the door on one, with Tim right behind him. Damian didn’t move, though. He kept his hands planted on his face, eyes still locked.

“Can they…?” Dick whispered as motors were shut off. Tim was talking to someone that wasn’t Jason, but he couldn’t distinguish the words.


“They can just go through you, c-can’t they?” He couldn’t keep the whimper out of his voice.

“Yes, but it is highly unpleasant.” Damian glanced behind him as he loosened his grasp on Dick’s face. Dick moved to follow the hands. “No, stop. You’ll lose some of the little blood you have left. Relax. You can sleep now.”

“Nightwing!” Tim called as he and Jason ran towards him. Damian stood and took a few steps back. “Nigh- Dick!”

~~

_Just what you’re worth_
They realized quickly that they couldn’t move him until they fixed some of his injuries. When they first crouched next to him, Dick seemed hesitant to the help, he wouldn’t even look at them, but in the end agreed to it.

Tim would have said that Dick then relaxed, became dead weight, but that would imply he wasn’t practically dead weight in the first place. Or that he wasn’t well on his way to literally becoming so.

Slowly, Jason moved their eldest brother away from the wall, laying him gingerly on the ground as Tim set to work. Dick still wouldn’t look at them, more focused on some spot to his left.

“Will you stay?” Dick suddenly called. Jason and Tim looked towards his face. He wasn’t speaking to either of them. Tears were running awkwardly down his cheeks. “With me? Please. I need you to stay.”

Tim and Jason continued their work, but kept sparing glances towards the eldest’s face. Delusional, that’s all. He probably won’t even remember.

“It’ll always hurt, so your little act of chivalry is almost moot… That’s why I…no, I…no. No, I won’t do this again. I promise. I swear. On Alfie’s life, I swear I won’t.”

“Who’s he talking to, you know?” Jason mumbled.

Tim shook his head. “I don’t…” He paused. If Jason actually thought about it, who he was talking to, or who Dick thought he was talking to, was obvious. Tim looked back at Dick’s face and followed his line of sight. But surely Dick couldn’t see him too. He’d have said. Tim didn’t see anything. “I don’t know.”

~~

Show me how to fight for now

He didn’t expect to wake up in a hospital. Bruce only ever took them to a legitimate hospital when their injuries were life-threa-

Oh.

Oh yeah.

Dick groaned and rolled over. He didn’t know how long he was out, but surely his family guessed his motives by now. Wires and tubes tugged at his arms as he moved to cover his face.

“Regretting it now, aren’t you?”

Dick jumped, his heart feeling like it was about to leap out of his chest. He uncovered his eyes and stared at the chair stationed next to his bed and its occupant.

Damian.

“Y-you’re here. You’re still here,” Dick couldn’t stop the smile spreading across his face. Damian was sitting in the chair, his legs crossed, one hand in his lap, the other leaning on the armrest and supporting his head.

“Grayson, you keep using the word still as if I ever left in the first place.” Damian sighed. “And don’t talk so loud, or the nurses will think you actually are crazy, despite what Father told them, and give you more drugs.”
“You never left?” Dick asked as he leaned back into the pillows.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten our experience at that decrepit building with the ghost hunter already? Or your subsequent attempts to talk to me via the same method afterwards.” Damian said incredulously.

“Never.” Dick returned warmly. “But that was…that was really you?”

“I would not let someone else, dead or otherwise, roam the Earth claiming to be me unless I had full knowledge of it happening.” Damian sounded appalled by the notion. “So yes. Obviously I was present for all the times you imagined it to be me.”

“Then why haven’t I been able to see you until at the warehouse?” The elder’s voice seemed to become slightly sad. Strained. “Actually, why can I see you now?”

“That’s the thing about ghosts. I don’t believe humans are meant to see them, that’s why only a few can, and even then they are considered insane.” Damian said. “As for these instances for you? Drake seemed to believe it was because it was a near-death experience. I’m inclined to agree.”

“You talked to Tim?” Happiness leaked through his tone.

“Of course not. He was explaining it to Superman when he stopped by yesterday. I just overheard.”

“Oh.” Dick sighed. He made a mental note to talk to Tim about all this anyway. “So…am I still in a state of near-death?”

“No.”

“Then why can I see you here?”

“My theory is it’s because you are hyped up on so many drugs right now it’s amazing you can make a coherent thought, let alone proper sentence.”

He wasn’t trying to be funny, but Dick laughed anyway. “So, are you implying that if I become a drug addict I’ll see you all the time? I might have to try it.”

Damian scowled. “That’s not humorous in any sense, Grayson.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Dick tried to taper off his laughing. When he was able to control himself he looked at his brother again, shifting his hand across the sheets towards him. Damian stared at it a moment before uncrossing his legs and leaning forward. Even with his depressed senses, he felt Damian’s tiny hand curl around his. “You knew before I went to the warehouse, didn’t you.”

“I knew you were on a path of destruction that would lead you to that situation, yes. But I didn’t know you had reached that point until I was next to you.” Damian responded. “I’ve been trying to get you off said path for months. Apparently I failed.”

Dick wanted to protest. No, absolutely not, Damian. You did perfect. It’s not your fault. But it would be a lie. While not Damian’s fault personally, Dick’s current mental state was caused by what had happened to his child. It was a weird and vicious cycle. Damian hadn’t failed anyone or anything, Dick just didn’t know how to put it into words. So he didn’t try to.

“What’re you, like my guardian angel?” Dick teased.

“No, I just know you’re an idiot who can’t take care of yourself.” Damian answered, rolling his eyes.
“But if that’s what you want to refer to this scenario as, then yes. It seems I am the guardian angel of our family.”

“You watch over everyone? All the time?”

Damian nodded. “Depending on whose crisis is more dire at the given moment.”

“Who were you with when you…when you found out about where I was?”

“Todd and Drake.”

“Why?”

“Todd and the archer had had an argument and he was planning on drinking himself into a stupor over it.” Damian said, annoyance at their brother clear in the tone. “You know, for a mass murderer, Todd is ruled by his emotions.”

“Hm,” Dick mused, absently rubbing his thumb along Damian’s hand. He could feel it, it was there. Damian was real. “I’m not going to see you again, will I?”

Damian shrugged. “There is no guarantee about it. I can’t even say you’ll be able to see me next time you wake up, on drugs or not.”

“Am I really awake right now? For all I know this is just one huge dream.”

“Yes, you are awake. I would have informed you by now if it were a dream.” Dick stared at him for a moment with a quirked brow. Damian growled. “For the sake of continuing my explanation, yes, as a member of the spirit realm, I can infiltrate dreams as I see fit. I’ve done it for Todd and Father before – and no, I will not visit your dreams every night, Grayson, so don’t even ask.” Damian stood and leaned onto the mattress. “But…I just want you to know. Even if you can’t see me, or hear me or whatever, I am there. And I can hear and see everything. Sometimes I can interact with things, sometimes I can’t, like with that flashlight trick you always try. It’s different every time.”

Dick nodded, trying to fight the urge to cry or lunge at the boy.

“…Do not do this again, understand? Do not feel guilty, you did not kill me. You protected me when I needed it most. You all did.” Damian’s voice became quiet. “I am not saying it will not…hurt or you won’t have your moments of despair or anything. But please, just try to remember that I am there. That I will help you if I can. Interact with you if I can.”

“Damian…”

“Despite preconceived notions, I do not like seeing you all upset. Especially on my account.”

Dick felt his lips shuddering as he shook his head slightly. “It won’t be the same.”

“I know. But I will do what I can.” Damian sounded almost like he was apologizing and Dick kind of wanted to hit him for it. That child had nothing to apologize for. “Do not worry, I will not leave you until I feel all of you could survive on your own.”

“So…you’re never leaving, right?”

“Basically.”

“Damian.” Dick couldn’t help but smile. “I want to hug you, but I don’t know if your ghost physics would prevent that, and I don’t want to look like a huge idiot.”
“I’m holding your hand, Grayson. I think I’m solid enough right now where you wouldn’t go through me. Nonetheless, you shouldn’t be moving much anyway. You’ll tear out your stitches.” Damian scolded as he shifted up onto the cot. Dick scooted over and spread his arm out so Damian could lie on it. Once he was stashed comfortably away in the crook of Dick’s arm, the elder wrapped both of his arms around the boy, surprised and warmed by the fact that Damian was indeed solid enough to be held.

“Stay until I fall asleep again?” Dick asked, leaning his cheek on Damian’s head. It didn’t feel like his hair, but there was still the simple fact that he could feel it at all.

“At least,” Damian exhaled. “Though, as I’m sure you can imagine, Father is not in a good way right now. I will have to check on he and Pennyworth later to make sure they are not becoming too much for Titus and Alfred to handle.”

“Of course. Don’t want to stress out our four-legged friends.” Dick slurred. “The pain meds won’t affect my memory, will they? I’ll remember this happened, right?”

“I don’t know.”

Dick sighed. “Well, I sure hope so.”

~~

Too in love to let it go

They sat for a while, Dick just relishing in the moment. Damian let himself be held, glancing up every few minutes to see if the elder had fallen back to sleep. He hadn’t, and he was going to try not to for as long as he could, though the drugs were making that a struggle. Nurses walked by the door a few times, chatting. Dick was pretty sure he even heard Bruce out there at one point. He felt his grip around Damian tighten slightly. Even if someone came in the room, Dick wasn’t letting his boy go. Not for anything.

“I’m not going to give up, by the way.” Dick murmured.

“Hm?” Damian looked up at him.

“I’m still going to try and bring you back. In any way I can.”

“Oh,” Damian looked down again, settling his head against Dick’s shoulder. There was a grin in his voice, a mixture of optimism and teasing lacing his tone. “Well, good luck with that.”

~~

Flicker from view

“…ick? Can you hear me?”

He felt his body instinctively inhale. A deep inhale. And for once? For once, the weight of the world didn’t fall against his shoulders. His body still hurt, was still in utter pain, but for once, it wasn’t a struggle to breathe.

“Come on, Dick. You gotta wake up. I…can’t lose another brother. Especially not you. Not like this.”

His fingers twitched. He could feel an energy buzzing through his body. *Brothers*. So that narrows
whoever is talking down to three people.

Three. Two.

Two people.

No, wait! Wait. Three. It could be three. Because the world is mysterious and wonderful, isn’t it?

It took more energy than it should have, but slowly he opened his eyes. Immediately the chair came into focus. The chair. The chair where his precious little protégé sat, being snarky and adorable. Where the tiny ghost boy talked him back from the ledge, one more time.

It was empty.

“Dick?” The voice was barely over a whisper, and coming from the other side of the bed. He turned and saw Tim sitting there, in another chair, looking like he hadn’t slept in a while. And with him in the hospital, after a pathetic attempt at suicide-via-lack-of-medical-treatment, he couldn’t exactly blame him for not wanting to do so. Tim smiled, most likely in relief, but it was sad. “Good morning.”

“Timmy.”

“You’re going to have a lot of explaining to do.” Tim said, leaning his elbows on the bed. “Jason’s out hunting the dude who beat the crap out of you. Bruce is currently brooding over how to ask why it took you over thirty-five minutes to call for help after the bad guy escaped. And don’t try to say you were unconscious. We all saw the security tapes, Dick. You sat there for thirty-five minutes. And then for the next twenty, talked to yourself.”

“No to myself,” Dick smiled, reaching his arm out. Tim met him halfway, wrapping both of his hands around Dick’s one. “I saw him, Timmy. I saw him.”

Tim stared at him for a few moments before deciding not bother trying to convince Dick otherwise. He sighed in resignation. “I know you did, Dick.”

“Did he tell you?” Dick asked, his smile becoming a playful grin. Tim rolled his eyes but shook his head.

“No, he didn’t. I merely guessed from what you were saying when Jason and I got there. From what I know you’ve been feeling the past few months.” Tim saw tears welling into Dick’s eyes. He smiled as he stood from the chair.

“I saw him. I saw him, and I talked to him,” Dick said as Tim wrapped his arms around his older brother. “And I held him, Tim. I held my boy.”

“Mhm,” Tim hummed, balancing his chin on Dick’s head. Dick maneuvered his arms around Tim’s waist, squeezing tightly. “We’ll talk about this, you and me. I promise. We’ll talk about Damian when you’re out of the hospital. After you’ve recovered and Bruce doesn’t have you on suicide watch anymore, okay?”

“Alright,” Dick muttered. He dried his tears on Tim’s shirt, listening to the younger boy’s heartbeat. “Damian’s okay, Timmy. He’s okay. He’s still here.”

“I know.”

“Should we tell Bruce?” Dick asked. “I mean…”
There was the sound of light bounce at the end of the bed. Tim untangled himself from Dick’s arms and moved to see what it was. As he turned around the end of the bed, Dick’s medical chart flew off the side of the bed, nearly hitting Tim in the face. Tim picked it up, scanning the front page. He smiled, turning the chart to Dick. There was a dark scribble across a blank space.

No. Your secret.

Dick returned the grin, settling back in his pillows as Tim placed the chart back in its holder and returned to Dick’s side.

“Whatever you say, Damian. Whatever you say.”
Bruce stood in the hallway, staring through the glass of the door as a nurse did another routine check on Dick’s vital signs. Tim sat in the chair next to the bed, Jason standing rigid behind him.

Tim told him not to come in.

Well, not quite. He didn’t really demand him to stay out. Even through everything, Tim was still tactful. He’d suggested Bruce remain in the hospital hallway. At least while Jason was around. He didn’t say, but Bruce knew Jason still hadn’t forgiven him for the mess in Ethiopia. And judging by the sudden alliance between the two, Tim didn’t quite forgive him for that business with Frankenstein.

“It would…just be easier.” He’d explained when Bruce burst into the medical facility. “Better, for Dick. Less…stressful. Right now, stress is the last thing he needs.”

The glass wasn’t thick, but Bruce wasn’t listening, just watching. The nurse looked up at the boys and said something. Jason rolled his eyes and glanced towards the door – towards Bruce – before turning to face the window. Tim politely smiled, responded and then looked down at Dick’s sleeping form.

“What story did they give?” said a gentle voice from behind him. He didn’t need to turn around to see Clark Kent, but he didn’t want to look at his children anymore. Clark was smiling, but it was small, and a little sad. He pushed those ridiculous glasses up his face as he leaned back against the opposite wall.

“Motorcycle accident in the mountains. Or something,” Bruce sighed. “What’re you doing here?”

“Tim called. Well, actually, Tim told Oracle to call. I was off-world when the call came through to the Planet, so she got a hold of Lois.” Clark cocked his head to the side. “Why aren’t you in there with them?”

“Just…taking a break.” Bruce sighed. Clark’s face made it clear he didn’t believe him, but didn’t press the issue. Instead, he pushed off the wall and nodded down the hall, beckoning Bruce to follow. They walked around the floor, and then moved up to the next one, Clark smiling and greeting every nurse and doctor who walked by. Bruce silently sulked beside him, hands stuffed in his pockets. They were about head to the stairs to go up another level when they heard a child shouting in a nearby room. When they passed, they saw a young boy shouting at the nurse, throwing
“Daddy, I want Daddy!” he screamed, brown hair bouncing as he jerked his head. “Where is Daddy? Bring Daddy here right now!”

When Bruce exhaled, it was shaky. Immediately he looked away, knowing the alien was staring at him. “I… I can’t do this again.”

Clark put his hand on Bruce’s shoulder. “Talk to me, Bruce. Can’t do what?”

“Lose Dick. Lose anyone, any of them. Not after Da…” his voice died on his lips. He crossed his arms over his chest and put a hand over his eyes. His breathing became shallow and short. The child was still shouting, so Clark moved Bruce away, closer to the stairwell.

“I know this is difficult, Bruce. But he’s tough, he’ll get through this.”

Bruce began to shake his head. “He didn’t call for help, Clark. After they stabilized him last night, we found the security footage. He sat in that warehouse, fully conscious, for thirty-five minutes before we even had a clue he was there. It’s…it’s like he didn’t want to be found.”

“I see…” Clark muttered, glancing around at the patrons in the hallways. Bruce Wayne couldn’t be seen like this. He shifted to block his friend’s face. “How’s he been lately?”

“Meaning?”

“Come on, Bruce. Grief does things to people.” He squeezed Bruce’s shoulder and lowered his hand. “And you know how close your boys…were. Dick took Damian in when there was no one else, for either of them. They grew together and hurt together. They dealt with you together. And that’s a bond that when it breaks…well, it breaks hard.”

“I know. I never thought he was…okay, but after everything that happened, the boys sort of…went their own ways.” Bruce sighed and dropped his hand to his arm. “He wasn’t okay but…I didn’t think he would do something so…drastic.”

“Well…I don’t know what I can tell you, Bruce. Your family is in a bad way right now. Not just Dick, but all of you. Losing Damian…really messed all of you up. I can’t deny that. I won’t. That boy was special.” Clark smiled slightly, thinking of the few memories he had of the smallest Wayne. “But right now? Bruce, right now, by some miracle, Dick made it through this ordeal and we have a second chance to help him. For the first time since Damian’s death, you’re all in the same place. Maybe this is a second chance.”

Bruce snorted. “Perhaps I don’t deserve a second chance this time.”

“Oh, I think you do, my friend.” Clark laughed. “It’s what Damian would have wanted.”

Bruce didn’t mention the warmth slowly spreading through his chest, like arms being wrapped around him in a hug. He felt his lips begin to pull up as the heat spread to a small spot on his cheek, then tingled through his ear. Almost like a kiss and a whisper. Almost like an…it’s okay, Father.

Bruce breathed a chuckle as he leaned his head back on the wall and closed his eyes.

The tears escaped anyway.

~~
When he heard the mechanisms in the door begin to click, Tim readied himself to shoo Bruce away. He’d already done it four times. He looked up from Dick’s heart monitor and found his eyes pausing halfway through the journey to the door.

Damian was standing on the other side of the bed.

Tim felt himself deflate internally, when he realized that he wasn’t even surprised by the ghost child anymore.

After the brief stop, his eyes continued to the door, surprised to see their Kryptonian family friend standing in the doorway.

“Ah…whu…Clark!”

“Evening, Tim,” Clark whispered, closing the door behind him. “How’s he holding up?”

“As good as he can be, I guess.” Tim sighed. “He’s…stable, the doctors say. They’re keeping him medically sedated until some of his organs can run on their own. So…another few days to a week or so. They’re not sure yet.”

“And how are you doing?”

“Um…well…” Tim laughed dryly. “I found my brother half-dead in a shady warehouse on the other side of town and have been in this room for going forty hours while trying to keep Bruce and Jason from killing each other in the hall. How do you think I’m doing?”

Clark nodded, taking a seat in the chair on the other side of the bed. Tim watched as Damian squirmed when the man walked through him, and couldn’t help but smirk. Damian narrowed his eyes and tightened his lips, just like he used to when he was about to threaten Tim’s manhood. The smirk turned into a full-on grin.

“What’re you thinking about?” Tim’s attention went back to Clark after a moment, and his eyebrows furrowed. Clark chuckled as he said, “Come on, Tim. You’re Kon’s best friend. I’ve known you for years. You think I can’t detect all your quirks and habits? You seem…distracted, is all.”

Tim hesitated, and looked back at Damian, but he was no longer standing next to the chair. Instead, he was between Tim and Dick, staring down at their elder’s unconscious face and the wires trailing from his arms.

“So, what’s on your mind?”

“I think…I don’t…” Tim huffed. “When we found him, he was talking. Just…out of the blue, and to no one. At least, that’s what I told Jason but…”

“You think he was talking to someone?”

“Well…yeah. And I think I know who, too.”

Tim glanced over to Damian, who now had his hand on Dick’s arm, but was looking at him. The boy nodded, as if to affirm his suggestion. “Who, then?”

“…Damian.”

Now it was Clark who hesitated. His gaze drifted to Dick’s face and then back up to Tim. “Explain your stance.”
Tim gulped, but nodded, remembering that being a journalist wasn’t just a front for the alien. “Just... what he was saying. He said something about swearing on Alfie’s life, and only a select few ever refer to Alfred as that, or would even understand the reference. And he was asking the other person to stay, and about hurting. Since Damian…uh…passed away, I know Dick’s been real…flaky, I guess is the right word. Not to mention his line of sight at the time was matched with what Damian’s height is... was.”

The fix was too late, and Clark narrowed his eyes. “Is?”

“How to go, moron.” Damian muttered lightly, hopping up onto the cot. Of course he’d be able to hear him today. Of course.

Tim buried his face in his hands. “Promise you won’t call me crazy, Clark. Please.”

“You know I won’t.”

“And don’t tell Bruce. Don’t tell anybody.”

“You’ve got my word.”

“I… I’ve seen him,” he whispered. “I swear to God, Clark. I’ve seen the kid. Sometimes I can hear him, most times I can’t. But... but he died and I can still see him.”

Dick grunted in his sleep and Tim’s head snapped up. Damian leaned over their brother, putting a hand to the man’s chest. Dick instantly relaxed, and the next noise was most definitely a snore.

Clark was watching Dick, too. “Is he here now?”

“Yes.”

“Has he said anything?”

“Nothing constructive.”

“Fuck you.” Damian didn’t look up as he flipped his middle finger.

“Yeah, nothing worthwhile.”

“Is there a pattern to when you can see him?”

“Like situation-wise? No. One time I saw him just when I was taking a walk. Another time he popped up while I was in battle and forced me to save a friggen kitten.” Tim listed off. “Hell, if Dick saw him in that warehouse, I’m kind of surprised that I didn’t.”

Clark nodded slowly. “So, what’s your theory?”

“Pardon?”

Clark took off his glasses and looked up. “Why do you believe Dick saw him, if he truly did at all? Has he mentioned ever seeing him before?”

“No... and I have a feeling he... hasn’t. Would he be this miserable if he had?” Tim leaned back as Clark shrugged. “Maybe... well, you know what they say, right? Crazy things happen when you’re dying. Adrenaline rush, life flashes before your eyes...”

“Visit from a loved one to take you to the other side?”
It was Tim’s turn to shrug. “I don’t have any idea. Chock it up to a near-death experience? Only, instead of seeing a white light and angels he saw the spawn of Satan?”

“I’ll remember this next time you need my help,” Damian snapped, but there wasn’t much malice behind it.

Clark smiled. “Still not constructive?”

Tim clicked his tongue. Fighting with Damian brought an almost…normal air to the situation. “Not at all.”

Clark laughed and leaned forward. “It’s a sound hypothesis, Tim. Something I think you and Dick should talk about when he wakes up.”

“If.”

“When.” Clark said sternly. He immediately softened. “I mentioned to Bruce earlier that it was some damn miracle that Dick survived. If what you’re telling me is true, that Dick saw Damian in his time of dying…do you think your little brother had anything to do with saving him?”

Tim didn’t even try to be covert. He turned his head to completely stare down the child. Damian didn’t make eye contact, opting instead to position himself next to Dick, using the man’s shoulder as a pillow.

“Honestly? I think so.” Tim smiled at the boy. “I think it was all him. Dick did mention ‘an act of chivalry’ after all.”

Clark nodded and gently put his glasses back on before whispering. “Thanks for bringing him back to us, Damian.”

Tim paused, and then his smile shifted, becoming nostalgic and slightly proud. “He says you’re not welcome.”

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“Six days, Dickie.” Jason whistled. “You ready to blow this joint?”

“Not if it means going back to your place.” Dick grimaced the automatic doors opened and Jason pushed his wheelchair forward. “Somehow, I would bet the doctors wouldn’t approve of a pizza-and-beer diet during my recovery.”

“Like I want you crashing there. Nah, you’re going back to the Manor. Alfred said he wants to keep an eye on you. At least until your leg isn’t broken and you aren’t paler than Mr. Freeze.”

“And you’re okay going back there?” Dick questioned as they approached the car. It didn’t look like any of Bruce’s. Or any of Jason’s for that matter. So, most likely, it was stolen. Awesome.

“Peachy.” Jason said. “Alfie promised to have dear old Brucie out of the way until I was gone. But after that? I’m afraid you’re on your own, Goldie.”

“Great,” Dick sighed, slumping in the wheelchair.

“Not ready to deal Papa Bat just yet?” Jason moved around the chair and unlocked the doors. He turned around to help Dick up but the elder waved him off, standing up on his somewhat-good leg with the help of a crutch. Jason held up his arms in surrender, but stood close by, just in case. Dick
grunted and grimaced throughout the ordeal, but after a few minutes, was comfortably in the passenger seat.

Dick remained silent as Jason sat behind the steering wheel and took off down the road. They were about ten blocks away from the hospital before Dick spoke. “I just don’t know what I would even stay to him.”

“Tell him what a stubborn idiot he is.”

Dick stared out the window. “It’s more than that, it’s just…”

“Dick, we’ve had this conversation before,” Jason cut him off. “This whole thing is hard.”

“Jay…”

“And,” Jason snapped, clearly annoyed he was getting interrupted. “It was all about the kid.”

When Dick looked at him, Jason noticed the ghost of a smile on his lips. “What?”

“You think I didn’t talk to the replacement?” he scoffed. “He told me about your conversation when you woke up yesterday. That you missed that brat so much it was easier to try to kill yourself.”

Dick knew Tim would lie about what the two really talked about, and he was more than grateful for the falsity. Silence grew in the car until they hit a red light just outside of town. “I’ll admit. It… wasn’t the best plan.”

“I’ll say,” Jason snorted. “But I’m not going to scold you about it. I mean, I guess you did better than Bruce, in a way? You took it all out on yourself, not other people.”

“Sounds like you’re still bitter.” Dick mused. “Maybe you’re the one who has to talk to him, not me.”

“Don’t even go there, Dickie.” Jason’s voice was low and threatening. “But back to the point. I’m not going to berate you about it because you clearly didn’t get what you wanted. You’re still alive, so you lost.”

“True.” Dick nodded. He looked out the window, watching as the Wayne Manor gates came into view. “…I’m sorry, Jason.”

“Well,” Jason leaned out the window to punch in the key code. He then sat back, one armed locked on the steering wheel, and rolled his head to give Dick a lopsided grin. “Your loss is our gain, I suppose.”

“Aw, Jay,” Dick cooed. “You do care!”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get used to it.” Jason rolled his eyes as the gate finished opening, and he drove through. “After I find the asshole who left you for dead, consider Gotham in my rearview mirror for a while.”

After he put the car in park, Dick immediately helped himself out of the car, but stood waiting for Jason before attempting to walk for himself. He wasn’t that brave yet. When Jason reached him, he found himself staring out towards the family graveyard.

Jason watched for a moment. Did Dick know? Had anyone told him yet that Damian’s body was stolen? That they hadn’t found it yet? Dick seemed to find some sort of peace since waking up, he
didn’t want to be the one to shatter that.

No, he thought, Dick doesn’t know. For all he knew, his little bird was still buried by their home, where Dick could come by and see him whenever he wanted. Without thinking, he tossed Dick’s arm over his shoulder and made his way towards the cemetery.

Dick’s face broke out into a grin as they neared the monument. As they slowed to a halt, Dick let go of Jason’s neck, instead putting his weight against the obelisk. “Hey, Damian,” he muttered, kissing the stone. Jason vaguely wondered how many painkillers were still in the man’s system. “Good to see you again.”

There was a sudden bark, followed by snapping sounds. Jason turned his head to see Titus running in a circle in the field next to the graves, biting at the air. “Huh.” He sighed. Dick glanced up. “I didn’t think fireflies were in season this late in the year.”

Dick straightened and watched as Titus jumped and huffed, trying to catch one of the swarm of fireflies above his head. Jason was right, fireflies disappear in late August, they have no business being around in October.

But then he saw it.

It was quick, and if he hadn’t had the experience he just did, he would have brushed it off as being a stupid dog. Titus had stopped jumping, but was still running in a circle, randomly sticking his tongue out. At one point he stopped and sat down, but continued to throw his tongue out, his tail wagging furiously.

Titus never wagged his tail like that.

Not unless Damian was involved.

Dick smiled and leaned against Jason, both still watching as Titus seemingly licked at the air.

“Fireflies in autumn aren’t, like, a sign of the apocalypse, are they?” Jason asked, shaking his head at Titus before helping Dick towards the house.

When they reached the door, Dick looked back to see the lightning bugs had disappeared and Titus had finally noticed their presence, abandoning the field as he trotted up to them with a lolling tongue.

“Nah,” he laughed, running his hand across Titus’s head. “Not this time.”
Leaves

Chapter Summary

Everyone always seemed to forget about Alfred.

The wind was crisp as it blew through the colorful trees. It was days like this Tim appreciated the length of Wayne Manor’s drive. Autumn was a beautiful time of year, especially on the outskirts of Gotham. He felt a smile creeping onto his lips, both for the beauty of the area, and the squirming inside his hooded sweatshirt.

Dick had left the manor a few weeks prior, according to Colin, who Tim had seen in passing a few days earlier. Barely out of the cast before he packed a bag and headed off to Chicago, against everyone’s better judgment. Save from a few phone calls, no one had really heard from him since, and poor Alfred was heartbroken.

Oh, Alfred.

It didn’t take a family of detectives to know that Alfred Pennyworth was affected the most about the losses over the past year. The Joker had dismantled their bonds, Talia had taken their youngest away from them – after Alfred had encouraged his participation in the battle – and they’d almost lost their eldest as a result.

He blamed himself, something not uncommon to the entire Bat-family. Yet, he suffered in silence, prone to offering assistance to everyone else rather than accept it. Punishing himself for letting Damian out of the cave that night by dealing with Bruce’s grief and anger alone, never letting the boys know when it all became too much.

But Tim knew. He began to notice after Jason and the Outlaws skipped town. After Dick left the manor with nothing but a determined grin on his face and a nod towards Titus. After Bruce went with the Justice League to battle some force in Antarctica.

Alfred was lonely.

Through everything he’s ever done for them, they all disappeared, and left their grandfather a sad and lonely old man.

The wind blew again, and the squirming in his sweatshirt started up once more. As he reached the front door and began to knock, barking echoed across the grounds. Tim found himself staring across the red, orange and yellow trees, listening as Titus’s barks took a happy tone, and wondering if he was, in fact, playing with their dearly departed brother.

The door opened to reveal the caretaker, looking older than he ever has. His skin was pale, his eyes tired. He tried to smile at the young man in front of him, but it just looked sad.

“Master Timothy?” Alfred’s voice was quiet, but echoed through the foyer. Tim could barely suppress his sigh.

A sad and lonely old man, in a big empty house.
“Hey, Al. What’re you up to?” Tim asked as Alfred moved to the side to let him in. The hallway was warm, scents of cooking wafting through the air. The movement in his sweatshirt stilled for a moment before he felt it begin to climb up his chest.

“Some chores. Nothing too exciting.” The tension in Alfred’s voice was melting quickly. “Where is your team?”

“Taking a couple days off. Some are in school, others are visiting families. Been kinda quiet around the Tower, so we figured now was a good time.” Tim said, choking back the laugh that was going to escape his throat. “Say, Al…where’s Alfred?”

The old man smirked. “Against better advice, sitting on Bruce’s chair in his study. Or was. I had called our furry friend for lunch not too long ago. May I ask why?”

As if on cue, a fuzzy little head popped out of Tim’s collar by his chin, meowing loudly. Alfred raised an eyebrow as Tim chuckled, awkwardly trying to get the kitten out of his shirt. It took a few minutes, but when the calico was nestled in his palm, he held the bundle up. “Alfred Pennyworth, meet Desdemona.”

“Oh my,” Alfred breathed, taking the kitten from Tim’s hand. Desdemona instantly began to purr as she attempted to nuzzle against Alfred’s face.

“Found her, uh, on patrol about a month ago.”

“Oh, so this is the kitten.” Alfred smiled. “Master Clark told me your friend Connor mentioned that you found one during a battle. But if I am correct, weren’t you going to give it to a shelter?”

Tim looked at the ceiling, throwing his hand in his hair. “Kind of got attached. You know how it goes. Besides,” He gently pet Desdemona’s head. “I’m sure Alfred could use a friend more his size.”

Alfred hummed as they continued their journey to the kitchen. Ever a host, Alfred never lets a guest get far without food. “I’m sure he will appreciate the gesture. I do believe Titus has been slightly getting on his nerves lately.”

“Yeah?” Tim smiled. “So is that why Titus is outside? Little Alfred kicked him out?”

“Nothing of the sort,” Alfred scoffed. They entered the kitchen to find the other cat sitting on the kitchen table expectantly, all while batting at a bug in the air. Alfred continued to hold the kitten as he got a bowl from the cupboard, filling it with water. “I have gathered the help of some of Damian’s…friends to give Titus the exercise and socialization a canine of his breed needs. As I’m sure you’re aware, Bruce and I can’t do it all of the time ourselves.”

“Friends”? As in, plural?” Tim went over to the black and white cat, barely older than the kitten himself, watching as he grew annoyed with the bug flying around his head. He leapt up, trapping it between his paws and slamming it to the table. When he released it, Tim realized that it wasn’t a fly as he originally thought, but a lightning bug.

“Weird.”

“It turned out Master Damian had the same sort of charm all you boys do,” Alfred explained, bringing both bowl and creature over to the table. The furrier Alfred watched with curiosity as Desdemona reluctantly moved across the table to the bowl. “Much to his chagrin, of course. People were drawn to him. And, against his notions of human thinking, they stayed with him, too.”
Alfred’s voice took a sad tone. Tim opened his mouth to say something when there was a shout, a bark and laughter from outside. Tim looked out the large open window to the garden. Colin ran past, zigzagging across the yard, Titus right on his heels. The dog jumped, knocking the boy into a pile of leaves. The tiny redhead instantly disappeared as Titus showered him with affection. Suddenly there was another voice, female and older, calling for Titus to yield.

She was just as ginger as the boy currently entrapped in the leaves, and Tim almost asked if it was his older sister. But no, that would be impossible. Other than the ridiculously bright hair, she and Colin shared no physical features. She seemed to be his age, late teens or early twenties, hair cut short, and a brilliant contrast to the black glasses covering her face.

“Miss Carrie Kelley. Student at the local university. Master Damian’s acting instructor.” Alfred explained. Titus barked again and Desdemona jumped. Alfred the cat cocked his head to the side before slowly moving forward to examine the new arrival closer.

“Does she…”

“No.” the caretaker’s voice turned dark. “Master Bruce decided it was better she didn’t know. Instead, he has led her to believe that…that our dear child is out travelling the world for his studies.”

Titus’s ear twitched at Carrie’s voice and he immediately ceased his assault on Colin, running over to her and sitting obediently at her feet. Carrie pretended to ignore him for a moment and he barked in agitation. Desdemona mewed in fear and instantly, the older cat stood protectively over her, hissing towards the open window. Titus’s ear twitched again and he looked over. His eyes lingered on the two felines before glancing up at Tim and Alfred.

“Ah, ah, Titus,” Carrie sang. “I don’t think our British friend inside has any treats for you, regardless of that delicious smell coming from the kitchen.”

Titus snapped his head back towards the girl, fighting to ignore Colin coming up behind him. “Miss Kelley cared for Master Damian, and showed the same affection to Titus when he wasn’t here. I hired her on to come play with him a few times a week, for his sake, and Master Colin joined in the festivities when he happened to stop by two weeks ago.”

Most likely, Colin had been there for a different reason, but Tim thought better than to bring it up. He would talk to the boy later.

Alfred waved at a bug in front of his face. “Having Miss Carrie around is good for Titus. Takes his mind off of the…loss at hand. Therapeutic, almost. For he and Master Colin.”

Tim looked away from the scene outside and back to Alfred. In those few minutes, it seemed almost like the man had shrunk in on himself. He was paler than earlier, the bags under his eyes more prevalent.

“And you?” Tim asked quietly, putting a hand on the man’s shoulder.

Alfred shrugged, turning back to the counter to continue preparing the food. “It’s just nice to have the idea of happiness around this place again.”

Desdemona mewed again, and this time the older cat did too. Tim glanced down to see both of them moving towards the side of the table, purring, focused on a spot near the window. Tim didn’t follow their gaze. He didn’t want to. He knew who was there. Instead, he followed Alfred to the counter and watched as the man tried to busy himself with the task at hand.

“Alfred.” Tim said. The man continued to work. “Alfred, stop.”
He did, but he still wouldn’t look up. His grip on the mixing bowl tightened in attempts not to show his hands shaking.

“I’m almost inclined to say it’s all been the hardest on him, Drake.”

Tim nodded absently. He leaned forward to grasp Alfred’s arm. “What can I do?”

Alfred closed his eyes, shaking his head slightly.

“Father hasn’t even noticed. Grayson purely ignored it while he was here. He didn’t even tell Pennyworth he was leaving. It just so happened Alfred came in from the yard before he could.”

“Alfred,” Tim said sternly. “What can I do?”

There was a beat of silence. Well, as much silence as you can have with two purring cats, a dog barking, two children jumping in fallen leaves and an autumn wind. Alfred suddenly let out a shaky breath. He opened his eyes and glanced up at Tim, a broken smile gracing his lips.

“You can wash your hands, Master Timothy,” he said. “And help me prepare lunch for our guests and the animals. Then, you can find a spare rake in the garage and assist me with the yard work.”

Tim grinned, releasing the man’s arm and moving towards the sink. “Gladly.”

And that’s what they did. Tim helped Alfred create the meal of grilled cheese and tomato soup, with a dessert of caramel hot apple cider topped with whipped cream. He met Carrie, who he could easily see was a perfect match for Damian, and chatted with Colin, making the promise of another diner meet-up soon, just the two of them.

“Wilkes noticed.” Damian’s voice floated through the conversation. Tim didn’t bother looking for him. “He comes for Pennyworth as much as for my pets and himself.”

After Carrie had to leave, Colin decided to stick around for a few more hours, switching between playing with Desdemona and the cat Alfred and helping the real Alfred and Tim make cookies. When all cooking and baking was completed, and the kitchen cleaned, Tim kept true to his word and found another rake to start on the yard. Colin offered to help, but was quickly roped into crowd control, as Titus thought raking leaves was a new game and destroyed four piles instantly. Then, of course, tiny Desdemona apparently didn’t know what a leaf was, and, in her exploration, almost drowned in the remnants of one of Titus’s explosions.

And Alfred laughed. Laughed so hard he had tears in his eyes. It tugged at Tim’s heart a little, realizing how long it had been since he’d heard that sound.

When the yard was done, and the leaves all bagged (except for one; they wouldn’t take all of Titus’s fun away), Tim began to turn to Colin, who was sitting on the porch with the animals, to tell him he could let Titus loose. As soon as he opened his mouth, Alfred shushed him, pointing. The animals had all curled up amongst each other. Titus on the bottom, wrapped around Colin, who had fallen asleep against the fur, with Desdemona cuddled between his shoulder blades. Alfred the cat was balled up on Colin’s lap, head resting on Colin’s hand. Titus was the only one not asleep, opting instead to quietly lick Colin’s fingers.

In the dying afternoon sunbeams, Tim almost missed him, but Damian was there, too. He was also leaning on Titus, but on the opposite side of his neck. It was almost like that was his way to separate himself from the group. His arms were resting across his stomach, a leg crossed over the other knee, and he was staring up at the sky. Tim could see him speaking, but like a lot of the times, couldn’t hear any words. Obviously it was for Titus’s benefit, and most likely the only reason he wasn’t
asleep as well.

“I will call the nuns,” Alfred said from beside him. His voice was back to its normal tone, and it seemed some life had been pumped back into the old man. “Inform them that Master Colin will most likely be staying the evening. Would you like to as well, Timothy?”

“Nowhere I’d rather be, Alfred.” Tim sighed, putting his arm around the butler’s shoulder. Alfred chuckled, leaning against Tim, almost in relief. Tim grinned, as he quipped, “But only if there’s more cider.”

“Oh, my boy. Have you really been away that long?” Alfred smirked, moving towards Colin and the animals. Titus glanced up at them. Damian did too, and sat up to get out of the way. “There’s always more cider.”
Chapter Summary

It was only a matter of time before his Mother stopped by for a visit.

He didn’t breathe anymore, but that didn’t stop the air from getting caught in his throat. Everyone was…okay. There were no emergencies, no mental breakdowns, no danger to his family at current times. They were all on missions, with out-of-costume friends or, in his father’s case, sleeping for once.

No one needed him.

And he didn’t know what to do.

Damian figured it would be difficult, now that everyone was in different corners of the world. But it was the same as always, a quick blink and he could be out at that secret island the Outlaws lived on or to Chicago in a second flat.

He’d already cycled through everyone four times. He even went and checked on Cassandra, Brown, Colin and Supergirl once. But there were no problems.

He zapped himself back to the manor, to his bedroom, instantly gaining Titus and Alfred’s attention. Titus stood, trotting up to his feet, licking at his hand, while Alfred stayed on the bed, huddled around the kitten who was still asleep. Ah, that’s right. Drake was in Russia, and had asked Alfred to watch over Desdemona while he was gone.

As he moseyed around the manor, he stopped by both his father and Alfred’s room. The two were soundly unconscious. No nightmares or dreams of any sort, probably. They were exhausted. Damian didn’t want to admit to himself that he was too. Not like it would matter; Ghosts don’t sleep, ghosts don’t rest. Maybe this lull in time would help get him back to one-hundred-percent anyway, if only he didn’t spend all the free moments trying not to panic over everything being…good.

(It was too good, he told himself. Nothing was ever this good – this calm – for his family. Something had to be wrong with how normal and okay everything was. Something was lurking, waiting, that was the only explanation. Eventually the evidence would appear and this calm would be shown as a ruse to the evil behind it and…) 

Titus remained at his side, even as he ventured out to the cemetery, plopping down in front of his own grave. Despite his father’s wishes, Pennyworth had filled the hole back in, citing Grayson’s psyche as the reason. Recovering from his ordeal was not the time to inform him that his little brother’s body had been stolen. Damian curled his knees to his chest, closing his eyes and pressing his face to his legs.

Just don’t think about it. Everything is fine. Everyone is okay. There’s no reason to think otherwise. Not at-

Titus began whining a fraction of a second before Damian felt the presence behind him.

Ah, there it is.
“My child.”

Titus’s whimpers became growls as he stood over Damian protectively. Damian didn’t move his head. “Mother.”

He heard her shift forward, and could tell by Titus tensing and head turning that Talia was now standing next to him. “Did you think I wouldn’t find you, Damian?”

“I am merely surprised it took you this long.”

Titus barked once. A warning. Talia’s voice was tight, “Call him off.”

Damian finally looked up at her with a smirk. She was slightly transparent, like he was, but just as beautifully deadly as he remembered. Also like him, her cause of death had been wiped from her ghostly self. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a stupid old mutt, Mother.”

Talia’s eyes hardened as she glanced between Damian and Titus. “Call. Him. Off.”

Damian snorted, but did as he was told. “Back, Titus. She is no threat.”

Titus clearly didn’t believe him, but sat back against Damian’s side anyway. “The time with your father and his pets have made you crude and idiotic, yet you choose to stay with them even after they failed to stop your demise?”

“Your words no longer faze me, Mother,” Damian sighed, picking at a leaf caught on Titus’s paw. “Besides, Father and his allies would not have had to stop my demise if you had not ordered it to be carried out in the first place.”

“Your father needed to be taught a lesson. Do not trifle with my things.” Talia countered. She put her hands on her hips. “But if I’m correct, didn’t the circus boy attempt to teach you about the importance of family? What of your grandfather? I do not see you globe-hopping to help him in his grief.”

Titus jerked forward then, teeth bared at the woman. Damian took the dog’s muzzle in his hands and turned his face towards him, stroking his fur gently. “My assistance is reserved for those who actually cared for me, not those who stole my body out of spite. Besides, Grandfather, it seems, is more grieved by the fact that he lost the battle, not by the fact he lost his daughter or grandchild.”

There was a long pause before the grass suddenly crinkled as Talia knelt beside him. Titus didn’t notice, too enraptured by staring at his master. “Oh, Damian,” she whispered. “Don’t tell me you have forgotten how much we loved you.”

After a hesitation, Damian finally looked over at her, his anger and pain at her words was palpable. “How can you say that, Mother? After you tried to kill me? Tried to kill Grayson and Father over and over again? After you disowned me because I chose to help rather than to hurt?”

“I was…afraid of what Beloved might’ve been teaching you,” Talia said quietly, reaching her fingers out to stroke Damian’s face. “You were meant to rule the world, my little Alexander. I didn’t want him to take that belief away from you.”

“He didn’t,” Damian realized his voice was small after he spoke. “He only told me to be the best I can be. That I would be loved regardless.”

“And that’s how it will be, then,” Talia smiled. Gorgeous, to anyone else. Slightly terrifying to Damian.
“How…what will be?”

“Come with me,” Talia’s grin widened. “You and I will travel the world, just like we used to. Only now we will do as you please, help who you wish. Your good will should not be reserved for the Batman and his associates. In our spiritual state, you can stop wars and genocide. Don’t waste your time on grown men who use spandex as a fashion statement.”

“Mother, I-”

“Do not listen to her, Brother!” a shrill voice sounded across the graveyard. Titus turned and growled on instinct, but stopped as the figure moved forward. Damian was frozen in surprise as his younger brother came into view from behind his headstone and came between him and Talia, instantly pushing the woman away. Talia fell back against the grass. “You will leave now, Mother. Before I sic Brother’s dog on you.”

Titus’s eyes were flitting suspiciously between the younger boy and Talia, but as soon as the word ‘dog’ left the child’s lips, he seemed to understand everyone’s stance in the situation. Before Damian’s brain could even form a command, Titus leapt forward to stand beside the Fatherless, growling angrily at Talia.

It took Talia a minute to realize who the child in front of her was, but when she did, her face turned from shock to annoyance. “Standing against me once more, hm?”

“Only because you are wrong.” The boy glanced back at Damian, who had moved to his knees behind their protective wall, before turning back to Talia with a softer voice. “You forced me to take Damian away from Father once before. I will not let you try to do that again.”

“It is not your call to make, monster.” Talia hissed.

“Nor yours,” the child raised his head in challenge. “The person who has to decide anything is Brother. And, if I’m not mistaken, he made his long ago. You just refuse to accept it, you arrogant, pathetic loser.”

“You insignificant little ingrate.” Talia’s arm was suddenly in motion, launching towards the small child’s neck in what looked like some sort of deadly nerve strike. The boy didn’t flinch, ready for the punishment. “I’ve killed you once, I can do it ag-”

Without hesitation, Damian lashed out, curling one arm around the child’s chest and pulling him backwards, the other hand grabbing the inside of Talia’s incoming wrist and twisting it towards her shoulder. Talia let out a breath of bewilderment and pain before she ducked down and pulled away from the hold.

“Damian…” she murmured, cradling her wrist and watching as the elder spun the younger around and held him tight to his chest. The younger returned the gesture, wrapping his arms around Damian’s waist, but still turned his head to stare at her. It was eerie, the two sets of almost identical eyes that were gazing at her. The younger brown full of resentment and confidence, the elder blue filled with fury and contempt.

“Leave.” Damian spat, grip on the child visibly tightening.

“My child, do not-”

“Leave.” The force of the anger in that one word nearly threw Talia back again. “Now.”

Talia’s face transformed back into one of uncaring as she nodded and stood. Damian stayed on the
ground with the boy, watching as she began to move away. “This isn’t over, Damian. Mark my words. I am not the only one you’ve scorned out to seek their revenge on you.”

“Just as I am not the only one who will defend him!” the Fatherless shrieked, trying to turn in Damian’s arms. Titus barked in either agreement or his own declaration, no one was really sure. Damian put his hand on his brother’s head in encouragement to keep quiet.

“I am ready for the challenge, Mother.” Damian’s voice was even as he watched Talia begin to fade away. Her mouth contorted into a smile as she laughed. Out of nowhere, her arm slashed out into the air. At first, Damian was confused as to what she was doing. She was too far away from either him or his brother to hit them. Suddenly he felt something slowly running down his face. A liquid. He removed the hand from his brother’s head and ran his fingers against his cheek before holding them up to his eyes.

It was blood.

His blood.

His eyes widened as he looked back at Talia. She was virtually gone, but that smile was still hauntingly clear. Her voice echoed as she faded completely from sight.

“Are you really?”
Safe

Chapter Summary

He blinked and was in Grayson’s apartment. Well that was weird.

He didn’t know how it happened, not really. One second, he was there, in Gotham, watching Abuse and Batgirl take down some car thieves, when his mind wandered slightly to the vague information given at his mother’s last visit. The next? Well, the next he was in Grayson’s Chicago apartment, watching as his two roommates walked out the door, calling out their goodbyes.

As soon as he heard the door lock click, he scrunched up his nose, looking around his brother’s new abode. It was similar to the Gotham apartment, and in all the worst ways. Small spaces, tacky decorations, windows misshapen in their frames. But Grayson wasn’t dead yet, so that was… something.

Damian continued to glance around, feeling his initial curiosity quickly giving way to a heavy sense of dread. The walls fell, and vulnerability took hold of his soul. For once, he felt like he was the child he always pretended he wasn’t. He was nervous, twitchy, paranoid, defensive-

Scared.

He was scared.

Talia’s visit had shaken him. Not her herself. No he knew that was coming. He even expected a family reunion between the woman, himself and his clone. But her threats. They gave the air of being more than what they seemed. That Talia was only a messenger of sorts, and the real storm was on its way. That Damian may have been the target, but he wouldn’t be the only victim, living or dead.

And that…

That filled him with a fear he couldn’t put into words.

But of course, Damian wasn’t one to get scared easily. He fought murderers and torturers, was in life-and-death situations, like it was part of his breakfast routine. Fear wasn’t a normal emotion for Damian Wayne, especially when he was the one in danger. But that didn’t mean he never experienced it.

And when he did?

Well, he went to Dick Grayson.

It had been an unspoken ritual, one that no one really picked up for, save maybe his Father. After all, it wasn’t a frequent occurrence; therefore there was no real pattern to it. But whenever the panic hit him, he’d run to his older brother in any way he could. Dick, he realized, was the only one who’d ever seen him truly scared before. When they thought Bruce was dead? He came to live with the former Robin in Gotham. (Potentially the start of the non-existent pattern, if anyone was keeping real notes. Though it could have been an outlier, since this was before either of them could comprehend how important they were to each other.) After he figured out his mother put mind-control implants in
his spine? He stayed at the computer with the Batman, even when the elder told him to go get some sleep, as he searched the woman out. When Talia threw a bounty on his life? No one but Bruce knew it, but he and his mentor had spent a week at Dick’s old Bludhaven apartment. After the Joker attacked them all? He asked Dick to go back to the bunker, where they sparred for six hours before playing video games for another three and gorging themselves out on pizza.

So obviously his body – or paranormal abilities or something – acted against his mind on instinct. He had thought of the meeting with his mother, and that stab of fear – the one he couldn’t have when trying to protect his younger brother – surged through his veins. His defenses kicked in, sending him somewhere he would feel safe.

And he always felt safe with Grayson.

Damian felt himself swallow as he began to move around the apartment. Thus far, there was no evidence to even show that Grayson was home, let alone that this was his apartment at all. He was travelling down the hallway when his ear picked up on soft music coming from one of the rooms. He walked in that direction until he reached a door where the music was loudest. Instead of knocking he just walked through the wood. Grayson was on the other side, sitting on his bed with his laptop on his knees, headphones stuffed in his ears. Damian felt himself relax instantly.

Dick paused in his typing and glanced up. The air in his room suddenly changed, becoming colder and heavier. Sadder, almost. His arms involuntarily shuddered as he removed an ear bud, listening to hear if the heater was running or not. After a moment, he determined it was, and got up to see why the airflow was cut off to his room. He opened his door and was hit with the wave of heat instantly. Dumbfounded, he stood in the threshold, glancing between room and hallway for a minute, testing the different temperatures over the three-foot space, before his eyes widened.

“Damian?” he whispered. Damian felt his face contort into one of disbelief. “You here?”

“How do you figure?” Damian mumbled.

After a moment, Dick elaborated on his own. “I researched some stuff about ghosts. General consensus is spirits can manifest whatever emotions they’re feeling onto the living. Oh, and cold spots. Apparently cold spots are big thing.” The man came back into the room and closed the door, leaning against it. “The flashlights are over there, by the way. You know, in case you want to use them or something.”

Damian glanced over to the desk by the window. Sure enough, two flashlights sat parallel on the desk, away from the mess of papers and envelopes. Slowly, he felt his eyebrows knit together.

“You okay, Damian?” Dick’s voice was still gentle. “I mean, the, uh, feeling of the room seems different than a few minutes ago, is all. A little bit more…” his voice trailed off. “Just…go hit one of the lights if you’re really here. Let’s start there.”

Damian nodded in agreement, then rolled his eyes at his own idiocy. Grayson couldn’t see him, he thought as he walked to the desk. He alternated hitting both lights for a few seconds before stopping all together.

“Okay,” Dick’s voice rose and it was a losing battle, trying to keep the grin off of his face. “Good. This is good. Well, you being here, that’s good. This feeling though?” The smile dropped completely. “Damian, what’s going on?”

Damian opened his mouth to respond, but found that he couldn’t. Because he didn’t know. He had no idea what was going on. All he knew was that he was scared. But he didn’t know why. And
“Alright, Damian. It’s okay,” Dick suddenly said, moving towards the bed. “You’re scared. I get that. I...feel that. You don’t have to say it, though...ha, I wouldn’t even be able to tell if you did. We don’t have to talk about it right now, if you don’t want. Just...come over here.” He plopped down on the mattress and patted it with his hand. “Come sit with me.”

It must have been a force of habit, because Damian felt himself move at the command before his brain realized what was even said. He fell against the covers, closest to the nightstand. After a stretch of silence, he reached out a flicked a pen. Dick’s eyes immediately narrowed in on it and he grinned again.

“Tell me what’s on your mind, Damian.”

“I... am afraid.” Damian admitted quietly. “Something is going to happen soon, but I don’t know what. I don’t know who’s in danger and I don’t what I can do to prevent it.”

Damian knew Dick couldn’t hear a word he was saying in the slightest. But he still felt better for the fact that his brother was there, trying to read him in any way he could.

“She made me bleed. Grayson, Mother made me bleed and I’m already dead. How is that even possible? How could she...? Is there something she knows about death that I don’t? Is it possible that even in the afterlife she is a powerful being? What if whatever this thing is I’m not strong enough? What if I’m just a maggot comparatively to her and all of the other enemies coming this way? What-”

“Shhh,” Dick suddenly shushed. Damian’s mouth clamped shut when he realized he was becoming frantic. His brother couldn’t hear him, but in that moment, he’d lost control of his emotions and forced his mentor to feel the panic. He tried to avoid it, but shame flowed through his body. Dick just smiled wider, looking down to where he believed Damian’s height was. Damian was slightly disturbed that he was relatively close. “Everything will be okay, Damian.”

And that smile was so sincere. So realistic, Damian couldn’t help but believe it. He slumped against Dick’s shoulder, hard enough that he knew the man had to have felt something and glanced up at him. “Are you sure?”

Dick rocked slightly, and Damian could tell Dick was trying to force his smile to not turn sad, but he was slowly failing. “Trust me on this, Damian. Have I ever been wrong before?”

“Many times.”

“Okay, well, don’t answer that one. It was rhetorical anyway.” Dick laughed at his own joke. He paused, and Damian assumed he was trying to read his emotion again. “I know you’re still not okay, kid. And I know I can’t help, and there’s really nothing I can do but...would you stick around for a while?”

Damian pursed his lips in thought. He really should be following up leads on his mother, trying to figure out what spirit-magic she used to attack him, attempting to get ahead of her game, making sure his clone doesn’t-

“Just a little while. Like, an hour or something. Maybe two.” Dick’s voice turned to a whisper again. “...for me? Please?”

Damian sighed and rolled his eyes, but reached his leg out and kicked the pen on the nightstand again. Dick smiled and shifted, moving back against his pillows as he picked his laptop back up.
Damian followed suit, curling into Dick’s side, watching as he unplugged his headphones (so
Damian could listen to his music too, no doubt) and continued to type an email to Tim.

It only took a few minutes before Dick began to babble, just like old times. His voice was soothing,
the mundane situation, tranquil. He didn’t need to sleep, not like he really could of course, but
Damian felt his eyelids steadily start to fall. Dick paused in his rambles to smile once more before
sighing contently as he continued on.

No, Damian mused, echoing the sigh, a few hours at Grayson’s wouldn’t hurt. Not in the slightest.
Past

Chapter Summary

Tim gets an impromptu history lesson in Jason Todd.

“And what’s this?”

Tim twitched in surprise, then rolled his eyes behind his mask.

“The little red bird being a space cadet? That’s a good way to get yourself killed.”

“It’s three in the morning, Hood. No one’s come down this block for the last forty-five minutes.”

Tim sighed, turning away from the roof ledge to face his ally.

“No one but me,” Jason concurred, pulling a gun from his holster. “But then again, I’m the one with the gun, and it only takes one well placed shot to take you out.”

“What do you want, Jason.”

Jason leaned against the ledge, spinning his gun on his finger. Clearly someone was in a good mood. “Just wanted to see what you were up to. Like you said, you’ve been standing here for forty-five minutes. And by the way…you do know ‘here’ just so happens to be my territory, right?”

Tim’s eyes roamed the skyline around the building. In truth, he had no idea where he was and only vaguely remembered how he got here after stopping that bank heist two hours ago. He didn’t want to deal with this today. Really, he was just hoping to bullshit the conversation until Jason was either satisfied or bored, but if Tim was in his area of Gotham, well…either of those outcomes were incredibly unlikely to happen. “I know that.”

“Oh? Then what do you need?”

“…What?”

“Come on, Red.” Jason laughed. “You and the Bats only pop into my territory when you want something from me. So? What do you want?”

“Nothing. Just checking in on some things that got wrapped up sooner than expected, so I took a bit of time to myself. Is that a problem?” Tim snapped, moving to look like he was about to take off. “Besides, Hood, you don’t actually own this area. It’s still public property. We can come and go as we please, it’s just a courtesy to you that we don’t.”

There was a pause, and Jason removed his helmet. He still had his second mask on, but the lenses were narrowed as he looked Tim up and down. He clicked his tongue as he rested the helmet against his thigh. “You’re distracted, Tim. Why?”

“No I’m not.”

“Cut the shit.” Jason barked. “What’s going on in that weird little brain of yours?”
“Nothing, Jason. I sw-”

“If you don’t tell me, I’m calling Dick.” Jason cocked his head to the side. “You really want me to do that?”

“No! No,” Tim said immediately. Jason grinned. Tim sighed in frustration. “It’s just…something’s not right.”

“What do you mean?”

Tim shrugged. “I don’t know…it’s like something’s…coming? Like there’s a bunch of electricity in the air and anything could set it off any second. It’s the only way I can describe it.”

“Any idea what, exactly, is coming this way?” Jason dropped his jester act, sitting up a little straighter, watching as Tim paced the roof for a few minutes before coming to stand next to him, looking over the street once more.

“Not at all. I think it’s one of those things where we don’t know until it’s here. But I have no evidence, so it’s not like I can go tell Bruce or Clark or Barry about it or anything.” A low bass echoed down the street as a car slowly drove through the intersection below them.

“So, what, you thought I would help you against this mystery threat?”

“No…” Tim mumbled. “I just…was thinking about…something that could be construed as related.”

“Something…” Jason encouraged. “You know I hate this cryptic crap, Red.”

Tim pursed his lips. “What do you remember from when you were dead?”

“Uh…” Jason blinked. “What?”

Tim shrugged. “It’s related, I promise.”

Jason eyed him skeptically. “And everyone said Dick was the one who went off the deep end…”

Tim stuck his tongue in his cheek. “Look, if you don’t want to answer, fine. Just don’t be a jackass about it.”

He turned to go to the other end of the roof. He wasn’t more than ten feet away when Jason called out. “Well, what do you want to know?”

Tim stopped and looked up at the sky for a moment before turning back around. Jason was still in the same position, leaning against the edge of the roof, ankles overlapping. But now the helmet was on the ground, his arms crossed and face slightly grim. “Anything you’re willing to tell.”

Jason shook his head slightly. “Nah, Red. Anything I’m ‘willing to tell’ will take us two weeks.” He uncrossed his arms for a moment to use finger-quotations. “You’re asking me this for a specific reason, so ask the specific question.”

“Were you ever a spirit?” Tim asked, taking a step forward. “A ghost?”

Now it was Jason’s turn to look up at the sky, his mouth hanging open as he thought of something to say. “Ah…maybe. I mean, I suppose I was.”

“You suppose?”
Jason barked a laugh, rolling his head to the side to look back at Tim. “Of all the things about being dead, you ask me about that one. I can tell you loads about what dying felt like – every single second of that. I can even tell you how much being resurrected sucked. But the in-between? Well, that’s…different.”

“Different?”

“It’s not that I don’t remember. But it’s…fuzzy. I can only remember certain parts…moments…feelings…but all of it as a whole? You’ll have better luck getting Bruce to say ‘I love you’ to anyone.”

“What kind of moments?” Tim pressed.

Jason shifted, his shoulders hunched forward and he looked at the ground. “I remember…meeting Bruce’s parents. They were nice. Just as nice as you’d expect them to be, Timbo. And I…think…I saw you. You were with that idiot Nightwing. It must’ve been just when you were starting out, you seemed nervous. I remember being…angry. Angrier than all hell at you, and Bruce and that anger just sorta…grew, I think?”

“You seem to remember them pretty clearly.” Tim said quietly.

“But I don’t. Not really.” Jason sighed. “Like, I don’t know why I was on that rooftop when I saw you and Dick. I don’t know how I even got there. It was a building put up after I died.”

“Following Nightwing, maybe?”

“I doubt it. It’s not like we got on real well when we were younger.” Jason sounded like he was still bitter. “I don’t even remember what you two were saying or doing. It’s almost like it was a dream. I just remember being there. Seeing you two. Then I blinked and it was two years later and I’m in the Watchtower watching Bruce annoy Clark to all hell. Next thing I knew I was fighting the waters of that damn Lazarus Pit and…the rest is history.”

“I see.” Tim nodded. “Do you remember having any sort of…abilities?”

“What, like the metas? Like Flash or Superboy or Wonder Woman?”

“Um, well…I don’t know. I guess?” Tim scrunched up his face. “Could you touch things if you wanted? Make yourself solid? Or seeable?”

“Well?” Jason mumbled. “I think…when I saw you that time on the roof, I got angry so I wanted to push you off. And…I tried, actually. But I went right through you, ended up falling myself.”

“How unfortunate.” Tim muttered drily.

“Shut up,” Jason drawled. “But then another time, I remember punching the computer monitor in the Cave and smashing it all to pieces.”

“I remember that!” Tim shouted excitedly. Jason just stared at him with a quirked brow.

“My point being.” Jason’s voice was amused. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess I was…some sort of poltergeist. That being a dearly departed doesn’t necessarily mean you’re departed at all. But getting brought back? It…fucked with my mind, Tim. It took my memories from when I was dead. Or tried to. But I guess I messed that up too, huh?”

Silence reigned for a minute or two, before Jason sighed, shaking his head as he leaned back to look
at the road. “I didn’t know for a long time. For a long while I just…I remembered dying and I
remembered waking up. But I’d dream about that in-between. About being a ghost? Part of the
paranormal? It took me a while to realize, they weren’t dreams at all. Just memories. Memories I
shouldn’t have with people I shouldn’t have met. It was a weird thing to figure out, almost terrifying,
so I stopped trying to remember. Especially because…because there’s a chance that, maybe, just
maybe, I let my anger take over a few times. And maybe I did some things I wouldn’t be too proud
of.”

“Sounds like you remembered them anyway.” Tim said, coming and sitting next to Jason.

“No, I don’t. But it’s like you said earlier,” Jason looked up at him. “Something’s just not right. And
I, for one, just…don’t want to know.”

“I see.” Tim repeated.

“But,” Jason suddenly reached out, slapping Tim on the knee. “It’s in the past, Red Robin. So not
much can be done about it now. No need to sit here and fret about it, right?”

Tim laughed lightly. “Yeah. Right.”

“So that answer your question?” Jason asked as he stood. Tim nodded. “And does that help with
your big mysterious problem?”

“Yes, I think so.” Tim got up too. “Thanks, Jason.”

“Hey, what’s family for?” He grinned as he leaned down to grab his helmet. “Now, I don’t know
about you, but reminiscing always puts me in the mood for a nice cold beer. I can’t actually
remember how old you are, or if I ever even knew in the first place, but I doubt you’re of age. Want
to come with anyway?”

Tim smiled. “Rain check on that, Red Hood.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve got a hot date waiting for you.” Jason’s voice was muffled as he put his helmet
back on. The sarcasm, however, wasn’t.

“Not a hot date. Just a cat who gets separation anxiety after about six hours.” Tim hopped up on the
ledge, unhooks a grappling hook. “Take care of yourself, Jay.”

“You too, Timmy.” Jason said warmly, checking his gun one last time before putting it back in its
holster. “And don’t you forget about that rain check. I intend to cash it next time you and I are in the
same city.”

“Of course.”

“So make it a nice city.” Jason said as he backed away down the roof. “Los Angeles, New York,
Edinburgh…I hear Madrid is real nice.”

“Madrid, right, right…”

sometimes, Tim was grateful when the team had missions in Gotham. That way, during downtimes,
such as now, he could stay at his own place, get time to himself. He landed on the balcony, juggling
opening the window with trying to take off his mask at the same time.
He could hear Desdemona mewing happily from the living room, apparently having not heard him come in. But of course she wouldn’t have, not when she had Damian there to keep her busy. The family didn’t (secretly) call him the animal whisperer for nothing.

Sure enough, as Tim came through the hallway, he could see the soft glow Damian’s transparent body was giving off. (Tim didn’t ask why he was glowing. Like Jason had said, some things are better off not being know.) He seemed to be holding a string, bouncing it up and down, watching as tiny Desdemona leapt after it time and time again. Damian kept the kitten’s attention as Tim disappeared into his room to change and then slipped into the kitchen to grab a cup of water. After about ten minutes, he finally slumped onto the couch. When he did, Desdemona jumped, backing into Damian’s legs and falling over at the surprise. When she realized who it was, she righted herself, meowing louder than before as she hobbled towards him.

Tim smiled as he scooped her up, scratching at her chin and listening to her purrs as Damian stood, making a slight show of dusting off his trousers before sitting against the kitchen table.

“Well?” Damian mouthed. Tim was still having trouble hearing the boy, and over Desdemona it would be impossible.

“Ran into Jason.” Tim shook his head. “He didn’t know anything.”

Damian’s face contorted into frustration as he pushed himself off the table.

“Hey, stop it.” Tim scolded. “I told you not to expect much. It’s a sore subject for Jason, as it really would be for anybody. He told me what he could, and even that wasn’t much.”

Damian looked at him questioningly.

“He said the memories came in bits and pieces. That they’re fuzzy and he’s gotten to a point in his life where he doesn’t want to remember what happened when he was a spirit anyway.” Tim sighed. Desdemona began nibbling at his fingers. “What I got from it is that he spent a lot of the time angry and may have done some bad things.”

Damian nodded slowly before running his hand down his face. Tim could see him attempting to clear his throat. “Any mentions of abilities?”

The voice was light, and softer than wind. But it was there, and Tim would take it as it was. “Not really. Nothing that he could recall personally. But like I said…”

Tim trailed off as Damian turned away, moving towards the window that overlooked the alleyway.

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“Another…spirit. They came to me with a warning.” Damian’s voice whispered. Tim was a little taken aback when he saw Damian’s lips not moving. “They themselves had abilities that I have yet to see in myself. So I was only thinking that there must be a way for me to develop them, therefore neutralize the threat.”
“You’re in trouble?” Tim asked. Damian half-heartedly shrugged again, before slowly turning the gesture into a nod. “What can I do?”

“Nothing,” Damian’s mouth was back to moving. “You’ve done enough, Drake. Thank you.”

“No, Damian, it doesn’t work like that.” Tim snapped. “We’re still family. We still protect each other. We’ve both been around long enough to know that death doesn’t change any of that.”

“I don’t want you involved.”

“Well, that’s too damn-”

“Mother will hurt you if you intrude in this battle!” Damian snarled. The room suddenly felt heavy and tense, Tim’s stomach tying into knots. Desdemona began shaking in fear.

“Moth…Talia?” Tim asked. “Talia’s threatening you again?”

“Stay out of it, Drake,” Damian hissed, but it almost sounded like he was begging. “Stay out of it, and keep everyone else away from the situation, too. I will handle it.”

“I’ll do research for you, Damian. I know Dick’s already done a bunch.” Tim said quickly. “We’ll find out if there’s a way you can get these spiritual powers too. We’ll back you on this.”

“I said I will handle it.” Damian’s voice was dark and angry. Tim knew he wasn’t angry at him, more concerned if anything, but that didn’t stop him from hesitating. Desdemona leaned out towards Damian, mewing softly at him in comfort. Damian shook his head. “Do nothing, Drake, but keep an eye out and protect yourself. I hope the next time I am forced to see you, the matter will be resolved.”

“Damian, wait-”

It was too late. Suddenly, the room was empty, the weight in the air lifted. Damian was gone.

Desdemona looked around before meowing sadly and nestling against Tim’s neck. Gently, Tim plucked her from her perch as he went to go sit back on the sofa. As he sat down, he held the kitten in front of his face, staring into her bright yellow eyes.

“I agree, girl,” he mumbled, placing her on his chest. He stroked her head absently, staring at the window Damian had just been standing at. “I don’t have a good feeling about this either.”
Stolen

Chapter Summary

Dick finds out what Ra’s did to Damian. He isn’t happy about it.

The door slamming shook the whole wall. Alfred yowled in annoyance at being woken as Titus jumped to his feet. Damian glanced up from the music player that was gathering dust on his nightstand as stomping footsteps echoed through the house.

It wouldn’t have been the first time Father came home angry, Damian thought. Or, for that matter, been the first time one of his associates at Wayne Enterprises showed up to rant about accounts or something like that. But Bruce was already home, and in fact hadn’t even gone into the office all day. So when Damian heard Pennyworth trying to placate whomever the invading party was, his curiosity was piqued, and he slowly made his way out of his bedroom and towards the banister.

The voices floated through the main hallway, “…-ard, please. You need to calm down. Now I will go fetch Master Bruce and we’ll settle this without any-”

“No, Alfie. Tell me where he is right now.” Damian felt himself straighten as he recognized the voice as Dick’s. He was in town? Since when? Did anyone know?

“Richard,” Alfred tried using his stern tone, the one that hadn’t worked since any of the boys were about sixteen.

“Alf, if you give him a heads up that I’m here, then he’ll just run and disappear like he always does.” Dick cut him off. Damian felt his face scrunch in concern as he all but ran down the stairs, Titus in tow. Dick was rarely angry, let alone without a visible cause. Normally, it surrounded the safety of their misfit family, but as far as Damian was concerned, everyone was fine. And anyway, why would Bruce have anything to- “This is important and- No, Alfred, don’t scold me on the fact I haven’t talked to him since…since the Leviathan incident. That is the least of our problems right now.”

They were in the hallway, Alfred must have been in the process of dusting the paintings and corridor tables when Dick barged in. As the two of them stared silently at each other, Damian saw his brother’s hands were balled into fists, nails threatening to cut into his palm.

As Damian took in the scene in front of him, Alfred sighed. “He’s in the cave. Took the day off to work on the new suspension system for the Batmobile.”

Dick nodded and sidestepped the older man, continuing down the hall. Titus huffed and glanced up at Damian before following behind him. As he reached the door to the study, he called over his shoulder, “I would get an ice pack ready if I were you, Alfie.”

Damian’s eyes widened in surprise and he instantly zapped himself down to the cave. He was standing at the computer consol as he heard the clock entrance open, the same angry steps thumping down the stairs overpowering the jingle of a dog collar. He looked over to the parking area to see his father completely immersed in his work, bent over the open hood of the car, grunting as he upgraded the system. He didn’t hear his guest enter. Titus must have known for, as Dick reached the bottom
step, he let out a couple of loud barks.

Bruce twitched and glanced back. Seeing Dick, he sighed, reaching for a rag as he turned to make his way towards him. Dick, meanwhile, glanced down at Titus as if the dog betrayed him before moving to meet Bruce halfway.

Damian felt himself gulp.

“Dick.” Bruce said in greeting. “I didn’t know you were going to be in town. How’s Chica—”

_Whack!_

The fist to the face spun him around, and Bruce crumpled, barely catching himself on his elbows. Titus began barking as Damian surged forward. Dick stood over their father, suddenly breathing heavily, ignoring Titus as the dog latched onto his jacket with his teeth, trying to pull him backwards.

“You…” he whispered. “You son of a bitch.”

Bruce stayed on the ground, watching the blood drip from his mouth to the floor. Damian skidded to a halt, kneeling next to his father, watching as the man’s face became stoic, his hand in a fist at this point as well.

“How long?” Dick’s voice was low and hostile, but Damian could hear pain behind the fury.

Bruce spit some blood across the floor before turning towards him. “How long what?”

“How long ago did you let some filth steal _your son’s body_ from his grave?” he shouted. “How long until you were going to _tell me_?”

There was a pause where all that could be heard was Dick’s breathing and the drip of water from somewhere else in the cave. After a moment Bruce shifted into a sitting position. Titus looked at Damian before whining softly in Bruce’s direction. Bruce reached out, pulling the dog towards him a little, petting his neck in comfort.

“When I found him again,” Bruce said. “I was going to call you then. I didn’t… I didn’t want you to worry.”

“Worry? You didn’t want me to _worry_?” Dick’s voice felt like venom, Damian thought, watching as Dick threw his arms in the air. “Bruce, this is _your son_ we’re talking about. My _little brother_. He’s already _dead_. There’s nothing to _worry_ about anymore.”

“That’s exactly it.” Bruce shot back. “Damian had…” his voice cracked, and he had close his mouth, take a moment before starting over. “Damian had already passed and you weren’t taking it well. I wasn’t going to add to the stresses you were enduring by telling you that the only piece we had of our boy – the last physical proof we had of his existence – had been taken from us, too.”

Dick’s breath hitched, and it dawned on Damian suddenly that both men were close to tears.
“And what? You thought by telling me I would just shut down?” Dick asked. “Are you that dense, Bruce? Or stupid? Have you forgotten how much I loved that kid? How much I would do anything to help him if I could? No, I wasn’t taking him being murdered in cold blood well, but I couldn’t change that. I knew that. But how do you know I wouldn’t have been able to find the assholes who wanted to take him from you again?”

“I…”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t do that for him?” Dick pressed. “For you?”

Bruce finally looked up at him, but didn’t say a word. He and Dick stared at each other in silence before Dick turned away, blinking rapidly as he ran a hand across his eyes. He chuckled dryly, rolling his eyes as he stalked away across the cave. Damian already knew where he was going. He and Bruce watched as Dick stopped at the memorial cases, in front of Damian’s.

Damian looked back to his father as he heard Titus give a whine. Bruce was pushing the dog away and standing, going the same path Dick had taken. Damian scrambled behind him. Bruce stopped a few feet behind Dick, while Damian stood off to the side, watching both of them with Titus. Bruce waited while Dick took in the small Robin costume once more. It wasn’t the same one Damian had died in, no one would have been able to endure that.

“Talk to him, Father.” Damian muttered as Dick slowly put his hand on the glass. “You want to, we all know that. He’ll respond. He wouldn’t have come here if he didn’t actually expect to talk to you.”

Bruce took a step forward. “How have you been doing anyway, Dick?”

Dick shrugged. “I have good days and bad days. Guess we can chalk today up to a bad one.” He tried to laugh again, but the sound came out wrong. When he decided it was a lost cause, he frowned, closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the glass. “Who’d a thought someone could hate a ten-year-old child so much as to keep coming after him even after he’s dead.”

Bruce hummed in agreement as he put his hand on Dick’s shoulder. “Who told you about this?”

“Jason. Called me because he said he had a lead on the case, but couldn’t get a hold of you or Tim.” Dick said. “I was on my way here as soon as I hung up with him, but he called me again about an hour ago. The lead didn’t pan out.”

“I know who did it.” Bruce said. Dick opened one eye and glanced back. “I just need time to plan how to go after him. I won’t drag this battle out. I want to hit him once. And I want to guarantee it will hurt.”

It seemed that Bruce became more and more angry as he spoke. Dick turned towards him, hand still against the glass. “Who…?” But the question didn’t get out before his eyes widened, and then filled with the same anger he had earlier. “Ra’s.”

Bruce nodded. “He took both Damian and Talia. That means he has a plan of his own. One I will stop, if it’s the last thing I do.”

“One both of us will stop. At least. Somehow, I don’t think you’ll have a difficult time recruiting on this one.” A light smile graced Dick’s lips. Bruce returned it, slightly tightening his grip on Dick’s shoulder.

“Master Bruce?” Alfred called from the staircase. Bruce turned towards him. “I was informed you might need some medical assistance.”
“Ah…yes, I suppose I do.” Bruce sighed, raising a hand to his cheek as he looked back at Dick.

“I’m not apologizing for it.” Dick said smugly.

“I don’t want you to.” Bruce said. “We’ll get him back. Before Ra’s does anything more to him. I’ll get our boy back. I swear.”

“Emphasis on we,” Dick said. Bruce nodded before moving away to see Alfred. Dick turned back to the case, and Titus came to sit next to him. Damian moved forward as well, leaning against the glass as he watched Dick’s face. It was a lost cause, Dick trying to stop his tears. As soon as he heard Bruce speaking with Alfred, he let a few stray ones fall. “I…I know you’re here, Damian. Somewhere. I can’t feel you or anything, but I know you’re here.”

“You’re a regular psychic, Grayson.” Damian drawled, crossing his arms as Titus licked Dick’s hand.

“I know you’re here, but I miss you anyway.” Dick whispered. “…I still miss you so much.”

Titus whined quietly, ramming his head into Dick’s hip.

“But you already know that. And if you’re standing here, you’re probably making fun of me.” Dick muttered, looking down at Titus, before sitting on the floor next to the dog, back against the case. Bruce and Alfred both looked over at him, and he noticed their voices suddenly became much quieter.

“Only because you deserve it.” Damian snorted, repeating the motion, sitting on Titus’s other side. “You know, Grayson? I don’t know whether I should be mad at you for attacking Father or not. The fact he did not tell you what happened really shouldn’t be excuse enough for your actions.”

“Wherever Jay was when he called, he sounded like he was having a bit of trouble. I wonder if you were there helping him.” Dick mused, smiling as he played with Titus’s ears. Titus made rumbling noises from his throat in return, lightly hitting Dick’s knee with his paw. “I wonder if you’re there now.”

“It shouldn’t be an excuse. But, for some reason, it is.” Damian sighed, leaning his head back, staring at the rocks above him. “So, I guess. Um, thanks. For punching Father in the face. For me.”

“Timmy and I still haven’t talked about you popping up everywhere, though.” Dick said. “Though he sounded real…uneasy last time I talked to him. Jason said last time he saw him, the little genius was seriously paranoid. So we should probably get that cleared up before we have a serious conversation about ghosts and such.”

“I hope you and Father can start to mend your broken bonds soon, as well. The toll you’re both taking on each other by not speaking is ridiculous.” Damian said. “Also, Drake needs to mind his own damn business, then maybe he won’t be so insecure over everything.”

“Come on, pup.” Dick called, patting Titus on the back as he stood. “Let’s go find Bruce’s plans to take down Ra’s, and get some brainstorming started, huh? And also a beer. Everyone should always have a beer on hand when preparing to taking down criminal mastermind.”

Titus barked and stood. Damian stayed sitting against the case. Titus looked at him, cocking his head to the side. Damian smiled, scratching the dog’s ear before nodding and waving him away. Titus huffed then, looking up at Dick. The man stared at the bright red and yellow costume for a moment before smiling, running his fingers across his eyes and then tapping the glass. “Talk to you later, kid.”
Damian watched them walk away before leaning back against the case again, staring up at his own uniform. “Yeah. Later, Grayson.”
Awaken

Chapter Summary

In which Colin misses an entire ghost battle in his bedroom.

Chapter Notes

On the original file, I wrote a note to myself saying I apparently edited this one differently on the ffnet site, but don’t remember the changes. So, I guess, if you’re super curious about what I changed, just go find it there. I can’t imagine it’s much, though.

Damian wasn’t surprised, at least not much, not for long. Every day he remembered his mother’s warning.

“I am not the only one you’ve scorned out to seek their revenge on you.”

But still, there was no other choice than to be shocked when he turned a corner at the orphanage Colin lived in to see the armored man standing in front of him, arms crossed, mask-less and looking ridiculously smug.

Ducard. Nobody.

The shock quickly transformed into anger. Into a red-hot fury. How dare him. It was one thing, for the man to attack his father, or even his brothers. But to appear at the place his best friend called home? Who did he think he was?

“Ducard.” He spat, falling into an attack stance out of habit.

Ducard’s grin grew before he chuckled, glancing up at the old chandeliers and brickwork of the walls and ceiling. “Funny, meeting up with you in a church.” His eyes finally fell back to Damian. “You sure your skin’s not burning, Demon?”

“What do you want?” Damian asked. He would not let himself be goaded or deterred, not now.

“Just to chat,” Ducard said, walking slowly forward. Damian twitched, but held his ground.

“Couldn’t we chat elsewhere? The manor is where we chatted the last time you wanted something from me.”

Ducard nodded, “True, true. But last time you needed no incentive to listen to what I had to say.” Damian narrowed his eyes. “This times it seems you do. And your father is old news. No point to involve him this time. That dweeby little red head down the hall however…”

Damian’s eyes widened before Ducard disappeared into thin air. “No!” he shouted, following suit. He blinked and was in Colin’s room. The ginger was asleep in his bed, having been injured a few nights before and barred from patrol by a concerned Batgirl until he healed. Ducard was standing
over him, a strange sort of orange-glowing sword in his hand, held at Colin’s throat. “He has nothing
to do with this, or you.” Damian said calmly, staying by the door. “Let him be.”

“Oh, but he has everything to do with you, doesn’t he?” Ducard asked, lightly tapping the blade
against Colin’s skin. Colin shrugged at it, burying his face into his pillow. “The only friend you ever
made outside that ridiculous family you have, isn’t it?”

Ducard was no fool, nor one to play a bluff often. At this point, Damian wasn’t willing to chance it.
If he didn’t comply to whatever his fellow spirit wanted, Colin would pay the price. His eyes were
glued to the saber, attempting to calculate a counterstrike. “What do you want?”

“To chat.”

“You said,” Damian hissed. “About what?”

“Word around the graveyards is you got a visit from your mother,” Ducard said. The blade in his
hand started to flicker.

“Correct. Your point?”

“A war is about to begin across the spirit realm.” The blade disappeared completely. Damian’s eyes
moved to lock with Ducard’s. “And you’re the prime target.”

“I’ve gathered.” Damian sighed. “Mother is nothing but vindictive. I was born from her want of
revenge against Father and his lack of empathy for her and Grandfather’s missions. My death was
her revenge against Father for taking me from her. Now, she wants revenge against me for sticking
with my father and his cohorts, even after my demise. You are telling me nothing new, Ducard.”

“Are you frightened?” Ducard asked, taking a step back away from the bed. Damian noted that he
was purposely keeping Colin between them, most likely as a type of leverage.

“For myself, no. I am already dead. I cannot be injured anymore.” Damian muttered. “But my mother is never direct in her attacks.”

Ducard nodded. “You believe she will attack your living loved ones?”

“No reason not to.” Damian muttered. “Especially if she has the ability to, which you seem to be
implying she does.” Colin suddenly yawned, opening his eyes. He sat up slightly, reaching for the
blanket that seemed to have fallen from his shoulders. Once he grasped its corner, he flopped against
his pillow, curling deeper into his comforter. After a beat of silence, he sighed, signaling that he had
fallen unconscious once more. Damian couldn’t help but smirk fondly as he addressed his enemy.

“What is your stake in this, Ducard?”

“Your mother approached me. Asked me to be involved. Apparently she seems to believe I hate you
as much as she does.” Ducard said, watching Damian as his focused shifted, and he slowly moved
around the room, staring between the multiple posters that adorned the wall.

“I don’t truly believe the emotion my mother has for me is hate. But I digress.” Damian glanced over
his shoulder. “What was your answer?”

“I haven’t given one. I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Why?”

Damian didn’t realize he’d let his guard down until he was thrown head first into the brick wall, a
hand tightly gripping the back of his neck. “Because I wanted to see what kind of fight you’d put up.”

Damian tried to push back. He twisted, throwing his elbow, then his fist, backwards. But it was no use, Ducard was out of reach. “Duca—”

“You know *nothing*, do you realize that?” Ducard whispered. “Being dead is a mystic state. Ridiculous, really. You still have all your skills and tricks you had as a living thing, but then you have so much more. And you? Oh, Damian. You have no idea.”

Damian continued to struggle. “Wha…what are you babbling about?!”

Even with his limited vision, Damian saw the orange glow reappear. Again, he tried to turn his head, but Ducard didn’t let him, instead holding the sword up to his cheek. “How do you think I have this? How do you think I’m able to manifest it whenever I want?” The blade was pressed against his skin. “How do you think Talia was able to cut you without being anywhere near you? With you both dead, how do you think she was able to cut you *at all*?”

Damian froze. “You were there.”

Ducard chuckled. “You were so preoccupied with the arrival of your mother and protecting that little brat with you that you didn’t even notice me over by that ostentatious house.”

With one last shove against the stone, Ducard released him. Damian stumbled and turned. He took a step forward, ready to go on the offensive, when he found himself falling to the ground, an invisible weight blanketing his body. The weight kept pressing, and for a fleeting moment, Damian mused on what it would feel like to be crushed. The weight suddenly stopped and let up slightly, enough for Damian to move his head and look up at Ducard. “Didn’t give her an answer, huh?”

“No I haven’t. But should I decide to join her, at the very least, I want an opponent who will put up a decent fight.” Ducard smirked. Damian gritted his teeth; there was no doubt in his mind who’s allegiance Ducard would serve. So why was he wasting his time here?

“So what. You’re going to be a tough love sensei now or something?” Damian tried to shuffle his body across the floor.

“Sensei? Not so much.” Ducard backed up against the bed. Damian’s heart dropped as he raised the blade. “Like I said, it’s not much of a fight when the adversary doesn’t know even know how to lift his weapon, let alone *use* it.”

Ducard looked down at the sword in his hand. His smirk grew once more as his grip on the hilt tightened. Before Damian’s eyes the blade grew, becoming longer and broader. He began to scrabble against the wooden floor, trying to stand, to do anything to protect his friend.

“No, Ducard…stop…wait…this is…this…” His struggling wasn’t working. And he couldn’t even call out. Colin couldn’t hear him. Colin probably had no idea of the scene going on next to his bed.

“Spotlight’s on you, Boy Wonder!” Ducard shouted, raising the sword above his head, half admiring the beauty of it. “Imagine it. You’re in the throes of battle, with a weapon you don’t know how to use, and the person you’ve sworn to protect is about to get killed by the enemy. What do you do?”

Ducard squeezed the hilt and swung his arm downwards towards Colin’s throat.

“No!” Damian screamed.
And the world stopped.

Something flooded through Damian’s veins, pulsing, feeling like it was about to explode through his skin. It didn’t take a genius to realize whatever it was, this power or adrenaline, was tied to his emotions, his anger and fear. His fingers curled into the floor, nails digging into the wood. As the sword came closer to Colin’s body, Damian tried one more time, surging forward.

All at once, the power beating through his body burst. It was an uncontrolled blast, sending both the weight on his back and Ducard flying in opposite directions. The sword disappeared just as it would have cut through Colin’s neck. Ducard hit the wall behind the bed and slid down it, sputtering an unnecessary cough.

Damian stood and walked slowly to the bed. The power was already rebuilding inside his soul, a dull hum now, behind his thoughts. He looked down at Colin, making sure there was no injury. It didn’t appear there was, and Damian found himself wondering what a manifested spirit sword would have even done to the boy.

Another cough brought Damian out of his thoughts. Ducard was still sitting against the wall. As Damian made his way around the bed, he noticed a crack in the brick behind Ducard’s head, and realized he couldn’t recall it being there before. No matter.

“What do I do?” Damian hissed, crouching in front of the man. He glanced down at his hand, and found a small, green-glowing, shimmering knife lying there. Was it that easy? He just…wished for it and there it was? He looked back up at Ducard and gripped the knife, holding it up to the man’s throat. His voice was cold, eyes unblinking as he answered the question. “I adapt.”

Ducard regarded him for a moment before smiling. “That’s my boy.” He whispered. Suddenly he threw his hand up, smacking Damian in the chin with the butt of his palm. Damian fell back, smacking his head against the bed frame. He closed his eyes, both in frustration and pain, before blinking them open. Ducard was no longer in front of him, but rather on the other side of the room, next to the door.

Damian spun around, using the bed as a crutch as he moved to his knees. In a mimicry of his mother, he slashed his arm through the air. Ducard’s sleeve tore open, followed by his skin. Blood poured from the gash like a waterfall, though Ducard didn’t seemed too bothered. Instead, he stared at it as if it were a paper cut, before glancing back up at Damian, who was had come back around Colin’s bed.

“Vicious,” Ducard said, holding his arm up for inspection. The gash ran from his elbow to his wrist. “And not Talia kind of vicious either.”

The nod towards his father did not go unnoticed, but Damian chose not to comment on it. “Come near this place again, come near anyone I’ve worked with again and I’ll—”

“What, kill me? Been there, done that, Damian. Or don’t you remember?” For the millionth time, it seemed, Ducard grinned, as if this were all some big joke. “But you got your start. The rest is up to you. See you on the battlefield, kid.”

“I look forward to it.” Damian said, stoic. As Ducard vanished, Damian looked at his hands. The knife was gone, but he could still feel the power running through his bones. It was like a door was opened inside of him, and he had no idea how to shut it. But if using this power, harnessing it to do what he wanted, would safeguard the people in his life, like Colin, then maybe he didn’t want to.

This was a new start. All this time of being dead, he was plagued with feelings of guilt, of being
pathetic. He could do nothing but react and sometimes, merely reacting wasn’t good enough to save someone, save anyone. An image of Grayson in that godforsaken warehouse flashed through his mind.

But now things would change. Now he could fight back. He’d have to test it, but he bet if he tried hard enough, his abilities could be felt by the living. They’d have to, if he had any chance of saving his family from Talia’s wrath. And he would save them. He’d protect them, no matter what it took. Even if it meant selling his soul to the Devil.

The knife reappeared in his grasp, and transformed before his eyes into a batarang. He couldn’t help but grin. After a moment of flipping it between his fingers like he used to, he let it dissipate. Staring at his hands once more, he curled his fingers a few times in a stretch before following in Ducard’s footsteps, and disappearing himself, whispering as he went. “Watch yourself, Wilkes.”

When Colin awoke the next morning, he immediately found himself staring at the dark brown stain on the floor by his door, one he didn’t remember ever seeing before. And were those…scratch marks in the wood next to the stain? Later, as he got dressed thinking about how he was going to bring this up to the nuns, he noticed a crack in his wall next to his bed. Suddenly, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he missed something.

Something really important.
Midnight Clear

Chapter Summary

It didn’t take long for Jason to realize that Damian’s dog was an asshole.

Chapter Notes

This was written around Christmas two years ago, thus the title

It was cold, and otherwise, he wouldn’t have been out here. Or really, out anywhere. Nights like this is when Roy was an even bigger sap than normal and forced him and Kory to stay in, drink hot chocolate and be a giant heap of people and blankets on that shitty old sofa the archer insisted on keeping. In fact, this evening Roy had tried to convince him to do just so. No, Jason wouldn’t normally brave the snow and negative-degree temperatures, but it was the only night he could be one-hundred-percent sure Bruce wasn’t around. At least the only night for a while. And Jason wasn’t planning on staying in Gotham long enough to wait for another chance. It was kind of a now or another-six-months-to-a-year-minimum type deal.

The house would have been eerie – terrifying, really – with its dark windows and dead foliage, if only that stupid Great Dane didn’t come bounding out of the back door like he hadn’t seen a human being in ages.

(And, as Jason scratched at Titus’s ears and cooed into his fur, he realized that, with Bruce as his caregiver, it may have been the exact truth. Poor dog. The kid would turn over in his grave if he knew. In fact, Jason had a mind to go tell him himself.)

But wait a second. With Alfred accompanying Bruce to wherever he was…how did Titus get out of the house? The butler never forgot to close and lock all doors when they went out, ever. Even if it was just to the store. After a few seconds, Jason shook his head. It didn’t matter. First time for everything.

After three failed attempts to usher the dog back into the house, Jason shrugged, patted his thigh and began walking across the yard. Titus bucked excitedly and ran next to him, seemingly not bothered by the frigid air or snow clumping in his fur. Jason just huffed, zipping his jacket up further and shoving his hands in his pockets as he watched his breath disappear into the air.

He’d forgotten what a hike it actually was to the graveyard. After about five minutes, he had half a mind to turn back, break into the manor and raid the kitchen for a hot drink while he stole the good stuff from Bruce’s liquor cabinet before returning to where the Outlaws were, no doubt, waiting for his return. But no. He soldiered on instead. After all, this was a meeting that was long overdue.

When they passed the threshold to the cemetery, Titus took off around the tombstones as if it were a maze made just for him. Jason just rolled his eyes as he made his way towards his destination.
The monument was unimaginative and a little underwhelming. Just a big pointy obelisk. It didn’t even get the bestowal of having a name on it. At least Martha and Thomas Wayne got that. It was just…there, like an afterthought. And for some reason, that made Jason practically furious.

“Hey, Robin.”

He hadn’t visited the graveyard, not really. Not since it happened. He came to the cave when he could, after he heard what Talia had done, and he saw the body. He saw Dick beside himself, trying to help the forever-brave Alfred clean and prepare their dead boy for burial. He watched as Bruce sat stoically in the manor, staring blankly out a window. But he never found Tim. The genius was there, according to Alfred, but couldn’t be located.

But that was enough. Jason didn’t want to go through any more. He left before the coffin was ready, and was always able to come up with excuses as to why he couldn’t come back. Whenever he came back to the manor, he’d make sure he didn’t even look towards the cemetery. In a way, he didn’t want to face the reality of it. That Bruce didn’t let it happen again. That things would be different for that fucking little brat. That being the ‘real son’ out of all of them would mean…something.

Suddenly Jason forgot the cold and the snow. He sat down in front of the stone and crossed his legs, staring up at it. “Nice digs you got here.”

In the almost-year of ignoring the reality of it, he found himself imagining it anyway. In the recesses of his brain, he hoped that the gravestone was huge and obnoxious. Some big intricate design that Bruce oversaw first hand. Maybe, instead of the family graveyard, Damian’s plot was in an area of the Wayne grounds all on its own, just to mark how special it was. How special the person it was built for was. Damian would have absolutely hated it – everything about it – but it would have shown that Bruce cared. It would have been a huge sort of proclamation, as if Bruce were saying, “This was my son and I want the whole world to know how much I loved him.”

“Bruce really went all out for you, huh?” Jason sighed. His eyes landed on the remnants of a flower that was rotting on the base. “Sorry if I woke you or something. I know its damn near midnight. But I just thought I’d…I don’t know, stop by. See how you were holding up out here all by your lonesome.”

He didn’t feel stupid talking out loud. For one, it kept Titus close. Whenever Jason would start speaking, he’d see that goofy dog’s head pop up behind a different marker, as if he was just making sure Jason was where he left him. For two, in all of Jason’s years, he’d talked to worse inanimate objects than a grave. Besides, for some reason, he felt like someone was listening, and hardcore judging him with fierce disbelief.

“Ran into Tim about a month ago,” he said, trying to shake the feeling. “Was asking me some weird-ass questions about when I was dead. He even asked if I was a ghost at some point. And the funny part? I answered him on it, because no one’s ever really asked me about it.”

Titus appeared between two headstones, rolling back and forth in the snow. Jason pursed his lips, thinking of how he would have to clean the dog later, if he didn’t want there to be any evidence of his visit.

“But he believed me on it.” Jason mumbled, looking back up at the monument. “Little bastard believed me on every word I said. And it just…I guess got me thinking of you, you little shit. Wondering where you are, if you’re some vengeful little thing like I was or if you’re actually resting in peace. I doubt you’re the latter, because that’s just how awful the cards dealt to you were, huh?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason thought he saw movement behind Titus. As he went to glance
over, Titus suddenly jumped up and started running around the cemetery again, only this time barking loudly. He didn’t seem to be actually going anywhere so Jason tuned him out.

“But…if you are here kid? Don’t waste your time on your dad. I know you looked up to him like nobody’s business and all…and I know he loved you and all that but…” Jason stumbled over his words. It was hard to concentrate with Titus echoing across the grounds. “And I’m not saying give up on your dad or anything. But Dick, he…he needs you, man. More than I’ve ever seen him need anybody. You were a little asshole but for some reason he loved you. And you dying tore his heart out, and I don’t know how good he is at picking up the pieces.”

Titus ran up next to Damian’s grave and jumped up against the stone, still barking. Jason continued to ignore him, merely raising his voice. “And Bruce has a support system, as much as he won’t admit it. He’s got Clark and Diana and everyone else in that stupid satellite they all hang out in. Tim’s got his Titans and I’ve got Roy and Kory. But Dick’s got nobody. So if you’re around still, which I bet you are, and need something to do, go find your stupid older brother and—”

Titus finally paused in his barking and stared up at the sky. It was clear, with the bright moon filtering behind a few displaced clouds and stars sprinkling around it. Jason sighed in relief as Titus pushed off from the monument and returned to having all four paws on the ground, and opened his mouth to continue speaking.

Suddenly Titus let out a long, joyful howl and took off out of the graveyard, towards the line of trees that bordered the grounds.

“Jesus Christ,” Jason spat, leaping to his feet. He glimpsed at the stone as he ran by it. “Your dog is crazy, do you know that?!?”

Jason ran after Titus and what made Jason even more frustrated was that Titus seemed to know it, too. The dog kept slowing down, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Jason was still there. When it was confirmed, he’d flash a lopsided grin and speed up again.

“I’m going to kill you, you mutt!” Jason shouted as he lost his footing in the snow multiple times. And he meant it, too. Maybe not explicitly kill the dog, but kidnap him and force him to deal with Roy being all touchy-feely for a week or wear those stupid dog-sweaters, then Titus will wish Jason killed him.

The snow got the better of Jason, then. As soon as he closed the distance between himself and Titus, he reached out to grab the dog’s tail and promptly fell on his face. As he struggled to get up, he heard Titus give a little huff, and swore to any holy being there was that the dog was laughing at him.

When he finally righted himself, Titus had disappeared. Since this wasn’t a mission or anything of the sort, other than his guns, Jason had nothing on him. Luckily the moon was bright enough that he could clearly see the dog’s path laid out in front of him. The trail led him into the woods, where he heard Titus bark. He couldn’t have been more than ten yards away, but the further in Jason went, the darker it got. Soon, he lost track of the scent, and stopped, trying to decide his next move.

Suddenly there was a wet nose pushing against the palm of his hand. Even in the darkness, when he looked down, he could see Titus’s beady eyes staring happily up at him. Jason didn’t realize he was slightly panicked until he felt it begin to melt away as he pet the dog’s head.

“Damian would be so proud of you, you little turd.” Titus’s tail began waving wildly at the mention of his master. Jason turned back towards the forest’s edge. “Now let’s get you back before…”

Jason trailed off as Titus refused to budge. He looked back down at the dog’s eyes; they’d become
stern and serious. Jason was about to lean down, make sure the dog hadn’t injured himself when Titus bounced off again, in the direction he’d been going before.

“What is it, Titus?” Jason drawled. “Is Timmy trapped in a well?”

Titus growled, lowering his ears. Jason held up his hands in surrender, walking up to him. Titus took it as agreement, turning and walking forward. Jason took the small victory of Titus not running away like a kid on a sugar high and followed. After a few seconds of walking, he felt himself look down at Titus’s tail. He was about to question what drew his attention when a small light blinked at the tip of it. The light suddenly moved upwards, floating up and away from Titus’s body. After a short time of watching it, the light landed softly on Jason’s nose.

It was a bug.

A firefly.

Jason would have stopped to consider the oddness of it; Lightening bugs are strictly midsummer creatures, and he’d already seen a few in mid-autumn. Would have, if he didn’t run smack into Titus, who had suddenly stopped.

“All right, dog. What the hell is going on?” he snapped. Titus just looked up at him, before turning his gaze back in front of him. Ahead, Jason could see a faint glow leaking from between the trees. He narrowed his eyes, slowly walking forwards. Titus, relieved that Jason was finally listening, jogged quietly beside him.

The glow got stronger as Jason got closer. The wall of trees opened into a small meadow, where Jason couldn’t keep the gasp from falling out of his lips. There were fireflies everywhere, illuminating the place as if they were, collectively, a light bulb. Some hovered around contently, blinking slowly, while others adorned the trees that hid them, making them look like Christmas trees that currently occupied every park and home from Gotham to Central City.

“This is some kind of fairy-magic shit, right?” Jason breathed, slowly taking steps into the clearing. Titus huffed in amusement again as he trotted past the man. Jason watched while Titus moved to the middle of the meadow and looked straight up. A few of the lightening bugs landed on his nose in steady succession, as if giving him gentle kisses in greeting.

Titus barely even glanced over when Damian appeared next to him. “Todd is right you know. You are crazy.”

The dog flopped his tongue out, giving Damian his best grin in acknowledgement.

“How would you bring him here, of all people?” Damian asked, watching as Jason continued to inch into the area. Titus, paying no heed to his boy’s complaints, laid down, eyes still glued to the insects around them. Damian exhaled in annoyance, plopping down next to him. “…I don’t see why you’d waste your energy anyway. These stupid insects follow me wherever I go. I was already in the cemetery with Todd and you were already calling to them. If you’d have just waited long enough, they’d have shown up, like they always do.”

If Damian didn’t know better, he’d have said Titus was smirking. Instead, Damian sighed again, wrapping his arm around Titus’s back, scratching at his fur absentely. Titus looked over to where Jason was finally approaching him and gave a little whine, gently leaning his head against Damien’s knee.

“Beautiful,” Jason nodded, coming to a stop at Titus’s side. He stuffed his hands in his pockets,
watching as cloudy breaths mixed in with fireflies. Like with Titus, a few of the bugs felt the need to brush against his face or land momentarily on his head. “Weird as all hell, but beautiful.”

Titus gave another little whine and reached his paw out to slap at Jason’s foot. Jason took the hint, chuckling as he sat at Titus’s side, opposite of Damian, rubbing his hand across the dog’s head. They sat in silence for a few minutes, all watching the fireflies dance above them.

“Make sure to get him home before he freezes,” Damian said dreamily, neck craned as a bug tried to steer itself onto his nose. “He’s too stupid to leave on his own. Most times, anyway.”

There was a soft click. Damian and Titus glanced over to see Jason lighting a cigarette. Jason peeked down at the dog as he inhaled. “You mind? ‘Cause I don’t think the bugs do.”

Titus huffed, but let it go, snuggling his head against Damian’s knee, giving a little whine once more. Jason, of course not realizing Damian was there, stared at the dog sadly.

“It’s okay, bud.” Jason whispered, patting Titus’s neck before rubbing his head. He took another drag of his cigarette, exhaling slowly. “I miss him too.”

Damian stared at him a moment, then nodded. “I…miss you too, Todd.”

Jason suddenly grinned, tapping a finger against Titus’s noggin. “Now, don’t you go telling Damian I said that, pup. Got it?”

Titus just wagged his tail.

Jason laughed again, leaning down to give Titus a quick peck on the head. “I knew I always liked you.” Jason leaned his cheek against Titus’s fur, turning his head so he could still look up at the scene above them.

“Here’s to you, kid.” Jason murmured, taking one last drag of the cigarette, snuffing it in the snow and pocketing the butt. He had a feeling Titus wouldn’t be letting him leave if he littered. Jason closed his eyes, but cold still see the warm glow the lightning bugs produced. Could somehow feel the warmth that they weren’t. Must be one of those things that’s all in your head. But it was all right. Jason was okay with it. The moment, right now, was nice. Strange, but nice. And he hadn’t really had nice in a while.

Tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow he’ll talk to some members in the costumed community about the out-of-season insects. But for now, he’ll just…enjoy it.

“Yeah.” Jason sighed, opening his eyes again. The bugs twinkled brighter than the stars above them and Jason felt a stupid smile plastered on his face. “Here’s to you, Damian.”
Chapter Summary

There was no one there. Tim knew that. And Damian hadn’t been around in ages. So who moved that bottle on the counter?

Chapter Notes

Based on lyrics from ‘Big Houses’ by Squallascope

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"We follow our own steps, while our shadows keep watching us."

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Tim gulped, pointedly ignoring the way his knee bounced nervously under the table as he watched Desdemona flit around on the floor, playing with a toy mouse. He also tried to ignore how dry his throat was, and the cold layer of sweat on his face. They didn’t mean anything. Nothing at all.

Desdemona suddenly froze and looked up at Tim – well, right behind Tim – and began hissing angrily. But that was nothing, too. She was a kitten, she had temper tantrums. No reason to take that as a warning. No reason whatsoever to turn around and search out the threat. Because there was no threat there. Tim was home alone. Alone with his cat, who could apparently see things he couldn’t.

There’s nothing there, Tim. No one is watching you. No one can be watching you. Because there is no one behind you.

The bounce of his leg quickened.

“Des, stop it.” Tim scolded. The kitten twitched and looked at him, lowering her hackles. She mewed sadly before returning attention to her toy. Tim shifted to turn his attention back to his laptop when there was the distinctive clink of a bottle falling over on his counter.

Tim squeezed his eyes shut. Don’t look. Nothing’s there. Don’t look, don’t look, don’t look.

It’d been like this for weeks. The undeniable feeling of being watched, that there was something there, just out of perception. And in his lifestyle, that feeling was fine, normal even. But there was more. A feeling of malice, of anger…

Of evil.

And it was all aimed at him.

At first, he thought it was Damian, because why not? Damian did the same. He was often just out of the line of sight, not always able to be seen, but always watching. Vigilant, just like Bruce and Dick
taught him to be. But Tim was never fearful when Damian’s spirit was near. True, the last time he
had seen Damian, the child had been angry, but it was different. In fact, in some ways, when the
ghost boy was around, visible or not, Tim felt…safer.

And that point is what made Tim’s stomach drop. There’d been no signs of Damian in over a
month.

Unconsciously, his finger began to tap absently on the side of his laptop. Had something happened to
his younger brother once more?

Desdemona meowed again, and Tim couldn’t stop himself from almost leaping out of his seat. While
stuck in his mind, Desdemona had apparently made her way onto the table, and was currently sitting
on his keyboard. She stared up at him, head cocked to the side, purring in amusement.

“It’s not funny.” Tim muttered, feeling his face heat up slightly in embarrassment. Desdemona took a
step toward him before her ear twitched and she glanced behind him again. A floorboard creaked,
and Tim tensed. Desdemona’s ears suddenly lowered as she began hissing once more. An icy breeze
blew across the back of his neck as his stomach began to churn and knot. Added to his unwanted
reactions, he felt his hand begin to shake as well.

He moved to swallow once more, but found his throat was too dry to do even that. Without thinking,
he snatched Desdemona up, tucking her safely under his arm, and stood. “Come on, Des. Let’s go
visit Titus and the Alfreds.” He said quietly, pretending there wasn’t a slight quiver in his voice. As
he moved towards the door, he felt the shadow behind him follow. “I think Babs said Dick was
in…”

He reached for the doorknob, and pulled. It wouldn’t budge. He glanced up at the locks, and saw
that they were all open. He jiggled the knob again, but to no avail. It was stuck. Ignoring the speed of
his heartbeat, he just shrugged, readjusted Desdemona and moved towards the window. It wouldn’t
open either.

He exhaled. Don’t panic, he thought, as he moved from window to window, getting the same result
each time. You were trained by Batman; you’re in worse situations than a locked apartment every
night. You’re fine. Just don’t panic.

As he continued walking around the apartment, Desdemona began to squirm in fear. He gently pet
her head, cooing assurances that were both for her and himself.

He could see the shadow trailing behind him, and every time he glanced at it after turning away, he
noticed that it multiplied. Suddenly, his whole apartment seemed shrouded in a grayish-black
darkness. At this point, his gut had become a bottomless pit of anxiety and dread.

Desdemona began to whine softly as Tim checked the final exit – his bedroom window. The result
was the same as all the others, but it was here that he noticed the frost beginning to gather on the
glass. Without feeling it, he knew it was coming from inside.

This wasn’t good.

As he backed out of the room, he started to pull his phone out of his pocket. He needed help, and
he’d take it from anybody. He turned around when he reached the hall, scrolling through his
contacts. Dick was in town, he remembered as his last thought, and hit the screen to initiate the call.
He looked up while he held the phone up to his ear and froze, unable to stop the gasp escaping his
mouth. Even Desdemona stilled, eyes wide as her claws dug into Tim’s arm.
A man stood at the hallway entrance, his eyes empty and face sunken. He was thin, almost malnourished, and dressed in a pair of dirty overalls, a flannel shirt and hiking boots underneath. But more than that, he was translucent, and in his hand was a red-glowing, oversized ax.

Tim took a step back, but the man moved quicker. He raised a fist out in front of him and then flicked his hand open, fingers spread wide. Tim barely registered the movement before he was thrown backwards, hitting the bedroom door he didn’t recall closing. Desdemona yelped on impact, and Tim groaned as air left his lungs. Stars littered his vision as he blinked, trying to breathe. Even in the blur, he could see the man with the ax shuffling towards him. He tried to think – he had no weapons on him, and couldn’t move. How was he going to defend himself?

The dots on his vision became too much, so he closed his eyes in attempt to focus. Think, Tim, *think!* You’ve got to do something. Get Desdemona out, at the very least. You just need to-

Suddenly, the cold hallway became absolutely frigid, and the knot in Tim’s stomach lightened. Chancing a peek, he slowly opened his eyes. Two short legs stood in front of him, facing the other man, a green-glowing rapier clutched in hand. He didn’t need to see a face to know it was Damian, just as he didn’t need to see Damian’s face to know the boy was livid.

The man with the ax had stopped his progression, scowling at Damian. Desdemona meowed in recognition, trying to shift out of Tim’s arms to take cover under Damian’s feet. Tim only barely caught her, tightening his grip around her as he turned slightly to shield her.

“How many times do I have to tell you imbeciles?” Damian snapped as he raised his own hand. The man instantly slammed against the wall and crumpled to the ground, his head at an impossible angle. Tim couldn’t help but notice the sudden gashes around the man’s exposed neck, nor the blood trickling slowly from them. Damian suddenly lashed out with his sword, stabbing a woman who was appearing out of the wall through her chin. As he pulled his blade back out, the woman collapsed, still half in the wall, and began to dissipate. “Attacks on my family will *not* be tolerated!”

A third being dropped from the ceiling, and grabbed Damian by the throat. “It is Lady Talia’s will, therefore it shall be done.”

Tim opened his mouth to say something, but his shock was preventing him from doing so. The rapier in Damian’s hand disappeared as he struggled against his attacker. As he did so, Tim noticed more men and women – of all shapes, sizes and ages – slowly creeping up behind them, each with a different colored glowing weapon. Damian was horribly outnumbered. As valiant as the effort was, there was going to be nothing he could do. He would be destroyed, much as he destroyed the ax man and the woman, and then they would come after Tim, as was their original target.

Desdemona alternated between hissing and meowing as Tim curled his knees up to his chest, shifting to the corner of the bedroom door. He didn’t want to watch this, not again. He didn’t want to watch Damian annihilated as he sat helplessly by, *again*. His lungs were allowing oxygen once more, but all he could do was hyperventilate, watching the hoard come closer and closer.

“Lady Talia’s will, huh?” Damian gasped out, struggling to stay on his feet. “Well then, do me a favor-”

Damian balled both hands into fists and thrust them forward, then immediately separated them by throwing his arms out to his sides. His attacker, and the mob behind him, were all thrown backwards and held down by some invisible weight.

“-and tell Lady Talia she can go to Hell.”
The other spirits all looked up at Damian with a mixture of spite, anger and fear. Some forced themselves to disappear right then, others remained in Damian’s cage, almost in challenge. As Damian lowered his arms, two green swords appeared in his hands.

“Do you all really wish to try again?” Damian called over the group as he took a step forward. That seemed to do the trick. Tim blinked and everyone was gone. Everyone but Damian and the attacker from the ceiling.

“Do not get cocky, Master Damian,” the attacker spat as Damian loomed over him. “Your mother sees all that you do and can very easily adapt to things like what you did today.”

Damian didn’t bother with a response. Instead, he took one of his blades and jabbed it through the man’s skull, giving it a quick twist before pulling it back out. He watched the man slowly fade away before turning back to Tim. He was silent for a moment, taking in Tim’s appearance, with a quick glance at Desdemona before speaking. “Are you alright, Drake?”

Tim attempted to give a little nod as Damian approached him, but he had no idea how well it worked. Damian still seemed to be waiting for a response, in any case. “Where…” Tim breathed as Damian crouched in front of him. “Where did he go? And the woman? And the-”

“Not sure. Though I have it on good authority that it’s Purgatory. Or Hell.” Damian shrugged. “I’ll get a definitive answer when I have the time.”

Tim nodded, and he knew he did this time. “What was this?”

“An annoyance. My mother is trying to distract me by attacking all of you. She seems to believe you are all my weakness. What she doesn’t seem to understand, and I doubt she ever will, is that, in a way, you are all my strength. I will most likely never fight so hard as to make sure you’re all safe.” Damian shrugged again, trying to lessen the importance of his words. Tim just nodded again, suddenly feeling unable to do anything else. Desdemona meowed happily, batting at Damian’s fingers as he continued to stare at Tim. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I…” Tim sighed. “I honestly don’t know, kid.”

Damian hummed as he glanced behind him.

“I think…I think those things have been tailing me for weeks. I’ve felt them practically everywhere I go.” Tim continued. Now that he found his voice, he seemed unable to stop it.

“A scare tactic on Mother’s part, no doubt.” Damian looked back at him for a moment before going back to whatever he was working with. “Many spirits know you are most susceptible to contact with the afterlife, therefore considered an easy target. I knew she was planning an ambush on you, so I decided to bide my time. I apologize for the suffering you endured because of it. I tried to reach you, but the others were either always around, or sucking at your ability to see or hear me. So I was lost in the crowd, more or less.”

“Until today.” Tim concluded.

“Until today.” Damian agreed. He finally turned completely around, pushing something towards Tim’s hands. “Here.”

“Tim? Timmy, you there?”

Tim blinked at Damian before looking down. It was his phone, and a call to Dick had been started. His fingers scrambled over the screen before he was able to hold the phone up to his ear. “D-Dick?”
His hand was shaking. Was it doing that before? He looked at Damian, who inclined his head as he scratched Desdemona’s face. Dick’s voice instantly sound worried. “You alright, bro? You called earlier, and I heard a bang, but nothing else. I called you back and you didn’t answer. I’m on my way now. Should be there in about five.”

“Oh, good. That’s…uh…that’s good.” Tim stuttered. “Door should be open when you get here. I’ll be in the hall.”

“Okay?” Dick said suspiciously. Tim heard a car horn in the background. “Is everything alright?”

“I have no idea.”

Dick was silent for a few seconds, and then: “Four minutes, Tim.”

Tim dropped the phone, opting instead grip his hair. He was calm. In shock? Terrified. Concussed, most likely. And Tim had never been more proud of Damian. The boy merely remained in front of him, keeping Desdemona busy as Tim had an internal meltdown, but staying close enough to help in case it all became too much.

Tim didn’t think it was even four minutes before the door slammed open and Dick appeared in the mouth of the hallway. Dick only hesitated a second before coming forward. “What happened?”

Tim just looked up at him, holding eye contact as Dick got closer. Damian merely moved to the side, pulling Desdemona out of the path of Dick’s shoes. Dick collapsed to his knees, taking Tim’s face in his hands. “Tim, you’ve got to talk to me, buddy. What happened?”

Tim thought a moment, before he whispered. “Damian.”

Dick’s fingers twitched against his skin, but otherwise the older man had no reaction. “What?”

“Talia sent spirits to attack me.” Tim said slowly, wondering how crazy he sounded. “Damian saved me.”

For once, Dick didn’t look around. He didn’t ask Tim to elaborate about Damian, if he was okay, if he was still there. And Damian was glad about that. Instead, Dick just leaned forward, taking Tim in his arms, holding him against his chest. Tim’s breathing became short as he returned the gesture. “You’re okay,” Dick muttered. “I’ve got you, Timmy. You’re going to be alright.”

Tim glanced over at Damian, who sat stoically against the wall, Desdemona attempting to climb his thigh. The boy looked tired, but content with the outcome. Content with the scene in front of him, and his current company. “Yeah,” Tim sighed into Dick’s shoulder, smiling at his little brother. Damian huffed, rolling his eyes in embarrassment. “Yeah, I think we’re all going to be.”
Clark could only take so much silent brooding.

A vague aftermath-scenario of Bats/Supes 5-7

The dead leaves crunched with each step. With the snow melted, Clark never had a chance at being ‘stealthy,’ even if he’d flown there. But the fact was he didn’t. He walked, and Bruce didn’t care enough to think about where he walked from. He could have walked straight from Metropolis; it just didn’t matter.

He knew what his friend was here for.

“I feel like I should arrest you or something,” Clark laughed as he came up behind him. Bruce barely turned his head in acknowledgment. “Keeping Titus inside on a day like today? It’s practically a crime.”

“Hm.”

“And it’s not real fair to him either,” The humor was instantly out of his voice. “Next to you – and perhaps Dick – no one loved Damian more than that dog.”

Bruce’s eyes shifted back to the obelisk in front of him.

“And you’re going to force him to stay inside?”

“He’s distracting. I come out here to think.” Bruce explained. “Can’t do that when he’s slinking around the cemetery whining.”

Clark frowned, taking a few more steps forward. Standing beside Bruce, he took in the grave in front of them. He didn’t want to believe that this was forced to be made for a ten-year-old, a child. It was a depressing statistic: for all he and his friends did to fight evil, in the end they could never save the ones they truly cared for.

Bruce sighed, as if he were annoyed. Clark knew he was deflecting. It wasn’t an easy topic after all. Bruce growled, “Get on with it.”

“Can we talk about it? Please? Without you being all…bullheaded?” Clark pleaded, pushing the glasses up his nose.

“That’s like asking a shark to stop swimming,” Damian murmured, picking at his nails as he settled into comfortable position next to his gravestone. “And I’m pretty sure you’ll have better luck with that, Kent.”
“What is there to talk about?” Bruce asked. Damian noticed that Bruce was staring at the stone, actively avoiding making eye contact with the Kryptonian. Clark was looking at Bruce, but wasn’t going to push it, not yet.

“Really? You’re really asking me that?” Clark asked. “And so soon after Dick tried to…God, Bruce. For a genius, you’re the biggest idiot I know.”

“I knew it wasn’t going to happen. I know how you are.” Bruce said quietly. “And it would have been for the good of the people. Nothing’s more important than that. That’s our job.”

“But why?” Clark suddenly sounded miserable. “Why were…are…you so okay with being dead?”

Bruce finally looked over at his friend. “Really?” He repeated. “You’re really asking me that?”

Clark opened his mouth to respond, but thought better at it, and snapped his lips shut, looking down at the gravestone.

Damian clicked his tongue, watching as fireflies started blinking in the tree nearby. “Got you there, Superman.”

“I just…” Bruce whispered, shuffling his foot across the grass. “I mean…maybe Dick had the right idea.” Clark looked over at him, eyebrows raised. “I’m not saying I was going to kill myself. You know I would never do that. I wouldn’t put any of you through that again but…if it was unavoidable? Dying in battle while protecting the planet? Well, getting to see my boy again – not to mention my parents – it…it wouldn’t be the worst outcome. It’d kind of be a win-win, in a way.”

Clark watched him for a few seconds. “I…see. I guess.” The alien sighed, crouching as he glared intensely forward. For a few seconds, Damian was afraid Superman was staring right at him. The animals, he could deal with. Drake, even, was fine. But Superman? That would just be…weird. “I’m not going to apologize for saving your ass, Bruce…”

“I know.”

“…But I am sorry for keeping you from your son.”

The wind blew across the grounds and the two men remained silent. Damian stayed quiet too, watching as the number of fireflies grew in the tree. He was kind of surprised neither his Father nor the alien had noticed the oddity yet.

“But maybe we should talk about that, too.”

Bruce looked down at him. “What?”

“You told me once, months ago. Probably don’t even remember it.” Clark said, still staring at the gravestone. “It was right after Damian died. I asked you if you wanted to talk about it. You told me that you didn’t, that you might not ever be ready to. Well, maybe that’s too damn bad. Maybe it doesn’t matter if you’re ready to talk about what happened to Damian, but you just…you need to. Dick didn’t, not really, and look what he almost did. I’m not going to sit here and watch something similar happen again, especially not to you, so.” Clark reached out a hand, brushing his fingers across the stone. “Talk to me, Bruce. Tell me what happened to your little boy.”

Bruce was quiet for a minute, but Clark had learned a long time ago how to outwait the Bat. When he spoke, his voice was shaky, and cracked more than once. “I told him to stay back, but why would I think it would work now? Heaven knows it didn’t work on any of the others.” Bruce suddenly crumpled next to Clark, knees bent in front of him, arms folded across them. “And the boys will say
what they want. That he came to save the city because that’s what heroes do. Because he was an outstanding kid, and he was, don’t get me wrong. But they’re incorrect. He didn’t do it for the city, or because it was his duty as Robin. He did it for me.”

“Right, because he knows your morals.” Clark grunted, falling back from his ankles to lean on his hands. “He wanted to make you proud.”

Damian snorted loudly. “Hardly.”

Bruce shook his head. “Not at all. He was trying to save me.”

“I don’t…” Clark’s face scrunched in confusion. “I don’t think I follow.”

“He’d warned me before. Talia was trying to hurt me. I’d assumed she was trying to hurt me through threatening him, and that might’ve still been true.” Bruce gulped, looking down at his fingers. “But in reality, Damian knew he was the only one who had a chance at making Talia pause. Of forcing her to stop her attack, potentially make a deal where, at the end of the day, we all went home, back to our separate corners of the planet.

“He wasn’t there the night everything went down, but he could see it in the cave. He saw Dick overwhelmed, me captured. It’s why he left and came after us.” Bruce sighed, shoulders dropping. “He wasn’t trying to save the city. Not really. In the end, that would have just been a really great bonus. No, he was trying to save me. And I…”

Clark glanced at him over his glasses. Bruce put a hand over his eyes, but it didn’t stop the tears that were starting to run down his face. His voice was barely above a whisper. “I didn’t get there in time to save him.”

Damian watched as Clark let Bruce emotionally collapse. And frankly, there was nothing else the alien could do for him. It was what he needed. Just let it all out. Talk, cry, scream, hit things. Allow Clark to pick up the pieces afterwards. Damian raised his hand towards the tree, wiggling his fingers slightly. A few lightning bugs quickly floated down to dance around his skin.

“I’d be lying to you, Clark, if I said seeing Damian wasn’t my first thought when I jumped in front of that energy beam.” Bruce muttered. “Or that I wasn’t slightly disappointed in waking up again without seeing him. And in the fact that I woke up at all.”

“Over there, insects,” Damian murmured, shifting his hand towards the men nearby. “Go comfort Father as you do Titus when the occasion arises. Bother the Kryptonian as you do for everyone else at all other times.”

The bugs obeyed, slowly flying around the duo before landing silently on their shoulders and feet or the grass nearby. Clark glanced at them, but said nothing, opting to continue listening to Bruce instead.

“I just miss him, Clark. There’s nothing else I can say about it.” As if unfazed, Bruce held his hand out, letting one of the fireflies land on his finger. It fluttered its wings as it traversed up and down his knuckles, blinking. “There is literally nothing I wouldn’t give to get him back.”

“Kara said that’s what Dick said, too.” Clark shrugged. “But I don’t think Damian would want you sacrificing anything, least of all for him.”

“Right,” Bruce rolled his eyes and sniffed. “Because you knew him so well.”

“Just as well as you did,” Clark snapped, immediately sighing after. “I’m just saying.” He paused,
blinking rapidly as a firefly landed right in the middle of his lens. “Maybe Damian would just want you to be happy. Did you ever think of that?”

Bruce looked down at his shoes. “And how am I supposed to be happy if he’s not here?”

“But that’s the thing, Bruce. He is.” Clark grinned, putting his hand on Bruce’s shoulder. Some of the bugs fluttered upwards in annoyance. “That kid is everywhere.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“For as much like…well, you…as that kid was? He touched so many lives. He befriended that orphan down in Gotham, gave him a purpose. Gave Titus, that cat and the cow a home and a family and, even…I mean, look at you.” Clark was practically giddy. “You opened your father’s study again. You let some light back into your life. All because that little boy with a big scowl showed up and thought you were worth fighting for.”

Clark shut up then, watching as his friend’s eyes filled with tears all over again. Damian pursed his lips, leaning back against the stone. “Jeez, Father. And here I thought Grayson was the sappiest person you associated with.”

“He left so much behind. He’s never really gone, not if you think of him everywhere you look. You see him in your house, in those drawings he did, in his room. Any time you hear music, you think of his musical talents. In the cave, you see his gear and that car he designed and helped build with Dick – Hell, you see him when you look at your other boys! You can’t see Tim or Jason without thinking of how similar they all acted, how they each have the weirdest way of showing how much they love you. And Dick…you look at him and know a part of him is missing without his little brother there, following him around like a shadow. But you know that he’s exactly who taught Damian how to never give up on you.”

Bruce looked down at his hand, where about a dozen more insects had gathered, all blinking contently as they explored his skin. In the dim light, Clark saw a slight smile grace his face. “Damian liked fireflies, too.”

“I didn’t say I liked them, I said I resonated with them.” Damian sulked, pointing at Bruce. “There’s a big difference, Father.”

“There you go.” Clark laughed. Bruce’s grin grew slightly, obviously from a memory that he wasn’t sharing out loud. Clark took the opportunity and threw his arm around Bruce’s shoulder.

“I should be worried about it, shouldn’t I? Lightning bugs aren’t in season. They haven’t been for months.” Bruce mused, holding his hand up. The bugs blinked, and Bruce thought they looked awfully cheerful about it, if that were even possible. “But…I’m not. I’m…oddly comforted by their presence.”

“I don’t know how far into believing in Heaven and Hell and all that jazz I’d go, but I know that boy is watching over you.” Clark gave his shoulder a quick squeeze, motioning to the fireflies with his other hand. “You’ll see him again, Bruce. I promise. Maybe not any time soon, but you will. Though, for now? Enjoy all the little gifts Damian left behind for you and the boys. Take all that love you have pent up in your broody, old heart and give it to the sons you still have. Do it in Damian’s honor, and then…go get some coffee with Dick. Reminisce about the little boy king you both helped raise. And smile a bit. I bet Damian would appreciate if you smiled a bit.”

Damian hummed. “I suppose. But only if Grayson smiles, too.”
A lightning bug landed on Bruce’s nose and lit up. Bruce sniffed once more, wiping at his eye. The insect remained. “Can I do all that after I beat the living crap out of his grandfather for stealing him from his grave?”

“Of course,” Clark grinned. “I don’t think Damian would mind.”

“Not in the least, Father.” Damian smirked. “Not in the least.”
Chapter Summary

Surely it wasn’t his Nightwing, not with that swath of blue across his chest and the bulky armour. No way.

Chapter Notes

Supplemental listening: ‘Home’ by Mumford&Sons

This is Injustice! Nightwing, if that's not clear.

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“You were young, I was not old, but our story was not told. But torn apart by greedy hands.”

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“Damian?”

The boy turned his head towards the voice.

“No…”

Damian remained quiet as his brain tried to comprehend. Because this? This was impossible.

“Please, God, no… this isn’t…”

He watched as the man inched closer, arm outstretched, gloved fingers twitching in uncertainty. Titus barked in greeting, wagging his tail happily.

“This isn’t…real. This isn’t…what?”

Damian stared at the man with narrowed eyes. He couldn’t be who he looked like. Surely he would have known, surely his father would’ve been beside himself in grief, not currently out at Wayne Enterprises gala.

Nightwing stopped about five feet away from the railing Damian was currently perched on, arm still in the air as if he were a mannequin. In the faint glow of the computer and workbench lights Damian noticed the change in armor, the bright blue splashed cross his chest, the faint transparency to the man’s frame.

Nightwing, too, it seemed, was dead.

“Don’t tell me, Damian…” the man muttered, arm finally lowering, though he came no closer.

“Please don’t tell me that Bruce and Clark’s…thing…don’t tell me you got in the middle of it.
But this wasn’t his Nightwing.

Damian paused, cocking his head to the side as he sized up his visitor. After a few seconds of silence, he met the man’s eye. “Who are you?”

“What-“

“You are not Richard Grayson.” Damian said, his voice accusing.

“Dami, wha-“

“You are not even Jason Todd, who I’m told once traversed around as Nightwing.” He hopped from the railing, waving at Titus to stay sitting. “So, who are you?”

“Please don’t do this,” Nightwing pleaded, watching as Damian circled around him. “It’s me, Damian. It’s Dick. Why don’t you believe me?”

“Because Dick Grayson is alive and well, and you are clearly neither of those things.” Damian snapped. “And your impersonation of him is pitiful at best. So I will ask again. Who are you?”

Nightwing opened his mouth to argue more, thought better of it, and smacked his lips closed. Anger took over his face as he rolled his shoulders back and crossed his arms. “My name is Richard Grayson, formerly of Haly’s Circus. I worked under the Batman, first as Robin, and then as Nightwing, before I was killed during a brawl in Arkham.” He paused, seemingly reluctant to say his next statement. “It was… a death you mercilessly blamed yourself for.”

Damian, who had been examining the armor, glanced up, concern and confusion washing over his face. “I…killed you?”

Nightwing’s face softened. “No, buddy. You didn’t. Not really. You just, for some unfathomable reason, think you did.”

“Impossible,” Damian said, standing straight before turning away. Nightwing knew it was a way to hide his face. “I could never hurt you.”

Nightwing chuckled, “Dami, I know tha-”

“And there was never any sort of brawl inside Arkham Asylum during my entire tenure in Gotham,” Damian reached the computer, pressing a few buttons. A security feed of both Arkham Asylum and a Chicago street popped up on the screens. “And, you’ve rarely, if ever, called me ‘Dami.’”

Nightwing grinned, coming up behind him at the consol. As he stared at the screens, he saw why the boy had brought up the Chicago street. He saw Nightwing – or, well, himself – swing across the screen, the stain across his chest a bright red. The time stamp was current. “So… I’m not your Nightwing.”

“It would appear so.” Damian sounded like a mixture of smugness and relief.

“And you’re not my Robin.”

“No.”

“So how did you die?”
It was a strange direction for the conversation to take, and Damian was caught unprepared. “I…well, it’s…complicated. Or, weird, at the very least.”

“Try me.”

Damian looked away. “My mother. She sent a clone of myself to kill me to get back at Father. The clone succeeded.”

Nightwing’s grin faltered, his arms dropping to his side. “Dami, I’m sorry.”

Damian shrugged. “No point in being upset about it.”

“I bet he…” He nodded at the screen. “…I would beg to differ.”

“You’ve started to make your peace with what happened.” Damian said, stabbing another button and turning the screen off. He turned away from Nightwing once again, walking back to where Titus was still sitting. “At least, I think he has. He has…good days and bad days.”

“And the really bad days, I take it.” Damian glared up at him. He held his hands up in surrender. “Same dude, sort of, remember? I know if I were in his position and lost you? I’d go absolutely crazy.”

Damian sighed, crouching down to pat Titus on the head. “I try to…minimize the damage he and the others may inflict on themselves.”

Nightwing kneeled next to him, letting Titus sniff his fingers. “You know, you may not be my little brother but you act a lot like him.”

“What a novel notion,” Damian rolled his eyes, actively avoiding Nightwing’s gaze.

Nightwing chuckled again. “I just mean…it’s not your fault, whatever you think is. It’s really not.”

“Yes it is, I le-”

“No you didn’t, Damian. You didn’t leave.” Nightwing interrupted, sternly. He reached out, putting a hand on Damian’s shoulder. “You were taken. And that’s not your fault.”

Damian finally looked up at him, his emotionless stare crumbling in seconds. Nightwing’s heart broke a little. This wasn’t his little brother – not by a long shot. And he was grateful for that, because that meant his Damian wasn’t dead. But if anything, that realization made it worse. His Damian was thirteen years old and thriving. Maybe not happy and well, but he was thriving, and that was enough. This Damian? He was younger, only allowed maybe ten or eleven years. Eleven years and a mother who thought him expendable, like a pawn in a game. And he wasn’t even going to think about what this world’s Bruce was like.

As Damian’s eyes started to become misty, Nightwing gave his shoulder a sharp squeeze. “Why,” Damian croaked, blinking quickly to disperse the moisture. “Why are you here?”

“Wish I knew, kid.” And Nightwing couldn’t stop himself. His Damian wouldn’t have stood for it, and he had a feeling this one wouldn’t either, but he did it anyway. He pulled the boy against his chest, wrapping both arms around him and burying his face in the boy’s hair. “I wish I knew.”

Damian didn’t react, other than to slump against the elder in resignation. Titus sniffed at the embrace, noticing his master’s posture and realizing something was wrong. He licked at Damian’s nose, whining softly.
“I miss you, Grayson.” Damian sighed.

“I miss you too, Dami.” Nightwing smiled. “And who knows. If I could be transported to your world, maybe my Damian could too. And maybe he’ll find your me. Then, they’ll have this same conversation and be able to comfort each other.”

“Ha. Somehow, I doubt either of them will find much comfort in knowing that on another Earth, they’re dead.” Damian countered drily. Nightwing shrugged nonchalantly. “And my Grayson has barely recovered. I don’t think a suddenly-alive-me would be the best thing for him at current times.”

“Recovered?” Nightwing asked as Titus suddenly stuck his nose between their embrace, pushing the older man back and sniffing at him. “Not to sound pessimistic or anything, but losing his little brother isn’t something he’s going to recover from, probably for the rest of his life. He’ll deal with it, sure but recover-”

“He made an attempt on his own life,” Damian all but whispered. Nightwing froze. “Tried to cover up an effort at suicide with a battle against some criminal. All because he wished to join me in the afterlife.”

“Oh, Dami…”

“So while Grayson, I’m sure, wants nothing more than for me to be back in his life once again, me showing up – another me, one’s that distinctly different from the one he personally raised – I doubt would be good for his mental or emotional health.” Damian explained. “And, if what you told me was true, I doubt your Damian would want to see another Grayson. All he would see is the one he killed.”

“He didn’t-”

“So, it is a nice thought in theory, but not in practice.”

Nightwing sighed, pushing Titus away and standing. “So is that what you do for fun?” he asked, tone annoyed. “Sit around and just…let your brain stew in all the terrible things that people are going through?”

Damian shrugged, standing as well. “More or less.”

“Don’t do that to yourself, Dami.” Nightwing said softly, shaking his head. “Don’t let it eat you up. You’ll become a vengeful spirit that way or…or a poltergeist.”

“I’m not letting it devour me. I’m merely fixing the problems I’ve caused.” Damian argued. “Besides, what do you do for fun?”

Nightwing paused, and this time it was he who turned away. “I haven’t been dead long enough to find out.”

“…Oh.”

“I followed you for a bit.” Nightwing muttered, though Damian wasn’t sure if the man actually meant to be speaking with him, or just remembering out loud. “Bruce cast you out after I died. Or…or you left or something. I don’t know. You weren’t together. And it was hard. So hard. You both are constantly moving, this way and that way and I…I can’t keep up.”

“Nightwing…” Damian stepped forward, put off by the man’s sudden uneasiness.
“I lost you.” Nightwing whispered. “Something happened to Bruce, so I went to go make sure he was okay. Alive, at least. I found him, and he was surrounded by some trustworthy folk, so I decided to go back to you. But…I couldn’t get a read. You weren’t where I’d left you and, for some reason, I couldn’t do that trick. I’m sure you know the one I’m talking about.”

“Where you wish to be with someone and you’re transported there. Yes, I know of it.” Damian nodded. “I’ve done it with my Grayson.”

“I tried it. I tried it so many times, Dami. But it never worked. I can’t find you.” Nightwing’s voice became shaky and weak. “I don’t know where you are, if you’re okay. Hell, I don’t even know if you’re still alive. And that thought scares me. Because you can’t be dead. You can’t.”

Damian pondered for a moment. “Nightwing, how did you say you ended up here in the cave again?”

“After I tried to dissipate to where you are for the millionth time, I think…I think I started to panic. Everything about it is kind of fuzzy. I started to freak out, to think the worst about what could have happened to you. I closed my eyes and…and then I was here. Then I saw you sitting there playing with your dog and you were transparent and I just…” Nightwing turned around, a few tear trails leaking from his mask. His voice was lighter than Damian had probably ever heard someone speak. “I just need my little brother to be okay.”

“And I’m sure he is.” Damian said, snapping at Titus. The dog’s ears twitched before he took off for the stairs that led to the manor. “There can only be one Damian Wayne dead at a time.”

It was a morbid joke, but Nightwing laughed anyway. “Yeah. Maybe you’re right. I…I hope you’re right.”

“I hope I am, too.” Damian smiled, looking to further the ghost’s mind from his fears. Nightwing reached out, running his fingers through Damian’s hair.

“Can I see it?” Nighwing asked suddenly. “Your grave, I mean.”

Damian’s face scrunched in confusion. “Why?”

“Because.” Nightwing grinned. It looked silly with the tears still escaping down his face. “Just because.”

_Because I don’t want to be reminded of my own world anymore, _was left unsaid. _Because I don’t want to think about my Batman or my Robin for a while, _was surmised through the silence.

Damian thought for a moment, staring up at the spitting image of his own mentor, and nodded. Nightwing then shifted his hand from Damian’s head to his hand, grasping tightly at his fingers. Damian didn’t have the heart to chastise him for it.

Titus was already out by the marker, Alfred the cat sitting regally next to him. Alfred took in Nightwing’s appearance with an air of distrust before shifting to sit close by Damian’s feet. The trip was as pointless as Damian imagined it would be, though Nightwing seemed content with circling the obelisk, so he kept quiet.

After a few moments, Nightwing glanced down and pointed towards a rotting bundle of red flowers that were half buried in the snow. “I left those.”

“Did you?” Damian sounded surprised for some reason. “I thought they were Drake’s idea.”
Nightwing sniffed, “They might have been. But that bouquet is tied together with a shoelace. And you told me once that—”

“That you were the only moron on the planet who would do such a thing.” Damian finished.

The elder spirit smiled. It was small and nostalgic, but slightly sad. “And I said that things like that is why you loved me.”

Damian rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “Perhaps we all are the same people.”

Nightwing snickered, looking back at the gravestone before looking at some of the ones that surrounded it. The two remained silent for a moment, before Nightwing sighed, looking up towards the stars. “It’s not fair, is it? For you and me.”

“What’re you talking about?” Damian glanced over at him.

“We’re never allowed to be together. Not for very long, anyway.” Nightwing turned to look at him, leaning on the tombstone. “The longest time we were allowed to be together was when I first met you. And we hated each other half of the time. Then, you were with your dad all the time and I was always busy doing whatever the hell it was I was doing and…”

“And then one of us died.” Damian concluded. “And the world is transformed into nothing but what-ifs and should-have-beens.”

Nightwing snorted. “You too, eh?”

Damian sighed. “For you, for me. For my Grayson and for your Damian. It seems, regardless of what universe we all come from, grief acts the same.” Alfred rubbed his face against Damian’s ankle. Nightwing stared back up at the sky. Damian mulled over his question, arms tightening across his chest. “So…what’re you going to do now?”

“Not sure. Try to get back to my own universe, I suppose. Keep trying to find you.” Nightwing hummed. “Or. I could stay. Hang out with you some more. Get up to some ghostly shenanigans like you and I did when we were both breathing.”

Now it was Damian who snorted. “You don’t even know the type of ridiculous things Grayson and I used to do.”

There was humor in Nightwing’s voice. “Just like you don’t know half the crap me and Dami did. It was awesome.”

When Damian glanced up, he saw Nightwing peering at him out of the corner of his eye, and they shared a smile. Nightwing took the opportunity to steal an embrace again, this time kissing Damian’s hair. Damian grumbled a little, but returned the hug, swatting Titus away when the dog wanted to join in as well.

“You be good, okay?” Nightwing murmured. “Stay safe. Please. I may not have been dead very long, but I know it’s just as dangerous in the spirit world as the real one. Just be careful and call for me if you ever need anything.”

“And how do I do that?” Damian’s voice was muffled against Nightwing’s armor.

“Beats me. But you’re a smart kid. You’ll figure it out.” Nightwing pecked Damian’s head once more before letting him go and backing up a step.
“You be careful, too. Especially if you’re going to stick around this godforsaken place.” Damian warned. Nightwing nodded.

“See you around, Dami.”

“Goodbye, Nightwing.”

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Nightwing stood in the corner, watching as the man in front of him rolled his eyes at whomever he was talking to on the phone.

“Jay, I know. Look, I’ve been busy.” Dick Grayson sighed, exasperated. “Hell, you’ve been busy. Sorry if I don’t have a phone on me at all times.”

Dick looked exhausted. Nightwing took notice of the multiple dark spots across his arms, legs and chest, and the nasty looking cut at his hairline. And those were only the visible injuries; he could only imagine what was underneath the shirt and shorts. Vaguely, he wondered if he should zap himself back to the cave and tell Damian his brother was hurt.

“What the…what the fuck do you mean I didn’t tell you about what happened?!” Dick suddenly shouted. “It didn’t happen to me, it happened to Tim. I only barely got there in time to pick up the goddamn pieces. So if you really want details, call our other brother. But let me tell you, I highly doubt he’s going to want to talk much about it.”

With that, Dick threw the phone against the sofa and shuffled over to the window, next to where Nightwing was standing. Up close, the twenty-something looked over double his age, with eyes dulled by too many horrors.

“Oh, Damian,” he breathed, leaning his forehead against the glass, wincing at the pressure against his wound. “This crap is really getting serious, isn’t it?”

“Don’t you worry, Dick,” Nightwing said, putting a hand on the man’s shoulder. Dick’s eyebrows furrowed, sensing a presence, but knowing it wasn’t one he knew. “I’ll take care of Damian. I promise. Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll keep your boy safe until you can do it yourself.”

Dick shivered, pushing away from the window and looking around his apartment. Nightwing smiled as he let go, watching in amusement as the man fumbled around the apartment, trying to pretend that he wasn’t visited by another ghostly being. After a few minutes the spirit disappeared back outside, floating quickly over the Chicago streets. No one said he couldn’t do a little sight seeing before heading back, right?
Titus doesn’t like the spirits hanging around the house, and just wants his Damian to come home.

“In the name of Master’s sanity,” Titus whined, throwing a paw over his face. “Will you shut her up.”

Alfred stopped licking his paw to send a haughty glance the dog’s way. “Master is not here, you twit. She is bothering no one.”

The cat then stood, stretching out his front legs, and looked over to where Desdemona sat on the coffee table, hissing and swatting at the air.

“Besides,” Alfred sighed, moving away. “She’s doing a much better job of protecting this house than you are.”

Titus’s head shot up from the floor as he growled at his friend. “I protect this house just fine.” He heard Alfred huff in disbelief. Titus stood to follow him. “And anyway, my boy said there is no danger.”

“Away with you!” Desdemona screeched at a spirit hovering over the couch. It stared at her blankly before a yellow-glowing butter knife appeared in his hand. Desdemona hissed, throwing her paw at the man. The man blinked and disappeared. Desdemona sat down, chest puffed out proudly. “I will not allow any of you to attack Timothy’s father’s home!”

“Believe it or not, my dear canine,” Alfred purred, jumping up beside the younger cat. “But Damian is not always correct.”

“Well…” Titus lowered his ears, staring at all of the other ghosts slowly floating in and out of the sitting room. Today, it was tame. The spirits that had suddenly taken residence in the manor weren’t always this tranquil. “…Damian’s right most of the time…”

“Where is Damian anyway?” Desdemona asked. “I have barely seen him since he protected my Timothy from these strange humans.”

“That’s because your Timothy is fragile,” Titus mocked, walking over to the window. The yard, too, was full of these other transparent beings, just walking around like lost sheep.

“What he means,” Alfred explained calmly, before Desdemona could retort. “Is that we haven’t seen Damian in a while either.”
“Where do you think he’s gone now, Alfred?” Titus asked softly, continuing to watch the spirits in the yard. His eyes darted between the lawn and the driveway, ready to protect his master, should the man return home any time soon.

“He’s been busy dealing with these...things.” Alfred sounded distracted. Titus turned to see the elder cat had curled himself around Desdemona, and was swiping at a child not much younger than Damian. “He told us as much last time we saw him. I wouldn’t worry too much, Titus.”

“I’m not worried.” Titus responded quickly, spinning his head back to the window. “I just…I miss him. That’s all.”

“Maybe he is with my Timothy?” Desdemona squeaked, peeking at the dog over Alfred’s back. “Timothy always tells me stories about when they work together. Them and that Grayson person.”

Titus shook his head. “No, Timothy is with that team of humans. My boy says he hates them. So I doubt they are together this time.”

“Regardless, he is fine, Titus.” Alfred cut in. “Have some faith in our child.”

“I do.” Titus huffed. “I just…I do not like these other see-through people. It is fine when it’s Damian, or that child that seems to follow him...or even the see-through Grayson that isn’t Grayson because Grayson is not see-through. They are okay. But I don’t like these other ones.”

“Nor me.” Desdemona said, ducking under Alfred’s paw. “When they are mad, they throw you against walls.”

“That has not happened here,” Titus murmured. “But I am...concerned. If our boy is not here...could that happen to Master? Or the one who gives us food? I think that’s why we need-”

“Damian?” Desdemona whispered.

“Yes,” Titus agreed. “He should be here. Because if he’s here, then Master and Food-Giver will be-”

“Damian!” Desdemona mewed loudly, jumping out of Alfred’s embrace. Titus and Alfred turned to look at her; she was standing on the edge of the table, staring out into the hallway towards the stairs. All of the spirits in the room had turned, too. There was a flicker of movement upstairs, a small flash of green.

A small whisper echoed through the room and, in an instant, all of the ghosts were gone. As relief flooded Titus’s body, he glanced back out to the yard. All the transparent beings were gone there as well. Quickly, Titus trotted out of the room, passing a Desdemona who, while struggling to jump from the table, was muttering a happy litany of, “Damian, Damian, Damian, Damian...”

Titus paused in the large hallway, staring up the stairs to see Damian slowly strolling down the hall, surveying the family portraits that lined the wall. He didn’t seem injured, but looked as through he was distracted. Exhausted. The dog sniffed and moved up the steps. Damian glanced back at him as he reached the top landing, and a smile spread across his face. “Ah, there you are. Miss me, boy?”

“Very much!” Titus wagged his tail as he walked forward. Damian patted his head gently, before continuing his trek down the hall. Titus stuck to his side, tail incessantly whipping the back of the boy’s legs. Damian didn’t seem to mind. They ended their journey in Damian’s room, where he promptly flopped onto his bed. Titus jumped up next to him, nuzzling his elbow. Damian turned on his side, wrapping the other arm around Titus’s neck, pressing his nose into the fur.
They sat in silence for a few moments, before a shuffling sound was heard at the door. Both Damian and Titus glanced up to see Alfred jogging into the room, Desdemona hanging limply from his mouth. Damian smiled again as Alfred leapt onto the bed, depositing Desdemona on his shoulder. The kitten mewed hoarsely, shaking her head quickly before kneading at Damian’s shirt. Alfred opted to occupy the small space between Damian’s stomach and Titus’s foot, curling up into a tight ball, with his head on Damian’s side. When the cats were comfortable, Damian pressed his head back against Titus’s fur, fingers absently petting Alfred’s head.

“Mother is stepping up her game.” He sighed quietly. “She attacked the Outlaws today. Todd wasn’t with them – I don’t know where he is – and I don’t know if Mother knew that. Be she attacked the alien and the archer anyway.”

Desdemona stumbled against his cheek, licking him with her sharp tongue.

“I was lucky, Titus. I was so lucky I was able to distract the attackers long enough that Starfire could get Arsenal out.” Damian’s voice was shaky. All three animals stared at him in concern. “They stabbed him. Turns out those spirit-weapons? They can hurt living creatures. And there were so many more enemies this time. At least double the amount that went after Drake.”

Desdemona looked up at Titus, adoration shining in her eyes at the mention of her Timothy. Titus lowered his ears. Poor kitten. She has no idea what Damian’s talking about. Not that Titus really did either, but he could tell his boy was scared, and that was all that mattered.

“So if Mother sent that many to go after Todd…is she just upping the ante? What about when she goes after Grayson? Or Father? Will her army be ten-fold?” Damian shuddered. “I…I don’t know if I can handle that much.”

Titus let out a low whine, nudging his nose against Damian’s head. “Why is he sad?” Desdemona asked, gently pawing at Damian’s face. “Timothy gets this way sometimes. Well…a lot of times. And I still haven’t found a good way to get him out of it.”

“You don’t.” Alfred said quietly. “You just…let them be sad. You sit here with them, listen to their troubles and let them be sad.”

“And you only do something if they ask you to.” Titus added. “But even then…”

“I don’t know who these spirits hanging around the manor are.” Damian’s voice was muffled against Titus’s fur. “I would assume Mother sent them. But they haven’t done much of anything yet, so I suppose I can let them be.” He hummed, looking down towards Alfred. “Maybe they’re just old Wayne family members. Only, unlike Grandmother and Grandfather, have no invested interest in what I do or where I go.”

Alfred purred in agreement.

Damian sighed, closing his eyes. “That’s the one thing that sucks about being dead. You don’t sleep.” He smiled slightly, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead.’ Grayson said that once. Well, joke’s on you, idiot.”

The boy shifted closer to his animals. He opened one eye, glancing between the three. “Regardless, I’m going to lie here and rest a bit. That battle took more out of me than I expected. Force me up in about an hour or so, all right? I would like to go make sure the Outlaws are okay. Or that Todd found them, at the very least.”

Titus huffed against Damian’s hair in promise, but skeptically looked down at Alfred, who nodded.
Damian needed more than an hour’s rest.

“Make sure they do it, okay Desdemona?” Damian muttered, gathering the kitten up in his arms as he closed his eyes once more. She meowed lightly. “If you do, I promise I’ll get you into the cave to meet Bat-cow tonight.”

Desdemona purred happily, giving slight glares to her elders. “I’m going to do it!” she cried. “You two have been promising me Bat-cow for a month!”

“Of course, of course,” Alfred drawled, turning over. “Remember, Damian requested one hour. So, in one hour, lick his face a few times.”

“Okay!”

Titus couldn’t help but laugh to himself a little as he turned on his side, throwing a paw across Damian’s shoulders. By his estimation, it would take Desdemona about three hours to realize she didn’t know how long one was.

But with Damian safe and secure and here beneath his arm, that was perfectly fine by him.
Elegy

Chapter Summary

The Bat-family cope with the one-year anniversary of their youngest’s death.

“Come on, Kori,” Roy sighed, pushing himself off the sofa. “Let’s get him to bed.”

“He’s…drank a lot before,” the alien mused, stepping lightly over the empty bottles littered around the man’s feet. “But never so quickly. Never this much. And I’ve never seen him pass out from it before.”

“Did you expect anything less?” Roy scoffed, gently pushing Jason off the arm of the recliner he was currently flopped over, and into a more proper sitting position. Jason grumbled quietly, but didn’t fight it. Roy stood there, hand on Jason’s shoulder for a moment before he glanced up at Kori, his voice a whisper. “It was today, after all.”

“Today?” she asked, with hesitation. She moved to Jason’s other side, leaning down to take in his slumbering face as she thought. “Was there was some sort of commemoration going on today that I wasn’t aware of?”

Roy shook his head, closing his eyes. “It’s the day Robin died.”

Kori’s head snapped up to look at him.

“A year,” he muttered, and then paused. After a few seconds, he opened his eyes, looking out the window and onto the city. In that moment, he couldn’t actually remember what city they were in, but it didn’t matter. “It’s been a damn year.”

“So soon?” Kori sighed, voice conveying her empathy. She ran her hand over Jason’s hair before planting a kiss on his forehead. “Did he talk to the family today?”

“Hell if I know,” Roy seemed to snap out of his reverie, turning back to Jason and grabbing the sleeping man’s arm. “I don’t think the result would have been different either way. He could have drank because he missed the kid, because Robin never seemed to actually catch a break, or because it reminded him of his own death. Or it could have been because he did talk to his brothers, or even Batman, and he feels all the grief and guilt they still seem to have. For all his bravado, Jay’s still pretty in-tune with the Bat-clan. Or Nightwing and Red Robin, in any case.”

Kori grabbed Jason’s other arm, and together they slowly dragged him to his room. Roy stood by the window, absently staring out the window while Kori tucked Jason in, making sure he was comfortable, and placed preemptive hangover supplies next to his pillow – a water bottle, some aspirin and a trash can.

“Should we leave him alone?” Kori asked, admiring her handiwork before turning to Roy. She knew this was hard for him as well. Any time he thought of the deceased Boy Wonder, thoughts of his own lost child filled his mind.

“We’ll be just down the hall, so he’s not really alone anyway,” Roy drawled. Kori walked up next to him, sliding her hand up the elbow of his crossed arms. Finally, he looked at her, a sour and grim
smile on his face. Kori leaned her head on his shoulder, and he followed the gesture, his cheek on her hair. “It’s just not fair. Lian…Damian…They were just kids. Obnoxious little brats who didn’t ask for any of this. They deserved so much better. Better than a sometimes-there dad who ran around in a mask. Better than a criminal mother. Better than being stuck in all this shit.”

“But they loved it,” Kori cooed, running her fingers up and down Roy’s arm. “Lian loved you more than anything, just as Damian loved Dick and their father. They would not have traded a moment.”

“Maybe they wouldn’t. But I would,” Roy argued. “I know for a fact Dick would. Bruce probably would. If it meant they were kept safe.”

Suddenly, Jason let out a loud snore. “Come,” Kori whispered, pulling at Roy’s arm. Roy mindlessly followed her lead. They spent the next few hours out on the sofa, before Roy too passed out, though he did so from exhaustion as opposed to alcohol. Instead of trying to move him to a bedroom, Kori found a blanket and threw it over him, kissing his forehead, and then his cheek, before heading to her quarters.

As she moved out of the room, she glanced to the mantle of the rarely-used fireplace. Their safe houses were scarcely decorated, and this one was no exception. However, Roy always made sure there was some sort of photo of his little girl in each one. In this one, the picture sat atop the mantle. But today, there was something else. Today, a bright red batarang sat next to it. Kori walked over to it and picked it up, running her fingers over the slightly-dulled blade, recognizing it as both formerly belonging to the most recent Robin and as a memento she knew Jason to carry with him everywhere, an active reminder for what was taken from them. He must have taken it from his pocket as he drank, without either herself or Roy noticing.

“Rest well, little bird.” She whispered to it, kissing the smooth surface and placing it carefully against the photo once more.

~~

Tim wasn’t getting out of bed. Not for anything. Not today.

He had a plan; he’d made it weeks ago, really. Desdemona’s litter box was in his attached bathroom, a large bowl of her food sitting next to the window, close to an automatic water bowl – one that filtered and replaced the water every ninety minutes or so, filled to last three weeks – and her toys were currently overtaking the carpet. Not to mention that she was big enough now that she could jump on and off the bed as she pleased, so he didn’t even have to move to help her with that.

For himself, he had two bottles of water – and a jug of milk and jug of orange juice, in case he suddenly needed variety, in the mini-fridge under his bed – and a full box of protein and fruit bars, in case he became hungry. He could survive on that for twenty-four hours, sure. Hell, he’d survived on less for longer time before.

He wasn’t even going on patrol that night, and had already warned the appropriate people who might find that odd. Besides, he wouldn’t have been any help in battles anyway, not with such a large chance of crippling flashbacks threatening his mind.

He’d covered the basic necessities: take care of the cat, take care of yourself, make sure the people around you don’t worry.

But what had him nervous, what had him literally hiding under the covers of his bed, was the one thing he couldn’t control. The one thing he didn’t want to deal with, today of all days.
Damian.

He couldn’t plan for the ghost child, not when he still struggled in detecting a pattern to the boy’s appearances. The only solid lead he had was that he believed Damian to appear when the kid thought someone was in danger, either physically or emotionally. And that was all fine and good. But today, on the day of the child’s death, Tim didn’t want his help. Tim didn’t want to see the reason he couldn’t get out of bed. Tim didn’t want to see the person whose loss undeniably shattered their family.

Just thinking about it, even under his blankets, Tim closed his eyes. He hoped it would help, that there was no way he could see Damian – or any other spirit – if his eyes were closed. And maybe that was true, but the potential appearance of a ghost was replaced with the memories of the day. Of being trapped, helpless, under that tank. Of watching Damian take the Heretic on by himself. Of being witness to Damian getting beaten to a bloody pulp, then murdered in cold blood.

“I’m sorry…” he whispered hoarsely, feeling his legs curl up to his chest, his hands digging into his scalp. “I’m so sorry…”

He heard Desdemona meow gently close by, on top of the blankets, but Tim couldn’t figure out if she was meowing at him in comfort – something she found she often did – or voicing a greeting at someone entering the room, which she did just as often, especially if it was Damian.

Tim squeezed his eyes shut tighter, pressing his body closer. He can’t see me like this. No, no, no one can see me like this.

Desdemona meowed softly again, but for some reason, Tim just couldn’t read it. He remained still, remained completely under his comforter, a true safety blanket at this point. There was still no sound, no real movement that he could perceive. But, after a few minutes of absolutely nothing, Tim felt his mattress almost imperceptively shift, like a small weight had sat on it.

And Tim broke, the sobs silently racking his frame.

~~

Dick Grayson was a wreck from the start.

But really, in the past year, when hadn’t he been a complete and utter mess?

He’d spent the morning cursing, screaming, punching, throwing – anything to release his anger and pain. His roommates tried to help, tried to hug or soothe him, give him anything they thought he needed, but none of it helped. They knew, sort of. He’d given them some story; his youngest brother died in a tragic accident. Car wreck, pool drowning, medical emergency. He couldn’t remember. It didn’t matter. He thanked them for their attempts as he ushered them from his room, locking the door almost before it was even closed.

Since then, he’d crumbled. Slid down a wall and bawled. His hands alternated between covering his face and pulling at his hair. He just couldn’t stop.

“Damian…” His voice was shaky and blubbery as he wiped his nose. The action didn’t help a thing. “Oh, Damian…”

Bruce had called. It was way early in the morning. Dick had heard it, but was still sleeping, so chose to ignore it. It was before he remembered what today was. (He’d scoffed at the realization when it hit him. As if he could ever forget this date.) The ringing ceased, and a few minutes later the phone buzzed with a written message: “Call me if it gets too much, Dick.”
A cough escaped from his throat, then a gag, followed a low moan. It wasn’t fair. What higher power decided it had to be his baby brother to be sacrificed that day? His little boy? What’d the kid ever do to them?

And the spirit thing…there were days Dick loved it, and days he hated it. Today was definitely the latter. It acted as a reminder that Damian was still there, somewhere, and that was wonderful. But Dick couldn’t see him, couldn’t hear him. Worst of all, he couldn’t touch him. Couldn’t hold him in his arms, or run his fingers through his hair and it was unbearable. Damian was there…but he wasn’t. Not in the ways Dick needed him to be. He needed to be more than just a presence. More than just a shadow in Dick’s periphery.

The tears began falling faster and Dick dug his nails into his arms as he lowered his forehead onto them. After a few seconds, he heard a loud thunk! and looked back up. The flashlights on the desk across the room began flashing madly. Dick blinked slowly at them. Of course. Of course Damian would be stopping by today.

“It’s not the same, kid…” Dick muttered, shaking his head. To himself, he sounded like he was underwater. “You’re here but…but you’re not and it’s just not the same.”

The flashlights stopped blinking, but one stayed on. Dick assumed it was Damian’s way of signaling he was still there. Dick hiccupped, trying to slow his tears, to calm his current meltdown, but it wasn’t exactly working. He closed his eyes, trying to breathe deeply, hoping that that would work, that would stop the grief from pouring out.

“I can’t—Damian, I…I can’t!” He shook his head, burying it back in his arms as sobs took over his body once more. Instantly, he felt a cold breeze rush over his left arm, two small areas remaining frigid in the aftermath. Nothing else happened for a good ten minutes. Dick continued to cry in his anguish and Damian remained at his side, grasping his arm to let his mentor know he was still there.

It was a little while after that, when Dick began to feel the cold spots on his arm warm up. “No, Damian, please—”

The light on the desk blinked once.

What, Grayson?

“Please don’t leave.” He whispered. “Not for a while. I know you’ve got…your dad to look in on, and maybe Timmy and Jay but…” Dick felt his arms involuntarily tighten around his knees as his voice escaped his throat even quieter than before. “Please don’t leave yet.”

The light stayed steady for a few seconds before it quickly rolled off the desk and across the floor, bouncing against Dick’s toes. It blinked again. Now a cool wind brushed against his right arm.

Dick smiled. Tears continued to flow down his face, but he smiled through his weeping. After a choked laugh, he leaned his head back on his arms, staring into the empty space next to him. Just barely, and in no way accurate, he could picture the cranky boy next to him.

The spirit thing…yes, there were days Dick loved it and days he hated it. Today was definitely…a mixture of both. The purest definition of ‘bittersweet’ if there ever was one.

~ ~

After a day of pretending at the office – pretending to be a playboy, pretending to not understand business proceedings, pretending that it wasn’t the one year anniversary of one of the worst days of his life – he found himself roaming the halls of his home. His decidedly large and awfully shadowy
To an infrequent visitor, it would look the same as always: immaculate hallways, lined with the most beautifully painted family portraits. Classic and classy furniture adorning each room.

But Bruce Wayne saw something else. He saw a cold house once warmed by the brief, but intense, stay of its most lively tenant. At the first corner to the left of the stairs, he could see light dents in the plaster and paint, made when Damian, riding Titus like a horse, had misjudged the turn and went flying off his steed. Some of the paintings down both adjacent hallways were still crooked. He could see rooms that hadn’t been opened nor used since Bruce was a child himself coming to life with clear windows and dust coverings removed. New family photos littered the corridor tables. Damian with Dick, Stephanie and Titus; Tim, Jason and Alfred in the kitchen; there was even one of all four boys, though when or how it was taken, Bruce had yet to find out. Little things that appeared after Damian became a permanent fixture in the city, in their family. Little things that held so much meaning.

He could hear Titus following close behind, but he didn’t turn to look at him. Because that would be too much. He couldn’t look at the dog without every emotion known to man. The dog that was Damian’s, the dog the boy hated at first, the one he didn’t even want to name, let alone keep at the manor. The dog he quickly came to love, who loved him in return. The dog who never left his boy’s side, and would only do so when he was forcibly removed.

The dog who mourned, who lost much more than the rest of them, if they ever could stop in their own grief to think about it. The dog who lost the only human being who mattered to him.

Titus seemed to understand what today was, even if neither Bruce nor Alfred vocally said. Titus, along with Alfred the cat, more often than not slept in Damian’s room every night. This morning, Bruce opened his bedroom door to see the dog sitting there, staring straight ahead. He had looked up at Bruce and slowly wagged his tail, his ears drooping slightly. After a few seconds, he stood, carefully taking steps forward until Bruce’s fingers softly brushed against his muzzle, then, gently, he licked the man’s fingers. Once. Twice. Titus looked up after that, waiting for Bruce to move.

The Great Dane had been his shadow ever since, with a brief interlude of when Bruce was at the office.

The trek through the manor was doomed from the start, as there was nowhere else the journey could end other than the bedroom of the slain. The cat was already there, lying up on the mantel, curled around the trophy of Red Hood’s helmet. His purr echoed through the empty room, mixing with the crackles of the low fire that was lit below him – proof of Alfred Pennyworth’s own vigil, earlier in the day.

Bruce moved to the fireplace, giving a quick pat on Alfred’s head, before reaching down to the pile of logs and throwing another one on the dying flame. Sparks flew up, brightening the whole room. As he tended to the fire, Titus moved closer and laid down, taking up his usual spot between Damian’s bed and the stone mantelpiece. When Bruce deemed the fire decent, he turned back to Damian’s room, looking at all of the artifacts his son had collected during his Gotham period. Exotic plants and a pair of swords adorned the windowed wall, while a cased string instrument and shelves upon shelves of books took up every inch of the other three partitions. Looking between each object – and seeing Damian in every one – Bruce couldn’t help but think of when this was a guest room, and before that, a storage area for some of his parents’ old things.

As he always did, he walked over to Damian’s easel, plucking his sketchbook from the small shelf before going back to his stool at the fireplace. Only because of the day that it was, he thought of the first time he did this, right after Damian’s murder. The fire blazing, Titus lying sadly at his feet. The
cat was different, but otherwise, everything was the same.

Titus whined softly, and Bruce sighed, attempting to dislodge the sudden lump in his throat as he cracked the spine open and stared down at his son’s obvious artistic talent. No matter how many times he looked at the doodles, he was always amazed.

Amazed, and viciously saddened, knowing the artist would never be able to complete any of them.

“Brother?”

Damian didn’t look around. He continued to stare up at his gravestone, hands stuffed in the pockets of his hoody.

“You shouldn’t be here.” He didn’t mean for his voice to sound rough or accusatory. But he knew it had that affect on his clone.

“…I know,” The boy whispered. “I just… I know what day it is, as I know you do as well. You spent it talking care of your family. Of Father and his allies. But I have not seen any spirits come to take care of you, not even that other Nightwing person. I just… wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Guilt leaked out of every syllable, but Damian still didn’t want to look at him. No matter how much the child had atoned, the fact remained. The Fatherless had killed him in cold blood. Had taken him away from Grayson, from his father, from the family he’d always wanted. Damian had more or less forgiven him—it was his mother pulling the strings after all—but the fact remained. And this was the one day out of the year he would remember it. This was the one day out of the year that Damian was going to be angry about it.

He wasn’t going to lash out at his brother, or be angry at him over it all. But still. He was going to be angry.

“I was killed by my clone, who was sent by my mother.” Damian snapped, glancing at the identical grave marker next to his. “Of course, I’m totally okay with it.”

The clone read the sarcasm, and bit back the remark that threatened on his tongue. Damian was correct. Of course he was. Instead of trying to placate his older brother, he merely kept his mouth shut, moving to stand next to him, in front of their mother’s grave. Damian peeked down at him, taking in his proud stance but notable tenseness in his shoulders. Still from guilt? No… well, partially. The boy was staring at Talia al Ghul’s tombstone with fury. She had done this to him. She had made him do this to his brother.

A small angry child. Damian couldn’t help but wonder. Is this what he had looked like to Grayson when the elder took him in? He must’ve, because he felt a sudden urge to cheer his killer up.

Damian’s eyes slide back to his own grave. “Thank you, though.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the boy blink and look up at him. “Hmm?”

“For checking up on me.”

The boy nodded. “Well… I needed to talk to you anyway, I suppose.”

“Oh?”
“Word around the lands is that Mother will strike soon.” The Heretic said. “Do you believe yourself to be ready?”

“I will be.” The discussion was immediately dropped. Not like there was anything else to say about it anyway. The two stood in silence for twenty minutes before Damian sighed loudly. “A year.”

“It seems like it’s been much longer.” The clone muttered. “Has your family progressed as much as you expected them to?”

“Not in the least.” Damian rolled his eyes, thinking of Drake, Todd and Grayson. “If anything, they’ve regressed in their grief.”

“Because they loved you. Because they still love you.”

Damian shrugged. “It’s no good for them.”

“Perhaps.” The clone stepped closer to him. “Or perhaps they share in my thinking.”

Damian rolled his eyes. “And what thinking is that?”

It was sudden, but Damian wasn’t quite sure why he wasn’t expecting it. His clone suddenly wrapped his arms around Damian, burying his face into his chest. Damian hesitated a moment, but in the end relented, wrapping one arm around the child, and letting the other hand mix into the boy’s hair. The clone then shifted his head, looking up at Damian’s gravestone. “This is not the end for you, Brother. I can feel it.”

“What, you think I will find life somewhere?” Damian drawled. “Death is the end for everyone.”

“Not for the Red Hood, not for our Grandfather. Not even for Father himself.” The clone sounded genuinely happy at the idea. “They will find a way to bring you back. Or you will find it yourself. Maybe your family knows that, but they are misrepresenting their own hope for that prospect as grief. They miss you; they are anxious for your return.”

“Hm.” Damian grunted. After a moment, he gave a light tug to the boy’s hair. “No more traveling and information-gathering for you, little one. You are clearly delusional from your exhaustion.”

The Fatherless giggled, leaning more of his weight against Damian. “Happy deathday, Damian. May you have very few more.”
Conjecture

Chapter Summary

Damian doesn’t know what to expect when it comes to Grayson’s dreams. All he knows was it wasn’t this.

“Where are we?”

Damian scoffed at his side. “It’s your mind, Grayson. Shouldn’t I be asking you that question?”

“Oh. Right.” Dick looked down the street. Stereotypical suburbia. Each house two stories, brick everywhere except for the garage that was situated to the left. That had white horizontal paneling. Each mailbox a navy blue, a red flag lowered next to it. Absently, Dick reached out, placing his arm across Damian’s shoulders. The boy leaned into him, with a quick glance upwards.

“You okay, Grayson?” Damian asked. “You seem…spacey.”

“You’re actually here, right?” Dick murmured, ignoring the questions as he walked forward, arm still loose across Damian’s back. Damian kept in step with him easily. “Like, I didn’t make you up in my subconscious?”

“No, I’m really here.” Damian said, stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets. It was the black one, with yellow stripes. The one that was Tim’s, and somehow became Damian’s. Dick knew that.

“Why?”

“What, I can’t just invade your subconscious whenever I want? I thought we were closer than that.” Damian drawled. Dick smiled, barely registering the houses they were passing. Not noticing Damian’s head swiveling to stare intently at each one. “But if you must know, Oracle was slightly concerned for you. Apparently you have not been the forthcoming chatterbox we are all used to. She called Alfred, and they had a discussion about how you seemed…distracted, in your latest correspondence with them.”

“There’s just some stuff going on in Chicago.” Dick shrugged, rubbing his hand lightly up and down Damian’s arm. “No big deal.”

“I figured. As much as they pretend to, they don’t get how your mind works. But I just wanted to make sure.” Damian said with a haughty air, almost as if to say ‘how dare they pretend to know you as well as I do.’ Dick squeezed his arm. The boy suddenly stopped; Dick turned to look down at him. Damian shrugged Dick’s arm away, eyes darting around. “Where are we?”

“You know where we are,” Dick sighed. “We’re in my-”

“But this…” Damian scrunched up his face. “This isn’t a dream at all.”

Dick chuckled, turning away and continuing down the street. “Dreams aren’t the only thing in the subconscious, Damian.”

Damian huffed, following slowly, continuing to stare in wonder within each house. Each one
seemed to shimmer slightly, almost like he was looking at it through water or a bright object was reflecting against it. After a few more houses, he took off across one of the lawns, pressing his hands against the shifting window and looking through the glass. Inside, Damian was sitting on the sofa, next to Tim, and the two were laughing. Laughing so hard, Damian had collapsed against Tim’s stomach, and Tim had his arm around him. There was a chair next to them, a very regal, very elderly, Thomas Wayne occupying it. A large smile graced his lips. Jason was on floor in front of them, doing some sort of pantomime. That was it, that’s what they were laughing at.

The room was connected to the kitchen, and Damian saw Bruce pass by in the doorway, trailed a few seconds later by his mother, Martha, a large casserole pan in her hands, then Cassandra, a pitcher filled with a drink occupying her arms. Suddenly, Dick came stumbling down the stairs, fingers caught up in the last few buttons on his shirt. He rounded the sofa, collapsing over the back just long enough to press a kiss to both Tim and Damian’s temples, before dancing into the kitchen to help Martha get a pan from a top shelf.

The Damian outside the window blinked and turned. Dick was in the lawn behind him, that blank smile still on his face. Damian scowled, running across the street, repeating the action at the window in the new house.

In this living room, it was Christmas. Dick looked to be only mid-teens, sitting on the floor by the tree. A toddler Damian was perched on his lap, fiddling with a candy cane. A younger Jason and a younger Tim sat on the sofa, each on either side of Talia al Ghul, who was reading them a story. Bruce suddenly walked in the door, a pile of gifts in his arms. Toddler Damian squealed – *squealed*. Loud enough for the Damian outside the window to hear – and stood on shaky legs, attempting to run at his father. Dick got up right behind him, shadowing him in case he fell. He didn’t, not until he was practically at his destination. As he toppled over, Dick scooped him up, kissing his fat baby cheek before presenting him to Bruce, who did the same.

Damain backed away from the window, and turned to his brother, who was still standing in the other yard. He felt slightly panicked, mostly confused. “Explain yourself, Grayson!”

Dick chuckled, walking out to the street. Damian met him there, staring up at him with a furrowed brow and slight pout. As Dick’s chuckling subsided he sighed, putting his arm back around Damian’s shoulders. “You a fan of hypothetical situations and theories, Damian?”

Damian crossed his arms. “No.”

Dick laughed again. “Well, I guess I’m not really either. But when you live more or less alone, it’s all you can really do.”

“That does not explain a thing.”

“This,” Dick spread his arm out, indicating the whole, endless, street. “Is where I put all my hypothetical situations. Well, not all of them. The good ones. *Good* hypothetical situations.”

“Good…?”

“I guess. I mean, I don’t think it’s as simple as I’m trying to make it sound but…yeah, basically.” Dick gave a little shove, and the two of them made their way down the street again. “Dream lives, maybe. I have a bunch. Like, imagine we were all a family, but happy. Happy lives, and without being costumed heroes.”

Damian glanced over at a house. Dick was coming out the door, a standing Barbara Gordon in the doorway, clad in pajamas. Barbara fixed Dick’s tie, and he kissed her before heading to the car in
the driveway.

“Or imagine I grow up and get married,” Dick continued. “Imagine Bruce’s parents didn’t die. Or mine, or Timmy’s. Imagine Talia wasn’t, well, completely out of her gourd and stuck around. Imagine she and Bruce stayed together to raise you.”

“I think I get it.” There was a shout a few houses down. Damian glanced up just in time to see Jason tackling him – an older him, sixteen at least – while Titus hopped around them. Damian was laughing as he shouted his surrender, holding up a football. Jason snatched it from his hands, taking off towards the back yard.

“I guess Babs and Alfie weren’t wrong, when they said I was distracted. Things in Chicago have been…rough. Not bad, not always. But…” Dick looked up at the sky. “Sometimes I just like to get away from the real world.”

“Go someplace that you find satisfactory.” Damian nodded slowly as they passed a house where a five-year-old Damian was perched on Tim’s back, on the run from Stephanie, who was in the same position on Barbara’s back. Selina Kyle was watching them from the front porch, a cup of tea in one hand, Alfred the cat being stroked by the other. “That…makes sense, in a way. These are your escapes. And you’ve stored them all in your subconscious.”

Dick nodded as he confessed, “I end up doing weird skits in my head. Play out one whole ‘day in the life’ kind of thing. Sometimes if I’m just a bit stressed in the middle of the day, I’ll try to meditate or zone out. That normally does the trick. If stuff is real bad, I’ll do it as a way to put myself to sleep and it just…becomes a dream.”

“It looks like you didn’t do that this time.” Damian mused, looking at the infinite line of the worlds in Grayson’s head. “Perhaps you are more troubled by the things happening than you realized.”

Dick smiled, but this one wasn’t absent. It was warm and almost contagious. “Nah. I think my subconscious realized before I did that you were here. And you’re so much better than hypothetical.”

Damian let a small grin grace his lips as Dick pulled him tighter into his side while they walked. As they continued their journey in silence, they passed more theoretical lives. Dick with his arm firm around Starfire’s waist (shiny wedding rings evident on both their hands), watching as his small daughter played hide-and-seek. “Uncle Damyan! Uncle Damyan, I think Uncle Jay is cheating!” she shrieked playfully, pulling a twenty-something Damian from the bushes.

There was another with a younger Dick teaching a younger Jason how to play baseball. This Jason had scruffy red hair, which Dick covered by throwing his own cap on the boy’s head, and pulling it over his eyes before swinging an arm around his shoulders and giving him a noogie. A woman with dark hair watched, a wide smile on her lips, as she rinsed off the car she’d been watching.

Another scenario a few houses down. Much more simple, much more wistful. A tree in the front yard, Dick and his father John both hanging upside down from different branches, while his mother Mary took a photo of them from the ground.

A few houses more, and on the other side of the street, a campfire was set up in the middle of the front yard. All four boys were adults, Damian the youngest at twenty-five. All of the girls were there, too. Each one of them had some sort of boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife sitting with them as they roasted marshmallows and hot dogs. Damian snorted as he handed the pretty brunette next to him a beer and glanced across the flames at Tim – whose face was growing increasingly red as Jason and Stephanie continued some embarrassing story about him. The blonde girl next to Tim grinned.
sympathetically as she linked arms with him, leaning on his shoulder. Bruce sat with them, smiling in his wheelchair as he sipped on the whiskey mix Cassandra had handed him a few minutes before.

“Do you have a favorite?” Damian asked. “Scenario, I mean. Is there any you go to only when it’s really bad?”

“No, not really. They’re all pretty regularly used.” Dick responded. “As for favorite…maybe a group of them. But…nah, I don’t really have any favorites.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” Damian rolled his eyes.

“Ha, what does Jason always say? ‘Oh dear, I think I’ve been bamboozled!’” Dick mock-shrieked, slapping his face with his free hand.

“Don’t you dare start quoting the Red Hood or I am leaving and never coming back.”

“Sorry, sorry. Couldn’t resist.”

“But…that proves that you…do have a favorite?” Damian questioned.

“There’s a few that I prefer, yeah.” Dick nodded slowly.

“…Well?”

“Well…what?”

Damian sighed loudly. “Are you going to show me?”

Dick’s pout was ruined with the grin growing around it. “You’ll laugh at me.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Dick squeezed his arm again. “You’re so persuasive, Damian. Fine, we can look at a few.”

They walked a few more meters before Dick steered Damian towards a backyard. Here, Alfred was manning a gigantic grill, Lucius Fox at his side. Both men looked older, maybe by a decade or so. John Grayson, followed by Jack Drake, each carrying a plate of raw meat and skewers of fruits and vegetables popped out of the door that led into the house. There was a hefty shriek from a woman over by the tree. Damian looked over to see himself getting squeezed by Mary Grayson.

“Harvard!” Mary exclaimed gleefully. “Oh, Dami, Bruce just told me! Sweetheart, I am so proud of you!”

“Thank you, Ms. Mary.” Damian blushed as he returned the hug. “It was probably Dick’s tutoring.”

“Oh, don’t be so modest. Especially not for Richie. We all know he’s terrible at science.” She playfully slapped his arm. “You know, I still can’t believe you asked him to help you. Why didn’t you just ask Timmy? He’s the doctor.”

“He was busy studying for the board exam. I didn’t want to bother him.” Damian smiled, glancing behind Mary to see two children barreling towards him. He handed his drink to Mary, just in time to be tackled to the ground by the larger boy, no older than four, followed shortly by his younger sister, who just clung to Damian’s leg.

Jason suddenly came out of nowhere, grabbing the boy and tossing him in the air before nestling him safely in his arms. Damian watched as his older self wrapped his arms around the girl. Jason walked
off with the boy, who had his tiny arms tight around the man’s neck and was continuously smacking his lips against Jason’s cheek. He made his way over to where Tim was standing with Barbara, both of them with ridiculous party hats cocked on their heads.

“What, exactly, is being celebrated?” Damian whispered, leaning further into Dick’s side, feeling oddly uncomfortable with the crowd before them. A flame exploded from the grill, and then men surrounding it all laughed. At the same time, the little girl had a death grip on Damian’s hand and was dragging him through the back doors of the house, only to reappear seconds later with Bruce clutched in her other hand.

“Everything,” Dick grinned. “You graduated high school. Timmy passed the board exam and is officially a doctor. Jason’s got his fifth wedding anniversary and it’s my birthday.”

“And who all is here?”

“Everyone,” The grin spread to his voice. “This is a world where no one’s parents were taken from them. Everyone had the life that they wanted, the family they wanted. The whole shebang.”

“Interesting.” Damian muttered, watching as Bruce lifted the little girl – apparently Jason’s daughter – onto his shoulder while Dick snuck up behind Damian, snapping one of the odd party hats onto his head. “How would we have met in this universe?”

“I don’t know. School tutoring programs or something.” Dick shrugged. “I only got as far as you were with Bruce since birth, and he sponsored the yearly Haly’s Circus visit to Gotham, and befriended my parents. So our families remained close while you and I grew up. I’ll figure out how the Drakes and Todds got in here later.”

Dick herded him back to the street, to a house across from the party and three plots down. The two moved up to the porch, where Dick instantly opened the front door, ushering Damian inside. A German Shepherd ran by, barking excitedly. It hopped up on the couch, staring out the front window, tail wagging. Dick shuffled Damian over to stand by the stairs, out of the way.

“Richard!” His mother called from the kitchen. “I think the Waynes are here!”

Dick at his current age burst down the steps. He peeked out the curtains on the front door, “Yup, just pulled up. Good boy, Ace!”

The dog jumped from the sofa, tail still wagging as he barked, standing excitedly at Dick’s side. A few minutes later, there was a light knock on the door, followed by it opening and Talia walking through, Bruce and Damian right behind her.

“Talia!” Dick exclaimed, surging forward to embrace the woman. “Mom’s in the kitchen. I think she would love your help with that recipe you gave her last week. She thinks there’s something she’s missing. Hey Bruce!” Dick continued to smile as he released Talia to give Bruce a firm handshake.

“Dick. Hey Ace,” He leaned down to pat the dog on the head. “He’s good with other animals, right?”

“Friendliest dog I know. Why?” Dick asked. “And where’s the littlest Wayne?”

“I’m short, Dick, not invisible. Jeez.” Damian, also at his last known age, sighed as his father walked further into the house. Dick smiled, ruffling the boy’s hair. Damian smiled, trying to duck his head.

Dick glanced down, noticing Damian’s hands cupped against his chest. “Whatcha got there, D?”
Damian’s eyes lit up as he spread his hands. “Father and I found him in the ally by his office. We didn’t find a mother, so he said I could keep him, so long as he doesn’t belong to anyone!”

The small kitten meowed softly, clearly having just woken from a nap. “That’s awesome!” Dick cried, crouching down to get a better look. “What’re you going to name it?”

“Alfred.” Damian said, a hint of pride in his voice. “Because his fur is black and white, you know, like Alfred’s uniform back home? Also, if you look really close, you can see the cat has the makings of a mustache!”

Dick laughed, ushering Damian into the family room, where a video game console was clearly already set up. “Why, I do believe we’ve found Mr. Pennyworth’s clone!”

As the two departed, Damian looked up, expectation in his eyes. Dick smiled, pushing Damian towards the front door and out of the house. “This was one of the ones where your parents stayed together. Where mine stayed alive. And we both grew up sort of normal, in homes full of all the mushy-gushy love and stuff.”

“Grayson, you are a sap.” Damian said, his tone laced with gentle disapproval. “And I’m noticing a theme. You seem obsessed with me calling you by your idiotic nickname and forcing physical affection on me.”

“Even in death, I haven’t given up hope for you.” Dick practically giggled. “Now, come on. There’s one more. Promise…promise you won’t laugh?”

“Only as long as it’s not something ridiculous, like Drake and I getting along.” Damian snapped, crossing his arms as Dick continued down the street.

“Well…it’s not that bad.” Dick’s smile faltered slightly. “I hope.”

It was at the end of the street, because, apparently, this place did really have a stopping point. The lane turned into a cul-de-sac, with only one house in the circle. The house, while similar to all of the others, had a few differences. There were flowers outside, a bike in the front yard, some dog toys. Clearly this theoretical world merited more thought than the others.

Damian stood there, looking over all the little details, as Dick moved over to the large picture window. The man’s eyes became distant again, and slightly misty as he stared at whatever was inside. Slowly, Damian made his way to join him.

He could see himself inside, a little older, maybe twelve or thirteen. He was lying on the sofa on his stomach, feet up in the air, headphones in his ears. A Great Dane stood at the arm rest nearest his face, watching intently as Damian penciled in his sketchbook, glancing up at the dog every few seconds.

A shrill ring echoed through the room, causing the dog to twitch and let out a few barks. Damian scowled. “Hush, Titus,” he scolded, reaching for the phone on the coffee table in front of him.

“Hello? Oh, hi Tim…”

“Tim’s the neighbor.” Dick explained softly. “He’s lived next door for forever.”

Damian nodded as his other self continued, “…No, Mr. Todd’s car broke down, so he went to help him take it to the shop. He should be home in an hour or so…yes, I know I can call him Jason. I just don’t want to.” The boy suddenly laughed. “You guys are so weird. No other adults want to be called their first names by a kid. And excuse me if my mother taught me better than that…Yeah, I’ll tell him. You can just bring it over now, I’m here, but yeah, I’ll tell him. I wouldn’t eat yet if I were
you, though. You know how he is. He’ll come over to pick it up and then insist you come for dinner. I wouldn’t be surprised if he comes home with Mr. Todd still in tow for the same reason…Okay. Okay, yeah, got it. Okay, bye.”

The other Damian placed the phone back on the table, shoved a headphone back into his ear and continued sketching. Even from the window, Dick and Damian could see he had started a new drawling, to reflect the change in Titus’s position.

A few minutes later, Titus’s ear twitched again and he stood, tail wagging happily. Damian glanced up at him and shook his head, a fond smile on his face. A door in the kitchen opened and Dick walked through, shaking water from an unseen rain off his head as he slipped off his jacket. He looked older, too. Mid-thirties instead of early-twenties. “Dami, I’m home!”

Titus ran at him, jumping up once, before bouncing around underfoot as Dick came over to where Damian was still lounging. Much like one of the other houses, Dick leaned over the back of the sofa to ruffle Damian’s hair and kiss his head. Damian tried to duck it. “Dad,” he sighed, exasperated. “I told you not to call me that!”

“You let your mother call you that,” Dick smiled, moving back to the kitchen and picking up the mail he’d dropped on the counter.

“I can never decide who I want your mom to be,” Dick, the one outside the window, muttered. “I always just make it that we amicably split up. Or…she’s on business trips a lot.”

“I told you, you each get one nickname. Mom’s is Dami, yours is Robin.” The Damian inside said, sitting up on the couch, watching as Dick sorted the mail before sauntering back into the room. “And you’re lucky I allowed you to have the variation of ‘bird’ whenever you feel like it.

“Your grandma called me Robin, that’s why,” Dick hummed, sitting down next to him. “I liked it, but wanted my own variation.”

“I know,” Damian rolled his eyes, leaning against Dick’s arm. “She’s told me a thousand times. You have too.”

“Right, right. And a big ol’ teenager like you is too good for multiple nicknames. I forgot.” Dick smiled, passing an envelope to Damian. “Anyone call?”

Damian eyed the envelope distrustfully before tearing the top open. “Yeah. Tim did. He said he fixed your computer. You had too many files, not enough space left. He said he’ll give you one of his old external hard drives until you buy yourself one.” He took out the card, scanning the front before opening it. A few dollar bills fell out of the middle. Damian sighed, but a smile was forming on his lips as he read the message, absently grabbing the money. “It’s from Mr. Wayne. I thought you said you were going to tell him he didn’t need to send me a card for every holiday there is anymore?”

“Dad?” Dick inside grinned, looking over a bill, then leaning forward to toss it on the coffee table. As he leaned back, he wrapped his arm around Damian’s shoulders, leaning against the child’s hair as he glanced over the card. “This one’s for your report card, I think. He must’ve heard me telling Jay and Steph that you got that letter from the principal because you got straight A’s. How much did you get this time?”

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Damian snuggled – snuggled, the Damian in the yard could barely hold back his gag – into Dick’s
chest, turning the card around so he could read the front. “Fifty. Says getting a letter from the principal gets a special bonus.”

“Faaaancy. Don’t forget to write Bruce a thank-you card. I’ll take it into the office.” Dick mumbled. “What’re you going to spend it on?”

“There was a toy Titus seemed to want last time we went to that pet store Colin works at. What’s it called, Pennyworth’s?”

“Never a stray we’ll turn away,” Dick recited. “I know it, it’s been around since I was your age. But Damian, you don’t have to spend your own money for something for Titus. I told you your mom and I will cover it.”

“He’s my dog,” Damian said. “You only let me get him when I promised to take care of him. So that’s what I’m going to do.”

“He’s the family dog,” Dick smiled again, tightening his grip on Damian’s shoulder as he buried his nose in his son’s hair. Damian only marginally struggled against it. “You’re too sweet, bird.”

“Funny, just this morning you said I was a little demon,” Damian smirked. Dick barked out a laugh as Titus hopped up on Damian’s other side, effectively boxing the boy between them. Dick threw his other arm across his stomach and began tickling. Damian started shouting between giggles, trying to get away. It was impossible, especially with Titus towering over them both, pawing at Damian’s shoulder as he licked at his face.

After about a minute, Dick stopped, but held Damian tight in his arms. Once again, he kissed his son’s face. “Love you, Dami.”

Damian rolled his eyes and pinched his lips in a pout. “Love you too, Dad.”

The two went on to do menial tasks, then. Damian showed Dick some of the sketches he was working on. Dick went back to the kitchen, asking what they should make for dinner, which seemed to remind him that Tim had his computer. It was decided to be an event. Dick told Damian to put his coat on and grab Titus’s leash. They’d walk the dog, go to Tim’s, then come home. Damian had sighed, claiming something about having a video game session with Colin coming up within the hour.

“I told you,” Dick muttered in a breathy laugh as he turned away from the window and headed back to the street. “It’s all kind of silly.”

“Kind of,” Damian agreed, following behind. “But isn’t that the point of escapes?”

“You don’t have to be nice to me, Damian. You can tell me it’s all super weird.” Dick shoved his hands awkwardly in his pockets.

“If it wasn’t super weird and sentimental, then it wouldn’t be you,” Damian said. “Was…was that one your favorite?”

“My favorite of the group of favorites? I don’t think so. I think…I think the one where everyone’s parents were still alive and everyone’s happy. That’s the absolute best.” Dick had that dreamily look in his eyes again. “This one…I think, is my second favorite.”

“Hm,” Damian nodded. “I liked the one where you lived with your parents. And Mother, Father and I came to visit.”
“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. Much more…plausible, if we both got what we truly wanted.” Damian explained. “You want your parents alive to watch you grow and impart their wisdom. I wished for my parents to stay together just…so we could all be together. I suppose I never had a reason for wanting it. I just did.”

“And that should have been enough for them to give it to you,” Dick said, his tone a little dark. Damian noticed Dick moving towards a bench near the sidewalk, one that hadn’t been there before. The two sat, watching the nearby house. Mary Grayson was standing on the porch, holding what seemed to be Damian at six. Tim at nine stood next to her, clutching her skirt, as the three of them watched John wrestle a twelve-year-old Jason and fifteen-year-old Dick. The scenario wasn’t hard to figure out. What if they were all biological brothers?

“Which one were you thinking about when you fell asleep?” Damian asked, taking his eyes away as Tim reached up to their mother, an obvious request to hold the youngest.

Dick continued to stare, almost longingly. “The one we just left. It’s been my go-to one more often than not recently.”

“I see.” Damian mused. “Are you sure things in Chicago are…manageable? Do you require my help?”

Dick snorted. “No, I don’t. I’m just moping about it right now. When I wake up, I’ll be fresh. Able to get a game plan.”

“You’re sure?” Damian asked.

Dick rolled his eyes. “Yes, I’m sure. And what would you do about it anyway? Spook the bad guys into giving up? Solid strategy.” He leaned back, throwing his arm across the bench behind Damian’s back. “Besides, from the sounds of it, you’ve got your own things to deal with.”

Damian’s eyes narrowed up at his mentor. “Who the hell told you about that?”

“Come on, Damian. I thought we were over this whole you-thinking-I’m-a-complete-moron thing.” Dick smirked. “Tim said you saved his ass a couple weeks ago from an army of ghosts sent by Talia.”

Of course. How could Damian have forgotten?

“So maybe I should be the one asking you if you need help.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Damian snapped. “I can handle it.”

“Right. So you can handle your thing and I can handle my thing.” Dick agreed. “Where does that leave us?”

“That…” Damian leaned back. Quickly, Dick shifted his arm to lie across Damian’s neck. “That leaves us sitting on a bench, ignoring the problems we mutually – apparently – came here to escape, and…watching a synopsis of what life would be like if we were all Graysons by blood, as opposed to Waynes by choice.”

“Hah…yup. I guess it does.” Dick squeezed his shoulder. “Miss you, Damian.”

“I miss you too, Grayson.”
“Love you.” Dick tried.

Damian huffed. “The feeling is mutual.”

Dick grinned. “Next time you stop by, I promise I’ll have a real dream for you to explore.”

Damian’s eyes were sharp as he returned the grin. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

Dick held his smile, leaning in to kiss Damian’s hairline, like many of the scenarios they had just witnessed. “I hope you do, Damian. I really hope you do.”
Chapter Summary

Damian had been preparing for this battle for months. And it was nowhere near enough.

Chapter Notes

Part 1 of 4.

Supplemental listening: 'White Blank Page' by Mumford&Sons

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"A white blank page, and a swelling rage. You did not think when you sent me to the brink. You desired my attention, but denied my affections. So tell me now, where was my fault? In loving you with my whole heart?"

~~

“Brother!”

The shriek was loud enough to send the nearby group of birds flying. Damian glanced up from the Kents’ garden, where Clark and Kara sat chatting, just in time to see the Heretic sliding to a stop next to him. The child grabbed his arm, his eyes wild.

“Wha-"

“Father, it’s Father!” he shouted, tugging at Damian’s wrist and shirt. “Mother’s gotten him!”

Damian’s brain froze, long enough for his clone to drag him up from his seated position and begin running. He blinked, and he and the boy were in the foyer of Wayne Manor. Titus’s barks and Alfred’s hisses echoed through the hallways.

“Where?” Damian asked.

“The study!” the clone said. Damian didn’t need any more. He took off towards the room, readying the two green-glowing blades in his hands.

“Find Pennyworth,” he called over his shoulder. “I would suspect he is not with Father. Mother more than likely took him out first.”

The boy, who had looked frantic and terrified, instantly sobered and nodded, dissipating to another area of the house. Damian moved on, hearing Titus’s barking get louder with every step.

“Titus.” Damian ordered as he rounded the corner. Titus silenced immediately, staring at the spirit as he continued to paw at the door.
“...ink you’re so righteous, Beloved.” Filtered through the wooden door. “All I did was love you, and that warranted being exiled? Labeled a criminal?”

“Al...Alfred...” That was his father’s voice. It was light, and sounded like Bruce was struggling to breathe. “Alfred...help...”

“You never even knew of your son until I allowed it,” Talia spat. Damian heard the crunch of glass. “How dare you try to keep him from me.”

That was enough. Damian shifted through the door, jiggling the handle just enough that Titus could come nudge it open when necessary. Once inside the study, Damian felt anger course through him. His blades shimmered faintly. Talia stood in front of the desk, had apparently been pacing, while Bruce hung suspended on the wall, boxed in the frame of the portrait of his parents. In his periphery, Damian could see the chair his father must have been knocked out of. Its wheels were ripped apart and it lay on its side.

“It’s always a fight with you,” Talia sighed. “Can never just sit down and chat like normal human beings. You always have to act like you know better than-”

“Mother, enough.” Damian called, trying to stop the fury from taking over his motions. If it were anyone else, he would assume her immediate reaction was a fear response. But it was his mother, he knew her better than anyone. Her spin, coupled with the outstretched arm, that slammed him into the wall opposite of Bruce, was deliberate.

“It’s funny, Beloved.” Talia continued, as if Damian hadn’t just interrupted. “For as much as you claimed to have no feelings for me. To think of me as nothing but nuisance, you kept coming after me an awful lot. Yes, there is the potential criminal aspect of my organization, but your harassment was borderline obsession. And it apparently hasn’t waned since my death. Now you’re going after my father? Don’t you believe he’s suffered enough at your hands? First his grandson, then his daughter?”

Talia floated up into the air, above the desk until she was face to face with Bruce. Bruce continued to pant, trying to remain calm as he figured out a way down. It must have been difficult. After all, Bruce had been sitting in the room alone, and then suddenly found himself slammed up into a wall with no cause, no enemy behind it.

“You claimed not to love me, but wouldn’t leave me alone. And you were subjecting my son to your madness and brainwashing as well.” Talia leaned forward to kiss his cheek, but her voice was cold. “You left me no choice. You wouldn’t have a proper discussion with me. I had to take drastic measures. And it’s your fault Damian got in the middle of it.”

Damian grit his teeth. “Talia!”

“...I wondered when you would show up.” She responded slowly, turning and walking regally toward him on the invisible plane above the desk. He expected nothing less. His blades hadn’t disappeared, but he found himself unable to move his arms and legs. She was powerful; Damian could only hope he was just as strong, if not more so. As she neared him, her feet hit the ground once more and she smiled. It was malicious and arrogant, and Damian hated it. Hated everything about it. He struggled against his invisible bonds as she reached her hand up to stroke his face. “I’m so glad you did.”

“Let him go, Mother.” Damian kept her gaze for a moment before he heard a gasp from behind her. He glanced up to see Bruce straining, trying to reach up for his throat. “Let him go right now.”
“What have I told you about sounding like an entitled child?” Talia muttered.

“You’re crushing his windpipe!” Damian snapped, jerking away from her hand.

Talia’s smile disappeared as she lowered her hand and turned away. “He deserves worse.”

“Does he really?” Damian shouted. “You killed your own son – both of your sons – your own flesh and blood! What do you think you deserve?”

“He kept you from me.” Her voice had become cold again. Another picture frame in the room shattered as her power surged through the room.

“Because he loved me.” Damian countered, leaning forward. Goading his mother wasn’t the best idea, but it was the only one he had. He had to hope he could break her concentration, and she would drop one of them. Preferably both he and his father, but he’d take what he could get. “Because he cared for me and my wellbeing. And that’s more than I could ever say for you.”

“You watch your tongue, boy.” Talia whipped her head around. Damian held her eyes once more. “You’re on shaky ground.”

“Thanks to you, I’m not on the ground at all, Mother.” Damian smirked. Talia’s eyes narrowed.

“Now is not the time for you to embody the teachings of that idiotic circus boy…” Talia began as she stomped back towards him. She was about to reach out once more, about to do who knows what, when Titus growled and jumped through the door. He didn’t even spare a glance at Bruce before running in between Talia and Damian.

“Ti...Titus…” Bruce strained, watching the dog bark at absolutely nothing. “Here...here boy…”

Talia backed away from her son, watching the dog with her still narrowed eyes. Titus followed, growling angrily and barking any time Talia paused in her movements.

“Titus.” Damian called. The dog went quiet again. Talia relaxed slightly and looked up at her son. His smirk had that malicious element hers had moments ago. “Sic her.”

The Dane lunged forward, mouth open and teeth bared. Neither Talia nor Damian knew what a living animal could do against a spiritual human, but she didn’t want to find out. Talia flung herself to the side, a red-glowing shield appearing in front of her raised arm. But that was it; that was what Damian was waiting for. As Talia landed on the ground, Bruce let out a cough and went crashing to the floor. It seems a ghost could only use their powers on so much.

Titus’s instinct kicked in then, and he left Talia, running over to where Bruce was attempting to get up. “Get him out of here, Titus.” Damian said, throwing all of his strength into pushing at his restraints. “Get him out of this house and away from the grounds. I don’t care where.”

“He won’t get that far,” Talia gasped as she stood. The shield was replaced by a sword, similar to Damian’s. Talia flicked her wrist and, much like Bruce, her son collapsed to the floor. Damian didn’t hesitate. The second his feet touched the floor he bounced forward, swinging his blade in an arch that would have stabbed the woman in the stomach and cut up through her chest, should the hit have connected. It didn’t, of course. He rarely had ever been able to best his mother in a bout. Before he could pull his arm back, she grabbed it, twisting it until it was against his spine. As he tried to move to get himself any sort of leverage, Talia threw him to the ground on his stomach. Her knee joined the pressure on his back. Damian glanced over to see Titus in the process of supporting Bruce, but looked torn as to continue that task or help Damian. “Oh Damian. My poor boy. Did you really think this was all about your father?”
Damian squirmed. He couldn’t help it. It was habit. “Mother, what are you talking about?”

Suddenly, the large wooden desk went flying into the window. Bruce was barely able to cover himself and Titus from the glass raining down on them. As Bruce raised his head, Titus was sucked from his grasp, tossed against – and through – the door to the study.

“Did you really think I would show up here just to give the Batman a few haunted house type scares?” Talia whispered, her grip tightening as Damian shouted after Titus. The dog was a lump in the hallway, knocked unconscious. “My child, did you forget my warning? Did you forget Ducard’s visit?”

Damian stopped moving. It couldn’t be. Not now. Not already.

There was a commotion somewhere in the house, and Damian couldn’t look away from Titus’s lifeless body. In the corner of his eye, he could see his father trying to crawl to the door, mouthing Titus’s name.

Suddenly two men appeared in the doorway. Former members of the League, no doubt, judging by their robes. Damian’s clone was hanging between them. The child, no older than four years old, was bleeding. From his mouth, from his nose, from his eyes…from everywhere. The boy looked up at him, his head unsteady on his neck. “I’m…sorry, Damian. They…they got the better of me…I didn’t find the butler but…but there’s…”

Talia continued, her free hand finding Damian’s hair. He felt her start to slowly pull it. “Have you forgotten what you’ve been preparing for all these months?”

And then Damian heard it. The sound that made his stomach drop and his eyes widen.

No. Oh God, please no.

“Bruce?” It was Dick. “Alfred?”

“Brucie-boy!” That was Jason. And if the two of them were here, no doubt Tim was with them. “Where are you, old man?”

The best way to get rid of multiple prey. Get them all in one place.

Bruce had just made it to the doorframe, and collapsed onto his stomach. His eyelids fluttered closed. The two guards moved in, still carrying the Heretic between them, and stood off to the side of Talia and Damian. Talia then shifted her weight, leaning down to Damian’s ear. “I’ve got you, Damian.”

“No…no!” Damian shrieked. “Drake! Drake, if you can hear me, get out! Grab the other two and get out! Get out now!”

“Guys,” he heard Tim say slowly. “Something’s not right…”

“Bruce?” Dick’s voice had steeled. Damian heard the distinctive sound of guns being un-holstered. “Bruce, you here? Is everything all right?”

“Drake, please!” Damian was reduced to begging. He didn’t care. “Drake, get out of here!”

But it was too late. Jason gave a shout of surprise, followed by Dick. A gun went off, and a few seconds later it slid by the open study door. There were a few bangs and grunts and crashes. Then, the sound of bodies flopping to the floor. A hand came into view in the doorway, bouncing off the ground close to Titus’s prone form. Damian identified it instantly as Tim’s.
“What did I used to say to you, darling?” Talia purred as Damian restarted his struggle to escape. “Ah, I remember. Happy birthday, Damian. You lose.”

“They did nothing,” Damian roared. He could feel his own power brewing as his rage grew, but it was no match for his mother. “They did nothing to you! Let them go at once.”

“You had done nothing to me, either. Yet I did all I could to be able to use you against your dad,” a voice from the side of the room said. Talia let Damian turn his head enough just to see Morgan Ducard. “Life isn’t fair, and it turns out death isn’t either.”

“Mr. Ducard. You’re here early.” Talia said as she sat back. She didn’t sound entirely pleased by that.

“Your kid’s something special,” Ducard sighed, leaning out the door to look at the carnage in the hall. He nodded appreciatively before coming back in and standing over Bruce, who had slipped into unconsciousness. “I wanted to watch the show.”

“Fair enough,” Talia decided. “Are you ready?”

“Lady, I’ve been ready to do this for a long time,” Ducard cracked his fingers. An excited grin exploded onto his face.

“Ready for what?” Damian asked. “Mother, ready for what?”

“You have defied me for too long, Damian.” Talia explained. “It’s about time you’re punished for your discretions.”

“How? By beating up my family?”

“Close, I suppose.” Talia clucked. She glanced to the Heretic, who was uselessly struggling against the men holding him, then shifted, pulling Damian up into a sitting position. She kept one hand locked in his hair, the other tight across his chest and arms, holding him against her. She kissed Damian’s cheek and looked over toward Bruce. “You may proceed, Ducard.”

“Excellent.” Ducard immediately closed his hands into fists and shut his eyes. Slowly, an orange aura came over his body. As the seconds passed, the color got more and more vibrant. When it was almost blinding, Ducard opened his eyes and knelt over Bruce’s body.

“Mother, stop.” Damian kept up his struggling. “Mother, please, we can talk about this-”

Ducard didn’t hesitate. He plunged his hand through Bruce’s throat. There was no blood, no cuts. Ducard sat there a moment before he grinned and his arm flexed. Slowly, he pulled his arm back. For a split second there were two Bruce Waynes. One solid, unconscious on the floor, the other, transparent, and caught in Ducard’s rising grip. The body on the ground suddenly seemed pale. Too pale.

“I don’t understand…” Damian started. “What did you-”

“Silence.” Talia ordered. Ducard continued to pull his arm back until he was standing, and the transparent Bruce was still limp in his hand. Suddenly Ducard shifted away from the body and threw the opaque Bruce to the ground. The man coughed, rising to his knees. His hand went for his throat, where Damian noticed an orange string-like collar tied tightly around his neck.

“Wha…” Bruce grumbled, rubbing his neck.
“Nice to see you again, Bruce.” Ducard grinned. Bruce turned and looked up, staring at him with wide eyes. Damian continued to push against Talia’s grip, when there was a groan in the hallway. His attention snapped to the doorway. It wasn’t Drake; his hand was still in the same position, still lifeless against the floor.

“Damian?” he heard whispered. His head twitched back to where Bruce was still on his hands and knees. The man was staring at him now, tears already welling up in his eyes. “Damian is… is that you?”

“No…” Damian moaned. “No, Mother. You didn’t.”

“Son,” Talia said proudly. “May I present to you, the ghost of Bruce Wayne.”
**Chapter Summary**

Talia had the element of surprise. Damian had his family’s support.

**Chapter Notes**

Part 2 of 4

Bruce Wayne never could be kept down for long.

He instantly lunged forward, reaching for Damian. He barely got halfway before the orange collar
around his neck tightened and, suddenly, surprisingly, there was a matching leash connected to it.
Ducard held the other end of it, and seemed to take too much pleasure in yanking it backwards,
watching Bruce choke as he fell back.

“Father!” Damian cried, ignoring the terrified, whining tremor in his voice, as he surged forward.
Talia laughed as she easily reigned him back against her.

“Let the boy go, Talia,” Bruce hissed, eyes glancing around the room to see if there was anything
else he could do, taking in the damage. He saw the two guards off to the side, holding another child,
this one younger than Damian and injured. “You’re battle is with me, and you’ve used him as a
pawn enough already.”

“For once, Beloved, you are entirely incorrect.” Talia grinned, running her fingers through Damian’s
hair. “My tiff is not with you this time, but your heir. He is not the pawn in this game. You are.”

“He is still a child, Talia!” Bruce barked. His muscles tensed in a way that showed he wanted to
jump forward again, but thought better of it at the last second.

“And children should be punished for their mistakes.” Talia countered.

Another groan came from the hallway. Bruce didn’t look, keeping his eyes on Talia, but Damian did.
Titus was still out there, and so were his brothers. It killed him not being able to see what happened
to them. Not to see anything but Tim Drake’s stupid lifeless hand.

“And what was his mistake? Doing the right thing? Putting his life on the line to save others?” Bruce
snapped. “You killed him, Talia – killed all of us, if I’m gauging this situation right. The only one
who made mistakes here is you!”

Ducard suddenly pulled back on the leash, and Bruce fell back a little farther, gagging slightly. “No
one asked for your opinion here, Brucie.”

Damian scowled. Without thinking, he threw his elbow back into Talia’s stomach. She gasped in
surprise, loosening her bonds around him. Not much, but enough for Damian to slip out. In that split
second, he had to decide. He could do nothing for his father, not right now anyway. But the three in
the hall…one of them was conscious. And even if they weren’t, Damian needed to know what happened to them.

He took off towards the door.

He got as far as the threshold, saw as much as a bleeding gash on Tim’s forehead, and heard only “Talia, stop-” before he was tackled again. He felt a blade crash into his side, right below his ribs, and an arm encase his throat.

Bruce roared behind them as Talia slammed Damian into the door. “Where do you think you’re going? Your punishment is nowhere near complete, my son.” Talia jeered. “One more move like that and I send my Beloved, his pets and the boy you’ve suddenly began calling your brother off to Hell. You know there’s no coming back from that.”

Damian turned his head towards the room. He saw Bruce thrashing against Ducard’s collar, fury encompassing every muscle in his face as he tried to reach Damian and his mother.

“Talia!” Bruce shouted. “I will not let you hurt him again. I swear on everything I have that I will not-”

“All right,” Damian muttered quietly. “I… I yield.”

Bruce ceased his movement. His voice wasn’t above a whisper, “Damian, no…”

“There’s more here at stake than me, Father.” Damian said as Talia pulled him away from the door. The blade was pulled out of his torso and disappeared. “She has captured my predecessors as well.”

At those words, Bruce seemed to only just notice Tim’s hand on the ground beyond them, with Titus behind him. There was a beat of silence before the groan rang through the house again. Now closer, Damian could identify it as Jason Todd.

“Mmmrgh, what the… fuck?” Jason questioned. Damian tried to lean out the door. “Hey, Dickie-bird, where’d all these assholes in robes come from?”

Damian felt himself gulp, a difficult task with the arm still around his throat.

Not Todd, too.

“You were so eager to see your allies before,” Talia crooned. “Why don’t we go greet them now?”

Damian remained silent, but nodded.

“Ducard,” Talia called, maneuvering Damian out of the exit. “Beloved and the child are under your watch. Keep them in here until I say otherwise.”

“You got it,” Ducard grunted.

The hallway was worse than Damian imagined. Spirits in League robes lined the walls – not just in this area, Damian could see them on the stairs and second floor as well. Other, normal looking, ghosts filtered in and out of view, like they were curious as to the sudden influx of activity on the Wayne grounds. But Damian could tell, just by the glimpses he had of them, that they were here at his mother’s request. They were the ones who had defeated his brothers. Each one that appeared had a glowing weapon in hand, a few even with an evil, smiling face.

The bodies of Jason Todd, Richard Grayson and Timothy Drake were sprawled down the corridor,
almost like a makeshift trail. Todd must’ve been taken down first, then Grayson. Ever the hero, it seemed he had pushed Drake in attempt to propel him away from their invisible attackers, as the youngest of them was a good six feet away, currently at Damian and Talia’s feet.

Their spirits, however, were close to their bodies, each leashed like Bruce had been, a faceless League member holding the leads tightly. Dick and Tim’s spirits were still out, unaware of what had happened to them. Jason, though. Jason was awake, sliding his hand up the red rope the held him before looking up at his handler and then down the hall.

His eyes hit Talia and Damian, but he seemed unperturbed by their presence. His face seemed to tighten slightly, but he held up restraint in obnoxiously incredulous disbelief. “…The fuck is this?”

“You have such an affinity for your father and his companions. You wanted to be with them so badly,” Talia said quietly. With her free arm, she swept across the hall. “Well then, here they are, Damian. All just for you.”

“You…” Damian felt his lips quiver as his eyes darted from each of his brothers. “You killed them. You killed all of them.”

“Killed is an awfully strong word. None of their physical injuries were equal to death,” Talia justified. “Just knocked out, then their souls lifted. Your father and his pets never felt a thing.”

“Now wait just a goddamn minute, you old bag,” Jason snapped, jumping to his feet. “I may loosely – and I mean loosely – follow Batman’s teachings and morals, but I am no one’s pet. No one’s.”

Jason’s handler tugged back on the leash, but Jason ignored it. Mostly, anyway. It stopped him from approaching, but he didn’t stop pulling against it. “Jason,” Talia said, almost fondly. “You don’t seem…distraught over your current state.”

“What, am I dead?” He drawled, raising his arms out to the sides. “Been there, done that, hell of a vacation. But right now, that’s not what I’m most curious about. ‘Cause, see, what I’m most curious about is why you have that stupid little shit of a kid in a chokehold, and what you’re planning on doing to him next.”

“Oh?” Talia perked at the response. “Developed some brotherly love, have we?”

“Not really, no.” Jason countered. “But he has,” He pointed to Dick, then to Tim. “And the Replacement there is known to deal poorly with dead kids under the age of twelve. You really want them waking up in the afterlife to see you holding their favorite little whippersnapper against his will? Don’t answer that, because I’ll tell you. You don’t. You really, really don’t.”

“I can’t imagine they’ll put up any tougher of a fight than the Batman himself.” Talia smiled, giving Damian’s throat a quick squeeze. “And, as you can see, he also failed. Besides, you’re not the only dog we’ve collared today.”

“Mr. Grayson acts tougher than he is,” Talia straightened slightly. Damian let out a small gasp, his hands attempting to pull her arm away. Talia held on just as tightly. “I think I’ll take my chances, if you don’t mind. Guard, if you would-”

“I guess it’s only fair I warn you of one more thing, then,” Jason called, almost sweetly. “Nothing gets my blood boiling quicker than a dead Robin. Nothing, except, maybe the woman who killed
him."

Damian could do nothing but gape in admiration as Jason tugged his handler forward, using the leash to swing the man in front of him. In the same movement, he looped the rope around the guard’s throat, and spun him around, so he, too, was facing Talia.

“Do what you wish to him, Jason,” Talia said as Jason walked the man forward, stepping gingerly over both Dick and Tim. “He is as unimportant now as he was in life.”

“It’s not what I’m going to do to him,” Jason said, nonchalantly. “It’s what I’m going to do to you.”

Just as quick as before, Jason unraveled his guard, almost like a yo-yo, and used the momentum to slam the man into Talia’s side. As much as Talia tried to act otherwise, the hit jarred her balance. When she fell, she tried to take Damian down with her, but Jason grabbed the boy’s wrist and pulled him from her grasp. Instead of catching the boy, Jason let their momentum push them towards the study.

“Todd-”

“Don’t mention it.” Jason said instantly. “But we’re not out of the woods yet. Your dad’s in here, right?”

“Yes,” Damian muttered. “She’s trapped all of you and…somehow, she’s ripped all of your souls from your bodies.”

“Damn. Girl’s got a grudge.” He muttered as they crossed the threshold. Everyone looked up at their arrival. “Bruce, there you are! Here, I got a present for you.” Jason shoved Damian into his arms, leap-frogging over the man to take out Ducard. Once again, there was no hesitation between the former partners. Bruce instantly wrapped his arms around Damian, letting Jason shove the palm of his hand into the man’s chin and then perform a roundhouse kick to Ducard’s throat.

“I’ve got you, son,” Bruce breathed, folding himself protectively over Damian. The child couldn’t stop himself from closing his eyes and leaning into the embrace.

“Time for that later, Bruce,” Jason called. “Mama’s pissed, and I don’t think she’s staying down for that long.”

“Let’s go,” Bruce rumbled as he stood, Damian still in his arms.

“Go where?” Damian asked. “She’ll be able to find us anywhere. Not to mention, we can’t leave your bodies behind…”

“There’s nothing to be done about that right now, Damian.” Bruce smiled briefly.

“But there might be!” Damian countered. “You all still have a chance-”

“Who’s the kid?” Jason suddenly asked, taking a step towards the guards who continued holding him.

“Brother. My brother,” Damian twisted in Bruce’s arms. “Little one, we must-”

“Go without me, Damian.” The boy wheezed as the guards dropped him to take on Jason. Their battle was short. Jason knelt next to the boy, reaching out to lift him, but the boy waved him away. “I will protect the other two. Just…just go with Father and the Hood. I will be fine.”
Damian wanted to argue, but knew that the Heretic was the only chance Grayson and Drake had. “We’ll come back for you.” The boy nodded as he slowly picked himself up off the carpet. A purple sword appeared in his hand as his tiny body towered over his captors, a murderous gleam in his eye. Damian reached his arm out, “Todd, come here!”

Jason did as he was told, grabbing Damian’s hand tightly. A second later, the three of them were in the cave. Damian squirmed his way out of Bruce’s embrace as soon as they landed. Alfred’s cries were echoing louder down here, and for a moment Damian was impressed by his cat’s ability to carry his voice. Damian rushed to the medical area, where Alfred the cat was sitting on the cot, shrieking. On the ground in front of him was Alfred the human, unconscious.

“Alfred!” Bruce shouted as he and Jason joined Damian.

“He’s alive,” Damian breathed. “Mother always leaves someone behind to clean up her mess.”

The cat stared at Damian, still practically howling. After a few seconds, the cat leapt from the bed, darting across the cave. Damian followed him with his eyes for a few seconds, before looking back at his father and brother.

“There’s nothing I can do for him,” Bruce whispered angrily. Damian could tell he was gritting his teeth. “Not in this state. We’re…I’m…practically useless.”

“Welcome to my world,” Damian huffed, moving slowly towards the weapons cabinet.

“Well what do we do now, kid?” Jason shouted. “You were right, she’ll be able to find us anywhere. Moving down to the cave is just stalling the inevitable. What’d you even do to her?”

“Chose you over her,” Damian responded, reaching for a batarang. “…Again.”

“So, what, she staged a big ol’ coup?” Jason asked. “Jesus, Bruce. You sure know how to pick ‘em.”

“What can we do?” Bruce asked, instead of acknowledging Jason’s comment. “Damian, what can we do to make sure she doesn’t hurt you again?”

“You can stay out of the way.” Damian said immediately. “Find a way to get your spirits back in your bodies. I will deal with Mother. Todd, thank you for your assistance thus far.”

“Damian…” Bruce whispered. Damian stopped taking stock of the physical weapons to look at his father. Bruce’s eyes were wide and relaxed; happy to see the little boy that was currently in front of him. There it was, that love that Damian had always wanted from him. He knew it was taking all his father had not to rush at him and take him up in his arms. “…Your side. You…you’re bleeding.”

Damian glanced at the orange leash that still hung from his father’s neck. He didn’t need to look over to see the red one Todd was swinging between his fingers. After staring at them for a second he gingerly pressed his fingers to his side, where Talia had stabbed him. It wasn’t as bad as he originally thought, definitely not as bad as it had looked. It wouldn’t be a hindrance, he decided. Instead, he smiled, looking up at his father.

“It’s not much. I’ve gotten worse from Grayson in sparring sessions.” Damian said proudly. “Her goal is to use you all against me. I won’t let her. Not even if I have to die again, I won’t let her hurt you all. Not now, not ever.”

Bruce looked disheartened by this. What kind of man was he to let his son – his dead son, the one he shouldn’t be able to be seeing right now – protect him against the force that snatched him away in the
“I’ll be okay, Father.” Damian smiled. “I’ll be okay, so long as you all are okay.”

Before anyone could speak again, there seemed to be an electric static in the air. The cat howled again from somewhere in the cave. In warning, perhaps, or in announcement. “Damian!” Talia called. “Come, my son. Or have you decided that it’s not worth it? That you’re willing to sacrifice these three souls for your one?”

“Go, Father.” Damian scowled. “Take Todd and hide. I will rescue Grayson and Drake. And my brother, it sounds like.”

“Brother? That little boy?” Bruce questioned quickly. “Damian, who is that?”

Damian smirked drily. Bruce’s eyes suddenly became sad. “My killer, Father. The Heretic. Who else would it be?”

After a beat of silence, Bruce sighed, shaking his head. He’d seen weird before, but this…? “You take lead on this, Damian, and go on ahead. Jason and I will hang back, but we’re not leaving you.”

“Damn straight,” Jason agreed, snapping his leash in his hands.

“Fair enough,” It was a compromise, and Damian would take it as that. He nodded as he turned back in the direction of the computer consoles. He flexed his hands, relishing the feel of the blades growing in his palms. “Mother had the element of surprise before. This time she won’t be so lucky.”

Damian debated transporting himself across the cave, but decided against it. He would use these few minutes during his journey to think, clear his mind of any emotions he might feel that would hold him back. As he moved up the stairs, he saw Talia and a portion of her army were already there. Not everyone, but enough to be an inconvenience. Grayson and Drake were present, too. A blue and yellow tether attached to each one, respectively. They were both conscious, kneeling and livid. The Heretic stood between them, a few more injuries on his face and torso – he seemed to have lost his shirt – but he still had a sword in hand, even though a guard held his opposite arm.

“I swear, Talia, if you-” Dick started.


“But ma’am, the other two he ran with,” an assassin started uncertainly.

“If you find them, bring them to me.” She ordered. “I will deal with them personally.”

“You will not,” Damian’s clone snapped. “Father will defeat you, like he always has, if Damian doesn’t. You and your army may not be outnumbered, but you are outmanned.”

“I’ve destroyed you once, child,” Talia hissed as she neared him. “I will do it again.”

“You will not,” Tim repeated, leaning slightly in front of the Heretic. Damian barely held back his scoff. Always with the dramatic heroics, his brothers. “Your spat is with Damian, not a four year old.”

“You’re in the same position, Mr. Drake.” Talia said coolly, stopping in her tracks to level a glare at him. “And my father isn’t here to vouch for you.”
“I’ll take my chances.” Tim sneered.

“Tim, stop.” Dick hissed. Anger rolled off every syllable. “Talia, this is ridiculous.”

“No more ridiculous than dressing up in spandex and fighting crime dressed as a bat,” she sighed over her shoulder as she turned and moved back to the center of their group.

“How do you know Damian’s going to even answer your call of action?” Dick yelled. “He got Bruce away from you, what else is here that he’d need to come back for?”

“You, Mr. Grayson.” Talia smiled. “He’ll come back for you. He always has, after all.”

Dick opened his mouth to retort, but thought better of it. Instead, he closed his mouth and slumped back a little, guilt suddenly mixing in with his anger. Damian decided that was his cue.

“You trust in my concern for Grayson a little too much, don’t you think, Mother?” he called, stretching his shoulder as he glanced over his blades and walked forward. He hoped it made him seem uncaring and confident. “I’ve been telling him for years his foolishness was going to get him killed one day. This would only be proving me correct.”

Talia’s smile widened. “Are you telling me you didn’t come back for him?”

“I’m telling you that one hostage is a different story than three,” Damian countered as he approached her. He stopped a few feet away from her, and spun the sword in his right hand. In the corner of his eye, he saw Grayson – who had jerked his head up when Damian announced himself – grin at his showmanship. “And three is far too many.”

“Apologies, my son. But this is not a hostage situation that can be negotiated.” Talia shook her head, a long, colorless blade appearing in her own hand.

“Then what can I give you to let them go?”

“You.”

Damian readjusted the grip on his rapiers. “No.”

“Shame, then.” Talia clucked, looking almost remorseful as she flung her blade towards Tim. Dick gave a shout, the Heretic a gasp, and Tim just closed his eyes and flinched. After a second of not being impaled, Tim cautiously opened one eye, staring directly at the tip of the sword that didn’t hit him. It hung there for a second before disappearing. Talia frowned, eyes going back to Damian. “Nice parlor trick.”

“I said I wouldn’t freely give myself back to you,” Damian drawled, ignoring the move he had just made. “But I did not say you couldn’t win me back fair and square.”

“A competition?” Talia thought out loud. Her eyebrow rose at the prospect.

“You win, which is probably likely, then I’ll return with you.” Damian said calmly. In the movement he saw from the side, he could see Dick was already against the idea. “I win, you leave me alone until the end of time.”

“Simple enough.” Talia nodded, manifesting another blade in her hand. “And what of these cretins?”

“They’re let go regardless. This qualm has nothing to do with them.”
“True, but that seems a little too easy.” Talia considered her options.

“We can amend it that if you win you get all of us.” Damian agreed. “But I can guarantee you that Grayson alone will annoy you to high heaven in a matter of minutes.”

Talia paused, thinking it over. “I win, I get you and the chance send these fools off to Purgatory. A public execution.”

“…Does this include Father and Todd?”

Talia hummed. “They can run but they can’t hide.”

Damian glanced over. Grayson and Drake were watching calmly, stoically. Grayson’s lips twitched upwards in a smile as he nodded. Grayson trusted Damian. And that was terrifying.

Because Damian didn’t know if he could trust himself.

“It’s a deal,” It wasn’t Damian who answered. Spinning around, he saw Bruce and Jason standing on the platform. It had been Jason who responded. Instantly, Ducard and another guard were next to them, grabbing their leashes and pushing them to a kneel. The two resisted and grunted, but in the end complied.

Bruce’s eyes met Damian’s and he grinned. “Go get her, Damian.”

Damian gulped as he nodded and looked down. Biting his lip he turned back to his mother and stood a little straighter. “It’s a deal.”

“Wonderful,” Talia was suddenly in front of him, her sword flying down towards his shoulder. Damian easily blocked it. “Then let’s begin.”

It was a lot of fast footwork and fancy swordplay, with a mixture of ghostly abilities. Damian was relieved to see that their powers weren’t as unmatched as he had previously believed; it was just a question of refinement. His was raw and untamed, while clearly his mother had practiced and reignited it in.

None of the spectators, not even the Bat and his allies, made a sound throughout, merely mesmerized by the movement in front of them. At one point, after he’d blocked and returned an attack, he glanced over at Grayson. Even afterwards, he didn’t know why. The man was copying the moves, telegraphing what he thought Damian should do to counter.

After a few minutes, Talia let out a shout of frustration. Clearly Damian was putting up more of a fight than she had imagined. Following a successful cut against her collarbone, Talia paused, taking a few steps back from her target. They were both sweating, both breathing heavily, though they had no need, and both bleeding. For once, she and Damian were evenly matched.

She huffed a bark of laughter as she slumped her shoulders forward. Damian stood at attention, watching her even as she relaxed. Almost randomly, she flung a short knife across the arena towards Jason. A visible shield instantly appeared in front of both he and Bruce and the three on the other side.

“Resorting to cheating, Mother?” Damian sighed. “That’ll result in an automatic forfeit.”

“Not cheating. Just changing tactic.” Talia responded. Like the start of their battle, suddenly she was in front of him. She had no weapon, so Damian moved to lash out with his. Instead, she just shoved him gently backwards, into the waiting arms of Ducard, who had appeared in the arena. Damian
tried to wiggle himself away as he looked over to see the one guard holding the tethers to both his father and Jason. “This was the contingency plan from beginning. I didn’t want to do this, Damian.”

“Do what?” Damian shouted in exasperation.

“If you won’t let me care for you, then no one will,” A colorless dagger appeared in her hand, short and unflashy. “It’s only a shame I will have to do this in front of your allies.”

“Mother, don’t you dare!” The clone lunged forward, barely held back by the assassin. “This wasn’t part of the deal!”

“What is she doing?” Dick asked, leaning against the collar. “Kid, what is she doing?”

“She’s going to send him to Hell.” The Heretic sounded miserable. “Send him to Purgatory. And he can’t come back from that. When you die and become a ghost, you’re a ghost and that’s one thing. But to be destroyed while a spirit? That’s an end all. Then you’re really dead.”

“No, it wasn’t part of the deal.” Talia seemed sad as she reached up to Damian’s cheek. “Some days I regret ever creating you, Damian.”

“Me too, Mother,” Damian responded quietly. He’d stopped fighting now. He was tired. So tired. He’d stuck around to help his family, but he’d failed again, and now they were dead. Just like him. A fitting punishment, he supposed, to be executed in front of the ones you cared so much for, the ones you disappointed. There was a sudden flashback to his death - his first one, he thought with a dry chuckle – lying on the floor, watching the sword being raised into the air. That moment of misplaced hope. No one was coming to save him. There was nothing anyone could do. This was it. “Will you let them go after this? Please. As a last wish.”

She stroked his face one last time, before lowering her hand. “It will be considered.”

That was Talia al Ghul for no.

“Talia, wait,” Bruce shouted. “If you need to destroy someone, destroy me. Let him and the boys go.”

Talia ignored him, tsking. “You only had to come with me, my child. You only had to let me love you.”

Damian slumped against Ducard’s chest, an exhausted smirk splashed on his face. “I’d rather die a million times over than be forced to be with you another minute.”

Talia’s face darkened into a scowl almost immediately. “Anything you want, my love.”

She lifted the blade up and instantly plunged it towards Damian’s throat.
Hey Brother

Chapter Summary

“Oh, if the sky comes falling down, for you? There’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do.”

Chapter Notes

Part 3 of 4
Inspired by 'Hey Brother' by Avicii.

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“Oh, if the sky comes falling down, for you? There’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do.”

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The blade hit its target, but barely, before it was yanked backwards. Damian was ashamed to say he had flinched away from the attack and closed his eyes, but now they flew open. That wasn’t a deathblow; that was hardly even a scratch! So what had-

“Well, if I’d had known the combatants were allowed outside help I would have jumped in a lot sooner!” A voice called, cheerful, dark and angry all in the same tone. The voice’s owner was currently standing straddled over Talia, whom he had thrown to the ground, a short baton held against her throat. Damian didn’t know him as well, was murder in his repertoire? Judging by his body language, it wasn’t necessarily out of the question.

Him, Nightwing. The other Nightwing.

His family all gaped at the sight before them, each intermittently glancing at their own Dick Grayson, who was still collared and in submission.

Dick, in fact, was the first to recover from his surprise, though it could hardly be called a recovery, “…What?”

Nightwing ignored him. Nightwing ignored everybody except for Talia and Damian. His feet planted on either side of Talia’s waist, he turned to face the restrained child. “Dami, what was the last thing I said to you when I left?”

“…Nightwing…” Damian whispered.

“I told you to call me if you ever needed help.” The man snapped, motioning down to Talia with his free hand. “This would be a situation I was talking about. You’re just lucky that dumb cat of yours could be heard from the damn moon.”
As if on cue, Alfred popped through some of the ranks of soldiers, moving to sit near Bruce and Jason. Jason was the next to recover his senses, and he did a much better job than Dick. “Wait, you were on the moon?”

“Not exactly. The Watchtower.” Nightwing answered shortly. Damian saw his mother’s face fading back into an impassive one. Her muscles tensed as she thought of an attack. Nightwing gently tapped his weapon against her neck as he turned back towards her. “Not so fast, lady-”

“This is ridiculous,” Ducard hissed, dropping Damian to the floor and moving forward, orange machete appearing in hand. Nightwing didn’t hesitate as he flipped away from Talia, blocking Ducard’s attacks with his stick. From the ground, Damian noticed it was silvery in color. Nightwing let out a cackle as Ducard missed his target for a third time in a row. Ducard growled, “This is becoming a circus!”

“Born and raised, baby,” Nightwing grinned. “This is my kind of party.”

Apparently, Ducard didn’t underestimate what Damian might do once free. As soon as he crumpled against the ground, Damian felt that invisible weight pressing down on his shoulders. He tried to fight against it, to at least stay up in a sitting position, but his hands were slowly slipping outwards, his elbows shaking and bending under the strain. All of his current injuries and wounds were burning with the tension, and he could feel more invisible weapons slicing at his skin, more blood running down his body. Damian watched Ducard continue to stay toe-to-to with Nightwing in their battle. The man had better practice with his powers than any of them, and it showed.

The Heretic saw Damian struggling and pulled against his captor. The guard’s grip on his arm only tightened. The clone frowned. He couldn’t stab his assassin, Talia had made it quite clear to her ranks that he would be trouble; someone else would merely jump in to keep him down, or worse, just eradicate him from the situation. He couldn’t have that. He couldn’t help Damian if that happened.

He glanced at the two men he was between. Richard Grayson’s attention was divided, both watching the battle of his apparent double and Morgan Ducard, and observing Damian collapse to the floor. Timothy Drake, though, was focused solely on the battle. Or…was it something else?


The shield that was still around them began to waver slightly. The Heretic watched as blood poured from Damian’s nose, his right arm caving in underneath him. It hit him at the same time as Dick. “She is,” the eldest said. “She doesn’t need that knife to attack Damian.”

The nameless child pulled against his captor one more time. “Enough, child.” It growled, now digging nails into his arm. The clone grit his teeth and instantly threw his blade out to the guard next to him, the one holding Tim Drake’s tether. It went through the man’s jugular, destroying him instantly. Tim felt the tug on his lead loosen and looked over at Dick, then the child between them.

“What are you waiting for?” The clone snapped. “Damian needs your help!”

Tim didn’t need anything else. He took off running, ducking under Ducard’s weapon as he thrust it towards Nightwing. A few of the surrounding guards moved to go after him, but Dick threw his leg out, tripping them, and then delivering nerve strikes to their throats.

“Damian!” Tim shouted as he reached him. He threw his hands under Damian’s arms and tried to hoist him upwards, but it didn’t help. Tim crumpled in front of the boy, and cupped his face in his hands, pulling Damian’s head up to make eye contact. “You’ve got to fight this, Damian. We’re not letting you down again. We’ll get you out of this, but we’ll need your help.”
Damian’s eyes fluttered slightly but he nodded, and Tim could see the strain on the boy’s body as he pushed the weight. After a few seconds, Damian reached out, gripping Tim’s arm. “Du…Ducard… it’s…he’s doing it…he needs…distracted.”

Tim shook his head. “Not Ducard. Your mom.” He pulled at Damian’s arms again, but it was no use. He gave a shout of frustration and glanced at Bruce and Jason, still restrained, apparently being protected by the cat, before looking back to Dick and the clone. “Dick, it’s not working!” He shouted. “I can’t…Damian’s stuck, I can’t get him out!”

Ignoring his captor, Dick stood, heaving against his leash. “Talia, please!”

“I got it, Dick.” Nightwing called, suddenly changing the direction of his blocks and counterstrikes, though no one seemed to notice but his double and the child standing next to him. “You watch the kid. The cat’s got the other two.”

Nightwing continued to maneuver the fight. Before, he just went wherever there was room in the center of the arena. Now, everyone watching could tell he was moving in a specific direction. But which-?

Suddenly, Nightwing grinned and jumped towards Ducard. The man flinched, holding up his arm to block his face. Nightwing grabbed his shoulders and flipped himself over. While in the air, he pushed himself off his anchor, vaulting himself through the air to land right in front of Talia. Talia, who had a hard, but distant look in her eyes, didn’t turn to look at the man invading her personal space.

“Don’t think I forgot about you, darling.” He drawled. “Now if I were you, I’d let that kid go…” Without warning, Nightwing took his baton and smashed it across Talia’s face. She went sprawling to the ground on her stomach. “…and I’m so glad you agree.”

Damian suddenly flew back slightly, would have bounced across the floor if his grip on Tim’s arm wasn’t so tight. After a second of surprise, Tim leaned forward to take the boy in his arms, and held him to his chest. Damian was still sweating from his own battle, still exhausted. Pushing the hair off Damian’s face, Tim felt his gut twist. Damian wouldn’t last another hit. From Talia, from anybody. The kid was spent.

Tim glanced up. The other Nightwing was still standing over Talia, looking for all the world like Jason at his worst, clutching his weapon so hard Tim could see the faint lines of veins in his hands and arms. On the other side of that coin, across the arena, Dick Grayson still stood there, staring almost in shock at Tim clutching Damian a few yards away.

Ducard had recovered from Nightwing’s trick and spun around to seek revenge. Out of nowhere, Alfred hissed, running forward and leaping up at the man’s face. He had no chance of hitting him, he was still a spirit, but it surprised the man, and gave the opening everyone needed. Bruce and Jason jumped at each other’s holders, quickly freeing each other. Dick grabbed the Heretic, and in the same move, spun around to kick his captor in the head. The other assassins in the area all manifested weapons in response. Some even were already stepping forward.

“Nobody move,” Bruce called, his voice echoing as Jason and Dick – the Heretic still wrapped in his arms – converged on Ducard. The man looked at his options before holding up his hands, palms out, in surrender. “Move and you will get the same treatment as your companions.”

“Oh, you’ll get worse than that.” Nightwing breathed as Talia sat up. He closed the already small distance between them and readjusted the grip on his truncheon. His arm rose slightly. “I won’t let you hurt him again. I won’t let you hurt anybody again.”
“Night…” Damian murmured, trying to gather his strength and push himself out of Tim’s arms. “Nigh…Wing, don’t…”

Nightwing’s arm only came up as far as his shoulder before a hand wrapped around his wrist. He tensed before glancing over. Bruce stared coldly at him. “I don’t know who you are, or where you’re from, but here? Here we don’t give out that kind of retribution.”

“Not even for your own kid?” Nightwing responded, matching the icy tone. “Good to know your crap personality is consistent throughout the multiverse, Bruce.”

“We can figure something out.” Bruce said, pulling the man back slightly. “Create a prison or a hold for her.”

“We don’t have time!” Nightwing snapped, yanking his arm away. His eyes transformed from stoic to angry. After a moment, he looked away from Bruce, over to the child in Dick’s arms and then across the floor to Damian. Quickly, he moved over to them, kneeling down and leaning close to Damian’s face.

“You said…you were leaving,” Damian muttered. “Going back to…to your…Damian.”

“Haven’t found a way to yet.” Nightwing smiled sadly. “You’re kind of all I got left, Dami.”

Damian smiled back, but closed his eyes. “Give me…give me a minute. I’ll be fine in a minute.”

Tim squeezed his arm. “Damian, I don’t think-”

“What did you mean we don’t have time?” Dick called. Nightwing turned to look at him and almost laughed. It was like looking in a mirror. Himself, holding a smaller version of his little brother. He patted Damian’s cheek before standing and walking towards his double. Dick met him halfway.

“You and your crew still have a chance, Dick.” Nightwing said quietly. “I’ve got a team upstairs monitoring your bodies and their functions. You haven’t cooled down too much yet. Mini-Me, here? He was right. Being a ghost isn’t the end of the line, not always. You and Bruce and these other two? You guys can be put back.”

“That’d be pretty great, yeah,” Dick laughed lightly, glancing down at the child in his arms. “But what’s the catch?”

“Not much of one…” Nightwing glanced over to where Bruce was standing next to Talia, but watching Damian. “But you can’t tell me you wouldn’t feel safer with her completely eliminated.”

Dick hesitated, and his eyes traveled across the floor to his two younger brothers. Damian’s eyes were still closed, and Tim had resorted to gently rocking him back and forth, murmuring who knows what into the youngest’s hair.

“It’s him or her. At this point we can’t have both,” Nightwing continued. “I know who I’d pick. And, call me biased, but I think I know who you would too.”

Dick paused for a moment, turning back to look at Jason, who was making some snide remark to Ducard, his charge. “Say I agree with you…” Dick said slowly, turning back. “I don’t, but say I do. We’ve got a few other things to think about. A few other people…”
Nightwing glanced around at the assassins that surrounded them, each ready to give their lives – again – for the mad woman currently sitting on the floor. “Give me the kid.”

Dick took a step back, turning the Heretic away slightly. “What? Why?”

“Because I’ll need his help. You and your band of misfits won’t do it, so I will. I don’t see why not, though. You’re not breaking the golden rule. You can’t kill what isn’t alive, remember?” Nightwing said, holding out his arms. His face softened slightly. “Kid and I will handle this, you and Bruce get to Damian. He needs you right now. Just as much as you need him.”

“What about Talia? And Ducard?” Dick asked as the child in his arms reached out to Nightwing and was plucked from his embrace.

“The cat’s got ‘em,” Nightwing grunted, placing the clone on the ground. Dick looked over to see Alfred, indeed, herding Ducard over near Talia, both spirits looking angry and tense. “Talia’s not a fan of Damian’s pets. They’re a bit more powerful against her than you think.”

“Why?”

“Hell if I know. Why can our four-legged friends see us dead folk in the first place?” Nightwing countered. “Kitty’s got them in the corner, and I’ll be able to put up a wall around this little makeshift arena here, so Talia and Ducard can’t get out, and none of her army can get in. Grab Bruce and red-collar over there, and get to Damian. He’s weak right now, but he should be able to throw out another shield to block you guys, should Talia press her luck.”

“Makes sense,” Dick muttered, hands reaching up to his own collar and leash, but before he could pull it from his throat, Nightwing grabbed his arms, tugging them away.

“Leave it. You’ll need it later.” He said. Suddenly Nightwing’s face looked pained again, and his grip on Dick’s elbow tightened momentarily. “Just…get to Damian.”

It’s not like Dick needed urging. He glanced down at the child – whom he still had no idea who he even was, or why he looked like Damian – and nodded, before moving over to where Jason and Bruce stood watching Ducard and Talia. He didn’t say anything at first, just pulled them backwards. The two hesitated, and Bruce opened his mouth to argue, but Dick shook his head. He walked backwards a few steps, before turning, “Damian needs us, Bruce.”

Bruce instantly started moving.

“And these two?” Jason called.

“Let Nightwing handle it.” Dick responded, already halfway across the expanse. Tim glanced up then, his eyes conveying clear worry. Jason paused a few more seconds, looking back at Talia and Ducard angrily before following the others.

Dick knew if he had a heartbeat right now, it would practically be pounding out of his chest. He gently knelt down in front of Tim and Damian, putting his hand on Damian’s forearm. Damian opened his eyes, and Dick thought he’d never seen the kid so drained.

“I didn’t ask for Drake to help me,” Damian sniffed indignantly. Bruce quietly sat next to Dick, as Jason stood above them, observing.

“We know,” Dick smiled. Distantly, he heard Nightwing and the child begin their assault on the League of Assassins. There were grunts and shouts, bangs and thumps, and the distinct sound of liquid splashing against the floor. Bruce started to turn around, but, with his free hand, Dick took
hold of the man’s shoulder. “Bruce, don’t. There’s more important things going on right here than back there.”

Bruce bit his lip. He couldn’t just stand by. But, it seemed this man, this other Nightwing, and the Heretic had, at the very least, Damian’s best interests at heart. It was tough, but Bruce kept his eyes trained on his son.

“I’m sorry you all got roped into this.” Damian whispered. He began fidgeting in Tim’s arms slightly, and Tim had to reposition himself. It was clear he was uncomfortable with the attention. “I was hoping to take care of the situation before Mother became desperate.”

“You did fine, Damian. It’s alright.” Bruce muttered, reaching out to brush the wound in Damian’s neck. A small trickle of blood was running from it. “Does it hurt, son?”

Damian shrugged. “She didn’t stab me as hard as she wanted, Nightwing saw to that. I’ve had worse.”

“Who is that guy anyway?” Dick asked, pushing Damian’s hair back like Tim had, and attempting to wipe some of the blood off his face.

“You from another universe.” Damian’s eyes closed again. “It was a different battle, one in Arkham as opposed to against Mother, but you died instead of me. And then he ended up here. Neither of us have found out why yet, nor a way to send him back.”

Damian held out his hand, and Dick took it in both of his as he spoke. “I’m kind of glad you haven’t.”

“He saved your ass,” Jason quipped. Damian could tell by the sound of his voice that he was turned, watching Nightwing and the Heretic fight. “And is currently saving ours.”

Damian smiled slightly, and Dick felt his hand start to shake. His voice was small. “I don’t know what else I can do, Father. Mother is more powerful than me, knows more tricks than I do. Not to mention she has Ducard to help her, and I highly doubt there is any way to discourage his allegiance to her, especially against you. I…” Damian’s eyes scrunched tighter together. “I can’t take another attack from her right now, and I don’t think I can deliver one, either.”

As Damian spoke, Bruce had leaned forward and taken the child into his own embrace. Dick released Damian’s hand, only to take the other one when Bruce had his arms securely around the child. Bruce leaned his chin on Damian’s forehead, kissing the sweaty skin. “And you won’t have to, Damian.”

“We have to do something,” Damian sighed, eyes opening. Dick could barely suppress his own grin as he watched a smile ghost across Damian’s lips multiple times, his wonder-filled eyes twitching to each family member around him. Through everything going on, he was happy to see all of them. Dick knew the feeling was mutual. “And I’d rather not pawn off my battles on Nightwing or my clone.”

“I think I can speak for him when I say he’d gladly take it off you hands, Damian.” Dick countered.

“Did he have a plan?” Tim asked, moving over a little, so now both he and Dick were opposite of Bruce, and slightly leaning in over Damian. Bruce didn’t want to mention how protective the gesture looked. He could do without scoffing and eye-rolling children, thank you. “Dick, you talked to him. Did Nightwing – or the kid for that matter – have any ideas?”

“Just one,” Dick’s face turned dark. Damian’s eyes became concerned and Dick absently ran his
thumb across the boy’s wrist. “Bruce, you’re not going to like it.”

Bruce’s grip on Damian tightened as he sat up. “Then we’ll think of another one.”

“Cut the shit, Bruce,” Jason snapped. “What’d he tell you, Dick? That at this point it’s Talia or Damian?”

“Yeah.”

“Then there’s not a false word in the statement.” Jason moved to Bruce’s other side, crouching at Damian’s feet. He stared at his brother for a minute, expression clouding before turning his stare to Bruce. “She’s already done this, man. Reduced the toughest of all of us combined to puddle of blood and a shell of himself. You really think she’s going to suddenly change her mind and coexist with him?”

“You can’t kill what’s already dead,” Tim whispered. Bruce kept his gaze on Damian.

“And I’ll tell you another thing. Another thing I know from personal experience.” Jason hissed. “That is a woman with one huge chip on her shoulder. She continues the way she is? I give it two weeks before she’s a vengeful spirit. Then, not only would she trouble for Damian, but she’ll be trouble for living people, too.”

There was a pause, and Nightwing’s eerily gleeful battle sounds filled the space. Dick leaned down, kissing Damian’s hand before resting his cheek against the boy’s forehead. Bruce placed his hand over Dick and Damian’s, watching as the elder’s fingers still stroked blankly.

“Jason and I saw the recordings of your machine, Bruce.” Tim said quietly, patting Dick’s back. “That what-if machine? We saw the outcome. The only way to save Damian was to kill the enemy. There was no other way then. There…Bruce, I’m sorry, but there might be no other way now either.”

“You failed him once,” Jason’s voice was still filled with spite and contempt. “I’ll be damned if you think I’m going to sit here – if any of us are going to sit here – and watch you fail him again.”

Bruce squeezed the conjoined hands. Damian’s eyes shifted from watching Dick’s face to his father’s. “I can do it, Father.”


Bruce shook his head, releasing the hands to hold Damian’s face. He glanced up, watching as Nightwing and the Heretic moved in perfect harmony, almost like Dick and Damian themselves, finishing up with the surrounding army. As the masked man landed for a final time, he glanced down at the Heretic, who was standing next to him, a small smile coupled with owlish eyes adorning his face. Nightwing grinned and ruffled the child’s head before looking up towards the group in the corner. He opened his mouth, but no words came out before Talia screamed.

It wasn’t fearful scream, but infuriated. The sound waves hit everyone with force. Bruce doubled over Damian as the other three were pushed backwards. Nightwing was barely able to grab the clone’s arm as he, too, was almost blown away. The ground suddenly shook, a large crack appearing in the stone floor.

“Hey Bruce!” Jason shouted over the rumbling as he wrapped an arm around Tim’s shoulders to keep him in place. Dick was on all fours next to them, trying to keep his balance. “That vengeful spirit shit? I might have miscalculated Talia’s timetable!”
Alfred hissed, backing away from Talia, but not breaking his guard. Even Ducard put a little distance between his body and hers. A red aura surrounded her now as she moved forward.

“Alfred…” Damian muttered, peeking over Bruce’s arm. The cat’s eat twitched and he looked over, fear overtaking his yellow eyes. Damian smiled weakly. “Run.”

The cat hesitated for half a second, then did just that.

“You didn’t even want him,” Talia’s voice boomed as she walked towards them. Slow, deliberate steps. “You didn’t want him, your protégés didn’t like him. You never trusted him, and then you let him die for your mission. So why now?”

Out of nowhere, Damian felt himself being lowered to the ground. He blinked, staring up at his father. Bruce kissed his forehead once more as he shifted to his knees. “I won’t let her hurt you again, son.”

“Father, wait-”

“I promise.” Bruce smiled as he stood and turned to face Talia. She had stopped midway across the floor, and Bruce moved that direction.

When he reached her, her aura softened slightly, barely noticeable. Her voice was quiet as she repeated, “So why now?”

“Because you’re wrong.” Bruce responded, just as softly. His eyes traced her face. “I did want him, I still do. I love him, just as his brothers do.”

“Brothers,” she breathed. Suddenly Bruce grunted, collapsing to his knees. Damian tried to raise himself to his elbows. “You think your ragtag team of orphans is his family? Oh, Beloved. You and your allies are not his family. I am his family.”

“You stopped being his family the day you left him in Gotham.” Bruce spat. The words were barely out of his mouth before Talia punched him.

“Bruce!” Both Dick and Nightwing shouted simultaneously. The two attempted to run forward, only to be thrown to the ground by Ducard, who Damian saw raise an open-palmed hand. A few seconds later, Tim, Jason and the Heretic were forced into the same positions, collapsed on the stone, held there by an invisible weight.

“Quiet kids,” Ducard smiled. “Mommy and Daddy are talking.”

“You stopped being his mother when you claimed him a failure and disowned him,” Bruce continued, undeterred. Talia snarled and hit him again.

Damian rolled slightly, looking back at his brothers. They were all struggling against their bonds. The bonds were visible now, orange glowing chains that were connected to the ground, wrapping around their arms and legs, and connecting to their leashes and collars to slither around their throats. He didn’t need to look over to see Nightwing and his clone had matching chains.

“You stopped being his family when you put that call out for him to be assassinated.” Bruce hissed. The red aura darkened once more as a sword appeared in Talia’s hand. She smacked his face with the hilt.

“You never did know when to shut up,” Talia retorted, lifting Bruce’s chin with the blade.
Dick pulled against the chains. “Ah, ah, ah,” Ducard hummed. Dick’s face suddenly slammed into the stone. Damian let out a small gasp. When Dick looked back up, there was already a bruise forming on his face, no doubt a sign of a broken cheekbone if he still had a skeleton to worry about, and blood pouring from a gash underneath his face.

“Say another word, Beloved. I dare you,” Talia’s voice was cold and dark.

Bruce shrugged. “You lose, Talia.”

Instantly, the sword sliced through Bruce’s bicep, and he let out a shout of pain. Talia twisted the blade and he let out another one. The Heretic began shouting curses and pulling at his chains with all his might. Nightwing couldn’t calm him, couldn’t get him to ease back, and the chains cut fresh wounds into the child’s wrists and legs.

“One bird down,” Ducard sang as he walked towards Dick, Tim and Jason. He passed Dick, moving past him towards the others. Jason’s chains tightened, pulling him away from Tim. “Two to go.”

Damian clenched his fists and grit his teeth and pushed against the ground.

No more.

He felt the adrenaline, the power, surging through his veins as his body moved on instinct. Finally, finally, Damian was able to leap up and, when he did, he ran at Ducard as fast as he could. Upon reaching the man, he grabbed his arm, swinging himself around until his feet were planted on the man’s stomach. A green blade was suddenly in his hand.

“No more,” Damian hissed, keeping eye contact with Ducard as he plunged the dagger into Ducard’s chest and pulled it upwards through his throat. Ducard fell backwards, but Damian continued to stand on him as he ripped his knife back, Ducard’s blood flying up with it. Ducard’s lips moved, but nothing came out but gargling noises as his fingers twitched. Out of the corner of his eyes, Damian saw the chains restricting his brothers and allies start to fade, just as the man below him did. Damian leaned down towards Ducard’s face just before the last of him was gone. “No. More.”

“Damian, we’re okay…” Dick said slowly, trying to inch his way over to the boy. Damian stood back up, looking over at him blankly. “Damian, you don’t have to do anything else…”

“Yes I do,” Damian responded monotonously. “I’m not done yet.”

Bruce let out another grunt of agony as the rapier was plucked from his arm. Talia pulled her arm up, preparing another blow, when Damian instantly flickered into view between them.

“No more, Mother,” He said, his voice tight, barely holding back his fury. “I’m sorry.”

He didn’t draw it out. Didn’t make a speech, and didn’t wait for her to make one either. Damian leaned up on his toes and drove the knife into Talia’s chest, right where her heart would be.

Talia rocked backwards, the red aura disappearing as her gaze moved from Damian’s face to the knife he let go of, still sitting in her skin. She stared at it a moment before looking back up. Her lips were parted slightly and her face was blank. Then she whispered, “I love you, Damian.”

“I know you do, Mother.” Damian replied, his voice even, still tight, but gentle. “Goodbye.”

Talia closed her eyes as she began to fall backwards. She disappeared before she hit the ground.

Silence stretched through the cave, the only noises being bats skittering above and Nightwing’s
murmurs of comfort to the Heretic. Damian continued staring ahead into the empty space where Talia just stood, and he could tell the others were too. He took a few steps forward, a lame attempt to separate himself from Bruce, because surely his father wouldn’t be okay with what he just did. Wouldn’t excuse Damian destroying another soul just to protect him. He could survive with that, survive with his father hating him so long as the man was safe. And right now, Damian couldn’t think of anything else in the afterlife that might be a threat to the older man. Now if only he could find his grandparents, then Bruce would be perfectly happy…

Damian blinked and his vision suddenly doubled. Someone was calling his name, but they sounded miles away. Drake? No, it was his father…or…or his clone…?

His left knee buckled. He tried to compensate, tried to catch himself, but then his right knee followed suit. He watched the ground become suddenly closer, his hands smack against the stone, and then everything went black.
Chapter Summary

Because right now all that matter was the little boy in his arms. The little boy who was dead, but still bleeding. The little boy whose eyes were still closed and was still unresponsive.

Chapter Notes

Part 4 of 4

Supplemental listening: 'Rivers & Roads' by The Head and The Heart

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"Rivers and roads, rivers and roads. Rivers 'til I reach you."

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Dick was running as soon as he saw Damian stumble. He didn’t get there before Damian fell, but the child wasn’t on the ground long before Dick scooped him up in his arms.

“I’ve got you, buddy,” Dick breathed, arms tight around Damian’s torso, like it was the last link to humanity he had. He pressed his nose to Damian’s hair, felt tears welling in his eyes. This couldn’t be it. Damian couldn’t have sacrificed himself for them, again. That wasn’t allowed. That wasn’t supposed to happen! “I’m here, Damian, I’ve got you. You’ll be okay.”

He heard Bruce call to the others, asking Tim and Jason if they were okay. He heard their reply, but he didn’t know what it was. Nightwing was speaking to that other child, that other child who was… crying? Upset for some reason; Dick could find out why later. Because right now all that matter was the little boy in his arms. The little boy who was dead, but still bleeding. The little boy whose eyes were still closed and was still unresponsive.

One more miracle, that’s all he needed. Damian couldn’t take the same path as Talia. Dick couldn’t watch his precious little brother be destroyed all over again. He’d break, then. Permanently. Unfixable.

Just one more miracle.

He heard footsteps approaching, and he didn’t care who it was at this point. Dick wasn’t letting Damian go again, not even for Bruce. Not until the kid opened his eyes, looked at him and maybe even came up with some sarcastic insult. Anything.

“We’ve got to go, Dick,” It was Nightwing, standing behind him. Dick shook his head, closing his eyes, tucking Damian closer to his chest, if that were possible. “We don’t have much time left.”
“I have to know he’s okay,” Dick whispered.

He heard the squelch of leather bending in front of him, and suddenly there was a hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes to stare into a mask, his own mask but on another person. Nightwing’s face was serious, but gentle, and – God, was that what he looked like when he comforted victims? Stupid. “You know as well as I do that he won’t be ‘okay’ until you are. Until Bruce and you and those other guys are safe. He’d be a lot better off if we could return you to the living world, but at this point he’ll settle for safe.”

“You said we could be returned to our bodies.” Dick mumbled. “Can he? What about that other kid?”

“Potentially. It’s…a little complicated.” Nightwing said. “But right now, their bodies aren’t readily available, nor are their bodies close to having full organ shutdown. Yours, however, are.”

“. . . I didn’t get to say goodbye to him last time.” Dick argued. “I need to this time.”

“We’ll get you last, then. You and Bruce will go last, in case he wakes up.” Nightwing agreed. “Because you get that, right? I know this whole thing right now is weird and crazy, but Damian’s not gone. He didn’t disappear like Talia and Ducard. He’ll…well, I don’t want to guarantee anything, but there’s a good chance he’ll get through this. You can keep holding him while we work upstairs. I won’t take him from you, and no one else will, but, Dick, we need to go. Now.”

Dick paused, but then nodded, shifting his arm to wrap around Damian’s legs, and stood. He turned back to his family to see the small child holding Bruce’s hand, but getting the tears wiped from his eyes by Jason. Nightwing leaned close to Dick’s ears. “Who are they, anyway? Not Bruce, obviously, or the kid but . . .”

“Tim. Jason.” Dick said quietly, smiling slightly as the child leaned into Tim’s side. “Our brothers. Or, well, Damian and me. The middle children, I guess.”

“Huh.” Nightwing sounded sad for a moment. “We didn’t have them back home. They didn’t exist.” The vigilante shook his head and called to the Heretic. “Pack ‘em up, kiddo! You get Bruce and Dick, here. I’ll grab the other two.”

The child nodded and smiled up at Bruce, leading him over. As they approached, Bruce stared down at Damian’s tranquil face. The Heretic leaned up, stretching his neck to look, still smiling. “Brother is very brave, isn’t he, Father?”

“The bravest,” Bruce whispered. The Heretic took hold of Dick’s elbow, and suddenly, the four of them were back in the manor hallway. Titus was conscious now, most likely concussed, if Bruce had to guess by the dog’s wobbly stance in the study doorway. Though he knew what had happened to them, Bruce’s stomach still lurched at the sight of his sons’ bodies littered across the floor. Never safe enough.

There was someone walking amongst the bodies. A spirit, Bruce deduced, as the person crouched next to Jason’s body and tried to feel his arm. The man’s hand went right through the limb.

“Is that…” Dick muttered. Bruce looked over to see Dick repositioning Damian in his arms. “Cyril? Is that you, man?”

The armor clanked as Knight looked up, a big grin appearing on his face. “Well look at you two. Can’t help getting all bloodied up, even in the afterlife, eh?” Even from behind the grate covering his eyes, it was clear Knight’s gaze shifted to Damian, the grin faltering. “Oh, poor lad. Went a couple
rounds with that kook of a mother, eh? Nightwing’s going to beat himself up for that one, for sure.”

As they spoke, Titus had looked over. Clearly, the dog wanted to come greet them, come check on Damian, but had been told to keep post at the door. And Titus was nothing but loyal. He whined slightly, and then barked loudly.

“Shush, you old mutt,” Cyril called, though there was no malice in it. As Titus quieted down, though, everyone’s eyes went to Dick’s arms, where Damian quietly groaned, pressing his face against Dick’s chest.

“You’re okay, Damian. I’ve got you.” Dick resumed his cooing. He barely noticed Tim, Jason and Nightwing appearing nearby as he pressed his face close to the child’s. “I’m here, buddy. And so is Bruce. We’re all here, we’re all okay.”

Titus kept barking. This time no one stopped him, not as Damian became more responsive with each echo. His eyes blinked open. Still bleary and unfocused, he glanced up at Dick, then over to Bruce. Bruce reached out to grab Damian’s hand when a sharp voice sounded from the study door.

“Honestly, Thomas. I still can’t believe you and Mr. Grayson forced me to stay up here.” The woman snapped. Bruce froze mid-motion. “What I wouldn’t give to have been able to show the mother of my grandbabies a piece of my mind.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that would have helped matters, dear.” Thomas replied with a chuckle. He and Martha appeared in the door behind Titus. Martha opened her mouth to retort, but noticed the group down the hall. She slowly closed her lips as Thomas took her hand.

“Mom…?” Bruce’s voice was already quivering. “…Dad?”

“Hello, son.” Thomas said with a smile. Martha put a hand to her mouth, barely covering her own happiness.

“What are you waiting for, Father?” Damian smacked Bruce’s arm. Bruce looked down at him, face still contorted in shock.

“Damian, you—”

“Will be fine,” Damian replied, voice still scratchy and soft. “And you likely have quite a bit of time to kill before Grayson will put me down. So…go on.”

Bruce smiled and kissed Damian’s forehead before turning to his parents. He didn’t run or hurry. A steady pace. Martha and Thomas didn’t move to meet him halfway, but just shifted out of the doorway. Titus finally gave up in sitting still, and took off down the hall towards Damian, hopping over the bodies on the floor and passing through Bruce’s legs. That didn’t faze Bruce in the least.

All these years, all he could do was think about them, what he would say to them, what they would be like. Now that he was in front of them again, all those thoughts, all those words faded away. Instead, Bruce’s smile grew wider – the widest he’d smiled since that fateful night – and began laughing as he threw his arms around his parents.

He kept laughing, kissing his mother and father’s cheeks as he did. He held them for what seemed like an eternity, but knew it couldn’t have been longer than a minute and a half. When he released them, he exhaled, the smile still plastered to his face. “I’ve missed you guys so much.”

“And us, you.” Martha said, she brought her hands up to Bruce’s face, running her thumbs across his cheekbones.
“We’re so proud of you, Bruce. Of the man you’ve become,” Thomas said. “Grant it, your… *methods* of protecting Gotham City are a little unorthodox, but nonetheless. We couldn’t be prouder.”

“And your *children*…” Martha breathed. Bruce took her hands from his face and clung to them as he turned around. Damian was still clasped in Dick’s arms, but now they were surrounded by Tim and Jason, with the latter in the process of hoisting the Heretic onto his hip. Titus sat in the center of everyone, while Nightwing had left the group, and was quietly conversing with Knight. “Oh Bruce, your children are *beautiful*."

“And we’re so grateful you had them to take care of you.” Thomas chimed in. “They all love you so much.”

“Even Jason, as much as he tries to act otherwise.” Martha quipped. “And Damian is such a lovely little boy.”

“Mhm,” Bruce muttered. He turned away from the boys, looking back at his parents. “What happens now?”

“Now, my boy,” Thomas said, putting his hand on Bruce’s shoulder. “You and your boys are going to be sent back to the world of the living.”

“How?”

“It’s weird. Knight knows how to do it. I believe he taught Nightwing, too.” Thomas explained. “It has to do with the collars. Despite what it seemed, those weren’t a product of Ms. al Ghul or her army. Those were a part of your spirit.”

“It looks like a leash, but really it’s to connect your soul to your body.” Martha added. “If you pass before you’re supposed to, the collar and tether stay intact, as a way to reattach you, should the worst happen. A failsafe, in a way. Not always completely reliable, but…from what we’ve seen it works most of the time.”

“Sound reasonable enough,” Bruce mumbled. He glanced back at the boys. “What about Damian? Can he be brought back too?”

“Like I told Dick,” Suddenly Nightwing was next to them. “It’s complicated. We can’t do it right now, but I wouldn’t say it’s completely out of the question. For Damian or the other kid.”

Bruce nodded. “So what do you need us to do?”

“Just wait until it’s your turn. I promised Dick he could go last, but if you want it to be you, I’m sure we can negotiate with him.” Nightwing said. “I just asked them, Dick and Jason requested Tim goes first. In case, I don’t know, something interrupts us in the process or there’s some issue that we can’t think of right now. They want him to go first just to be sure one of you get out of this alive.”

Bruce looked back at the boys. He could see Tim’s arms crossed, face set in a slight pout. But he wasn’t arguing, at least not about that. He could see Damian’s head turned in Tim’s direction, his mouth moving. Tim replied and Damian smirked. “Good choice.”

“What do you need us to do, Richard?” Martha asked.

“Take Bruce over to the boys. There’s nothing about the process that would affect him I don’t think, but there’s no point in you all being over here.” Nightwing said. He stared at Knight and waved him over. Knight nodded, and turned to Tim. As Bruce and his parents moved back down the hallways,
Bruce watched Tim say one last thing to Damian and give the boy a one-armed hug. Knight then led Tim towards his body, passing the Waynes.

Tim grinned as they crossed. “See you on the other side, Bruce.”

Bruce returned the smile, but didn’t say anything. Once he reached Dick, Damian and Jason, he immediately turned around, watching as Nightwing explained something to Tim. Bruce felt his mother’s hand slip into his. “Don’t worry, Bruce. Timothy will be fine.”

“I know. I just want to be sure.” Bruce responded distractedly. He watched as the yellow rope tied to Tim’s throat brightened in color, the end of it starting to float slightly, bobbing this way and that, as if in search. After a few seconds the lead stretched out, plunging into the chest of Tim’s body. His body gave a slight jerk, as if shocked. Tim looked up at Nightwing, trepidation clear in his eyes. Nightwing just smiled and nodded. Tim’s hesitance turned into incredulity. While Bruce couldn’t hear him, he could read his son’s lips.

“This is so weird.”

Nightwing barked a laugh and pointed downwards. Tim took an unnecessary deep breath and moved to stand over his body. Slowly, he sat down, his spirit legs disappearing into his real ones, then his hips the same. As he shifted to lie down, he glanced back up Damian, gaze moving momentarily to the Heretic before he smiled at them. Then he disappeared into his solid body.

For a moment, nobody moved.

Tim’s eyes suddenly shot open as he rolled onto his side and began to cough. Titus trotted over to him, licking at the blood dried to his face. As Tim calmed down, he took hold of the dog’s neck, petting him gently.

“I’m okay, pup,” he wheezed, looking around the hallway. Save for Dick and Jason’s bodies, the whole place was empty. He called down the hall anyway. “I’m okay, I’m good. A little cold, but I’m good!”

Nightwing’s grin had never faltered, but now it grew as he turned towards the group, “Nnnnnnext?”

Jason clicked his tongue, “Guess that’s me.” He turned to Damian, who had been watching Tim’s ordeal with half-lidded eyes, and rubbed his hair. “Stay tough, kiddo. And remember what we talked about. I’ll see you soon, mkay?”

“You’re so confident you’ll find a way to bring me back to life.” Damian rolled his eyes. “But fine, I’ll hold you to it.”

“You better,” Jason grinned, setting the Heretic on the ground. “And lord knows if you don’t, Dickiebird here will.”

“Goodbye, Hood.” The ghost child said with a shy smile. “Please take care of Father when you can.”

“Will do, soldier.” Jason drawled, also ruffling the Heretic’s hair. “But only if you promise to take care of Demon Spawn here, okay? As you can tell, he likes to get himself into all sorts of trouble without any back-up.”

“Shut up, Todd.” Damian sighed.

The Heretic threw his hand up to his hairline, giving a very poor – and in Jason’s opinion, seriously
adorable – impression of a British salute. “Yes, sir!”

Jason didn’t say anything else, just nodded, flashed a grin, and moved over to where Knight was waiting for him. Not even a minute later, Jason gasped awake in his own body, sitting up with a complaint ready on his lips. “Jesus fuck, that was uncomfortable. Was it that weird for you, Timbo?”

“Quit your whining, Jason.” Tim snapped, slowly standing as Titus trotted over to do his check-up for Jason. “Now come on, you said Alfie was in the cave?”

Jason stretched his shoulders as he stood, following Tim down the stretch of hallway. Titus stayed where he was, merely turning his head to look back at those remaining. Dick and Bruce looked at each other.

“Bruce…” Dick started.

“We can take the awkward out of it,” Nightwing called, popping his head out of the study, where he’d disappeared to during Jason’s operation. No doubt he was checking on Bruce’s body. “Send you both at the same time. Just do your farewells together.”

“No, it’s…it’s okay.” Dick said quietly. Slowly, he moved to place Damian on the ground. He stayed crouched, looking up into Damian’s eyes with a sad smile. “I’ll go first.”

 “…Thank you, Dick.” Bruce whispered, turning back to his parents, guiding the Heretic to move with him. “Really.”

That was as much privacy as they were going to get. Dick sniffed, eyes moving down Damian’s neck and chest, taking in the injuries and torn clothing. He was trying to hide his mounting tears, but Damian saw them anyway. When Dick made eye contact again, there were already trails down his cheeks. He put a hand on Damian’s shoulder. “I’m so happy to have seen you again, Damian.”

“Despite the circumstances,” Damian’s voice was a little shaky. “I am glad to have seen you as well.”

Dick’s hand moved to cup his neck. “You…you be good, okay? You be safe. You keep yourself safe until Jay and I figure something out.”

“To bring me back?”

“I will never stop trying.” Dick’s voice was suddenly hard, serious. “For the rest of my natural life I will never stop trying. You deserve a better life than what you got. And I swear I will try my damndest to give it to you.”

“You already did,” Damian countered. “How many times do I have to tell you? We were the best. No one can take that away from us, Grayson.”

Dick surged up, wrapping his arms tightly around Damian’s shoulders. He kissed Damian’s ear, then buried his face in his neck. “I love you, kid. Don’t ever forget it.”

“It’d be impossible to.” Damian returned the gesture, wrapping his arms as far around his brother as he could. Neither of them knew how long it was until Nightwing came up behind them.

“Dick,” Nightwing murmured. The masked man seemed uncomfortable with breaking up the moment.

“I know,” Dick sniffed again, releasing Damian. He gave the boy one last smile, one last hand
through his hair, then stood, following behind Nightwing. “See you around, Damian.”

Damian just nodded, watching one Richard Grayson lead the other. When they reached Dick’s body, Dick and his double stood on either side, staring at each other. “You okay?” Nightwing asked.

“I will be, yeah. This…it’s weird to say, but this isn’t as bad as last time I lost him, if you catch my drift.” Dick wiped his nose, peering over. Bruce had come to stand next to Damian now, arm around his shoulder, and Damian had unconsciously leaned into Bruce’s side. The other child was off to the side with the elder Waynes, currently holding Thomas’s hand. “Take care of Damian for me?”

“You don’t even have to ask.” Nightwing smiled. “And…and if my kid brother ever shows up at your door…?”

“In a heartbeat.” Dick returned the smile. The two shook hands and suddenly Dick’s lead tugged downward. A few moments later, Dick was in the process of his return when, like Tim, he paused to give Damian one last look.

Even from a few feet away, he could see Damian’s lips shake slightly as he held onto Bruce’s hand against his shoulder. “Goodbye, Grayson.”

Dick closed his eyes and fell back. Air exploded into his lungs and he clutched at his chest as he almost instantly sprung up, breathing heavy. After a second, he pushed his hair off his forehead and opened his eyes. The hallway was empty. Dick smiled, running the hand down his face as he bent his knees, throwing his other arm across them. Titus was instantly in his face, licking at his chin. “I’ll wait for you out here, Bruce.”

Damian felt his father nod, and almost laughed. Grayson couldn’t see them anymore. The gesture was pointless.

“I hate to rush you, Bruce,” Nightwing sighed as Dick scooted to the wall, his knees still bent, head against the wooden panels behind him. “But the family reunion is going to have to be cut a little short. I can give you the time it’ll take you to get to your body maybe one more minute.”

“I understand.” Bruce nodded as he and his family regrouped. The Heretic relinquished his grip on Thomas’s hand, only to take Bruce’s instead. Bruce was slightly hesitant, but gave the small fingers a squeeze anyway. His arm was still around Damian’s shoulders as he looked up at his parents, a small but content smile lighting up his face. “Come on, boys.”

The walk was slow, and no one said much, each just enjoying the company of the family around them. Knight and Nightwing stayed in the hall as the Wayne family moved back into the study. Damian only glanced back once. Dick was still sitting there, Titus close at his side. Knight was stretching his arms, saying things quietly, most likely no one. Nightwing remained in the center of the hall, watching Damian with a hand on his hip.

“Sixty seconds, Dami.”

Damian nodded and focused back on his family. Martha had her arms wrapped around Bruce’s neck, and was speaking rapidly. “…so proud, Bruce. And I’m so sorry your father and I weren’t here to watch you grow up, weren’t here to help you care for all your children and spoil them rotten. But don’t think for a moment that we were ever not proud of you. We weren’t here, not really, but we saw all of the wonderful things you’ve done, all your hard work…”

“You’ve done amazing things, son.” Thomas cut in. “and we love you so much.”

Martha finally released her son, giving him one last kiss on the forehead. Thomas just continued to
smile as he held Martha at his side. Bruce instantly turned to Damian and knelt in front of him, just like Dick had.

“I’m sorry she hurt you. I…I’m sorry I had to destroy her.” Damian muttered, poking at the injury on Bruce’s arm. “I don’t think it’ll affect your soul too much once you return to your body.”

“No, I suppose it won’t.” Bruce agreed. He reached up and pulled on Damian’s hand, holding it to his chest, his voice becoming lighter. “You saved us, Damian. We had no way out of this one without you.”

Damian shrugged and looked away. Bruce smiled at the sudden shyness. “I…miss you, Father.”

“Oh, Damian.” Bruce cocked his head to the side, holding Damian’s hand tighter. “I miss you, too. Just as your brothers and your pets do.”

“My pets do not miss me. They see me every time I return to the manor, just as Drake’s cat does when I visit his apartment.” Damian scoffed. His eyes, which had been staring at the wall off to his side returned to Bruce’s face. “Are you going to stop them?”

“Stop who?”

“Grayson and Todd, on their endeavor to resurrect me.” Damian clarified. “And I suppose Drake will feel the need to join them on this undertaking as well.”

“They…are adults, and are very capable of making their own decisions without my guidance or opinion.” Bruce smirked.

“So…no?” Bruce’s heart swelled at the hopeful glow on Damian’s face. There was a cough from the doorway, and Nightwing and Knight stood there. They didn’t say anything; their presence was signal enough. Damian lunged forward, hugging Bruce as he tucked himself under the man’s chin. Bruce just continued to smile, repeating the gesture. A few seconds passed, and another less-than-subtle cough sounded off. Damian sighed, pushing himself away from Bruce. “Alright, Nightwing! We get it!”

Bruce laughed as Nightwing grinned and Damian glared. As he stood, he ran his hand along Damian’s face one last time. “I’ll see you soon. Maybe, anyway. If Dick and Jason get what they want.”

“They rarely do.” Damian rebutted.

“Optimism, son.” Bruce winked. “Maybe we’ll get lucky this time.”

“Let’s start with getting Mother’s and my bodies back from Grandfather, shall we?” Damian crossed his arms. “What do you always say? ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.’”

“Already on it.” Bruce said, walking towards his body, where the Heretic stood guard. The orange tether around his neck started bobbing as he neared his form. It strung itself out as Bruce sat down, legs disappearing into his own. “I’ll fly out tomorrow.”

The Heretic flung himself into Bruce’s arms. “Bye, Father!”

“Bye…son.” Bruce whispered, holding the back of the boy’s head. When the Heretic let go, he smacked a large kiss on Bruce’s cheek before dashing off to stand with Damian. The child giggled gleefully as he tugged on Damian’s shirt, half attempting to hide himself behind it. Damian winced slightly as the pull of his shirt brushed some of his injuries. “You all take care of each other,” Bruce
said, looking between his sons and his parents. The gaze turned to a glare as it moved to Nightwing and Knight. “All of you.”

“Always a worrier, eh, Bruce?” Cyril laughed. “Don’t you fret too much, mate. With Talia gone, I think we’re all going to need a good long break anyway. Starting with your two boys, here.”

“I’ll still be here, Father,” Damian said, ignoring Cyril’s comments. “Just so you know. If the house feels too empty or too dark or something one day. I’ll be nearby, listening. I promise.”

“Goodbye, Bruce.” Thomas called. “Now go on. Don’t make Richard sit out there by himself any longer than he has to.”

There was so much he wanted to say. To his mother, to his father, to his old friend and to his son. Well, both sons. But time was up. He knew that, and so did they. Instead, he just nodded, the smile still on his face, then moved to lie down.

His reaction wasn’t as extreme as the others. He merely closed his eyes when he lay down, and then opened them upon feeling the fresh air fill his chest. His face was pressed against the cool floor of the study still. He blinked a few times before shifting up to his hands and knees.

The room was empty, but he could still feel everyone’s presence. He could probably reach out and be touching Damian’s face, if he really wanted to. But he didn’t. Instead, he sat there a moment, looking out the window at colors filling the sky in the setting sun. This whole ordeal, Bruce realized, couldn’t have taken longer than thirty minutes. After a minute of gaining his composure, he got up and went back to the hall.

Dick was still sitting there, still against the wall, Titus still at his side. As Bruce moved towards him, he pushed his head off the wall to stare at him. There were still tears cascading down his face, and they didn’t match the smile forming underneath them.

“It’s real stupid.” Dick chuckled as Bruce sat next to him. “You shouldn’t be crying when you’re happy.”

“But at least you’re happy.” Bruce murmured, putting his arm across Dick’s shoulder and pulling him against his side. “And that’s all he wants for you.”

“You too, Bruce.” Dick retorted. Titus shifted on Dick’s other side, sitting up and staring into the study, tongue flopping out of his mouth in a grin as his tail began to beat against Bruce’s side incessantly. “So…what now, Bruce?”

“Now? Now we go after Ra’s.” Bruce’s grip on his shoulder tightened. “No one takes our boy from us.”

“No one.” Dick echoed. His grin turned vicious. “I’ll go get my schematics on some things we could do. And if I’m not mistaken, Jay and Tim have an idea or two they’ve been working on, too.”

“A family affair?” Bruce asked as Dick stood.

“A family affair. You mess with one of us, you’re going to have to deal with all of us.” Dick practically cackled. Titus barked and took off down the hall, still very unsteady, clearly in chase of something as Dick held his hand down to Bruce. “Have we ever done it any other way?”
Chapter Summary

Dick won’t let Bruce go another mission alone. Especially not one this important.

Chapter Notes

Based on Batman & Aquaman 29

“Pssst. Here, Titus.” Dick whispered at the dog sitting by the stairs. “Come here, boy.”

It was the next day. The day after the weirdest battle of their lives. The day after their souls had been held hostage. The day after they’d been gifted with seeing Damian again. After a night of recovery and strange family bonding, Tim and Jason had already left – Tim claiming a need to feed his cat, and Jason claiming a need to help him do so – and thus left Dick with Bruce and Alfred.

Poor Alfred. When they had all come to, and everything had calmed down, they told the old butler what had happened. How Talia still had her vendetta, how Damian nearly killed himself all over again trying to protect them. The old man seemed almost disappointed that he was not put through the same trials.

“I would have…very much liked to have seen the young master again myself,” He’d said quietly, standing and moving out of the room under the guise of making tea. They all knew it was a lie.

After Tim and Jason departed, Bruce instantly went down to the cave. Dick followed, listening as Bruce explained his promise to Damian, how he was going to go after Ra’s as soon as he could. Dick thought better than to ask to tag along. He knew what Bruce’s answer would be on the subject.

But that didn’t mean Bruce was going to go alone.

“Come here, Titus,” Dick continued, clapping his hands and crouching as Titus looked over at him.

“What is he doing?” The Heretic asked, leaning against Damian’s arm. The two were stuffed into the chair at the computer monitors, under a 72-hour lockdown set in place by Knight to recover from their battles, watching as Titus slowly, suspiciously, stood and started walking towards Dick.

“Being ridiculous,” Damian scoffed. “I don’t know.”

“That’s a good boy,” Dick continued to coo as Titus inched forward. The dog froze at a muted thump that echoed through the caverns. “It’s okay, buddy. Bruce just dropped something.”

“Dick, have you finished loading the cargo I asked you to?” Bruce grunted from the other side of the ship.

“Just about!” Dick called as he reached forward and tugged Titus’s collar. He swept the dog into a hug, lovingly petting at his head. “That’s a good boy, Titus. You’re the best. Now, can you do me a
favor?"

Titus glanced over at Damian, before focusing on Dick’s face, lapping at his nose.

“Bruce is going to go find our boy Damian. Yes, yes, I said Damian.” Dick smiled as Titus reacted happily to the name. “But he won’t let any of us go with him. So, can I count on you to help him out? Make sure that old fart comes home safe – preferably with Damian’s body, at the very least, in tow with him?”

Titus continued to lick at Dick’s face, tail excitedly wagging.

Dick pursed his lips, his voice lowering a few octaves as he kissed at Titus’s face. “That’s a good boy.” He repeated. “You’re a good boy. Yes you are. Yes you-”

“Dick, I want to leave in the next five minutes…” Bruce’s voice sounded as his footsteps began to come around the nose of the ship. Dick suddenly stood, throwing open the small door behind him and throwing Titus inside. As Titus stumbled, Dick slammed the cargo door closed, and turned the lock. Titus gave a small whine, and Dick shushed him immediately. Bruce then came into view. “…So I need you to hurry up.”

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me,” Damian deadpanned. The Heretic giggled against his arm.

“Just finished, Bruce.” Dick grinned, patting the door a few times before moving towards the older man. “You sure I can’t come with you?”

“This is something I need to do alone, Dick. You know that.” Bruce sighed, pulling the cowl up over his eyes. “And, god forbid, Ra’s has done anything to him, I may need you ready here at home.”

“Ready and waiting,” Dick said with a salute. “To welcome my little brother home with open arms.”

“Hrm,” Bruce had already covered his eyes, but Dick knew he was rolling them.

“Just...be safe, okay?” Dick said, the grin on his lips softening. “You know we all hate when you go on these types of missions by yourself.” Bruce nodded as he turned, moving towards the cockpit. Dick went back to the cargo door, and gave it one last tap as he whispered, “He’s all yours now, buddy.”

There was a light scratching, and Dick drummed his fingers against the steel before backing away from the vehicle. Damian sighed angrily, crossing his arms as he snapped, “I swear to any deity there is, Grayson. If anything hurts my dog, I will haunt you for the rest of your days.”

As the engines fired up, Dick stood next to Alfred, who, while Bruce demanded he rest after his ordeal, decided to still supervise the packing for Bruce’s latest trip. Hands clasped behind his back, he cleared his throat. “Master Richard.”

“Hm?” Dick glanced at him. “What, Alfie?”

Alfred returned the glance, his far more reproachful. The vehicle’s platform lowered into the water beneath it. There was one last boom of the thrusters, and then Bruce was gone. “Don’t think I didn’t see what you just did.”

Alfred then turned away, strutting over to the computer. Damian and the Heretic braced themselves to jump, should Alfred decide to sit down. “Hey,” Dick called as he walked behind him. “Bruce needs the backup. And, like he said. What if Ra’s does something to Damian? Lazarus Pits aren’t the safest method, but if Damian comes back that way, he’s going to need something to comfort him
upon his reemerging. And, you and I both know Bruce is no teddy bear. Besides, B could be busy when it happens. We don’t know. Titus was just a—”

“I didn’t say I was cross about it, Master Richard. Just that I saw you do it.” Alfred countered, standing at the monitors and pressing a few buttons. The spirit boys in the chair relaxed again. Dick watched as a communication line to Bruce’s submarine was opened. The butler immediately hit mute. “But, I will say, Bruce most likely will be a bit annoyed by it, and you won’t be the one who has to deal with his attitude.”

Dick grinned, throwing his arm around the butler’s shoulders. “You’re an angel, Alfie.”

Alfred looked at the ceiling as he shook his head. “Tell me something I don’t know, sir.”
“Knight *did* tell you that you were free to go, right?” Nightwing hummed as he sauntered into the library. The Heretic looked up sleepily from the sofa, where he was curled around Alfred the cat. Damian barely spared the vigilante a glance. “Your lockdown was over two weeks ago.”

“Of course he did.” Damian sounded regal. Nightwing thought he looked it, too, sitting on top of the giant bookshelf by the window. There was a stack of volumes beside him, not to mention the one perched awkwardly in his lap, and Nightwing couldn’t help but wonder how he got them up there. “What are you doing here, Nightwing?”

“Just checking on my two favorite not-brothers,” Nightwing grinned, rubbing the Heretic’s head. The little boy smiled and closed his eyes. Alfred whacked at Nightwing’s hand, annoyed by the man taking away the child’s attention. “And…still no luck in figuring out how to get to my own universe, so I figured I’d take a quick break.”

This made Damian look up. He stared at the man and the child for a moment. “I’m…sorry.”

Nightwing shrugged. “What are you two doing?”

“Reading!” The Heretic exclaimed, gesturing to the books sprawled around the sofa.

“*Researching,*” Damian corrected. “If Grayson and Todd have any chance, they’ll need a place to start.”

Damian didn’t need to elaborate. Nightwing had seen for himself how much his other-self and the Todd person had thrown themselves into tracking down any sort of lead on resurrection they could. “Oh, I don’t know,” Nightwing said thoughtfully. “They seem to have themselves a pretty good start.”

“*Please,*” Damian scoffed. “They wouldn’t know where to look even if my grandfather gave them the exact coordinates.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” Nightwing laughed as he began climbing the bookshelf. When he reached the top, he plopped down on the other side of the stack of books, flicking the cover of the top book open. “So what’s with the change of heart?”

“Meaning?” Damian went back to the novel in his hands. It took him a few seconds to flip the page properly. Nightwing found that, since the battle, he too was having trouble touching the simplest of living world objects. The question of how Damian and the child got all of these books out and in their various positions once again floated through Nightwing’s mind.

“You’ve been dead over a year, buddy. It never seemed to bother you before.” Nightwing mused. He scanned the first page of the book he’d opened and scrunched up his face. He looked back up at Damian. “So why now?”
Damian sighed, looking down to the floor at the Heretic. “I’d forgotten.”

“Forgotten what?”

“Forgotten how...pleasant it was to be with them.” Damian muttered quietly. “Well, Father, Grayson and Pennyworth anyway. Todd and Drake to an extent, I suppose.”

Nightwing smiled. “You miss them. And that thing we went through a couple weeks ago…it reminded you just how much.”

“There are only two options in reuniting myself with Father.” Damian said in attempt to ignore Nightwing’s accusations. “And any of them dying is not to be considered. At all. So that leaves only one way.”

“You won’t let them come to you,” Nightwing nodded. “So you’ll go to them. Makes sense.”

“Of course it does, otherwise I wouldn’t be doing it.” Damian snapped.

“What about him?” Nightwing inclined his head downwards, to the little boy sitting nose-to-nose with the cat. Damian’s eyes noticeably dropped.

“I...I don’t know.” Damian admitted. “He has no body to return to that I’m aware of. And even if he did, it doesn’t...I’m not sure how to say this. It doesn’t match him. It wouldn’t be suitable.”

“I don’t think he would mind, so long as he was with you and Bruce.” Nightwing offered.

“To rephrase. I wouldn’t find it suitable.” Damian said. His voice became a little darker. “My younger brother deserves better than what mother gave him – a genetically mutated body of an adult male that was grown inside of a whale.”

“Gross.” Nightwing shivered. “At least she gave him a good name, right? To make up for that?”

“No.” Damian’s tone was clipped. “She didn’t give him one.”

“Wait, Mini-Me down there doesn’t have a name?” Nightwing asked incredulously. “What the hell do you call him, then?”

Slightly embarrassed, Damian returned to the book in his lap. “Terms of endearment.”

Nightwing stared at him for a moment. “Dami, you should name him.”

“I should do no such thing.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is not my place. I am not his parent, I am his brother.” Damian didn’t look up at him. He flipped the page of his book, an easier task this time around. “And even then, it is a technicality. He is my clone.”

“He exists, and is a separate entity from you, but with similar DNA. That is brother enough.” Nightwing smiled. “I still think you should.”

Damian suddenly shouted a curse, slamming his book closed. Without him touching it, it flew off his lap, slamming into the opposite wall hard enough that a few pages broke loose, fluttering down slowly as the volume slammed to the floor. The Heretic jumped, Alfred hissed, and Nightwing could hear voices echoing through cracked door of the library from somewhere else in the house – a man
and a woman. As the pages landed softly, Nightwing looked back at Damian. His knees were drawn up to his chest and his hands were tangled in his hair.

“Damian, how long have you cooped yourself up in here?” Nightwing asked gently. “How long have you been researching?”

“Since before Father went on his mission,” The Heretic answered quietly as Damian buried his face against his legs. “And has continued, even though Father has returned for a few days recuperation.”

“And no breaks?”

“No breaks,” the child on the ground confirmed. Nightwing took another look at the books sprawled across the library. He hadn’t noticed before, but there were some in the similar disarray as the one Damian just launched. It seemed this hadn’t been the first time Damian got frustrated.

“It’s okay, Dami,” Nightwing said softly, putting a hand on Damian’s shoulder. His muscles were tight, and the child was shaking.

“It’s not okay.” Damian’s voice was muffled. He wouldn’t look up. “It shouldn’t be this hard. It is a simple concept.”

Nightwing rubbed the boy’s back as the Heretic set about calming Alfred down. They remained in silence, listening as Bruce assured whomever he was with that there was no one upstairs, nothing to worry about. It was an old house, it has its creaks and groans. Sure, of course I’ll check it out later, after you leave. Yes, I’ll give you an update next time I see you.

Damian’s muscles tightened under Nightwing’s hand. “I just…I want to go home.”

“I know you do, Dami.” Nightwing cooed, not mentioning the fact that they were already in his house. “Have a little faith in your brothers. They’ll get you there.”

“I…I want to be with Father.” Damian’s voice became a little watery. “I just want to be with my father.”

As if on cue, the library door opened further. Bruce and Alfred walked in, taking stock of the mess. The cat looked up at them, bored. Alfred sighed, bending over to start picking up the loose-leaf papers. Bruce slowly walked into the room, sitting on the sofa as he lifted up a book by his feet.

The Heretic bounced next to him, a wide grin spreading on his face. “Damian, do you think he could hear me?”

Damian finally looked up, the grip on his hair loosening as his hands shifted from his head to the back of his neck. “Probably not, little one.”

“Does Bruce know you two have been in here?” Nightwing asked.

“No. Father rarely uses the library anymore.” Damian said. “I don’t think he’s been in here since, at least, his last run in with the Joker.”

Bruce’s brows furrowed as he read the title of the manual in his hand. Then he leaned down and picked up another one, scrutinizing it in the same way, and repeated the action with a third.

“Do you think he’ll know it was you?”

“He is the Batman. What do you think?” Damian’s voice was snide, and had the tone of humor. But
Bruce’s face seemed to crash with every book he picked up off the floor. Alfred excused himself, claiming the library needed a dusting anyway and went off to find the proper supplies. The cat mewed softly, crawling across Bruce’s arm and forcing the books out of his hands.

“Oh, Damian…” Bruce muttered. He gently ran his hand across the cat’s head. “You don’t need to do this. Dick and Jason have already gotten enough help.”

“You should be relaxing, son.” Bruce sighed, glancing out the window. “You’ve done too much as it is.”

The Heretic leaned against Bruce’s arm, though the man didn’t seem to feel it. Bruce continued to stroke the now-purring Alfred on his lap. Human Alfred returned a few minutes later, a broom and feather duster in hand. The butler remained quiet, though hummed a happy tune as he worked.

“You’re not finding what you want to, are you?” Bruce whispered. Alfred barely paused in his humming. “It’s maddening, I know. Jason went through the same thing yesterday. I found him last night near Crime Alley, taking his frustration out on some poor car thief.”

Damian blinked, surprised that it was Todd getting angry already, as opposed to Grayson, who has wanted this much more, much longer, than any of them.

“There’s no easy fix to this one. It will take a long time. They want to do it right. I have no say of whether what they’re doing is correct or not, but I want them to do it right.” Bruce was still quiet as he looked back from the window, eyes scanning the room. His gaze came upon the stack of books on top of the shelf, and he smiled. “And I think they would be insulted to find out their little brother was doing all of their research for them. After all, they’ve already banned Tim from any every computer and archives we have for the same reason.”

Damian uncurled his legs, and suddenly zapped himself from the bookshelf to sitting on Bruce’s other side. Unlike the Heretic, Damian didn’t move closer to Bruce, but instead just sat there, staring up at his face with a look of respect and longing.

“But if anything, I’ll tell them these were the types of books you were looking in.” Bruce blinked, glancing at the collections beside him. His face scrunched again as he reached for one. “Though, why these books are even in the Wayne library, I’ll never know.”

“Perhaps it’s time to do a sort of inventory, sir.” Alfred quipped from behind the sofa.

“Perhaps, indeed.” Bruce agreed, tossing the book gently back to the ground. “Maybe after my nap.”


“Fine. Relax.” Bruce rolled his eyes as he shifted back, throwing his arms across the back of the couch. The cat meowed as he climbed up Bruce’s chest. “After I relax.”

“May we take a break too, Brother?” The Heretic asked, peeking over the cat’s body. Damian nodded, eyes never leaving Bruce’s face as he leaned back against the arm of the sofa and brought his feet up onto the cushions.

“The Wayne boys? Relaxing?” Nightwing cried, lying on his stomach, feet disappearing through the
ceiling as he cocked his head in mock-confusion. “Have pigs started to fly?!”

Damian rolled his eyes, but continued to watch both his cat and his brother make themselves comfortable against Bruce’s torso. His father had already closed his eyes, listening as Alfred hummed around the room. “Hey... little one?”

“Hm?!”

“Did Mother give you a name?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” The Heretic replied. “Other than titles. But no names like Bruce or Timothy or Jason.”

“I see.” Damian mused. He glanced up at Nightwing. “Would you like one?”

“I don’t need one.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Damian responded. “I didn’t ask if you needed one, I asked if you wanted one.”

The Heretic looked down, burying his chin against Bruce’s shirt. “I don’t deserve one.”

“Nonsense.” Nightwing chipped in. “Everyone deserves a name, no matter their perceived crimes.”

“What do you wish to be called?” Damian asked. The Heretic looked between Damian and Nightwing, a grateful and amazed smile in his eyes.

“Whatever you wish to call me, Damian.” The Heretic giggled, hiding his face against Bruce’s chest again.

Damian thought a moment, watching as Alfred came around from the back of the couch and moved towards the shelves. He then looked up at Nightwing. “Suggestions?”


“Hell no.” Damian deadpanned.

“Well, damn. I think I’m all out of ideas, then.” Nightwing sat his chin against his forearms. Damian bit his lip as he looked back at the child in front of him. “But I’m sure you’ll think of something, Dami.”
Skulls

Chapter Summary

But Todd was the most fun to tease. Most fun to mess with. Oh, he’d have fun all right.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by: ‘Skulls’ by Bastille

~

“I don’t want to rest in peace. I’d rather be the ghost that annoys you.”

~

He and Todd had never been particularly close. Sure, they were family. Yes, they would do anything to protect each other if they could. But in terms of actual relationship? Superman probably knew each of them better than they knew each other.

But Todd was the most fun to tease. Most fun to mess with.

And Damian was in a mischievous mood. Especially since Nightwing had, more or less, kidnapped the Heretic and barred him from the manor. All in the name of peace, tranquility and relaxation.

Yeah, well. Nightwing would get what’s due later.

Damian watched as the Red Hood, Starfire and Arsenal continued to fight the badass-wannabes who somehow got their hands on humanoid robots. None of them were in danger, not really. In fact, while Damian hadn’t heard the whole conversation, he was pretty sure Arsenal and Hood were currently enrapt in a childish competition of one-upping each other. So, there was no real reason Damian couldn’t throw another obstacle into his brother’s routine.

“You need to chill out, Dami.” Nightwing had said. “You need to have fun.”

Oh, he’d have fun all right.

The battle moved into an alleyway. Arsenal jumped to the fire escape. Starfire floated a few feet above him. The criminals – who had just robbed a butcher shop, pet store and an old lady feeding birds – pulled out guns, shooting without aim. Arsenal and Starfire destroyed or melted the weapons, noticing at the last second the mob of robots heading Jason’s way. Before either could move, Jason ran up the wall, slashing downwards with the mystic swords. As the robots popped and fizzled, Jason back flipped from the wall, landing softly on the ground.

“Nice move. ‘Wing teach you that?” Arsenal snorted.

“He wishes.” Jason’s voice came out muffled under the helmet, a little electronic. Was that a new
feature? One of the enemies jumped forward in a moment of bravery, a gun still pointing forwards. Jason wasn’t scared, but moved to take a step back anyway.

Damian popped in behind him. Using all the concentration and power he could, he stuck his leg out. Jason hit it, and toppled backwards, landing in a pile of rotting garbage bags.

“Graceful,” Starfire quipped, taking the moment of confusion to her advantage and disarming the gunman standing above Jason.

“That one’s from Red Robin, right?” Arsenal cackled. “What’d you even trip on?”

“Shut up. Let’s get this done.” Jason muttered as he moved. Damian grinned as his brother looked around. Before he could stand back up, Damian reached out, unhooking the clasp of the gun holsters. As Jason shifted, his weapons clattered the ground. “What the-”

Damian spun around to Jason’s other side, hitting the release of the helmet. The hiss of air sounded as Jason turned to find his abuser.

“Any day now, Hood!” Arsenal shouted gleefully. “These robots are apparently regenerative. Friggen’ sweet if you ask me, but I’ll admire them after you help me take them down!”

Damian glanced up, waving an open palm towards the delinquents and their machines. They were thrown backwards and, for a moment, the robots were scrambled. Damian smirked as he climbed the wall nearby. Jason, smacking the helmet release back down, moved to stand up again. Damian reached out to the fire escape ladder and threw it downwards. It flew down, hitting the front of the helmet as Jason looked up.

“Jesus Christ!” Jason’s electronic voice shouted. “What the hell, Arsenal?! Do you want my help or not!”

Roy had moved up to the second level of the escape and glanced back, bemused. “What the hell… what?”

“Boys, you may fight later,” Starfire scolded, watching the frightened criminals run out of the alley. The robots, however, stayed and continued to advance on the trio. “But for now, I think we have bigger problems.”

Damian threw his arm out again. The running criminals suddenly flattened to the ground on the sidewalk. He could hear sirens. Distant, but on their way.

“Heat sensing target locks.” Roy whistled, loading his bow as a robot looked up at him. “Cool.”

“Not cool. We’re the targets.” Jason growled as he stood. Damian hopped down from the wall and kicked at the guns Jason leaned down to grab. Jason paused and took a step forward to try again. Damian kicked them away once more. Jason stood full height and looked around. Seeing nothing, he turned towards his weapons and tried again. Damian put all his power into it and kicked at the holsters a third time, laughing as they went slightly airborne. Jason straightened again and looked towards the sky as he sighed. “I swear to God…”

“Hood!” Starfire called. “Now!”

“Screw it,” Jason breathed, turning back to the battle with the glowing swords. He took three steps and felt something tug at his foot. He stumbled, internally panicked, but caught himself. Damian frowned and stuck his leg out again. Jason crashed into it and collapsed, helmet slamming into the ground.
“Jaybird, what is wrong with you?” Arsenal snapped. Arrows went flying into the machines, as did starbolts.

“Nothing!” Jason snapped, moving to a kneel and unlocking his helmet, throwing it to the side. The domino underneath still protected his identity. “It’s damn sabotage.”

“From who?” Starfire asked, a robot groaning as it melted.

“I don’t know,” Jason’s eyes narrowed, sweeping the alley. “But I have a few ideas.”

Damian wasn’t listening, though. He was too busy crouched behind Jason, hooking the bootstraps together. Jason went to move again, and fell forward on his hands. He exhaled and closed his eyes, dropping his head to look down at his shoes.

“But good plan, I guess.” Roy drawled as Jason shifted to sit on his ass. “I mean, one of us have to be bait and draw their attention, right?”

“Yeah, totally.” Jason deadpanned. As he leaned down to fix his shoes, he hissed, “I hate you so much, you little shit.”

Damian grinned. So Todd wasn’t as dumb as he looked.

“If you’re going to fuck with me, at least get rid of those robots.” He muttered. “But do it nicely, so Roy can play with them later, or whatever he wants to do.”

Damian acquiesced, and nodded towards the robots. Their sensor lights all went dim, and most of them split in half down the middle.

Starfire and Arsenal watched for a moment before turning towards their still-seated teammate. Starfire floated downwards slightly. “Jason…?”

“Don’t ask.” Jason closed his eyes and waved his hand. “Just…go check on those dudes on the street out there before the cops get here and…don’t ask.”

Kori and Roy shared a look before moving out to the road, taking the most intact robot with them.

“That was dumb. And I’m sure you found it real fucking funny,” Jason snapped, quickly fixing his boots. “Maybe I should reconsider helping ‘Wing get you back.”

Damian hummed a chuckle as he rolled the apparently cracked helmet back towards its owner. Jason picked it up without looking away from his boots and moved it into his line of vision. He ran his fingers and palms over the helmet’s wound.

“Maybe I’ll just go replace the one you took from me last time with this one. It was my favorite, you know.” Jason mused, patting the helmet and standing. Damian reached out and pushed him a little. Jason moved with the shove, overdramatizing the motion. “Yeah, well. Stop stealing my stuff, bro.”

Jason paused again, looking back up at the sky. The police hadn’t made it to the scene in the street yet, but the old woman who had been mugged had. And boy, was she giving those criminals an earful. After a moment he sighed. “We’re trying, Damian. It’s taxing, and Dickie and I have some other stuff going on, but we’re trying. I want to say we’re getting close but…God, you should see the look of pathetic hope he still gets when he thinks a lead is going to pan out.”

Jason shook his head, clipping the broken helmet to his belt. He started moving towards the alley mouth, slowing as he neared his guns. He bent to hook a finger around the holster when they
skittered away from him again.

Jason froze in place. He barked a laugh as he pushed his tongue into his cheek and smirked. “I hate you, you little shit.” He repeated. “I hate you so much.”
Chapter Summary

Damian needs advice on his brother. From Tim. At the crack of dawn.

Chapter Notes

I knew a person with this name in high school. They were total a-holes, but I always thought their name was the coolest I’d ever heard.

Tim wasn’t opening his eyes. Nope, no chance. This was the first time in two months he had a chance to sleep not only a full night, but in his own bed. Just because his cat was awake didn’t mean he had to be.

“Des, stop,” he grumbled, pulling the blankets up tighter to his neck and burrowing against his pillow. He felt Desdemona pause in her hopping – he only assumed there was a bug flying around his room – and gently trotted up along his side, purring loudly as she sniffed at his head. He hummed a chuckle as she alternated between licking his face and biting at his hair. “Des, I want to sleep.”

Desdemona let out a soft meow, and Tim felt her move away from his face. It was quiet, but Tim could hear buzzing. Multiple buzzing, really. He sighed, vowing to take care of the bugs when he was properly awake. They weren’t really bothering him, outside of Desdemona bouncing around the mattress trying to catch them. The buzzing was sort of soothing, even. As he drifted back into unconsciousness, he felt his room lightening with the rising sun, and reveled in the fact that his alarm was not set this morning. He felt a grin slip onto his face as he remembered he’d turned his phone off, too, so no one from W.E. could call him.

Suddenly, he felt Desdemona jump onto his hip and crouch. Before he could roll over to slide her off, she ran up his side and began smacking his cheek repeatedly. In the second it took him to react, he heard a crunch and then felt something damp spreading across his skin.

“What the-” Tim spun around to his stomach, throwing Desdemona off his side with a surprised yelp, and smashing his hand against his face. When he pulled his fingers away, he saw the splash of a slightly glowing liquid, little pieces of insect skin floating in it. As he inspected the substance, he felt the temperature of the room drop slightly.

“They follow me everywhere,” Tim tensed at the light voice before turning to face it. Damian stood next to his bed, the colors from the dawn sky filtering through his transparent body, watching Desdemona shake off her shock. Tim opened his mouth to respond to the ghost child, but found his eyes moving towards the ceiling. Two dozen or so fireflies floated gently above his head, spread out across the room. “I don’t know why. Nightwing and my grandparents don’t know either.”

Tim exhaled sharply, ignoring the goo on his face and dropping his head back to his pillow. “Damian, it’s five thirty in the morning. What do you want?”
And how long have you been standing there? remained unasked. Tim watched as Desdemona leaned her body against Damian’s torso, purring once again in greeting. “I…” Damian’s voice strengthened a little, and Tim wondered if Damian had to put effort into that or not. “…need your help.”

Tim yawned and shifted his arms in a show of looking like he was going to get up. “What’s the emergency?”

“No emergency. Not really.” Damian looked uncomfortable. Or confused. To be honest, Tim’s eyes were barely focusing on the kid’s face, so he closed them as he moved back to his side.

“Tell me what’s wrong, Damian.” Tim hoped he was doing a fantastic job of emulating their eldest brother, but he was sure it just came out as a tired garble.

Damian huffed, sitting down next to Desdemona. “The Heretic…Nightwing thinks I should name him.”

“Name him?” Tim asked. He was happy to hear that the other version of Dick Grayson was still around, caring for the two deceased Wayne children. It put him a bit at ease, knowing Damian was still being protected, even with the threat of Talia gone. “What do you mean name him?”

“Mother never gave the Heretic a name like yours or mine.” Damian explained, running his hand across Desdemona’s head. Tim opened his eyes a sliver. “Nightwing has entrusted me to do so and…I’m not quite sure how to.”

“Don’t stress about it,” Tim sighed, scrunching his arms up under his chin and curling his knees around the spirit and the cat as his eyes blinked closed again. “I’m sure your little brother will be happy with whatever you choose.”

“But it needs to be proper, Drake.” Damian hissed. “I want to do it right.”

“Proper in a Wayne sense, or proper in an al Ghul sense?” Tim murmured, trying not to make it sound like he was bored. Damian pressed his lips so tightly they pursed all on their own. “Ahhh, that’s your problem.”

“My mother named me, so isn’t it only fair that Father gets to choose it for the younger child?” Damian tilted his head in thought.

“So go with Thomas,” Tim moaned. “Or hell, just go with Bruce.”

Damian narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think Thomas is right, especially after that run-in with Lincoln March, or whatever alias that was. And Bruce…he does not look like a Bruce.”

Tim rolled his torso slightly, opening his eyes to stare at the ceiling. Was this really happening? Was he really having a conversation with his dead brother, about naming another dead child? At five-forty-five in the morning?

“How about I call Dick. Or Jason even.” Tim suggested, throwing his arms out to his side. “They might have a few ideas.”

“No,” Damian said. “Grayson is an imbecile and Todd would not take it seriously.”

“Right, totally forgot.” Tim deadpanned. “Well, uh…how did Talia pick your name?”

Damian shrugged. “I am unsure. But I know it is Greek.”
“Greek names are cool.” Tim breathed. Sleep was quickly falling from his grasp. “Maybe go that direction. Doesn’t show favoritism between your parents, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Do you know of any good ones?” Damian asked.

“Alexander is good. Means warrior or defender or something.” Tim stated without much thought. “Wasn’t he born in a whale or something? Dorian means of the sea.”

“Mother always said I was her little Alexander. I never did find out why she didn’t just name me that.” Damian mused out loud.

“So, you want to go with Alexander, then?” Tim tried. Maybe he could get back to sleep after all.

“No.”

Never mind.

“And calling him something referring to his origins seems…cruel, somehow.” Damian said quietly.

“Look, Damian.” Tim rolled his head to look down at the boy. Desdemona was trying to climb onto his lap, but seemed confused as to why her paws kept going through his skin. “Don’t think so hard about it. The kid’s already gone years without one, right? I don’t think there’s some sort of pressing need to give him one now.”

“Yes there is.” Damian snapped.

“No, Damian, I don’t-“

“He was brought into this world to be a weapon. But he’s not a weapon. Through everything Mother put him through, he is a human being. He is my brother, and deserves every bit of respect and love all human beings do.” Damian said quickly, turning his intense gaze on Tim. His voice lowered, “Every bit of love and respect that I do. That you all gave me.”

“Then you can do that for him,” Tim responded quietly. “But he doesn’t need a name for you to do that for him.”

“While Mother’s methods were…strange, I knew she loved me. And one of the first things she did to show that love was gift me with a name.” Damian explained. “I…wish to do the same for him.”

Tim lay there, weighing his words. After a moment, he sighed, a smile across his face. “Fair enough.” Damian lowered his eyes, holding out his hand for Desdemona. “Where is the little squirt, anyway?”

“With Nightwing,” Damian hummed. “Little one has garnered a fascination with Todd, and I got tired of taking him to wherever the Outlaws’ current location is. So Nightwing said he would take him today. Or, yesterday, I suppose. I’m sure they’ll return before noon.”

Tim nodded. “He really is a good kid.”

“A good kid.” Damian echoed. “A great kid.”

“Indeed.” Tim inhaled, reaching his hand out to pet Desdemona too. The two sat in silence for a few moments, petting the cat between them, before Damian suddenly cocked his head to the side.

“Alexander...” He muttered. "Aristotle?"
“What?”

Damian looked up. “It means best. Or best purpose.”

“Is your brother the best?” Tim asked. “Don’t tell Dick that. I think he’d be insulted.”

“Well, the Heretic bested me, didn’t he?” Damian smirked. The joke was terrible, and they both knew it, but Tim laughed anyway. “Besides, we could always say he was named after the philosopher. Aristotle in himself was quite the influence.”

“Aristotle,” Tim repeated. “I don’t know…I think I like it.”

“I think I’ll run it by Nightwing, but…” Damian’s smirk turned into a soft smile, obviously content with his suggestion. “For once, Drake, we might actually agree.”

“Agree on what?” Tim felt something leap onto his legs. Desdemona let out a happy cry and went bounding to the edge of the bed.

“I came to ask Drake for advice.” Damian said, turning to the child at the end of the mattress. Well, Damian hadn’t been wrong; he said they’d return before noon. Almost six in the morning was definitely before noon. The Heretic looked up at Damian, eyes scrunched in suspicion. Damian rolled his eyes. “Shocking, I know.”

The Heretic grinned as he pressed a kiss to Desdemona’s head. “Advice about what?”

“Your name.” Damian said. The child’s head shot back up, eyes moving between Damian and Tim, who was now shifting to a sitting position.

“Did you pick one?” the child asked excitedly.

Tim nodded. “We…believe so.”

“How do you feel about Aristotle?” Damian questioned.

“Like the scientist?” The boy asked. Tim and Damian nodded. “That would…I mean…it’s…it would be an honor!”

“You like it?” Damian asked. To Tim, he sounded tentative. Hopeful.

“I do if you do, Damian.” The Heretic grinned. Suddenly, he leapt forward, throwing himself at Damian and wrapping his arms around his neck. Damian instantly froze. “Oh, thank you, Brother! Thank you so very much!”

Though he hesitated, Damian quickly returned the affection, holding the younger close to him. “You’re most welcome…Aris.”

The Heretic – Aris – giggled gleefully, leaning his head against Damian’s. Tim couldn’t help but smile at the sight before him, wishing more than anything that he could take a picture of the children. For himself, for his family. For Bruce, especially.

The two held each other for a few minutes, until rays from the sun finally began to shine in through the window. Desdemona, purring loudly, curled up in Tim’s lap, watching the fireflies above them blink out of sight.

“Come, let us go retrieve Nightwing from wherever you left him,” Damian breathed, lifting his brother as he moved off the bed. “We have bothered Drake enough.”
“You guys be good. Tell Nightwing I say hello.” Tim waved as Desdemona meowed.

“Goodbye, Drake!” Aris smiled brightly, and Tim thought he might be starting to understand Damian’s words. To them, a name – a proper, given name – was truly a gift, in every sense of the word.

Damian looked back at him one last time and gave him a grateful nod, before he and Aris disappeared into the beams of the morning sun.

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Bruce groaned as he rolled across his bed, feeling around the nightstand for his beeping phone. When his hand hit it, he immediately pressed the main button, shutting off the noise and opening the message. It was from Tim. Six-fifteen in the morning and a text from Tim? That couldn’t be good.

Bruce ran a hand down his face, blinking the room into clarity as he squinted at his phone.

“Saw your boys this morning.” It read. “Damian named him Aristotle.”

“Aristotle,” Bruce hummed. After a moment he smiled, closing the message and shifting further down into his blankets. “Damian and Aris. To tame the best. The best to tame.” He chuckled, holding the phone close to his chest, knowing he’d read the message again when he woke up in a few hours. “The afterlife doesn’t stand a chance.”
The computer screen suddenly shut down. All of Tim’s open files and windows closed, a blue desktop appearing instead. Tim blinked twice before the screen changed again, this time to the image of his brother in a pair of shorts.

“Timmy!” Dick cried happily, placing the plate of a half-eaten meal on the desk next to him.

“Dick…” Tim murmured, hitting random buttons on the keyboard. None of his previous windows returned. “How did you do that?”

“You’re not the only one good with computers,” Dick sang as he tipped a water bottle to his mouth. Tim smiled and rolled his eyes. Maybe he could take a break. He leaned back in his chair. “So what’s up?”

“Mmm.” Dick hummed as he finished taking a drink. He crossed his arms and leaned forward, taking up most of the frame of his webcam. “Wanted to talk to you.”

“About?”

Dick’s grin turned wistful as his eyes roamed the desk off-screen. He reached out and picked something up, sitting back in his chair and spinning the object between his fingers. A flashlight. “Stuff.”

Tim watched the flashlight on the screen for a few seconds before turning in his chair and glancing around his office. Seeing nothing, he turned back to the screen. “He’s not with you?”

Dick shook his head, tapping the tip of the light against his chin. “Was here earlier, I think, for a little bit. Him and someone else. Probably the little one. What’d Bruce say his name was, Ares? Alex? They were playing a weird sort of catch with my water bottle, rolling it across the floor for about twenty minutes.”

“Aris,” Tim corrected. “But Dick…what else is there to talk about that we didn’t already? After that…whatever you want to call it…that went down with Talia? We all know the same things.”

Dick nodded slowly before responding. “You remember when I was in the hospital last year?”

Tim snorted. “Which time?”
Dick smirked. “You know which time I’m talking about. Remember what we said we’d do?”

Tim sighed. No point in playing dumb. “That we’d talk about it. But Dick, that’s what I’m saying. We did talk about it. After Talia—”

“Damian told me something in that warehouse, you know.” Dick interrupted. “Something you failed to mention in our post-crisis group meeting.”

Tim leaned his head back on his chair. “Dick…”

“You can see him.” Dick said sternly. “More than when we were all dead, Tim. You can see Damian – and Cyril and Thomas and Martha and everyone else – every day. Whenever you want, really.”

Tim looked away from the screen, eyes searching the area to his right. “So?”

“So?” Dick repeated. He barked a laugh. “So, that’s kind of a big deal, Tim!”

“Why?” Tim snapped. “It’s not like I wanted it this way. I don’t…I don’t even know how it happened! I don’t know how it still happens. Sometimes I see them and sometimes I don’t. It started after Damian died and just…kind of continued on.”

Dick watched him for a moment, eyes dark and calculating. In the back of Tim’s mind, he noted that this must have been what Dick looked like under the cowl. Impressive, to say the least. “How do you deal with it?”

Tim stared at him for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“Are you…okay with it?” Dick asked. His lips pursed slightly, and Tim realized Dick wasn’t happy with his phrasing. “Does it freak you out? Or…scare you?”

Tim hesitated in his response, and suddenly it hit him like a ton of bricks. Dick wasn’t asking because it had anything to do with Damian. Dick never wanted to talk about it because their dead brother was involved at all. He wanted to have this conversation because he was worried for Tim. Worried what this unwanted ability might be doing to him.

Despite it all, Tim smiled. “It used to. The first couple times it did. I…got used to it, I guess.”

Dick tilted his head. “You guess?”

“It’s weird, I’ll give you that.” Tim leaned forward. “And it’s…it’s hard. You see these people – sometimes you know them, a lot of times you don’t – and you can’t…I just…you can’t do anything. To help them, to fight them…anything. And in our line of work? Not being able to help, just having to sit by and watch…I can say that I’ve gotten used to it, but I haven’t. I can’t. That’s…it’s impossible for me to do, and that’s probably the most frustrating part of it.”

“Hm.”

“Like, example.” Tim knew Dick didn’t ask for one, but he was on a roll now. “After your stint in the hospital, that first trip you made back to Gotham? When you found me in my apartment?”

Dick frowned. “How could I forget?”

“I didn’t see any of those spirits until the second they attacked, but they were stalking me for weeks. I could feel them, and in the corner of my eye I could see their shadows and whatever. But I couldn’t
see them, not until the moment of.” Tim deflated a little. “Not until Damian rescued me.”

“But your ability to see them and interact with them…that doesn’t enable you to touch them?” Dick asked.

“Not one bit. It’s like this weird one-way street. They can touch and hit and bite and all that – or I imagine they can bite, it’s not like anyone has tried to bite me – but us, as living, breathing flesh can’t hit back.” Tim didn’t notice, but he began gesticulating, throwing his hands in wide circles. Dick leaned his cheek on his knuckles to hide his smile. “So, when we were…well, when we were all dead, and we could actually do something? That…was weird. I was freaked out then. That’s why I froze.”

“You didn’t freeze, Timbo. You were restrained. If any of us had tried to move, we’d have been eliminated on the spot.” Dick assured.

“No,” Tim huffed, flopping back in his chair. “I mean, after the Heretic – after Aris – freed me. Any other time, I’d have jumped into action. But then, watching people who I know are dead battle it out, with you and Jason and Bruce there too…my brain just couldn’t deal with it, I guess. Not after everything I’d experienced already with the paranormal, you know?”

“Yeah, I get it.” Dick nodded. The two lapsed into silence, Dick staring off as he twirled the torch between his fingers again and Tim checked a message from Kon. “Do you…like it?”

“What, do I like seeing dead people?” Tim raised his eyebrow. “It’s…not the worst thing I’ve ever endured. But of course, rarely do I see the dead people that I want to see. No Mom, no Dad…hell, I think I’d even like to meet Martha and Thomas Wayne once or twice, you know, formally, but I’ve never seen them. Just crazy mad spirits and…”


Tim cocked his head to the side in thought. “Yes. I think…I think that’s a good part of it.”

“Oh?”

“I mean, I didn’t like the kid. To tell you the truth, I still don’t. Not really. Did I tell you he woke me up at freaking five-thirty in the morning last week…?” Tim shook his head. “I didn’t like him, but he was ten, Dick. Ten-years-old and murdered in cold blood. That’s…I didn’t like him, but I never, ever wanted that to happen to him. Happen to anyone, really. And I’m not naïve enough to say that I wasn’t affected at all by his death.”

Tim stopped, but Dick didn’t say anything.

“So, to see him – the dead him, dead Damian – it reminds me of what we lost, because we weren’t strong enough to do anything about it. We weren’t strong enough to save one ten-year-old, Dick. That messes with you.” Tim’s voice became quieter as he talked. “But it helps remind me why we do this, and to keep going at it. To stop the people that hurt him from hurting anyone else. To keep working at saving other little ten-year-olds in danger.”

“That’s an interesting way to look at it.” Dick commented.

“And I guess just seeing him isn’t always terrible.” Tim’s lips pursed and his nose crinkled. “He sometimes has interesting things to say. He sometimes saves my ass, too. One time he gave me a cat. It’s always different. Always…intriguing.”

“Intriguing is good.” Dick chuckled lightly as he lazily swung his chair back and forth. “But…this
thing you have…this medium business? It doesn’t…it’s not hurting you, is it? Not getting you into trouble?"

Tim returned the fond smile. “No trouble I can’t handle, Dick.”

“And hurting you?”

“Well, I can’t say spontaneously seeing the ghost of your dead younger brother is a real walk in the park.” Tim shrugged. “But if it was too bad, I’d tell you. Hell, I’d tell him.”

“Good.” Dick sighed. Relief was written all across his face as he took another drag of his water bottle. “You know you can talk to me about this whenever, right?”

“I figured, yeah.”

Dick looked down at his lap. “I’m sorry it took me so long to call you about it.”

“Don’t sweat it, Dick. It’s fine.” Tim waved it off. “How’s Chicago?”

“Chugging along as usual. Going to go out on patrol here in about thirty.” Dick mumbled, finally replacing the flashlight in his hand with the long-abandoned dinner.

“Don’t let me keep you. I should probably get going, anyway. If there’s any truth to the info Kon just gave me, Kara and Steph could use my help.” Tim leaned forward, looking at the message on his phone.

“Sounds fun. Be careful. Give the group my love, blah blah blah.” Dick listed, shoving his fork in my mouth. “Thanks for talking to me, Tim.”

Tim glanced up at him. “Thanks for listening.”

“Tell the brat I say hello, next time you see him?”

“He’ll probably come visit you four more times before he’ll willingly come see me, but I will, sure.” Tim nodded.

Dick hummed. “Love you, kid.”

“You too, Dick. Be careful out there.”

Dick flashed a food-filled smirk. “Always am.”

The screen went blank.
Body

Chapter Summary

Damian hated him. It would be so easy to take him down, here, right now, in this plane. But he’d promised Martha.

Chapter Notes

This one didn’t come out as angry as I wanted it to.

Damian sat in the back of the plane, between his own sarcophagus and his mother’s. It was too weird to look at himself, so he opted to stare at Talia’s prone form. Even in death, she was still beautiful.

His grandfather crouched in front of him, hand on each case of his kin. His face was soft and thoughtful as his gaze moved from daughter to grandson and back again, fingers gently tapping the glass lid.

Damian hated him.

He felt his ghostly powers thrumming through his fingertips. It would be easy, so easy, to take the man down. To snap his neck and everyone in his crew. To mess with the controls of the ship, send them down into the center of the ocean. Make it all look like a terrible accident. He and his mother’s bodies probably wouldn’t be salvageable, but it would be a small price to pay to get this terror off the planet. To get this scum out of his father’s life.

But he’d promised Martha, his dear grandmother who he’d come to cherish just as much as his father. He’d promised her he wouldn’t interfere. Promised her – and a worried-looking Nightwing – he wouldn’t do anything stupid or reckless.

“Soon, Damian.” Ra’s muttered, stroking his gnarly fingers down the boy’s case. “Very soon.”

Damian felt his rage flair, and briefly thought about how grateful he was that Nightwing insisted Aris stay back with him. A green blade materialized in his hand. It would be simple. No one would ever know, not even Martha and Nightwing. No one would ever be able to prove a thing.

“We’ll be a family again.” Ra’s hummed. “With no interference whatsoever from the Detective.”

“He’d know.” Damian snapped loudly. “He’d know, Grandfather, and he would never stop trying to find me. He would never give up looking for me.”

Ra’s had turned completely to stare at Damian’s case. “You will be able to show your true potential this time, my child.”

“And don’t think for a second Father will come after you alone.” Damian hissed. The blade grew larger in his hand. “Grayson will come, and so will Todd – the last boy warrior you threw into one of those god forsaken pits. Neither of them will be happy about what you’re trying to do. And they
“And use all the skills you possess. We will not restrain you based on social morals or subjective justice.”

“Father is still bitter about what you tried to do to Drake and I. Trying to steal our bodies just to be vessels for your corrupted soul.” Damian continued. “They will not be fooled by you twice. They will be angry. You’ve seen first hand what anger does to Father and Todd. But Grayson? Grayson is hard enough to contain when he’s neutral. I can hardly wait to see what he’ll do to you when he’s angry.”

“I have missed you so, Damian.” Ra’s said before glancing back at Talia’s casket once more, then moving back to the front of the plane.

Damian stood as Ra’s walked away. Easy, so easy. Just throw the blade.

“I know what he’s doing is wrong. I know he’s hurting your father.” Martha whispered, taking Damian’s face in her hands. “But promise me, sweetheart. Promise me you won’t attack him. This isn’t your fight, and Bruce is right on his tail.”

“But Grandmother-”

“You attack him, and you’ll become just like Talia. You’ll be angry and it’ll eat you up from the inside.” Martha leaned down, pressing their foreheads together. “…Just promise me, Damian. Please.”

The blade disappeared. Damian closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. After a few seconds, he turned to his own sarcophagus and hesitantly opened his eyes once more. Grayson always said he looked more peaceful when he was asleep; it’s why he never had the heart to wake him up after a long patrol. He was just ‘too cute.’

Damian didn’t feel like he looked peaceful or cute. He looked susceptible to assault. Of course, right now, to him, he just…looked dead.

His skin was gray, and he could already see the flesh starting to rot. Slowly, Damian reached down, pushing his hand through the glass and into his own face. Todd had sworn not to use a Lazarus Pit, but, if he and Grayson really wanted to succeed, what else would they use to restore his body to what it was?

Damian reached up to his own throat, shifting the hand in the case down to his neck as well. He didn’t have a collar and leash like his family had had, never did, to his knowledge. Does that mean he died when he was meant to? Or had the offer expired?

He sighed, moving his hand around his body. He felt his spine, shattered as it was. Traced over the dried lungs and gooey capillaries. Waded slowly through the aftermath of the deathblow.

Too much, it was too much.

He pulled his hand back out and sat down between the cases once more, listening absently as Ra’s gave coordinates to his copilot.

“Hurry, Father,” He muttered, leaning his head back against his coffin. “We’re running out of time.”
Dick couldn’t say he was surprised. It was a short notice invitation, and not many of the Bat’s allies liked to get together in costume for social reasons. Hell, even out of costume, it was near impossible to get a group of them together. And still over a year later, not many wanted to deal with this topic, not around him.

“Sorry, Grayson. Kori and I are stuck in Russia.” Jason’s voicemail said. “Freaking Roy got himself kidnapped again. Go figure.”

“Time travel issue,” Tim’s email explained – written on the fifth of July 1972, according to the message’s metadata. “Otherwise you know I’d be there for you. Gar sends his love, by the way.”

“You KNOW I’d be there in a heartbeat,” Steph’s text read. “But Babs and I were requested in China. I’ll be thinking about you, though. I’ll tell Cass you said hello. Remember: he was a brat, but he’d want you to be happy. Especially today.”

It was a stretch to reach out to Batwoman, but at least she responded, even if was just to say, “Busy.”

“In Metropolis.” Bruce told him over the phone. Dick knew already it was a lie, but he wasn’t going to push about it. For all he knew, Bruce would be in Metropolis by the end of the day. Clark and the other Leaguers were always better at comforting the man than any of them. If they were lucky, Diana would be there to help, too.

Dick didn’t hold the rejection against them. It was just out of courtesy anyway. No, he thought as he sighed and leaned back on the ledge of the Wayne penthouse, watching the sun start to sink into the horizon, Damian wouldn’t have wanted any of them there. Just him. Just Dick. Dick and Damian, like the good old days.

“Um…Mister Nightwing?” Dick looked over his shoulder at the voice. The little boy stood there in an oversized hoody, the giant sleeves rolled up to his elbows and the simple invitation clutched nervously in his hand.

Well, maybe Damian wouldn’t mind one more person.

“You mind grabbing some plates, Alfie? And maybe a beverage for our guest.” Dick said, smiling. Alfred nodded, stepping back through the doorway he was standing in and closing the door with a clang. No one saw Damian slip through it at the last second. “And please, Colin, call me Dick.”

Colin nodded shortly and shuffled forward, the paper crinkling in his fingers. “The phone at the orphanage has been down all week, and we aren’t allowed to use the nuns’ cell phones.” He muttered as Dick patted the space next to him. Colin eyed it hesitantly. “Otherwise I would have called.”

“Coming to what, Grayson?” Damian sighed wearily. He stood on the other side of Colin, leaning his hands on the concrete edge, staring across the city.

Colin shrugged, looking down at his feet. Dick watched him for a moment before spinning around on the ledge, planting his feet loudly back on the roof. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, and looked up at Colin, hoping to break into his periphery.

“And how have you been doing, Colin?” Dick asked gently. “With…all this? Red…Tim told me no one informed you of…what happened.”

“Oh, Grayson…” Damian muttered, looking at his brother over Colin’s head. “Don’t do this to him. Please.”

Colin looked up, his eyes misty. He shrugged again. “Okay, I guess. It’s not like anything changed. Not personally. Not…not really.”

“What am I supposed to tell them?” Colin’s tone was a little harsh. Damian glanced up at him with concern. “That I was good friends with Robin the Boy Wonder and oh, by the way, he’s dead?”

“Point. I doubt you’d have to be that specific, though.” Dick kept grinning. “How’s the Abuse shindig going?”

“Good. I don’t go out as much anymore.” Colin said, his lips twisted in a slight pout. “Batgirl and Red Hood ganged up on me about it. Gave me all these reasons why I shouldn’t and said they were going to babysit me. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“You sure don’t.”

“So I try to go to parts of town where I don’t think I’ll see them.” Colin reasoned. “Red Robin told me you moved to Chicago so…so I’ve kind of taken over your part of town, if that’s okay.”

“More than okay,” Dick laughed. Colin’s eyes moved from the elder’s face to the skyline, watching a golden glow take over the buildings and intersections.

“You’re probably already doing a better job than he ever did.” Damian muttered, hopping up to stand on the ledge.

“I just miss him.” Colin said quietly. Damian glanced back at him once more. “He was one of my only friends, you know?”

“I do, actually.” Dick responded, just as softly.

“What about you?” Colin’s attention turned back to Dick. “How are you doing?”

Dick nodded slowly. “Better than I was.”

“That’s good.” Colin allowed himself a little smile. “You were his favorite, I think.”

“He is not.” Damian said loudly, looking back to the towers in front of them. Colin had no evidence, how dare me make such assumptions!

Dick barked a laugh, leaning back on the ledge. “You don’t say!”

Colin regarded him with serious eyes, nodding vigorously. “But, uhh…Dick?”
Colin held up the card, clearly bent from being stuffed in a pocket a few times. “Why…?”

“Because Damian wouldn’t want us to mourn his death. At least, not more than we have been. So let’s celebrate his life instead.” Dick shifted as Alfred reappeared, as if on cue, holding a small stack of plates underneath a metal container. The sounds of splashing liquid came from a bag hanging off his arm. “Today’s his birthday, you know.”

“Really?” Colin asked, dubiously.

“Mhm.” Dick smiled, sliding over on the ledge so Alfred could set the container down. He gently placed a plate in front of each boy, and handed his to Dick as he plucked out a group of forks from his vest and gave them to Colin. Carefully, he pulled out three water bottles, setting them alongside the container. “At least, I’m pretty sure.”

Colin grinned, all crooked teeth. It was ridiculously infectious. Damian found himself smirking along with him as he crouched to investigate what Alfred had brought out. “Ha, I’ll take your word for it. I’d asked him once, you know. So I could get him a gift or something. It wouldn’t have been much. Maybe from the gas station down by the orphanage. But he wouldn’t tell me, no matter how much I bugged him.”

“For all his bravado, Master Damian rarely enjoyed being the center of attention.” Alfred hummed. “He wouldn’t even tell his father. If I recall correctly, in the end, Master Timothy used his connections with Ra’s al Ghul to find out.”

Colin didn’t know who Ra’s al Ghul was, but ignored it. “Did he?”

Dick wiggled his eyebrows and grinned. “Where do you think I got the info?”

“I’m going to kill him.” Damian deadpanned as he poked at a bottle unsuccessfully. Even as the words slipped out of his mouth, he wasn’t sure, exactly, who he was threatening. Both Drake and his grandfather were viable sacrifices.

Colin giggled gleefully, throwing his hands against his mouth in attempts to hide it. Dick winked as Alfred unlatched the container cover, revealing a medium sized cake. It was vanilla, covered with chocolate icing, and accented with red flowers. In the center, written in yellow with careful calligraphy, was Happy Birthday Damian.

Damian stared at it in surprise. His eyes shot up to stare at his friend, and then to his brother. “Grayson…” he whispered. “This was the ‘important event’ you came back to Gotham for?”

Colin and Dick’s smiles waned slightly, becoming more nostalgic. “He’d like that,” Colin murmured. “I think he’d like that a lot.”

“You think?” Dick asked. He glanced up at Alfred, and saw the man clutching the container lid to his chest, his eyes watery and far away as he stared at the dessert. Dick reached up, taking hold of the older man’s elbow. “You want some help, Alfie?”

Alfred blinked a few times before looking back at him with a small smile. “Of course not, Master Richard. Just hold the plates steady if you don’t mind.”

As Alfred cut up the cake and distributed it among the three of them, Dick and Colin continued to make small talk, mostly about Damian’s pets at the manor. In the three minute conversation, Dick learned that, apparently, a few weeks prior, Titus had gotten loose and found Colin while he was
patrolling as Abuse, just in time to bite a would-be attacker before he got a chance to shoot at the boy. While Alfred mentioned a mysterious, and very minor, injury on Titus’s paw that appeared around the same time, Dick couldn’t help but wonder if the dog hadn’t gotten a bit of ghostly assistance that night. Damian vehemently denied any involvement.

As the treat was distributed and each of them took a plate, Dick paused, looking over the city. After a few seconds, he held up his plate in mock-toast and breathed, “Happy birthday, little brother.”

“You big sap,” Damian scoffed, shifting to sit closer to the man, knees drawn up to his chin as he stared out at the city once more.

Alfred and Colin followed suit, repeating the blessing with smiles, before digging in.

“I change what I said,” Colin mumbled happily, mouth full of cake, as he pointed to the plate with his fork. “Damian would definitely like this. He’d definitely like this a lot.”

Dick laughed loudly, the sound echoing through the high-rises, while Alfred chuckled quietly. Even Damian had to smirk at his friend’s enthusiasm. “For once, Wilkes,” he said proudly. “I believe you are correct.”
Oblivion

Chapter Summary

Bruce uses the what-if machine once more.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by: ‘Oblivion’ by Bastille

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“You always take it further than I ever can.”

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“Sir, please—”

Alfred’s voice was cut off with the slam of the clock’s door, replaced instead by stomping feet. Titus opened one eye lazily, gauging Bruce’s mood. When he decided it wasn’t a good one, he lifted his head slightly, only to flop the paw it had been resting on across Damian’s ankle. Damian narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips.

“Well, I sure feel safe now.” He drawled. But he, too, didn’t get up to see what could have been wrong. Aris, however, did. At the sound of the clock opening, the little boy had jumped up, tearing across the cave at almost Flash-type speeds, and was currently stationed at the bottom of the stairs.

“He is not in uniform, brother.” Aris called. “What do you think could have upset him?”

“Could be anything.” Damian shrugged from next to the weapons cache. “Problems with the company, obnoxious media coverage, his arm candy of the month dumped him, his other children and allies. A multitude of things.”

Bruce huffed as he hit the ground floor, gliding across the stone to the computer. Aris stood at the stairs for a moment longer. “I wish to cheer him up.” He decided, turning back towards Damian, a determined pout set across his young face. “Tell me how to cheer him up, Damian.”

Damian stared back at him blankly. “Save yourself the trouble, Aris. Father is in one of his darker moods. Even Grayson never found a way to get him out of one of those.”

Aris’s pout deepened as he followed Bruce’s track to the computer. The man had sunken into it, hands steepled in front of him. From Damian’s vantage point across the cave, Bruce’s suit looked crumpled, his face slightly unshaven. To anyone else, he would look drunk. Aris all but disappeared in the screen’s strong glow, but his high voice was clear. “So, then…what do we do?”

“We do nothing.” Damian paused. “Until he gets destructive. Then we will contact Drake, and he will find someone to handle him. If I am correct, it is Catwoman’s turn to do so.”
Aris crossed his arms and scowled. “That’s stupid.”

“So is Father.” Damian shrugged again as he reached out to stroke Titus’s ear. “Sometimes.”

Bruce suddenly sat forward, still staring blankly ahead of him. Slowly, he turned, gaze passing over Aris and even over Damian and Titus, but landing somewhere nearby. His eyes looked tired and defeated, like he hadn’t slept in a long time and just found out terrible news. The ghost children followed his stare, finding the object of their father’s attention to be an odd-looking machine, tucked away in a darker corner of the cave. There seemed to be a chair in the center of the setup, half covered by a white sheet, and half surrounded by a bank of monitors – a similar, smaller, arrangement to the bat-computer.

“Oh no,” Damian breathed. He turned back just in time to see Bruce standing. “Not again. Titus!”

The dog jumped up, trotting happily over to Bruce. He swarmed his master’s feet, jumping up against his shoulders when that didn’t work. But Bruce ignored him, continuing his journey to the machine.

“What is it?” Aris asked, appearing next to Damian. “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know why Grayson and Pennyworth didn’t just dismantle that blasted thing after the last time.” Damian snapped. But he didn’t stand. For all his complaining, Damian didn’t move to stop Bruce from using it. Aris found that slightly…odd.

“The last time…for what?” Aris whispered, watching as Bruce uncovered the chair and sat in it, picking up strange looking glasses and wires. The screens around him flickered. Once again, Aris found himself wandering closer to the man.

“It’s a what-if machine.” Damian explained. “Father built it as a sort of training mechanism – at least I assume so – but most recently used it to relive my death hundreds of times over, all in the name of trying to figure out a way he could have possibly saved me from you. Resurrection Program is what the computer called it.”

“Did he?” Aris asked. “Find a way to save you, I mean.”

“He did. He and Grayson did.”

“And what was the solution?”

Damian hesitated. Long enough for Aris to turn and look at him expectantly. “They found that the only way to have saved me was to kill you.”

Although he tried to hide it, Damian watched Aris’s face drop. “…Oh.”

“Mhm.” Damian hummed. “But there were other factors involved as well. Like, for instance, the two of them needed to be there. And if you’ll recall, when I died, neither of them were. So. A multitude of changes were needed. Not just…not just that certain one.”

Titus whined as the computer spoke, introducing the simulation. It wasn’t the Resurrection Program, but Damian didn’t catch its title. Bruce sat back in the chair and the monitors popped to life.

The images showed the cave, and somehow it looked different. More aged. A dog hopped around Bruce’s feet. But it wasn’t Titus. No, this was some sort of shepherd. Australian, maybe border collie. Young and energetic, it waited patiently for Bruce to throw the ball.
Bruce himself looked…old. There was no eloquent way to put it. Gray was more than sprinkled across his hair and in the stubble around his face. Regardless, the Wayne genes treated him well. Old, but still handsome, especially in the suit and bowtie he was currently wearing.

He threw the tennis ball, and it bounced across the cave to where the memorial cases were. Damian was surprised to see that the cases had multiplied. Batgirls, Batwomen, Black Bats, two Spoiler uniforms, Huntresses, an assortment of Robins – complete with their older counterparts – and, of course, the different styles of Batmen.

Damian’s wasn’t there.

It took him a moment, but he realized that these cases weren’t of people who had died – well, some of them could be, but not all – but they were in honor of all those who had worn them. But still, Damian’s wasn’t there.

A car suddenly pulled into the cave. Once again, similar to the designs Damian was used to, but different. More modern. More flashy.

“I’m just saying,” Jason’s voice echoed as he got out of the driver’s seat. Tim opened the passenger door, shaking his head. They were both in modified Red Hood and Red Robin costumes, both looking at least ten years older. “He could be like I was. And the general consensus was that that was a terrible idea.”

“Because it was a terrible idea.” Tim muttered, peeling a mask from his face. “And he won’t. He spent too much time with Dick and Bruce – and respects them too much – to do anything like that.”

“But he still has that temper.” Jason reminded him, popping off his helmet. Jason’s hair was long, almost long enough to need a hair band. The tuft of white in his bangs seemed to have grown slightly larger.

“We all still have that temper.” Tim returned. “Since when do you not trust my judgment?”

“Since you started having faith in demon baby.” Jason deadpanned. “Face it, Timbo. You never did find that Fountain of Youth. You’re getting old, just like the rest of us. And the mind is always the first thing to go.”

“Excuse me, Master Jason.” Alfred scolded. If Bruce looked old, Alfred was ancient, sitting straight-backed in an electric wheelchair. Damian didn’t know where he was before, but he suddenly was wheeling over to the stairs the two were currently climbing. “I resent that comment.”

“Always the outlier, aren’t you, Alfred?” Jason smiled as he and Tim passed, gently placing his hand on Alfred’s tiny shoulder.

“Red Team,” Bruce hummed – both in the simulation and in real life. “What’re you two doing here?”

“That’s what I want to know.” Jason snorted. Tim rolled his eyes.

“It’s always a big deal,” Tim said, sounding almost nostalgic as he looked down at Bruce. “When a new Batman takes flight.”

Bruce smiled. “I think he’s nervous.”

“Please,” Jason called, having run into the dog. He was already sitting on the cave floor, tossing the tennis ball between his hands. “I don’t even think that kid knows what nervous means.”
“He is not a kid,” Alfred corrected, and then sounded slightly sad. “None of you boys are kids anymore.”

“Always kids at heart,” Jason chuckled.

“It’s big shoes to go into.” Tim continued with Bruce. “Dick always told me how nervous he was about it.”

“Different circumstances,” Bruce mumbled. “But…this morning. He asked if you were sure you didn’t want it.”


Bruce sighed and leaned back. “I’m always nervous for him. I’m always nervous for all of you.” He said bluntly. “He…he has already found himself a Robin.”

“Sheeeeee-it.” Jason said sarcastically. “You know who?”

“Richard Grayson’s child, perhaps?” Aris suddenly asked, turning to Damian. Damian shrugged and stood, interested by the simulation’s narrative.

“Of course.” Bruce said. “Brandon Wilkes. Age nine.”

“Wilkes…” Tim tilted his head. “You mean-”

“The son of Damian’s friend, Abuse. Yes.” Bruce’s voice was tight. “Mother died when he was four. A few months later, started showing symptoms of Venom poisoning, just like his father.”

“Hereditary?” Jason asked.

“We believe so. Brandon was never kidnapped or tortured. Lives in the suburbs. Only comes into the city for games and events.” Bruce shook his head. “After his mother died he became increasingly angry, prone to some violence. Colin was worried, so Damian offered to help him.”

“…And this was their solution?” Tim asked.

“Trial basis for now. Based on Colin’s own experiences when he was younger, Damian hopes this will give Brandon an outlet for his anger.” Bruce pursed his lips. “Colin okayed it, so…”

“Did you?” Jason snorted.

“Not my call.” Bruce sounded bitter about that. “Damian’s been training him for over a year. Swore to me and Colin he wouldn’t take him out until he was ready.”

“And is he?” Jason asked. His voice took a concerned tone. “Hell, is Damian ready? I noticed he hasn’t been out in the spandex and domino real often in…well, in the past year or so. Guess we know why now.”

Damian found himself shuffling towards the monitors. Aris glanced at him, but stayed next to their father. Bruce didn’t get a chance to answer the question, though, as they heard the door to the manor open. Titus, confused, thought it was the real door and went trotting away.

Two voices filtered through the simulation. Upbeat and quick. The images on the monitors changed as Bruce looked up to the stairs. Dick came hopping down them, his age also shining through his features, hand in hand with a little redheaded boy. Damian shadowed behind them.
He was older, late twenties. Tall and lean, like his mother, but with chiseled and handsome features like his father. His face was stoic but concerned as he watched the child in front of him.

And now Damian realized why his Robin uniform wasn’t in a case. It was being worn. He looked at one of the other monitors, the one that showed the whole scene. The cases were small, but now he realized the detail he’d overlooked. There was an empty case, right in the middle of the set.

“That’s your uniform,” Aris deduced a second later. “You would allow another child to wear your uniform?”

“It appears so.” Damian returned.

Back inside the simulation, Brandon jumped the last four steps, pulling Dick as he spun around in the cape. Damian made a beeline for where Bruce sat.

“Gotta say. I thought the trench coat getup looked weird when you were ten,” Tim grinned. “I think it works for you now.”

“Well I would hope so.” Damian rolled his eyes, holding his hand out to Bruce as the older man tried to stand. “It’s been almost twenty years since I made the design.”

Bruce clasped Damian’s hand tightly. “You ready, son?”

Damian smiled. The smile was bright and relaxed, evidence of his time spent with Dick. “Ready as I’ll ever be, Father.”

“You’ll…be fine.” Bruce breathed, looking his son up and down. “Just stay focused. Remember your training. Keep the boy close.”

“There’s a reason Colin chose me as his godfather,” Damian chuckled. “But yes. He will be kept close. At all times.”

“I’ll be at the gala on Fifth Street.” Bruce said, somewhat rushed. He began to fidget in the machine’s chair. Aris reached out to grab his arm. “I’ll have the communicator on. If anything happens, if you or Brandon need assistance do not hesitate to-”

“Father,” Damian said calmly. “This is not my first time on patrol.”

“And we’ll all be out there.” Jason added, pulling the hood over Brandon’s head as he leaned down to pet the dog. “We’ll check in on the little demon if we feel the need to.”

“And it’s not like Dick ever stopped following Damian around like a mother hen, even after all these years.” Tim laughed sympathetically. Dick made a noise of disagreement from the locker area.

“Your father has his own case to be working on.” Damian reminded him. He then raised his voice, most likely for Dick’s benefit. “As does Grayson. So you should both be too preoccupied with that to be needlessly escorting us.”

“I’ll do my best to keep them away from you,” Tim promised, clapping his hand against Damian’s shoulder. Damian gave a grateful nod and Tim turned away, complimenting Brandon’s uniform.

“We will be fine, Father.” Damian assured Bruce. “Please do not waste your evening worrying about us. Have fun at the gala. If I read the guest list correctly, there will be a miss Selina Kyle there to
Bruce laughed, but only in the simulation, as he wrapped his arms around Damian’s shoulders. When he spoke again his voice in real life was shaky. It didn’t carry through the computer. “You’ll do great, Damian. You and the boy both.”

Damian smiled and closed his eyes, leaning into the embrace. “I know we will. But thank you.”

Bruce’s voice suddenly hitched and both spirits looked at him. Out of the corner of his eye, Damian could see the simulation of his father releasing him from the hug. “I’ll be waiting up for you to get back. Just keep yourself safe.” Bruce’s fingers tightened on the armrest as a tear cascaded down his face. “I love you, Damian.”

In the program, Damian just smiled wider, pulling the cowl over his eyes. The small ginger was suddenly at his side, green mask in firmly in place across his eyes, and tugged at his hand. “Come on, Batman!”

Damian gave a final wave to Bruce as he and the child made their way to a vehicle. Tim, Jason, Alfred and Dick all watched from their various positions across the cave. Suddenly, the monitors began to flicker as Bruce sat up in the chair, moving to remove the glasses. The sound began to cut out as Brandon asked, “Will we see Nell out there tonight? Miss Stephanie said she and Nell might be working together this week…!”

The screens froze on the image of them getting into the Batmobile. Bruce tossed the glasses on the ground, covering his eyes with his hand and resting it on his knees. He whispered again, “I love you, Damian.”

Aris stood next to him, staring between the screens. Damian sighed and snapped his fingers. “Titus.”

The dog came walking back. He paused briefly at Damian’s side before going up to Bruce. He gave a soft whine and licked at Bruce’s forearm. Bruce reached out blindly, rubbing at Titus’s ears. After a few minutes he sat up with a sniff, his eyes red. “Come on, Titus. I bet Barry and J’onn could use our help decoding that signal, eh?”

Titus licked at his hand again as Bruce stood and walked away from the machine, not bothering to turn it off. As Bruce sat down at the computer once more, rubbing at his eyes, Damian turned back to Aris, who was still staring at the screens.

“I wasn’t there.” The little boy said blankly. Damian said nothing, walking up behind him. Aris glanced at him. “In the simulation, I mean. I wasn’t…Father didn’t include me in the program.”

“No, it doesn’t look like he did.” Damian nodded slowly. “But, to be fair, he didn’t include a lot of people in it that he probably should have.”

“I suppose not,” Aris mumbled quietly. His lips were twitching, and he was blinking rapidly. Damian could tell he was trying not to cry, trying not to be hurt by Bruce’s unintentional exclusion. He reached his hand up towards Damian’s. Instead of taking it, Damian leaned down to pick the boy up. Aris instantly wrapped his arms around Damian’s neck, leaning his head into the crook of his shoulder.

“The cave is dull,” Damian said gently. “Where to you wish to go?”

“Jason,” Aris said miserably. “I would like to go see the Hood and his friends, please. And then maybe to see Drake’s cat.”
Damian nodded as they turned. He was about to step off, but at the last second paused, staring at the machine. In a rash decision, he stuck his hand through the metal paneling of the computer underneath the main monitor and grabbed some wires. Using all of his strength, he ripped them out of their sockets and pulled them through the paneling, leaving a large hole. The screens flashed and sparked quietly before shutting down. He glanced once more at his father, who had opened a line to the Watchtower and was talking quietly, still trying to rub the tears from his eyes, before tossing the wires into the nearby darkness.

“I've always hated that machine,” Damian sighed angrily, as he and Aris disappeared into the air.
Lost (Hallelujah Part 1)

Chapter Summary

Grayson was never supposed to die. Never.

Chapter Notes

Based on Forever Evil #6-7. Inspired by/supplemental listening ‘Hallelujah’ by Jeff Buckley

I don’t know how satisfied I am with this bit. I wanted it sadder than I think it came out.

~~

“Love is not a victory march. It’s a cold and it's a broken hallelujah.”

~~

Earth was a mess. Damian wasn’t quite sure what happened. A rift in time and space? The Justice League – including his father – was missing? Even the world of the dead had been thrown into unrest.

With their fellow spirits turning rowdy, Nightwing became tense and overprotective. No other wraiths were allowed near them, not unless Nightwing knew who they were first. Aris was barely allowed to walk anymore, more often than not being clutched tightly to the older man’s chest. After a few days – and a near battle between Nightwing and some dead thugs – Damian suggested their group retreat to the manor. Nightwing quickly agreed.

The Wayne home was empty. Damian didn’t know where Alfred was, but wherever he went, he had taken Damian’s animals with him. Todd and his Outlaws were also who-knows-where. Aris had seen Drake and his team fly across Gotham in their ship. Damian also recalled that Grayson had been on his way back to town for some reason, but never made it, and had disappeared into thin air. It all made Damian nervous, but he hadn’t been too worried. Not yet.

Not until right now.

The three of them had been in the study. Damian was perched in the high-backed chair at the desk while Aris alternated between exploring the artifacts in the room and hanging from the light fixtures with Nightwing, when a sudden shiver went through the atmosphere. Damian sat up in the chair as Nightwing latched onto Aris, a silver baton appearing instantly in his hand.

The air continued to shimmer, and Damian thought he heard something. Another presence in the house? Impossible, Nightwing had put up layers upon layers of wards. Damian couldn’t even leave the premises if he wanted to, just as no one else could come in. He stood from the chair, shifting towards the door.
“Dami, don’t.” Nightwing whispered. “Please stay he-”

“Shh!” Damian hissed, holding his hand up. No, it wasn’t a sound, not really, but there was something. Something had changed. Something was…was different.

His stomach dropped. He didn’t know what this was, but it wasn’t good. He felt something tug at him, pull him out of the study. Before he realized it, he was running, faintly hearing Aris and Nightwing call after him.

He ran across the manor, peeking into every room or hallway that he passed. A sense of dread continued to wash over him with every step he took, and he just didn’t know why. He flew up the grand staircase. As he hit the top step, a bright light flashed through the hallway. Damian turned and covered his eyes. When he looked back, he couldn’t stop the anguished gasp that escaped his lips, nor the tears welling in his eyes.

It was Dick. Kneeled ahead of him in the hallway, half-clothed, woozy and unfocused. Damian had been a ghost long enough to recognize another.

“No…”

Dick Grayson was dead.

Dick looked up, blinking rapidly. “Damian?”

“No,” Damian repeated, taking a few steps forward. “No, no, no, no…!”

Suddenly there was a grip on Damian’s arm. Aris was beside him, holding him back.

“Let go,” Damian snapped, trying to pull away. “Aris, let go of me right now!”

“Damian, I don’t think you should…” Aris muttered, as Damian kept pulling, becoming more frantic. He glanced back at Nightwing, who was at the mouth of the steps, staring at his double in surprise.

Damian wasn’t listening. He looked back at Dick, tears falling from his wide eyes. “What happened?” He demanded. Dick glanced up, his form flickering slightly. “Grayson, what happened to you? Why are you…why are you dead?!”

Dick shook his head, and the blue leash around his neck swayed. “Crime Syndicate…Owlan…Luthor…?”

“*You’re not supposed to be dead!*” Damian shrieked. Finally, he was able to rip his arm from Aris’s hold. He quickly moved forward. Dick staggered up to stand. “You can’t…you can’t be *dead*.
That’s not allowed. Grayson, you’re not *allowed* to be dead.”

“Trust me, I didn’t get much of a choice.” Dick muttered. He smiled, despite everything, and reached out for Damian as he approached. “It happened…really fast, actually…”

Damian didn’t break his stride as he reached Dick. Instead, he pushed him. “Go back,” He growled. “Go back right now, you can’t be here.” Damian’s voice suddenly dropped to a whisper. “I don’t want you to be here.”

“I doubt that’s an option, bud…” Dick muttered, holding his hands up defensively.

Without warning, Damian grabbed the blue leash and yanked it down. “*It’s always an option.*”
Dick blinked again, then smiled, wrapping his arms around Damian’s shoulders. “It’s okay, Damian.” He murmured carefully. Damian was shaking in his arms, but slowly relaxing in the hold. “We’re together, and that’s all that matters, right? As long as you and I are toge-”

And then, Dick was gone.

Damian, who had been leaning against him, swayed slightly before dropping to his knees. Aris let out a panicked noise and was instantly at his side, clinging to his arm.

“He’s…he’s not dead…” Damian breathed heavily. “He’s alive. He died for a minute, but he’s… they brought him back. He’s alive.” Suddenly Damian turned his tear-streaked face to Nightwing, who was still frozen at the stairs. “He’s…Grayson’s alive, right?”

Nightwing just stared. He had never seen Damian look so scared, not even when Talia attacked. His face was pale, and his shoulders were shaking. Aris suddenly jumped up, taking Damian in his arms and holding him against his chest. But Damian’s fearful gaze never left Nightwing’s face.

_Not necessarily_, filtered through his mind as he smiled and said, “Of course.”

~~

Damian didn’t take the funeral well.

He watched, unmoving, as the family came and went. As his brothers and sisters and Leaguers all came and paid their respects. And then, only then, after everyone was gone, he let his own grief out.

He screamed and became violent; using his powers to slash out at trees, attack his own gravestone, and Talia’s. He stopped at Jason’s, sinking down its side instead of destroying it.

He wouldn’t let Nightwing near him. The elder spirit wasn’t sure if it was because he thought Nightwing lied to him, or if it was because he was too much like Dick, but Damian put up a barrier, watching with sharp eyes as he struggled to approach. Only Aris was allowed close. The little boy sat at Damian’s side, holding his hand as he spoke softly.

“If…if Grayson is dead,” Aris said thoughtfully, almost like he didn’t actually believe what he just said. “If his soul really is lost, then we will find him.”

“Of course we will.” Damian’s voice was cold. Damian himself had been cold, ever since Bruce returned with the bad news. “I have lost Grayson too many times already. This will not be another instance to add to the statistic.”

“And then?” Aris asked. “Will you be happy again when we find him, Damian?”

“Then I will be going after whoever killed him,” Damian said, sounding like he was making a promise. “And I will be killing them myself.”

“No, Damian.” Nightwing called, pushing against the barrier. A shimmering green appeared around his hand. “No, he…Dick wouldn’t want you to do that.”

Damian looked up at him, eyes hard and furious. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Yes, it does.” Nightwing countered, his voice almost pleading. “Talk to me, Dami. Please.”

“And what do you want me to say?” Damian roared. Aris instantly clutched him around his waist. “My brother is dead and I didn’t help him!”
There’s nothing you could have done.” Nightwing cooed.

“We don’t know that!” Damian hissed. “Grayson wasn’t supposed to die!” Out of nowhere, Damian slumped back against Jason’s gravestone. Aris squeezed him tighter. “Grayson is never supposed to die.”

“Everybody does, kiddo.” Nightwing pushed against the barrier again. “But it’s okay, because you two will be together again. As soon as we find him, wherever his soul went, you two will be together. That’s what you’ve always wanted, right?”

“No,” Damian scoffed. “What I’ve always wanted is for my idiot siblings and stubborn father to be alive.”

“But they want to be with you,” Aris added softly.

Damian crossed his arms over Aris’s. “Too bad for them.”

Aris snuggled closer to his side and looked up at him. “What else is it, brother? What else is wrong?”

“Why didn’t he just come here?” Damian whispered. “When I died, I immediately came to the manor. He…Grayson’s soul showed up here, for however brief a time before being…I assume…resurrected for a few moments. Why didn’t he just come back?”

“We’ll find him,” Aris promised. “No matter where he is. Nightwing and I will find him, and we’ll bring him back for you, Damian.”

Damian looked down at the child, his eyes soft. He smiled slightly as he wrapped an arm around Aris’s shoulders, pressing a kiss to his hair. Aris felt Damian’s fingers tense every time they heard Nightwing smack against the barrier.

“For you, Damian. So you won’t be sad anymore.” Aris muttered. “I’ll find Grayson for you.”
Waffles

Chapter Summary

Her visit wasn’t expected, but it was definitely appreciated.

Chapter Notes

I’ve never seriously written one of the girls before. Oh man, I hope I didn’t mess it all up colossally.

The bug landed on his nose. It blinked a yellow light twice, rapidly, as Tim raised his arm to swat it away. But before he could even raise his arm halfway, Desdemona leaped from the back of the sofa, smacking happily at it. Tim let out a sound of annoyance, grabbing the cat and holding her away at arm’s length. Desdemona purred happily, claws kneading lovingly at the air in between them. The firefly buzzed away, unbothered.

Tim sighed. Damian couldn’t not make an entrance, could he?

He turned his head to the right, taking in the spirit’s appearance. Damian looked…pretty rough. Angry, bitter, sad, hollow…similar to when he had first arrived in all their lives. Tim took notice of the seemingly unconscious tick – Damian was creating fists with his hands, tightening and loosening them over and over and over.

He looked up at Damian’s face. “So you’ve heard, then.”

“I’m dead, not deaf.” Damian spat. Tim felt a pang of annoyance at his tone, but didn’t act on it. The kid was grieving. They all were.

“He…didn’t find you?” Tim asked hesitantly.

“Momentarily.” Damian muttered. He must have noticed what his hands were doing, because suddenly he crossed his arms. “But that’s not what I’m here about.”

“No?”

“Someone has arrived at the manor.” Damian seemed uncertain as he looked away. “You two were close, so…so I thought you might be the best to comfort her.”

Tim killed his bike’s engine, but stayed straddled over it as he glanced over at the graveyard. She was standing there, unmoving. If Tim didn’t know the area, he’d have thought she was a memorial statue herself. (He always thought she should have had one, outside of the one in the cave, but…)

“How long as she been here?” he whispered to Damian.
Damian shrugged. “I returned to the manor at dawn this morning and she was already here. So I don’t know.”

Tim nodded, situating his bike and heading her direction. He passed Aris at the graveyard’s gate, rolling happily in the grass with Titus. The child gave Tim a quick wave, before turning to Damian, chattering quickly about something. Damian stayed back with him, letting Tim walk forward alone.

She was positioned in front of Dick’s tombstone. Or, mostly. Sort of between Dick’s and Damian’s, but facing Dick’s. With a with a sour feeling in his stomach, Tim realized for the first time just how close Dick, Damian and Jason’s graves all were to each other. It was a sobering thought, and visual, to say the least. He was a few feet behind her when she spoke. “This is messed up, Tim.”

“I know, Steph.” He responded, stopping. “When did you get back into town?”

“A while ago. I’ve been doing my own thing. Babs knew.” She said absently. Her head shook slightly. “God…I just…Tim, what the hell is Bruce doing?”

“The best he can.” The answer didn’t sit well with Tim, so he revised it. “Oh hell, I don’t even know anymore.”

“Dick was one thing. He was a big idiot and jumped into things he probably shouldn’t have. But he was an adult who made his own decisions.” Steph finally turned, looking at Tim with red-rimmed eyes and a snot-streaked face. Her voice was soft and agonized. “Damian was ten.”

“Yeah.” Tim croaked, finally crossing the distance to stand next to her. She sniffed, and, out of habit from days old, Tim wrapped his arm tightly across her shoulders. Once again, the visual of the graves hit his mind. It was…an eerie progression.

Jason’s grave was a feet behind the others. Worn and eroded, greenery taking hold of the letters as vines crossed jaggedly across them. From their position, it looked like his name had been ‘Jao od.’ Damian’s, to their left, was only slightly faded, though with an interesting amount of cracks and chips in its obelisk form that hadn’t been there at their older brother’s funeral. He didn’t even get his name carved into the stone. It was just an anonymous block of marble. Dick’s was to the right, shiny and new. His name carved carefully into the stone, gold filling in the letters, (“Only gold for the Golden Boy.” Jason had laughed bitterly) with an over-the-top epithet beneath the name.

_Beloved son, brother, friend and hero. Forever will be missed._ Tim almost gagged out loud.

His fingers tightened slightly against Stephanie’s shoulder. “You didn’t come back after…after Damian. I thought you would.”

Stephanie shrugged, leaning her head on Tim’s shoulder. “I wanted to, but…but I couldn’t take it. I can’t even tell you how many times Cass threatened to sedate me. Or how many times she actually did.” She laughed lightly. “By the time I thought I’d be okay enough to come back…Babs told me and Cass not to. She said Bruce was in a bad way, that me showing back up just…it wouldn’t be good. So I stayed away. But…with Dick and all…”

She trailed off, and Tim felt her shaky hand take hold of the hem of his shirt. He turned her, wrapping both arms tightly around her. “Shh, it’s okay, Steph…”

She shook her head sharply against his neck. “No, Tim. It’s not. There is a ten-year-old dead. Two of your brothers are dead. All because they believed in the goddamn Batman. In total, counting me? Discounting the miraculous resurrections? That’s three Robins – three kids – but four sidekicks sacrificed for the cause. How the hell is that okay, Tim?”
Tim glanced over to Damian. He wasn’t watching he and Steph, but instead smiling down at Aris as the boy clung to his hands, trying to walk up Damian’s legs, still talking aimlessly. Of course Damian wasn’t paying attention, why would he want to listen to how much pain his loss caused again? How much everyone was losing their minds over Dick’s passing? That was why he’d called Tim, after all.

Stephanie let out a light hiccup, and Tim saw Damian flinch. Ah, so he was listening. He just didn’t want to see Steph upset. That made sense. In a weird, Damian sort of way.

Stephanie suddenly pulled back, wiping at her left eye with her fingers. She turned back towards Damian’s stone, let out another soft laugh. “God, he was such a brat.”

“I’ll say,” Tim snorted.

“Dick was a brat, too. So was Jason.” Stephanie pointed at the other tombstones respectively. “Man, you were all brats.”

“Look who’s talking.” Tim countered. Stephanie’s face lit up with a smile as she stuck her tongue out. She reached out and lightly punched him on the shoulder. He feigned pain, making her laugh a little harder. As she calmed, she shifted her focus back to Dick’s marker and sighed. “Him and the kid were closer than kittens. I still haven’t figured out how, but they were. At least…Dick took Robin’s death the hardest, didn’t he?”

Tim shrugged, ignoring Aris’s shriek of glee from behind them, and Titus’s barks. “Depends on who you ask, but…I’d say so, yeah. A toss-up between him and Bruce, but really, Steph, everyone took it hard. Even I still have issues thinking about it.”

Stephanie nodded. “Then that’s the plus of this, right? They’re both dead, but at least they’re together in the afterlife, somewhere.”

Tim looked back at Damian then, letting the falsity of those words sink in. He had hoped that, too. That at the very least, Dick would be with Damian. That they would find each other in death, and both actually rest in peace. But they hadn’t found each other. And now Damian was a shell of himself with worry and Dick was probably alone.

“They’ll take care of each other.” Stephanie continued. “Them and their ‘alley-oops’ and really creepy in-sync teamwork. Just like it was always meant to be. When Cass told me Dick went back to being Nightwing, and Batbrat was going to be working with Bruce, I thought she had lost her mind. I mean, Bruce loves his baby, but anyone outside this stupid family could have seen that wasn’t a good idea…”

Stephanie started to ramble, letting out all the pent-up thoughts and ideas she’d had since she left Gotham. Tim smiled, letting her go for a few minutes, watching as Aris suddenly appeared at his side, peeking around his legs and staring at Stephanie in curiosity. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Damian move towards Dick’s grave, and sit against the stone with his head leaned back. Titus sat next to him.

After a while, he cleared his throat. “Hey, Steph. How long are you going to be in town this time?”

She paused in her rants, tongue popping into her cheek in thought. Then she grinned, looking much like the Stephanie Brown of old. “How long do you think you can handle me, Boy Wonder?”

Tim returned the grin. “There’s this diner I’ve been going to downtown. You had lunch yet?”

“Haven’t eaten since yesterday, actually. Lunch. Cass couldn’t stay long enough to have a good ol’
fashion Gotham dinner with me when she dropped me off, so I didn’t eat. Things are busy back east.” Stephanie answered. “And diner food sounds like the best thing in the world right now.”

“They serve all-day breakfasts.” Tim practically sang. “Rumor is they have some of the best waffles in the whole state.”

Stephanie dramatically threw her hand against her chest. “Why, Timothy! You sure know a way to a woman’s heart!” She suddenly started towards the manor. “Give me two seconds to find a bathroom and then we’ll go. Your treat, by the way!”

“Yeah, yeah…” Tim rolled his eyes, turning back to the spirit children. Aris was standing politely beside him, while Damian was still hunched against Dick’s grave.

“I didn’t know.” Damian muttered. “I didn’t know…Fatgirl was so distraught by it. Every time I saw her or Cassandra they seemed…fine.”

“Of course she was distraught. She was one of the few outside the house who liked you.” Tim drawled. Damian sighed and rolled his eyes. “But don’t worry about her, okay? You did the right thing, calling me. I’ll take care of her, Damian. I promise.”

“Who said she needs taken care of?” Damian scoffed, standing. Aris immediately stepped to his side, grabbing loosely at his hand. “Perhaps I had you come here so she could take care of you.”

Before Tim could even open his mouth to respond, Damian and Aris were gone. He huffed, turning back towards the driveway, where Titus was currently sprinting towards their visitor. As he approached them, Stephanie looked up.

“Do you think…” her gaze shifted back to the graveyard, but she continued patting Titus’s back. “I mean. Jason came back. I wasn’t actually dead, but I came back. Do you think…either of them have a chance?”

“I sure hope so, Steph.” Tim smiled, busyng himself with the bike. “I mean, if they don’t, what chance do you think would I have? I have too much to do to stay dead long than maybe three days.”

Stephanie laughed, punching his shoulder again.
Chapter Summary

Jason visits a Pit, and he isn’t quite sure why.

Chapter Notes

Could be companion to chapter 9. Not necessarily

Jason wasn’t surprised that he found himself here, standing on this ledge. He was just glad he didn’t really think ahead, didn’t ransack the Wayne cemetery. Because if he didn’t have the bodies, he couldn’t throw them into the waters of the Lazarus Pit below him.

The sloshing water echoed through the cavern. It was a little concerning that there had been no guards at this place. No one jumping out to attack him when he arrived. Did that mean Ra’s didn’t know it existed? Or that he did, and deemed it unworthy? Jason didn’t know. Didn’t much care, either. He shouldn’t be here. He shouldn’t be near any sort of Lazarus Pit, not in any way, shape or form.

He’d made Dick promise.

He gnashed his teeth together. It was more than unfair, more than upsetting. It was ridiculous. Was this the universe’s idea of a joke? First take the youngest, kill him in the most brutal way imaginable. Then, when everyone might barely be coming to terms with that, take the eldest too?

Yeah. Hilarious.

The green liquid steamed, fogging the area. Jason didn’t care. If it got too clouded, he would just leave. He didn’t really know why he was here anyway. Didn’t know why he had Kori and Roy stay behind. Didn’t know why he smashed his communicator on the rock outside the entrance. He didn’t have Dick’s body. As far as he was aware, Ra’s still had Talia and Damian’s. And he wasn’t injured. So it’s not like anyone was going swimming today.

Maybe he just needed a minute.

He kept his eyes trained on the water, watching bubbles burst and gurgle. If he’d have looked up, through the steam, he might have been able to make out the shape of a child. Two, potentially, at least for half a second.

Damian stood as rigidly as Jason was, though prided himself in not slouching. Not that he blamed the older man for the poor posture. Unlike Jason, however, he refused to look down, keeping his glare trained on the Red Hood in any way he could. The red bat across his chest, the guns against his hips, the accents of his leather jacket. The closest he got to glancing at the water was staring at the buckles across Jason’s boots, but that lasted only a moment, before Damian’s eyes shot back up to stare at Jason’s hair.
There was a tingle buzzing across Damian’s arms and feet. He kept feeling like something was about to pound out of his chest, his eye kept twitching. There was a desire to take a deep gulp of air.

It was a result of the proximity to the Pit. It had to be. Even without a body to be restored, the soul must be affected.

Aris hadn’t stayed. He’d tried, for Damian’s sake, but in the end the sensations were too much.

So Damian remained, for over an hour, watching his brother stare at water. He was just wondering if he should go check on the Outlaws, go reach out to Drake or even maybe his Father, when Jason shifted. He pulled a hand out of his pocket, running it across his clearly-unwashed hair.

“Fuck.” He sighed, shaking his head and rubbing a hand over his mouth. As he dropped his hand back down to his side, he clicked his tongue. “This sucks.”

Damian snorted.

“But at least I know where this one is.” Jason nodded, seemingly to himself. He turned away, heading back to the cave entrance. “Just as…you know, a back-up plan.”

Damian looked away as Jason continued to ramble, continued to justify his coming here as he shuffled down the path. When Jason’s voice was nothing but an echo, Damian closed his eyes.

The Red Hood’s mask was fractured. Jason was breaking.
Damian’s been angry since he found out Dick died. He didn’t realize how quickly he would be at his breaking point.

This one feels a little jerky/quick to me. Can’t tell if that’s a good or bad thing yet.

Supplemental listening: ‘BomBom’ by Macklemore & Ryan Lewis; maybe sorta ‘Monster’ by Imagine Dragons.

It had become their favorite pastime, Damian knew. He tried not to let it get to him, their staring and barely concealed taunts. After all, it’s not like anyone had much else to do in the afterlife, other than just bother each other.

But apparently rumor of him had spread. The ghost boy on a mission, he and his misfit crew of a baby and a masked man. Out to find one specific spirit in a sea of billions.

Damian let them have their fun. It didn’t matter what they thought or said. He was going to find Grayson regardless. But after so many weeks and months of hitting dead ends and getting ridiculed at each one, the joke was getting stale, cutting at Damian’s last nerve.

But Central City was the last straw.

“You’ll have better luck tryin’ ta come back to life.” Someone shouted as he and Aris passed through the city’s largest graveyard. The aimless group around the speaker sniggered instantly, like it was all an inside joke.

“I happen to know that that’s possible.” Damian shot back haughtily. He felt Aris step closer to his side. “Now do any of you know where the speedsters call home?”

Because surely Grayson would seek out his closest friends in death. Surely he’d stop by wherever West currently was.

“Even if we did, why would we tell you, shrimpy?” The man asked. He was young, mid-twenties at oldest with light blond hair. He was in a pair of cutoff jeans, a flat-brimmed baseball hat cocked sideways on his head, and a pair of sneakers more fit for the ‘80s. As Damian took in the other’s profile, he felt the group of spirits around them suddenly gravitating inward, creating an oval barrier around them.

“Brother, let’s go.” Aris said loudly, sounding even more superior than Damian had. “Nightwing is waiting for us.”

Damian nodded silently, turning away from the man and towards the edge of the ring.
“Yeah, brother.” The man mocked with more laughter from the crowd. Instantly there was something wrapping around Damian’s ankles. Damian looked down just in time to see a brown-glowing rope tug his feet out from under him. He landed on his chest, forehead bouncing off the ground as his hands slipped through it. “Let’s go.”

Damian grit his teeth as the group roared and Aris took hold of his arm, talking quickly. “It’s okay. He doesn’t mean anything by it. He’s just a stupid guy, so he doesn’t-”

Suddenly the man was beside them, slamming his foot into Damian’s back. Aris growled, lunging forward to try and push him off, but he wasn’t strong enough.

Damian inhaled sharply. “You will remove your foot from my being.”

The man snorted. “Or what?”

“Or you will regret it.”

The man laughed. “Sure I will, hotshot.” Aris grunted as he kept trying to push at the limb. The man’s grin disappeared. “Hey, knock it off, Junior.”

“Then get off of him!” Aris shrieked, punching at the man’s calf.

“And who’s going to make me? You?” The man chuckled, and the mob around them followed suit. When Aris didn’t stop, he sighed in annoyance, lifting his leg just long enough to kick Aris in the chest, sending him reeling back. “Get lost, kid.”

And suddenly, Damian could only see red.

Before the man could stomp his foot back down on his spine, Damian rolled to his right, jumping to his feet. The man stumbled, regaining his footing just in time for Damian to target his face with a flying kick.

The crowd stopped laughing when they noticed the long blades instantly in Damian’s hands. Damian stood over him, voice harsh as he hissed, “I warned you.”

There were shouts, and a few of the braver ones tried to come to the man’s aid as Damian began slashing downwards. He felt the air shift, noticed the dirt and grass around them rippling every time he hit his target. The man let loose an agonizing cry from beneath him, but Damian was unfazed.

He felt a grip on his arm yanking him backwards. Without thinking, he spun around, burying his blade in the offending hand. Another hand against his chest, he threw his elbow backwards.

It was a fight they wanted – a fight his fellow spirits had wanted for ages – and it was a fight they were going to get.

The other combatants quickly manifested their own weapons, but it didn’t matter, Damian was able to out-maneuver each of them with ease. He found himself not caring if his enemies were destroyed, so long as they went down.

“Brother!”

Damian couldn’t help but be pleased with himself, watching as he was able to create different weapons in a split second. None of the others were that fast. None of them even came close.

“Brother!”
The crowd began to clear, either from Damian’s success in battle or from the other ghosts retreating, and finally Damian found the man who had begun this whole thing. Running away like the coward he was, glancing back every so often just to make sure Damian was still preoccupied.

There was fear obvious on his face, and Damian found himself smiling as he punched a teenage who came at him with a tennis racket. Oh, how he missed instilling terror into everyone he crossed.

“Damian!”

When he stepped forward to chase the man, he felt a tug on his shirt. On reflex, he turned, lashing out with the hilt of his dagger. But this hit was different. Even as he moved, he could feel his body resisting, screaming not to go through with it. It was only after he made contact that he came back to his own mind and realized why.

Aris was stumbling backwards away from him, a hand clapped against his cheek as his eyes filled with tears.

“S-stop…” The younger’s voice wavered as Damian’s blades disappeared.

Someone took hold of Damian’s neck, intending to drag him backwards, but the magic, though quickly diminishing, was still flowing through Damian’s body, and he didn’t budge. “Gotcha, ya brat!”

Aris’s lip quivered, hand not dropping from his face. “You don’t…h-have to fight them…”

“If you know what’s good for you, sir,” Damian said blankly, not turning towards his attacker. “You and all your friends will leave the premises immediately.”

The squeezing arm froze then slowly loosened. A few seconds later the voices sounded far away. Anyone who remained kept their distance, making it obvious their impromptu battle was done.

“Oh, little one…” Damian whispered, taking a small step forward. “I’m so sorry. I just…”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know. You were mad. You had every right to be.” Aris smiled, even through the brimming tears. He crossed the distance to Damian, insisting even as Damian tried to back away. “But I promised Jason I would protect you from becoming a vengeful spirit like Mother did. So that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Damian sighed, not exactly feeling reassured by the younger’s resolve. He’d hit Aris. He didn’t know it was Aris, but that was no excuse. He hit him. He hit his brother. He hit a child. How could he...

But he could feel it, he could feel that poisonous power beating beneath his fingers. Could see the evidence in the ground around them. There were divots in the grass, plants and vases at grave markers blown over. Aris was right, he was following in Talia’s footsteps, letting his anger at...well, everything rule his actions, turn him into that child he was before he came to Gotham. Turning him into a monster.

He didn’t want to go back to that. He couldn’t.

But he was letting the darkness in. Dick’s death and disappearance was affecting him more than he let on. The journey to find his mentor was more draining than he imagined. Being away from his father and Gotham was stressful. What if something happened to them while he was gone?

He was weak, an embarrassment, a failure, a-
He closed his eyes as he felt his knees hit the ground, and clung to the smaller boy when Aris wrapped his arms around Damian’s neck.

“Do not cry, Brother. It’s okay.” Aris cooed, sounding more like Dick Grayson than he had any business to. “We will find Richard for you soon. And when we do, everything will go back to as it was.”

Damian nodded against the boy’s shoulder.

“We’ll get you happy again,” Aris promised, pushing away from Damian and pulling him to his feet by his hands. Damian couldn’t help but grimace at the swelling of the younger’s cheek. Aris smiled brightly anyway. “Don’t worry about a thing.”
Without

Chapter Summary

“What would you do without me?”

What would you do without me?

It was a joke, one created on a whim back when they were the Dynamic Duo. When they were Batman and Robin, the only Batman and Robin. When his father was dead, Drake was never around, the girls did their thing and Todd was in prison. Back when all they had was each other, it was an inside joke between the only two people in the room.

Damian never thought it would be anything but rhetorical.

What would you do without me?

Hit a spiraling depression, almost commit suicide, get angry, die at the hands of otherworldly threats, disappear as if he never existed. That’s what Grayson did without him.

Get almost crippled by guilt, take care of his murderer, bother Drake, also become angry, get an army of dead assassins sent after his family, find himself on the verge of being a vengeful spirit. That’s what he did without Grayson.

But it wasn’t just him. Wasn’t just them. The other Dick Grayson was going through the same, without his own Damian Wayne. It seemed no matter the universe, no matter the world, the outcome was identical.

They grew to love each other, and were then suddenly, violently, ripped apart without reason. Never to be together again, no matter how much they needed each other.

Damian could see it in how Nightwing acted. He babied Aris, always stuck close to Damian when he could, as if that was his punishment. That was his debt to be repaid – he left his own little brother all alone, it was his duty to make sure this one wasn’t forced to be so as well.

But it was still taking its toll, Damian could see it. Sure, Nightwing laughed and joked almost constantly, but it was in the quiet moments, the darker ones. When Aris wasn’t looking, and Nightwing thought Damian wasn’t either. His face would drop, eyes go blank as he watched Damian and his clone move about. He would look so pained, like someone had taken a vital organ. And maybe they had, now that Damian thought about it.

Because Nightwing’s predicament was worse than Damian’s. He and his brother were separated by more than just death, more than just the other disappeared. They were separated by universes. By worlds and voids and stars. And the longer Nightwing was here, the more unlikely it seemed that they would ever find a way to send him back.

What would you do without me?

Nightwing would do nothing. Because he couldn’t. He wasn’t just taken from his little brother, he was taken from his father too. His friends, his home, his planet. At this rate he wasn’t going to see
any of them ever again.

Someone – his death could be blamed, or maybe his journey here – did take a vital organ. It took his heart. And Damian and Aris were a poor substitute to replace it.

Not that Damian took offense to it. Nightwing was an equally terrible stand-in for Dick Grayson as well.

Titus whined from his side, knocking his muzzle against Damian’s temple. Damian glanced over, only able to see the dog in midnight’s darkness due to the obnoxious fireflies that had surrounded him and his crew. Aris and Nightwing were lying in the yard before them, pointing up at the stars and trying to differentiate them from the insects around them. Damian was a few feet away, Titus wrapped around him like a warm blanket.

Bruce wasn’t home. Damian had only returned to see how his father was taking the death of another one of his children. But only Alfred was here at the manor. Alfred who was, once again, grieving by himself.

He gave Titus a small smile, one he knew the dog didn’t buy for a second, and turned to look at the graveyard. He could see Dick’s marker, shiny and new near his own destroyed one. He hated it. Hated everything about it. Wished his father would destroy it like when the man had destroyed his.

“Idiot.” Damian mumbled as Titus pushed against his face once more. “You were trained better than to get yourself killed like that.”

There was no venom to the barb, but he said it anyway, even as Titus curled tighter around him, trying to lay his head in Damian’s lap.

“It was a joke.” Damian continued, feeling his lip quiver, tears gather in his eyes even as he blinked them away. “Your death was a joke. It was pathetic. It was…”

On Damian’s next blink, he just kept his eyes closed. He turned roughly, burying his face against Titus’s flank as he hugged his neck. He hated it. Hated that tombstone, hated that graveyard. He hated Dick’s murderers, hated the Justice League for not saving him, hated Dick for dying in the first place.

A memory popped into his mind. From right before he died. Before the battle, before his last heartfelt conversation with his brother. Dick bursting through the door on his bike, dragging Damian to safety. Saying that stupid line, the one Damian had just said to him not twenty minutes before.

Damian squeezed his eyes tighter, squeezed Titus’s neck harder. Ignored Nightwing concerned call of, “Dami, you okay?”

All he could see was Dick’s stupid smile as they landed in a heap behind that wall. The amusement in his voice as he shouted over the gunfire:

“What would you do without me?”

Damian had never wanted to find out.
Puppies

Chapter Summary

He liked playing with the boy. Because when he played with the boy, his boy came to play, too.

Chapter Notes

Based off a program my university used to do, where they’d bring in shelter dogs for students to play with to relieve stress. Also, again, on the ‘sixth sense’ animals are believed to have.

Titus POV

He loved when the boy came over. He would hear the car of the one who gives them food and feel his tail wag unconsciously. He figured out that the boy would show up on a schedule, always on the day the one who gives them food called ‘hump day.’ Even Alfred and Desdemona, when she was around, would purr excitedly as they hopped up on the windowsill to watch him arrive.

After all, his boy liked the boy. The boy always made his boy smile, so the boy would make him smile too.

Besides, when the boy came over that meant playtime. That meant running and chasing and catching and kisses. It also meant extra treats, but Titus liked the kisses better. The boy would laugh a lot when Titus kissed him. And when the boy kissed Titus, it reminded him of his boy, and that made Titus very happy.

There used to be a girl who came with the boy. She was funny, and talked about things his boy used to, but made Titus wait for treats or to give her kisses. She hadn’t been around in a while. He missed her, but it was okay, so long as the boy kept coming. If the boy kept coming, Titus would just give him all the kisses he would have given the girl. Titus didn’t mean to feel it, but having the boy come play was most important.

Because when the boy came to play, a lot of times Damian came to play, too.

Today was different, though. When the one who gives them food announced that today was hump day at breakfast, Titus got excited and sat in the front room, watching the driveway for hours, as he always did. But the boy – the one who gives them food called him Master Colin – never came. Titus began to worry. What if something happened, what if the same thing that happened to his boy happened to the boy, and oh no, oh no that can’t happen. Titus won’t let that happen. Master must be told right away! Master must fix it before the boy is missing and see-through like his-

“Come Titus.” The one who gives them food called. “It’s time to go for a ride.”

He dropped his ears, whining a little as he shuffled after the food-giver. Rides were fun, but what if
the boy came while they were out?

He sat in the front seat, and stuck his head out the window when it was opened, but he didn’t enjoy it as he normally did. He didn’t bite at the falling leaves or bark at the birds overhead. He was too worried. Maybe the boy was with the girl, but then the girl had disappeared too…

The car stopped at the park, but Titus wasn’t excited to see it. He sat in the passenger seat, head drooped, even when the food-giver opened the door.

“What’s gotten into you, pup?” He asked, crouching and petting Titus’s head. Titus could only whine pathetically.

“Alfred!”

Titus’s head shot up so fast, he banged it against the roof. The food-giver smiled before standing and turning. When he did, Titus could see the boy, bundled up in that old flannel jacket, jogging towards them. Titus barked in triumph, leaping from the car and jumping up against the boy’s chest as soon as he was close enough. He awkwardly wrapped his paws around the boy’s neck, ferociously licking at his face.

“Oof! Whoa!” The boy laughed, and it was music to Titus’s ears. Titus finally calmed as the boy unwrapped himself. He sat, barely, tail wagging viciously as he let out little noises. The boy continued to smile, rubbing at Titus’s head. “You miss me, buddy?”

“Yes!” Titus barked. “You’re safe! You’re not missing! You didn’t go away!”

“Sorry for the inconvenience, Alfred.” The boy was saying, looking up at the food-giver. “It’s a program for the orphanage, and Sister Agnes said she preferred if I didn’t leave in the middle. She said she thinks it’s…good for me.”

“Not a problem at all, Master Colin.” The food-giver smiled. “I just thank you for including Titus in your events.”

“He lives in a house with a bunch of cats. And, well…bats, I guess.” The boy laughed at himself, scratching underneath Titus’s chin. “He’s got to get out sometimes with his own kind. Would you like to stay?”

“Unfortunately I cannot. Speaking of bats…” the food-giver rolled his eyes. “If I don’t check on Master Bruce’s injuries I fear he won’t either. Timothy will be by to pick Titus up later, and requests you join him for dinner. Nothing fancy. Probably just a pizza or Chinese take away.”

The boy nodded, taking Titus’s leash from the food-giver and hooking it on. They waited until the food-giver drove away before turning back to the park. “You ready to make some new friends, Titus?”

He didn’t care. He was with the boy, and the boy was safe.

Instead of walking around the pond, or even taking the path, the boy led him off onto the grass. Before Titus could woof in confusion or investigate, he heard a chorus of little yips and more human laughter. The further onto the grass they moved, the more a scent hit Titus’s nose. A bunch of humans, like the boy and his boy, and also the smell of…

“Oh, I don’t know, Colin…” a new voice said. Old, like the food-giver, but higher. Titus looked up to see a woman in mostly black, staring down at him in concern. He wagged his tail, hoping it would calm any fears she had. “He’s a little…well, bigger than I imagined. Are you sure he won’t step on
them on accident?"

“He’s really gentle, Sister. I promise.” The boy swore. “There’s a younger cat at his house, well sometimes two, and he’s really good with them. I figured it wouldn’t be that different with puppies, you know?”

The woman continued to stare at him. Titus wagged his tail harder.

“And he…needs some socialization. He’s cooped up in a house all day.” The boy continued. “I promise, if he gets too rough with them, I’ll take him out. Right away.”

“How you got convinced Bruce Wayne to let you play with his dog, I’ll never know…” The woman seemed fondly exasperated. “But he’s your responsibility, Colin. Remember that.”

“Yes, Sister.” The boy smiled, then turned towards a little gated area. There were children inside, all laughing and squealing. But amongst those children were little blobs of fur and clumsiness. Brown fur, yellow fur, silver fur, and even patterned. They were all dogs, all like Titus, but smaller.

One had already spotted Titus through the fence and came running over. Titus couldn’t help himself. He jumped forward, almost knocking the boy down, and began sniffing eagerly. The puppy did the same, tail whipping around excitedly.


“Hello.” Titus returned.

“Come play.” The puppy jumped back, sticking its tail in the air, front legs pressed to the ground. Suddenly it jumped, but got tangled in its own chubby legs, and fell onto its side. It looked up at Titus again. “Come play with me.”

Titus gave it his best doggy grin as the boy pulled him away. “Okay.”

The boy pulled him through the fence’s gate and immediately ordered him to sit. Titus complied, and the boy kneeled in front of him. “Okay, Titus.” He started, unhooking the leash. “You have to be on your best behavior, okay? Don’t be too rough with the puppies. It took a lot to convince Sister Agnes and the shelter people to let you in here, so it won’t take much for them to kick you out.”

Titus leaned forward and kissed the boy’s nose. The boy laughed and held Titus’s head in his hands, pecking him between the eyes.

“You’ll do great.” The boy grinned. Suddenly he let out a laugh, and turned his head. Titus peeked around him to see not only the puppy he had talked to, but three others trying to climb the boy’s legs and back. The boy shifted so he was sitting and the puppies rejoiced, jumping up at the boy’s neck and tugging at his shoelaces.

Titus glanced up and saw other puppies had noticed his arrival. Slowly, he lowered himself onto his stomach. The other puppies came running, jumping on his flank and licking at his muzzle. The other children had noticed Titus too, and quickly followed their furry counterparts.

“Cool dog, Wilkes!”

“He’s so big!”

“Did you ride him here? He looks like a horse!”
“The nuns aren’t going to let you keep him, you know!”

The boy laughed and talked with the children around him. Titus stayed close to his side, but didn’t pay attention. He was too amused by the puppies rolling around him. They nipped at his toes and at his tail. One brave puppy even got as far as getting a hold of Titus’s ear, before ungracefully tumbling back to the ground. But she was okay. Titus checked.

The puppies were all different sizes and colors, but Titus found that he loved them all already anyway. They were cute, and thought they were tough. But it wasn’t until one of the smallest ones – a little tan pup with short plump legs – curled up at his side to take a nap that a realization came to him.

They reminded him of Damian. Because Damian was his boy. Damian was his pup. Damian was small and tough and liked cuddling for naps.

He let out an involuntary whine and laid his head down. Suddenly he was tired. The human children didn’t seem to hear him, the boy included, but the puppies did. Instantly all of them (minus the sleeping one) swarmed his face, licking and chirping and biting at his fur in comfort.

“Don’t be sad!”

“We’ll make you feel better!”

“You can be our new mom! Maybe that will help!”

“We love you new mom! We love you soooo much!”

And Titus appreciated it, he did. He kissed them all back and let them all keep climbing on top of him. But he didn’t feel better until he felt the boy’s hand on his head, gently petting behind his ears. He closed his eyes then, feeling content and safe, at least for th-

“Who’s that?”

“It’s a new human!”

“Was he here the whole time?”

“I didn’t see him! But the lady in the dress thing didn’t open the gate!”

“I haven’t played with that human yet. I want to play with that human!”

“Me too, me too!”

Titus opened one eye in curiosity as some of the puppies jumped off of him and scurried away. None of the humans reacted, including the boy, though were curious as the fluffy mob took off across the enclosure.

“What do they see, do you think?”

“Probably the birds. Maybe a squirrel or something.”

Titus raised his head, and felt his face explode into a grin. Knew it, he knew it. His boy almost always showed up when he was with the boy.

Slowly, so as not to alarm the other human children, Titus stood and stretched, trotting over to where
Damian was crouched, letting the excited puppies sniff at his hands.

“You were never this small.” Damian quipped. He didn’t look well. There were dark circles under his eyes, his gaze unfocused. Titus cocked his head, maneuvering between the puppies. He licked Damian’s cheek, and kept doing so until his boy smiled at him. “I’m alright, Titus. I’m fine.”

One of the puppies tried to launch itself at Damian’s chest, but ended up going through him and headfirst into the chain-link fence. It gave out a painful yelp when as it landed, pawing at it’s own head.

“Careful, little babies.” Titus murmured. He nosed at the puppy, pushing it back to the group before lying down behind Damian. Damian took the hint and sat back, leaning against Titus’s flank. Now when the puppies tried and failed to climb on his boy, he would be there to cushion them from the fall.

It wasn’t long before the other human children migrated back to the puppies. It was a good thing, too, as many of the puppies were now getting worn out, and needed a warm place to sleep. Nowhere warmer than a human child’s arms, that’s what Titus thought.

The boy came and sat at Titus’s front once more, smiling when Titus rested his head against his lap. The boy and Damian were both petting his head and, for the first time in a while, Titus felt at peace.

“Did you have fun today, Titus?” The boy asked gently. Titus wagged his tail. “Me, too.”

“You take care of him, okay Titus?” Damian whispered. “You take care of Wilkes. You protect him as much as you can. So he doesn’t end up like…”

His boy’s voice cut out then, but that was okay. Titus knew who he was talking about. After all, his boy hadn’t been right since then. Since the smiling man died. Since the one they called Grayson went away.

But that wasn’t right. Because the smiling man didn’t die. He still-

“Promise, Titus?”

He huffed in agreement. Damian smiled, looking down as a little smushed-face puppy tried to wedge underneath Damian’s arm.

“Man, I didn’t think they’d love you this much.” The boy laughed, scratching at Titus’s ear as the last few puppies curled up against Titus’s legs to sleep. The boy’s smile turned wistful. “Damian would…he’d be real proud of you.”

Titus just wagged his tail.

“You’re a good boy, Titus.” The boy sighed, leaning back against the fence. Titus closed his eyes. “A very good boy.”

He heard Damian hum, felt him drop his head back against Titus’s side. “What Wilkes said.”
Chapter Summary

The search is over. For both of them.

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"The minor fall and the major lift."

~~

They were just sitting in Cassandra’s apartment. The girl in question was curled up on the sofa with Stephanie, two large pizzas on the table in front of them, as they marathoned very poor quality – at least in Damian’s opinion – romance films. Damian didn’t want to be here, he wanted to be out, chasing down leads for Grayson, checking on his father and his friends, be doing anything but sitting on the dirty carpet doing nothing.

But Nightwing insisted, practically ordered that the three of them take a day or two off. And when Aris sat next to him on the floor, leaning lovingly against Damian’s arm, Damian couldn’t find it in himself to say no.

He was all Aris had. He had to remember that. He couldn’t be selfish. Couldn’t let his self-destruction and mission of anger leave the child alone.

So to say that Damian and the others were surprised when Martha Wayne appeared in front of the television would be an understatement.

“Grandmother, what’re yo-” Was all Damian was able to say before Martha lunged at him, swooping him up in her arms. Her hand was suddenly on his face, patting his cheek, running through his hair, turning his head back and forth.

There was a light thump as Nightwing, who had been floating behind the girls on the sofa, dropped back down to the floor. Cassandra only glanced at the sound. “Martha-”

“Grandmother!” Aris shouted, tugging on Martha’s jacket as she continued her frantic examination. “What is it? What’s wrong? Where’s Grandfather?”

“You’re here.” Martha muttered as her eyes slowed their frantic search. She met Damian’s gaze. “You’re still here. You’re...you’re still dead.”

“Well of course I am.” Damian didn’t mean to snap as he struggled out of her hold. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Martha seemed reluctant to let him go, and her thought process was almost visible as her stare moved up to Nightwing. “Have you found Richard yet?”

“No, ma’am.” Nightwing said gently, stepping forward and putting a hand on Damian’s shoulder. “Martha, what’s going on?”
“I think you’re going to want to come with me.” Martha’s voice was shaky as she turned and picked up Aris. She seemed flustered. The only analogy Damian could think of was that she looked like she’d seen a ghost.

Damian and Nightwing glanced at each other. This couldn’t be good.

~

Their destination was England, Damian could tell right away. He didn’t recognize the field they were in, nor the large building about a half mile away, but he recognized the signs.

Thomas Wayne stood a few yards off, staring at that giant building, though when they arrived he turned, smiling at Aris and Damian.

“Grandfather, what’s goi-” Damian started, but was again cut off, as Thomas’s face hardened as he faced Nightwing.

“My boy,” Thomas muttered, walking quickly up to Nightwing. He first took hold of the masked man’s shoulders, then cupped his face. “My boy, I need you to remain calm. Can you do that for me? Stay calm and keep yourself together?”

“Thomas, what is going on?” Nightwing barked, taking the man’s hands away from his person.

“What has you two so rattled?”

“Thomas, take them both.” Martha whispered. “Have them both see at the same time.”

“Wherever I go, Aris goes.” Damian claimed, almost before Martha had finished speaking. Aris nodded, squirming until Martha put him down, then ran to Damian’s side, clutching at his hand.

“Now, what is it? What do we need to see?”

The Waynes didn’t argue. Instead, Thomas held his hand out to Martha, who took it, and turned towards the large building. They didn’t zap themselves there, or even float. They just walked.

Nobody spoke as they moved, and Nightwing stuck close behind the boys. As they neared the building, Damian suddenly realized that he did know it. Brown had been sent on a mission here, back before…well, everything. St. Hadrian’s. A school for girls that also doubled as a training base for the organization Spyral.

“This way,” Thomas murmured as they got on the grounds. Once more, they didn’t use their powers, they walked like the human beings they once were. They shifted through the walls, sure, but otherwise took the hallways and climbed the stairs.

With every step, every second they walked, Damian’s stomach turned. What was it? What was going on? Why did his grandmother suddenly believe he was alive? What did any of this have to do with Nightwing?

They suddenly ended up in a hallway that Damian noticed would be very hard to get to for a living person. Hidden, then. He wasn’t surprised. St. Hadrian’s was an odd place, if he remembered Batman’s files on it correctly.

But at the corner, they stopped, and his grandparents turned back towards them. “Second door on the left,” Thomas said softly, with a small smile. Damian glanced down, saw light spilling out from under the door. “I advise Nightwing goes first, but it is up you three.”

“Together.” Aris said, almost suggested, looking up at Nightwing.
“Together.” Nightwing agreed grimly. Aris smiled and held his other hand up. Nightwing took it, almost gratefully, and Aris stepped forward.

Since when was the smallest of them the bravest?

They walked through the door in a trail. First Nightwing, then Aris and finally Damian. But Damian closed his eyes to go through the wood, and kept them closed even when he knew he was free of the material.

If Aris asked, he’d have admitted it. He was scared. He was terrified of what he would see, what had unnerved his grandparents so.

But it was at Nightwing’s gasp, Nightwing’s whisper of “Oh…oh my god…” that he forced his eyes open.

They were in a small bedroom, not much bigger than a closet, really. It only had a desk, a chair and a bed. The desk was in the far corner, being completely ignored. The chair had been pulled out and occupied, currently stationed at the side of the mattress.

“This is…someone tell me this is real.” Nightwing’s voice was hoarse as he released Aris’s hand and stepped ahead. “Dami, please tell me this is real.”

“I...only if you tell me it’s real first, Nightwing.” Damian returned. But he didn’t move forward. Instead, he stayed at the door, eyes wide as he clutched Aris’s hand tightly.

“It is.” Aris sounded…triumphant. He shook Damian’s arm as he jumped up and down. “Oh, Nightwing, Brother…it’s real!”

And it was. It was the real Dick Grayson sitting in that chair, just as it was the real Damian Wayne lying unconscious in the bed. Both breathing. Both alive.

But the breathing Damian was different. He looked older, thirteen or fourteen, with a more prominent shadow of brown in his dark hair.

By the looks of it, Grayson knew, too. Based on his hunched back and clasped hands resting on his mouth, he knew that this wasn’t his Damian. Wasn’t his Robin. But that wasn’t going to stop him from keeping guard over him like he was.

“That’s him. Oh, god, Dami, that’s him.” Nightwing’s voice was shifting from shock to joy as he moved forward. He turned back to Damian only once, tears already spilling over his mask. “Dami, that’s my brother!”

Damian nodded absently, still staring at Dick. That was why. That was why Grayson’s spirit never found them in the afterlife. Because he wasn’t there at all. He wasn’t dead. When he had disappeared from the manor all those months ago, it was because he was brought back to life, and was kept that way.

But if he was alive, then why did his Father tell everyone otherwise? Why did they have a funeral? Who’s body did they bury?

His knees wobbled, and Damian found himself clinging to Aris’s hand with both of his, afraid that if he let go he’d slip through the floor. If he let go, the scene in front of him would vanish, and the one thing he’d been searching for – the one thing both he and Nightwing had been searching for – would be lost all over again, potentially this time for good.
Suddenly Dick shifted, bowing his head against his hands and closing his eyes. “Please, Damian.”
He breathed. “Please just...let your presence be known. I know this isn’t you, not really. I know this
is... Please. Just...let me know you’re here, too.”

Dick shifted again, his sad blue eyes staring at the sleeping boy in his bed, and Damian instantly saw
the detail he overlooked. There was a nightstand next to the bed, and on it sat two flashlights.

Even in his euphoria, Nightwing heard Dick’s plea and turned towards the lights. “No!” Damian
shouted, releasing Aris’s hand and running forward. “No, I...I want to.”

Nightwing held his hands up in surrender, backing up until he fell gently onto the side of the bed.
Slowly, he reached out, taking hold of the living Damian’s fingertips.

Damian watched him for a moment, before looking down at the two objects. Unnecessary as it was,
Damian slowly inhaled and exhaled before he reached out and tapped the light on the left.

And there was a relief in that. A relief in the whiteness jumping on, shining against Dick’s arm.
There was a relief in how fast Dick turned, how fast a thankful smile washed over his face.

“Oh, thank god.” Dick exclaimed, dropping his head into the cradle of his hands. “I mean...not
thank god. I just mean...it’s been so long, Damian. I thought...I don’t even know what I thought. I
thought something had happened to you, I thought you were gone for good. I thought...” Dick
suddenly raised his head once more, glancing at the boy asleep. “Is...is Nightwing here? The other
me?”

Damian hit the same light, deciding it was the one that would stand for yes.

“Is this his...”

“Tell him yes.” Nightwing stated before Dick finished. He never took his eyes off the unconscious
teenager in the bed, moving his hand up to hold the boy’s cheek. “Yes, this is my brother. This is my
Damian.”

Damian obliged.

Dick exhaled again. “Thought so.” He nodded. “I found him in London. He was bleeding and
running from...something. I didn’t get to ask him what before he passed out. When he saw me, he...
I think it was shock. And that plus the blood loss...he went down like a ton of bricks.”

Damian didn’t hit the torch, too busy taking in Dick’s face. He looked tired and worn out. But worst
of all, he looked unhappy, and desperately so. It was an awfully ugly emotion on his features.

Dick finally stood, leaning over the bed to take the boy’s pulse and fix his blankets before moving
over to the window. Damian put all the ghostly power he could into his hand, spinning one of the
flashlights around to follow the man.

“They all think I’m dead. Bruce believes it’s better right now if they think I’m dead. But you
probably already know that.” Dick sighed. “Did you know I wasn’t?”

Damian hit the light, turning it off.

“...Guess that explains why the flashlight thing didn’t work for the past couple months.” Dick
surmised. “And I guess it would be the same answer for if you told Tim I was alive, or were ever
tempted to.”
The sleeping Damian suddenly stirred, groaning slightly in his sleep. Nightwing sat forward, cooing at the boy as he ran his hand over his head. The boy calmed almost instantly.

“Shit.” Dick muttered, running his hand through his hair. Damian faintly registered Aris going to sit on the bed, staring down at the other-Damian with curiosity. “I just feel like I haven’t talked to anyone in so long.”

Damian shifted closer, watching the older man carefully. His eyes were unfocused on the grounds below them, but he wasn’t crying. Not like Nightwing behind them. Maybe he was just too exhausted to. Heavens knew Damian was.

“I don’t know what I’m going to say to him, Damian.” Dick admitted with a sniff. “When he wakes up. He’s going to be a mess. Hell, I’m going to be a mess.”

Damian glanced back at the bed. Nightwing had moved. He was now sitting at the top of the bed, back against the wall and Aris sitting on his lap as he continued to stroke at his brother’s hair.

“It’s going to hurt him.” Dick continued. By the change in his tone, Damian could tell Dick was looking at the bed, too. “It’s going to hurt him so much to realize that I’m not who he thinks I am.”

“But you’ll get him through it, Grayson.” Damian said absently. “It will hurt, but he’ll figure out quite quickly that you’re close enough. No matter what universe, what version of you it is, you fix things. You fix people. It’s just…what you do.”

“Hopefully Helena will let him stay.” Dick grumbled. “Let me take care of him.”

Damian smirked. “You’ll keep him anyway.”

“Not like she can stop me.” Dick scoffed. “But I…I just hope I’ll be able to send him back home. I’m sure his Bruce is missing him a lot.”

From what Nightwing had told him of his universe, Damian sorely doubted it.

“Speaking of,” Dick inhaled. “I should probably call your dad. Give him an update, or report or something.” Dick blew out, turning and sliding down the wall, sitting on the floor beneath the sill.

“Eh, I’ll do it tomorrow. Maybe after a nap. Or twelve.”

Damian narrowed his eyes.

“Haven’t slept in like three days. Maybe twelve naps won’t even cover it.”

Damian rolled his eyes, but plopped down on the ground next to his brother.

“Sleep, Grayson.” Damian commanded, unconsciously leaning against Dick’s arm, much like how Aris did to him. He could see the happy tears still silently cascading down Nightwing’s face, even from where he sat on the floor. Suddenly he glanced over to see Thomas and Martha finally entering the room, the tiny smiles still on their faces. “We will watch the child until you wake up.”

The elder Waynes floated to the bed, Martha, of course, babbling quietly as she fawned over the new arrival. As they did, Aris gently dislodged from Nightwing’s lap, hopping from the bed and coming over to Damian and Dick. He glanced between them before crouching in front of Damian, head cocked in question.

“We found him, Brother.” Aris stated. “We found Grayson for you.”
“We did.” Damian concurred lightly, turning his gaze down to his clone. “Thank you.”

“You said if we found him, you would be happy again.” Aris muttered hesitantly. “Are…are you happy now, Damian?”

Damian let out a light chuckle and opened his arms. Aris didn’t need any more invitation, lunging forward and squeezing Damian’s torso. “Extremely.”

As Aris settled in Damian’s hold, Dick continued to stare at the bed, watching the rise and fall of the other Damian’s breathing. He couldn’t see anything but the conked out teen, but he felt that the room was full. Full of people, full of love and full of a lot of happiness. After another moment’s pause, and a cool sensation on his arm, he felt the corner of his mouth twitch upwards. “Thanks for finding me again, Damian.” he whispered. “I’m sure you’re annoyed because I probably say it all the time but…I missed you.”

Damian closed his eyes, feeling the last tendrils of tension leave his body, slowly morph into warmth. Grayson was no longer disappeared, no longer dead. He was right here, right with Damian, alive and well. Nightwing finally found a piece of his old life, was finally reunited with his own little brother, however strange the circumstances. And Aris…was just Aris. Soaking in the victory of having his two travel companions find what they thought they had lost forever.

He felt a smile spread on his face, and for once didn’t try to hide it as he hugged Aris tighter to his chest.

“But as much as I missed you.”
When Robin woke up…it didn’t go as well as hoped.

It took Dick over an hour to convince the other Damian that he wasn’t a clone, he wasn’t a trick. He was Dick Grayson. Not this boy’s Dick Grayson, but another, one who understood what he was going through. One who was also trying to deal with the loss of his most beloved brother.

After that, Robin’s walls completely crumbled. His face was flooded with tears, apologies falling out of his mouth like vomit. Dick just held him close, throwing out an “it’s okay”, “it’s not your fault, bud”, “he doesn’t blame you, I know he never would” anytime Robin stopped to suck in a breath.

Nightwing was crouched near where the boy had collapsed to the ground, where Dick was currently trying to hold all his pieces together. He alternated between running a hand over Robin’s hair and lightly stroking his fingers up and down Robin’s arm. Anything in hopes that the boy would feel him, would know he was there, would feel safe on all sides.

Damian and Aris remained perched on Dick’s bed, Aris’s face buried in Damian’s side, arms clinging to his torso.

“I don’t like it, seeing you so upset.” Aris had claimed softly when Damian asked, shutting his eyes and turning his head away from the scene before them. “No matter which you it is.”

It was another hour at least before Robin calmed enough to explain what was going on, and what had brought him to their Earth. Apparently there had been some sort of conflict. He kept saying things like ‘Superman’s army’ and ‘Batman’s resistance’ but never clarified, so Dick didn’t ask. Nightwing, however, became concerned, his face growing more and more worried as Robin went on.

He explained that magic had been involved in the fight, that some sort of beast had been summoned, a portal opened. It had been opened behind him, and he couldn’t stop himself before he fell into it. And in the haze of battle and injury, upon arrival, he couldn’t decipher if the creature had followed him or not, so just assumed it had and stayed on the offense, running for his life.

When he finished, Dick explained that whatever he had been running from didn’t follow him. There had been no reports of magical beasts or otherwise.

“But just in case, why don’t you stick with me.” Dick tried, helping the boy to his feet and sitting
him on the edge of the bed. Aris and Damian just moved away, opting to sit on the pillows. “Who
I’m…well, the organization I’m with right now, I think they’ll have the tech to be able to send you
home. But I don’t want you out there on your own, just in case it wasn’t the monster that came after
you, but someone else.”

Robin blinked a few times, then looked away.

“Okay?” Dick pushed. “Stick with me for a little bit? Do you think you can do that, Damian?”

“…Robin, please.” The boy muttered. “But…yes. I suppose we can try this.”

Dick gave him a sad smile. “Cool. Be right back.”

Nightwing shook his head. “He’s putting his walls back up already. It used to take him much longer.
Something…” He sighed heavily. “Something must have happened, something must have reverted
him to…”

“You’ve been away a long time.” Damian shrugged, watching as Dick turned away and tugged on
his sneakers. Damian untangled himself from Aris and slid off the bed to follow. “Anything
could have happened to him in that time.”

Nightwing stared at his brother blankly. “I don’t know how you do it, Dami. I don’t know how
you’re able to be this close to Dick and know you can’t do anything to help him.”

Damian didn’t answer the thought, more that he didn’t know rather than he didn’t want to. “Stay
here with him. I’ll go with Grayson.”

As soon as Dick closed the door behind him, he let out a haggard breath, dragged a hand down his
face. As he stepped quietly down the hallway, he mumbled. “Rougher than I thought it would be.”

He didn’t say anything else, not down to their destination, nor on the way back. But Damian didn’t
mind, he stayed at his side anyway. Their journey took them to a part of the St. Hadrian’s grounds
that didn’t really match the rest of it. The walls were red, light from large computer monitors and
technology adding a strange glow. There were other people down here, all of which Damian would
label as strange, though he didn’t quite know why. Before he realized it, he felt himself take a step
closer to Dick’s side, that strange ghostly green power surrounding not only his body, but Dick’s as
well.

He didn’t know these people, didn’t know what they were capable of. He wasn’t going to take any
chances.

But no one paid Dick any mind, not even when he coded himself into what seemed to be a weapons
cache. They weren’t there long. Only a few minutes and Dick pulled out a small metal rectangle. He
looked it over quickly before nodding and stashing it in his pocket.

He practically jogged back to his room, and Damian was forced to float a few inches off the ground
to keep up.

Robin hadn’t moved, his gaze still lowered and far away. Nightwing and Aris sat on either side of
the boy, the elder just staring at him while the youngest jabbered on absently.

He only looked up when he heard the clink of Dick setting the small machine down at his desk.

“If it’s what I think it is,” Dick hummed, spinning the chair that was still at his bedside back to the
desk. “Then this should send you home.”
“Should?” Robin asked, standing and slowly creeping over Dick’s shoulder. Nightwing watched him for a moment before glancing down at Aris. He reached out, running a hand on the littlest one’s head. Aris just gave him a big grin. “You don’t know?”

“I’m over fifty-percent sure.” Dick grinned, popping the box’s cover. He glanced at the masked boy behind him. “That’s better than our normal odds, don’t you think?”

Robin just snorted and rolled his eyes.

“It’s looks similar to the tech my buddy Vic uses.” Dick continued, hands nimbly picking at some of the box’s innards. “And he’s pretty great with boom-tubes and transporters and stuff. Goes by Cyborg. Do you have a Cyborg? Anyway, if that’s the case and it is like the stuff Vic uses, I should be able to tweak this to our needs pretty easily.”

Their conversation quickly turned technical, with Dick doing most of the talking, Robin adding small things here and there. Almost instantly, they settled into a comfortable – almost familiar – routine.

“You think he can do it, Dami?” Nightwing whispered. Damian turned to look at him. “You think your brother can send my brother home?”

“If anyone can, it’d be him.” Damian assured.

“You think…” For the first time since Damian met him, Nightwing seemed unsure, hesitant. It was an odd look for him. “Do you think he’d be safer here?”

“…here?”

“On…here in your universe.” Nightwing clarified. “Things are bad back home, Dami. They were bad before I died, bad before I showed up here myself. Damian is alive, and I’m so grateful for that, but he looks terrible, so I can only imagine it’s gotten worse.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea for him to stay here?” Damian countered.

“If it keeps him safe, I’ll think any idea’s a good one.” Nightwing admitted with a weak smile.

It was, surprisingly, Aris who spoke next. “Do you think he’d want to? Stay, I mean.”

“Probably not.” Nightwing chuckled softly.

“He doesn’t belong here, Nightwing.” Damian added. “Safety or not, he shouldn’t stay. He needs to go back.”

“You didn’t say the same about me.” Nightwing pouted. “You’ve let me stay as long as I’ve wanted.”

“That’s different and you know it.” Damian hissed. “You’re dead. A ghost isn’t going to affect much. Besides, I didn’t let you. If you recall, at our first meeting you said you were going to find your way home. I was as surprised as everyone else when you appeared at my aid against Mother.”

Before Nightwing could argue, once again Aris interjected with his tiny, calculating voice. “Do you not trust Robin to protect himself?”

“No, of course I do, I-”

“You trust me to do so, right? And Aris?” Damian cut him off. Nightwing saw that he was clearly getting ganged up on, but nodded anyway. “Then trust him.”
“It’s not the same, Dami, it’s…” He glanced up to see both his fellow spirits staring at him. Despite their young ages, their eyes were wicked and sharp. Instantly Nightwing was reminded of who both their mother and father were. “I do trust him. Always. With everything I’ve got.”

He saw Damian’s blue eyes shift over to lock with Aris’s brown. Damian smirked, turning his attention back to the living just as Dick stood from his desk, letting Robin inspect the metal object. “Good.”

Robin silently turned the box in his hand, and seemed satisfied. Clutching the machine, he turned, going for the cape that had been hung in the closet. Dick frowned. “We don’t have to do this now, Dam…Robin.” His eyebrows furrowed, it was clear he didn’t like referring to the child only as his vigilante name. “I just wanted to make sure we had the tech, check it all out to make sure we didn’t have to go searching for it.”

Robin didn’t respond. He was still going towards the closet, where the door was closed. He reached for the knob, and at the same time, Nightwing threw his hand up. Instantly a silvery rope appeared, connecting the doorknob to the wall. Robin, clearly unable to see it, tugged at the handle anyway, huffing when the door wouldn’t budge.

Dick’s eyes widened only slightly. He knew who it was. Or at least, what was being done, even if he couldn’t see it either. “Take a breather,” he said casually. Robin turned to glare at him. “Have a sandwich. I know this cool little restaurant in town, you’ll love-”

“You know I shouldn’t.” Robin stated coldly, almost sadly. “You know it would be better if I left as soon as possible.”

“Robin-”

“For both of us.” Robin finished, eyes dropping. “I am…grateful for your hospitality. While I have never forgotten you – will never forget you, Grayson – I have forgotten your kindness. It’s been a while since I've seen anyone do anything just for the sake of kindness.”

Dick didn’t respond, though it was clear to Damian that he wanted to.

“But this is just as hard for you as it is for me. I can see it.” Robin whispered. “I am not your brother, but I am enough like him that this hurts you. Just as you are enough like Grayson that I…”

Nightwing was instantly on his feet, embracing Robin in a hug the boy would never feel.

“I killed Dick Grayson once,” Robin said stoically. “And I do not deserve the second chance to protect another.”

“Maybe neither of us deserve a second chance.” Dick murmured, glancing at the flashlights still on his nightstand. “But…if it’s what you want, Robin. There’s miles of fields around the school. Let’s head out there, just in case something misfires. This may be a school to create super-villainesses, but I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“Fair enough.” Robin agreed. Nightwing didn’t let him go as he turned back to the closet, but he dropped the rope holding the door closed. Robin opened the door and, in a practiced move, had both his cape and utility belt strapped on in an instant, mask twisting in his fingers. He stared at it for a moment before sucking in a deep breath and pressing it against his face. “Lead the way.”

Dick gave a smile – clearly disappointed – but did as he was ordered. Robin clung to the box, and didn’t complain when Dick dropped an arm across his shoulders as they entered the hallway. Damian picked Aris up, and together with Nightwing they followed close behind.
There weren’t many people outside. Just some adults, teachers Damian guessed. They glanced over curiously but Dick didn’t look back, just kept Robin against his side and pressed on. They were almost off the school grounds, though, when Dick was forced to stop as a woman stepped out in front of them.

The dark-skinned woman didn’t say anything, just stared at Dick for a few seconds before her gaze fell on Robin. Dick’s grip tightened on Robin’s shoulder, and once again Nightwing threw a hand out. There was suddenly a silver ring around he and Damian’s living doubles. A shield.

But the woman did nothing. Instead, her eyes returned to Dick in confusion. “I had heard that Robin had…”

“You heard right.” Dick answered, but didn’t clarify.

“Is this why you disappeared last night?” The woman pressed. Dick didn’t answer. Robin put a hand on his utility belt. After a moment of silence, the woman sighed. “I will cover for you until noon. Either be back by then or cover yourself.”

Dick smirked and pushed Robin forward, swerving around the woman who didn’t move from her place in the path. “Thanks, Helena.”

Even as they left Helena behind them, Nightwing didn’t lower the shield he’d put around them. Neither Aris nor Damian mentioned it. Not long later, St. Hadrian’s was a distant dot on the horizon behind them.

“You sure about this, Robin?” Dick asked as the boy slipped his arm and began pressing buttons on the box. “I mean, just a couple miles further and we’re at that restaurant. And what kind of host would I be, if-”

“Richard.” Robin scolded. There was a high-pitched whirring as the machine came to life. Robin spun away and pointed the machine in front of him. Instantly, some sort of reddish-orange energy beam shot out and began pooling in the air in front of him. Gently, Robin placed it on the ground in front of him and crossed his arms, waiting for the process to complete.

Slowly the colors of the energy field shifted from red-orange to a deep purple with black. Soon it went from colors to solid shapes, then a setting. A city street, deserted and destroyed. Burned out cars, trash, rubble. It was night there, as opposed to the mid-morning surrounding them.

“That’s where the battle was.” Robin hummed, head twitching back and forth to take in the damage. “It must be…I…I wonder who won.”

“The good guys, I hope.” Dick stepped forward and Robin turned to look at him. “It was…nice. Meeting you.”

“And you.” Robin nodded shortly. “…Take care of yourself.”

Dick grinned. “Only if you do first.”

Robin seemed to not expect that response, and blushed slightly in a fluster. “Grayson, I’m being serious!”

Dick barked a laugh, reaching out before the boy could stop him and folding Robin into his arms. “Me too, Boy Wonder.” He whispered, kissing Robin’s temple. “Be careful, and take care of yourself. And if whatever your world is going through gets to be too much? Find yourself a boom-tube and give me a call.”
Robin’s eyes widened behind his mask and he instantly returned the embrace. His grip was visibly crushing, and Dick was forced to give out a grunt of pain, but neither let go.

“He won’t have to do that.” Nightwing mumbled as he moved slightly towards them. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Damian didn’t seem surprised by his words. “For a second, I thought you were going to pass this up.”

Aris blinked, staring at Damian in confusion, then over to Nightwing. “Wait, you’re…leaving?”

“It’s been what he’s been trying to do since he got here, Aris.” Damian replied. “Frankly, I’d be a little insulted if he didn’t leave at this point.”

“But…” Aris’s brow furrowed as his lips quivered in panic. “Do you not…I thought you…”

“He is not leaving because of us.” Damian assured gently. “But we are not his true family, and this is not his true world. It would be selfish of you and I to force him to stay.”

Nightwing smiled, backtracking slightly to run a hand over Aris’s head. “Thanks for putting up with me this long.”

Aris sniffed, leaning forward against Nightwing’s chest. “Thank you for helping us, Nightwing. And caring for us. We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you.”

“It’s been my pleasure, kiddo.”

“I’m glad you’ve found what you’ve been looking for.” Damian smiled warmly.

Nightwing laid his hand on Damian’s shoulder and squeezed it. “You too, Damian. Keep him in line, okay? If I’ve learned anything from this…adventure, it’s that Dick Grayson is completely useless without his little brother around to whip him into shape.”

“We’ll try.” Damian chuckled. “Safe travels. And good luck with your Damian and Bruce.”

“Haha, heavens know I’ll probably need it. But there’s nowhere I’d rather be than with them.” Nightwing leaned down for a quick hug, pecking Damian’s head before leaving a lingering kiss on Aris’s cheek. “I love you two. So much.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Damian rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Now get out of here before you miss your chance.”

Nightwing didn’t need any more encouragement, racing forward just as Dick released Robin. The boy backed up to the portal’s edge, watching as Dick waved goodbye one last time.

“If you’re ever on my side of the universe,” Nightwing called, one leg already through the portal. “Look me up.”

“I hope we’ll never have to.” Damian shouted back with a smirk as Aris waved frantically. Robin turned and jumped through the opening, his ghost brother close behind him.

Nightwing’s laughter echoed through the field as the portal blinked closed.

Dick watched the empty space for a few more minutes, probably waiting for any potential kickback. But when nothing else happened, he sighed, bent down, picked up the metal rectangle and pocketed it.
Dick turned back towards the school and began shuffling towards it. Damian blinked, hiked Aris up on his hip and trotted after him. Aris stared over his shoulder, leaning against Damian’s neck. “I’m going to miss Nightwing.”

“And when you do, remember that he is happy.” Damian said as they fell in line with Dick. “And that’s all we wanted for him.”

“Do you think Grayson is happy?” Aris asked, glancing at the man who had thus far been silent.

Dick’s eyes a thousand yards away, and he was clearly just walking the path out of habit.

“I think…Robin was right.” Damian replied. “I think this whole scenario has been very tough for Grayson’s psyche.”

“That doesn’t answer my question, Damian.” Aris chided.

“I think Grayson is happy that he found Robin before anyone else did. I think Grayson’s happy that he was able to get Robin back to where he was meant to be.” Damian clarified. “But I also think Grayson is going through the sudden relapse of loneliness he went through when…well, when he lost me.”

Aris sat up then. “Do you think he will…”

“I don’t think he will attempt to harm himself again, no.” Damian shook his head, but found himself staring up at his mentor anyway as they reached the school grounds. “I think the relapse will be very short lived.”

Aris hummed, glaring up at Dick critically, watching as they maneuvered through the hallways and made it back to Dick’s room. “Well, we should stay with him, though. Just in case.”

“Of course.” Damian smiled as Dick collapsed on the bed and closed his eyes for a well-deserved rest. He placed Aris on the floor, but his clone immediately scrambled onto the mattress, curling into Dick’s side and staring up at his face in concentration. Damian let out a light chuckle, situating himself up by the pillows. “I couldn’t think of a better plan myself.”
Faith

Chapter Summary

Tim knew it was the wrong choice to give Bruce his way, he just needed a little support in doing something about it.

Chapter Notes

Probably not my best. Should be updated a lot more often now in the new year! Happy New Year’s to everyone, I hope you all have a great time.

Between Batman&Robin 34 & 35

He sighed as he swung between buildings. Maybe he should call it a night early. He was too distracted to be of any real help anyway. Hearing that your little brother’s stolen dead body was currently being shipped across the world, in both an attempt to play keep-away with Batman and resurrect the young soul it used to house… It’s a lot to take in, even for him.

And for Bruce to refuse their help…it was rough.

Jason and Barbara didn’t seem to be doing much better. He’d already run into Batgirl, taking her frustration out on some repeat offender who thought it’d be funny to use the Joker’s likeness. And Jason was doing his best Batman impression, brooding on the wall that surrounded Arkham Asylum.

But just as he thought to twist, to reroute his swing towards his apartment, he spotted them. Faint in the bright lights below them, opaque in the city’s smog. They were standing on his target building’s roof, holding hands and staring at him blankly, like something out of a horror film.

And he knew he couldn’t run from them, as much as he didn’t want to deal with them right now. They were ghosts, after all. They’d just follow him. Appear in his flat like they owned the place. Heavens know they’ve done it before.

He exhaled for a second time, arcing over the ledge and planting his feet on the tar roof. Aris smiled and waved. Damian just blinked.

“Father has returned from his travels.” Damian called without preamble. Always straight to business with these Waynes. “And it appears he was…empty handed.”

“Mission’s not done.” Tim shrugged. He rocked on his feet before leaning back to plop on the roof’s ledge. The ache from his heels echoed up his legs. “Where’s Nightwing?”

Damian hummed, but didn’t answer the question. Aris released his hand, trotting over and climbing onto the seat next to Tim, staring up at him with that curious way of his. Damian just crossed his arms.
The three remained in silence for a few seconds, Aris and Damian staring at Tim while Tim stared at Damian. Just by the boy’s face, the older could tell the younger knew. Knew about the meeting, knew about his father’s actions. Tim didn’t want to say anything, but he knew Damian wasn’t going to ask. He was too proud, too stubborn, just like his parents. He expected Tim to give the information freely, like it was his right to hear it.

Ever the little prince.

Tim sighed. “He just wanted us to know. Be on a level playing field in case things went bad.”

“He doesn’t want your help.” Damian stated.

“I think it’s more he doesn’t want us to get hurt. Doesn’t want to risk losing us too. Not after…” Tim cleared his throat. “Not after you and…and Dick. And I get that. I do. We all do. But, still.”

Damian didn’t respond.

“You’re a little shit.” Tim continued. “But you were our little shit. And there’s not much we wouldn’t do to keep you safe, even if we were mad at you. Just as, there’s not much any of us wouldn’t do to bring you back, either.”

Damian remained silent.

“You get that, right?” Tim whispered. “You knew that? That...as much as we never said it, Dick wasn’t the only one who thought of you as his little brother. Or hers, in Cass’s case.”

“I knew!” Aris bounced on his spot, patting excitedly at Tim’s arm. “I knew that! Even before Mother killed me. I saw it!”

“I bet you did.” Tim chuckled. “You’ve got your mama’s brains.”

“I was always a little jealous. Always wished I had siblings like Damian did.” Aris admitted absently. He turned, giving Damian his brightest smile. “Now I do. And it’s better than I imagined.”

Damian returned a softer smile, but not for long before continuing with the conversation at hand. “So...you wanted to go with him, but you agreed to his demands to stay behind anyway?”

“We didn’t agree. We didn’t have a choice.” Tim emphasized. “You know Bruce. He didn’t say ‘Please, will you stay behind?’ he just said ‘Stay here. I’ll be back later. Hopefully.’”


“I know, I...I know.” Tim sighed, glancing down at the city behind him. “And I want to say it’s because this time is different. This whole situation is different, because—”

“Because it’s family.” Damian finished.

Tim nodded. “But then, wouldn’t that mean we’d fight harder? It’s different, but a different kind of different. Not different in that we would back off, different in that it’s more important, more necessary to battle for what we want.”

“And what is that, Drake?” Damian asked. But it wasn’t harsh, like it normally would be. It was gentle, encouraging. “What do you want?”

“My family back.” Tim looked up at the child. “Every part of it. I want Bruce and Cass home, I want you and Dick alive.”
As Tim spoke, Aris quietly reached out and took Tim’s hand. Tim felt it, but he couldn’t say what it felt like. It wasn’t hot or cold, and there was no weight to it. It was just a sensation of being touched.

“And right now, it seems like we…we might succeed in one of those. We might have a chance to get you back. And then it’s the domino effect. We get you back, Bruce comes home, then maybe Cass will come visit for a while. After that, only…only one person from our family isn’t here.” Tim found that once he started, he was having trouble stopping. “But it’s dangerous. We get you back, we get Bruce back. But…there’s a chance we don’t get Bruce back at all. That he never comes home. Then you don’t either. If we were able to go with him – or if he allowed Clark or Diana or even Arthur to accompany him – then maybe the chances of him being safe, of succeeding in bringing you back, would rise. The probability of a happy ending here would be higher.”

Damian barked a laugh. “Always statistics with you, eh, Drake?” He shook his head, but glanced down at Aris. “But…you always have the capacity to change your mind. Go against Father’s wishes.”

“Would if I could.” Tim pursed his lips. “He’s already left for Apokolips. And we have no way of following.”

Damian smirked as he repeated. “That never stopped us before.”

Tim watched him for a second, then matched the grin. “You think we can?”

“I have no time for your fit of pessimism, Drake. Gather our remaining brother, gather Gordon. Put your brains together, you’ll figure it out.” Damian assured as Aris nodded vigorously.

“Watch it, squirt. Almost sounds like you have faith in me.”

“Hah. Maybe I do, Drake.” Damian mumbled, looking up towards the muddy stars. “Maybe I do.”

Tim smiled at him for a few seconds. “Will you…will you be there too? Backing us up?”

“If I can be.” Damian agreed. “I can’t guarantee it, though.”

“That’s enough for me.” Tim promised. He let go of Aris’s hand, ruffling at his hair before slapping his own knees and standing. He opened the communicator on his arm, and Aris watched as he quickly located both Jason and Barbara, setting coordinates for the three to meet. “Beat you back to the cave?”

Damian clicked his tongue, already disappearing from view. “You wish.”

“Brother!” Aris squawked, lunging across the rooftop to where Damian had just been, he too already fading into nothing. His voice lingered behind him. “Damian, wait!”

Tim snorted a laugh, opening a line to both Barbara and Jason. As he waited for them to answer, his eyes drifted to the sky. “See you soon, brat.”
 Judgment

Chapter Summary

Some of Bruce’s allies question his abilities to bring his son back, and Aris takes offense.

Chapter Notes

I’d realized I’d kind of been ignoring how much Aris loves his papa, apart from brief mentions and like twenty chapters ago. Two more to go!

In the end, Damian couldn’t fulfill his promise to Tim. He couldn’t go with them to Apokolips, as much as he wanted to.

“Drake will understand, Brother.” Aris said, soothingly, hanging onto Damian’s hand as they passed through the yard. The fireflies whizzed around their heads happily, alternating between creating patterns around them and landing in their hair. “You did everything you could.”

“I should have known you and I were going to be affected.” Damian sighed. “I should have known that our ghost physics applied to dimensional portals, that to us the portal was just another wall to walk through, not a doorway to somewhere else.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Aris corrected. “Our only experience with portals was with Nightwing, and everything worked for him.”

“Nightwing is perpetually an exception. To everything.” Damian drawled. “But if I could have grabbed onto Titus, then maybe he wouldn’t…maybe he would have been safer if…”

Damian’s voice trailed off as they continued around the bend, as he picked up voices coming from the Wayne cemetery in front of them. Instantly he was on alert, because Alfred was in the cave, and no one else should be here. He didn’t slow his walk, merely turned and picked Aris up, holding him tightly against his side as he manifested a green batarang in his hand. Aris remained quiet, wrapping his arms around Damian’s neck, also creating a small purple dagger in his hands.

“…who he thinks he is. He’s breaking the rules!” The male voice was sharp and annoyed. Damian assumed he would have to identify based on silhouettes and shadows, but quickly realized there was no need. Not with one member of the group glowing a bright green, and that light reflecting all of the other faces.

Green Lantern. The Justice League.

They were standing in front of Damian and Talia’s gravestones, inspecting the damage Bruce had done to Damian’s.

“Hal, you need to see it from-” The Flash – Barry Allen – muttered gently.
“From his perspective, yada yada. I know.” Hal cut off. “This was his kid, I get that. And that sucks. But if it were any of us, you know he’d be trying to stop us too.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Diana countered. “After everything he’s been through, you don’t know he wouldn’t want to help you.”

“It was a stupid decision, though.” Barry tried against her, watching as Clark crouched and picked up a piece of the destroyed marble. “First off, he went on his own – and Hal’s right, that’s something he always harps on all of us about doing – and second off, he went in without any sort of backup, or any sort of plan!”

“This case is clouding his judgment.” Hal carried.

Aris squirmed in Damian’s arms, and Damian put him back on the ground. He could see Diana was already exasperated with this argument, could see that Green Lantern wasn’t going to drop it any time soon. Clark suddenly tossed the stone back to the ground and stood.

“Don’t be so quick to condemn him, Hal.” Clark scolded.

“I’m not condemning him, Supes.” Hal rolled his eyes. “I’m just saying, when he gets himself killed, don’t expect me to be the most tearful person at his funeral.”

“He better bite his tongue before I cut it out for him.” Aris threatened quietly. Damian glanced down and saw the small dagger still in his clone’s hand. He instantly snatched it from him.

“We should have known we weren’t going to change his mind, no matter how much we pushed him.” Clark exhaled. “When he gets back, we can yell at him all we want, but for now…we just need to sit and wait, and be ready to jump to his aid if the call comes through.”

Hal sighed and crossed his arms, clearly not ready to drop the argument.

“But we do have to think of a punishment.” Barry reminded. “He did break the rules. He went against what the League wanted for his own means and gains. I’m not saying it’s a bad cause – Clark, you know that no one more than me hopes he succeeds in this – but he shouldn’t get a special pass this time. He knew that going into it.”

“We’ll have a hearing.” Diana said. “With everyone. Decide it then.”

“What’s the point?” Hal hummed bitterly. “No worse a punishment than going to save your son and coming back empty-handed.”

The others remained silent, let the comment linger.

“How dare he.” Aris suddenly growled. He was at least five feet away before Damian realized he’d moved, heading straight for Hal Jordan. “He will stop speaking against Father like this. He will stop bringing up the possibility of failure. He will stop this right now.”

Damian lunged forward, grabbing Aris from behind just as another violet blade appeared in his hand. He wrapped his arms tightly around the younger’s shoulders, pulling him against his chest. “It’s okay, little one.” He cooed, running a hand over Aris’s hair, ignoring the tears brimming in the child’s eyes and the wave of fireflies that flittered around them still. “The Lantern is our Father’s friend.”

“Then why,” Aris’s voice cracked, pulling halfheartedly against Damian’s hold. “Why is he saying these things? Why does he think Father will fail in bringing you back?!”
“Because…he’s pessimistic.” Damian mumbled. “Don’t take his words to heart. Look, no one else is.”

“You underestimate his perseverance. He will return with…with something.” Diana snapped.

“He will return with his son.” Clark said firmly. “Now Hal, you and Barry head back to the Watchtower, tell everyone what we found.”

“We found a whole lot o’ nothing.” Hal muttered.

Clark glared at him. “Head back to the Watchtower, tell everyone what we found.”

Barry pulled on Hal’s arm before he could argue again, and the two silently took off around the other side of the manor. As soon as they were out of sight, Clark sighed and shook his head. “…Hal’s got a point.”

“And I know you hate admitting it. Especially about Bruce.” Diana dropped her shoulders. She took Clark’s place at the side of Damian’s stone, reaching out, running her fingers across the jagged remains. “Gods above, I hope he succeeds. I hope he can bring that little boy back.”

“And I hope the cost isn’t too great.” Clark added. “I hope Bruce doesn’t cross that line to have Damian returned.”

“He wouldn’t.” Diana declared.

“For his flesh and blood? For his children?” Clark asked. He glanced over at the blinking cloud of lightning bugs nearby. What an interesting sight. “Come on, Diana. You know him better than that.”

“I do.” Diana admitted with a resigned sigh. The nearby bugs seemed to notice her defeat, and came swooping over to comfort her, blanketing her hair and space with light. “But Clark…what do we do? If…he doesn’t come back.”

“We take care of Gotham. We take care of his children.” Clark said confidently. “We take care of the things he loved, and we make sure they’re all safe.”

“Just you and me?”

“It’s…doable.” Clark smiled. “But only as a last resort. Only if Bruce doesn’t come back.”

Diana glanced up and mirrored the grin. “Deal.”

“See?” Damian whispered, rocking Aris slowly back and forth. The boy had slumped into his chest, dissipated the dagger. “They still believe in Father. And they are his closest friends.”

Aris sniffed, spinning into Damian’s neck. “G-good.”

Damian smiled as Diana let out a giggle, twirling with the fireflies around her. He kissed at his twin’s temple, feeling the tension buzzing under his skin as he whispered, “Don’t worry, Aris. Everything will be fine.”

“I am just…nervous. For Father. For your family. I want them safe. And the more these idiotic heroes say that Father won’t be victorious in his quest…it is just very disheartening, Damian. And I don’t know what to think.” Aris’s voice was shaky, and Damian could see he was quickly breaking down. “I want them all to shut up. I want them to stop sticking their noses in our business.” Aris clutched at his shirt. “I…I just want them to bring you back.”
“Me…” Damian hesitated. Because…this mission, bringing Damian back to life. It was inconceivable that they were this close. That this goal – they’ve all wanted for over a year – was actually plausible, actually in their grasp. All it took was a swing through an alien planet. No problem, not for the likes of them, right? If they succeeded it would be wonderful. Their family would be almost whole once more. If they succeeded…Aris would be left behind. Damian had known that from the moment Bruce went after Ra’s, had tried to avoid the thought since then, too. He found himself holding his brother tighter. “…Me too, Aris.”

“We should probably go.” Clark exhaled. “You know the kids get annoyed when we get to see Bruce after a mission before they do.”

“True.” Diana let out another laugh, releasing one of the fireflies on her finger as she took to the sky. She gave one last glance to Damian’s destroyed tombstone. “And a reunion like this? It would be a crime if we saw Damian before, say, Timothy.”

“Ha! I hope Alfred has the ability to tape that one.” Clark hummed as he followed suit. “Want to bet on it? Damian and Tim are reunited, hugs or punches?”

“Clark.” Diana tsked, though her grin showed she wasn’t actually annoyed. “Obviously you don’t have siblings. I’m going with hugs, for sure…”

Their voices faded as they disappeared into the sky, but Damian had long since stopped listening. He was too focused on the child in his arms, on the destroyed tombstone nearby. Stay dead, be with Aris. Be alive, be with his Father. No, no, there had to be another way. If he got a second chance, surely Aris could too.

Aris’s breath hitched as he let out a light sob. Damian glanced up at the lightning bugs for help.

This wasn’t going to end well.
Damian can’t help but think of those he loves, of what might happen to them. It really takes him places.

It was a rare moment of weakness, one that Damian was glad he was dead for, that only Aris could see.

He didn’t know what to do.

When his family’s trip to Apokolips spanned over twenty-four hours, Damian felt panic rising in his being. Should it take this long? What if something happened? Is it possible for one of them to be left behind? What if that Hellbat suit took down Father’s body functions quicker than expected? What if one of them died?

No, stop. Slow down.

He and his clone ended up staying in the cave, seeking comfort in the only ones Damian trusted to give it without judgment – Pennyworth and his animals.

And they all seemed in need of comfort themselves. Pennyworth for his charges, the cat and cow for their canine friend. They were all huddled around the computer, watching as Batwoman and Batwing handled the city. Perhaps it was to take their mind off the five who were gone, or the situation at hand. Perhaps it was to, for once, just not think about the losses they had all suffered in the past year and a half, and the stress those losses caused.

Stress that was somewhat in vain, Damian thought absently as he scratched at Batcow’s ear, because Grayson wasn’t really dead.

(And if Father succeeded in this mission of bringing him back to life, that would be the first thing they would discuss.)

But still. It was near torture, not knowing what was happening, having no communications with Bruce or any of the team. Not knowing their status. Not knowing if-

“Damian?”

Damian jerked, glancing up at Aris, who was sitting on Batcow’s back with the cat. “What?”

“You’re shaking.”
Damian blinked and looked down at his hands. Indeed he was.

He closed his fists and his eyes, trying to will himself to stop. But it wasn’t working. He couldn’t focus on himself, all he could see was his father, his brothers, Barbara Gordon, Victor Stone, his dog. All fighting. For their lives, for him. All risking everything just for him.

He wasn’t worth it.

And as much as he tried to fight it, his mind went to its dark place. Pictured his allies not being strong enough. Drake stabbed through, Gordon paralyzed again, Stone smashed into millions of electronic little pieces, Todd blinded, deafened, muted as he’s beaten over and over.

Imagined the suit not helping Bruce. Imagined it being torn away, his father getting impaled, beheaded, ripped apart. His family, being destroyed for real. Not metaphorically, not emotionally. Physically.

All the king’s horses and all the king’s men…

No. No, please. Not them. I’ll stay. I’ll stay dead if you don’t hurt them. Please don’t hurt them. Please don’t take them, too.

“Brother, you’re-”

Aris’s voice suddenly cut out, and the atmosphere changed. It was…hot, here. Loud. There were shouts and explosions and…barks?

Damian opened his eyes.

The sky was red and the ground was rock. Bodies littered the ground, and Damian couldn’t tell how many were dead compared to alive.

But the barking continued.

And it was impossible. Because he and Aris couldn’t go through the portal. He and Aris were Earthbound. He-

“Titus!”

-was on Apokolips.

Without another thought, he raced towards the voice, the one that sounded like Batgirl. As he ran, he felt himself lifting off the ground. And if he was ever grateful for his spiritual abilities to levitate, it would be right now.

It was just over the ridge where he found them, fighting off a near-skeletal hoard. Titus was lying on the ground, obviously had just been hit with something. He was conscious, but woozy. And Damian didn’t waste another second.

“Down, Titus.” He ordered gently, floating to the ground beside his beloved friend’s head, taking it in his hands. Titus tried to wag his tail, but it was difficult for him, so he gave out a small whimper instead. Damian smiled at him. “Just stay down, boy.”

Titus listened, though hesitantly, turning his attention back to the battle before them. It was everyone but Batman, and they were all fighting as hard as they could. But even then, it seemed that they were struggling against their emaciated foes.
There was a roar across the plains and, faintly, Damian could see his father – the ferocious Bat –
fighting his way through a swarm, heading towards what seemed to be a castle, or at least the base of
operations.

*That must be where I am.*

There was a shriek in front of him, and Damian turned to see Batgirl on her knees. Titus gave a harsh
growl, trying to push himself to his feet. Even as Damian tried to stop him, the dog went right
through his fingertips.

Like Titus had, Batgirl was struggling to get back to her feet, even as the other boys created a wall
between her and their attackers

And he doesn’t know why. If he was ever asked, Damian would only be able to shrug. But right
then, watching Gordon fall, watching Drake try to pick her up and get her out of harm’s way,
watching Todd and Stone protect them…

He thought of Grayson.

He thought of his eldest brother, and what he would be willing to do. What he would do if he were
on Apokolips right now. Bruce may currently be the Hellbat, but Grayson would most definitely be
the Bat out of Hell.

Most definitely, whoever hit Gordon would no longer be standing.

Damian could almost see him. Escrima sticks in hand, beating his way through this army,
demolishing anyone who so much as laid a hand on his family, on those he claimed to love. Or, at
this moment, anyone who would dare to stand in his way of helping Batman retrieve his littlest
brother.

(He could even see the surprise. The shock turning to joy and relief on the faces of his brothers and
sisters as they realized. As they cried in happiness as their family quickly became void of any missing
pieces. That this mission to get one of their members back ended up getting all of them back as
well.)

And through Damian’s panic and worry, he couldn’t help but smile at the idea.

That was all it took.

Damian blinked, and the wasteland was gone. His fighting siblings were gone, his valiant dog was
gone. Even the faraway image of his armored father was gone. In its place was a small, plain room,
with only a desk, a nightstand, and a bed.

Grayson’s dorm.

The man in question was in the bed, apparently deep in slumber. Damian could see the radio to
Bruce’s frequency laid out on the desk, obviously on and ready to be used at a moment’s notice.
Even from his position kneeled on the floor, he could see a small photo mixed in with the wires. One
taken of their whole family, right after Bruce had returned to them from the time stream.

Bruce had told Dick he wasn’t allowed to come to Apokolips. Clearly the man had done the next
best thing.

“Brother!”
Damian looked back to the bed, saw Aris leaning over Dick’s shoulder, a wide smile on his face. Dick snorted in his sleep, brushing lightly at the spot where Aris was clutching his arm. “You seemed so anxious when you disappeared from the cave, I thought you had come here to relax. But when I got here, I couldn’t find you. And I…well, I wasn’t quite sure where else to look. I was going to wait until Grayson woke up, try to communicate with him to find you.”

“You did the right thing, Aris.” Damian flashed him a grin as he stood. “But it’s fine, I…I’m here now.”

“I see that.” Aris hummed playfully, tugging the blanket up to Dick’s neck before flopping over it. “Where were you?”

“With…Father, if you can believe it.” Damian whispered, sitting on the edge of the mattress. Aris sat up slightly, eyes wide. “I ended up on Apokolips. For however brief a moment.”

“But we…we tried…the portal, it…well.” Aris settled on. “How’s it going, then?”

“Couldn’t tell. My…our siblings were separated from Father.” Damian described. He didn’t elaborate, though. Didn’t want to, if only for the fear of those dark thoughts of his family’s potential torture popping back into his mind. “Though they all seemed to be holding their own pretty well.”

“Hm.” Aris pursed his lips. “Think we can go back?”

“I don’t know.” Damian admitted softly, glancing back down at his hands. He could just see Titus lying injured across his lap. “I… I don’t know if I want to.”

Aris watched him for a few seconds – obviously reading his expression. How did he get so good at that? – before climbing over Dick’s torso and settling into the man’s spread arms. “Okay, then. We don’t have to.”

Damian watched the child make himself comfortable, amuse himself by poking at Dick’s nose and mouth. Dick unconsciously fell for the bait, twitching his skin and batting at his own face. “Aris… are you sure?”

“Sure I am. It might be better if we’re not there, anyway.” Aris said thoughtfully. “You and I tend to become very…intense about these types of situations, where your family is in danger.”

“Our.” Damian corrected on instinct. “Our family.”

“Our.” Aris repeated, glancing up at Dick’s closed eyes. “Cool.”

“But…” Damian scrunched his nose. “If there’s anyone who deserves to know what’s going on, especially with this, it’s us. Don’t you believe?”

“We’ll know one way or the other. If they succeed your soul will go back to your body and you’ll be alive. If they don’t, then I’m sure Father will call Grayson to inform him.” Aris explained, almost as if he were the adult of the situation. “Don’t worry, Damian. What did you just tell me yesterday? Everything will be fine. We don’t need to be there watching, not if it’ll make you nervous.”

Damian frowned, turning and leaning back against Dick’s hip, across Aris’s legs. “I’m not nervous.”

Aris gave out a warm bark of a laugh. “Of course not, Brother. But just in case. We’ll stay with Grayson. Whether you want to admit it or not, his presence…well, it calms you.”

Damian glanced over at his clone, his twin. His own little brother. He didn’t want to argue with him,
just on principle and also for the fact that he was right. But even more so, along with the dark, dangerous thoughts of what might happen to his family, there was that one he was still hiding, that one he still wanted to ignore, in all futile hope that it will never happen.

Aris wasn’t going to return to the world of the living with him.

As much as Damian wished against it, he knew it was going to happen, knew there was nothing he could do to stop it. And he didn’t want to spend what might be his last days in the world of the dead bickering with the child.

Damian smiled, and reached his hand out. Aris pushed upwards instantly, taking Damian’s fingers and letting himself be pulled into Damian’s embrace. Damian nuzzled the top of Aris’s head, closing his eyes as Dick let out a loud snore and Aris giggled.

This. He could do this. Until the situation was resolved. Until he was brought back to life. For the rest of eternity. Whichever came to pass.

“Grayson isn’t the only presence that calms me, little one.” He whispered. “I love you, Aris.”

“I love you too, Damian.” Aris repeated. And there was an air of finality to the exchange. It left a bad taste in both of their mouths. But they knew needed to happen anyway, before it was too late. “Always.”

And Damian could do nothing but echo the sentiment, glancing up towards Dick’s face. “Always.”
In the end, he was still taken by surprise.

There was no warning. No hint that it was going to happen. Damian and Aris were sitting on the floor of Dick’s room, talking while they tried to develop creative and complicated weapons with their auras. Dick himself was sitting on the bed, alternating between fixing his escrima sticks, cleaning his gun and reading a book, all while humming some oddly bittersweet tunes. The Wayne boys had never specifically made their presence to the eldest known but, they had a feeling he’d figured it out himself anyway. He was actually smiling, and for no good reason this time. Just like the good old days.

For a moment, everything was…fine. Practically good, even.

And then it wasn’t.

No tip-off, no red flags, not even a sense of foreboding, which in all honesty is what he expected. The stab was sudden, and felt like it was made of a thousand suns. He jerked backwards, tried to catch himself on his hands, ended up falling onto his back.

“Damian!”

Aris’s voice seemed both distant and everywhere as Damian’s vision blurred and blinked. Grayson’s room, the Cave, the lobby of Wayne Tower, his own bedroom.

“Damian, can you hear me?!”

The flickering images stopped on Wayne Tower, they stopped on the massive hulk standing over him. Aris. Aris as he was, Aris as the monster the world assumed him to be, Aris as the murderer that he forced to act as, when he really wanted to be anything but.

The invisible stab in his chest pulsed. Damian heard his own pitiful last living words, mixed in with his father’s voice. Bruce sounding like he was giving some sort of chant, some sort of wish or plea. Fierce and determined and urgent.

Aris’s voice broke through the muddle. “Damian! Damian, brother, you are safe. I…I don’t know
what is happening to you, but you are safe.”

The stab throbbed again, and Damian relived being killed, relived that sword slashing through his torso, so incredibly close to where this new pain was, relived that last gasp of air, the tears falling down his face as everything went dark.


“Aris!” He gasped, reaching out blindly, throwing his hand in any direction until he felt tiny fingers wrap around his. That seemed to stabilize his universe a little bit. The flickering images slowed, started to switch between only two. His current location and the Cave.

“I am right here, Brother. I have you.” Aris said calmly, his tiny voice seemingly free of any fear or uncertainty. Behind the voice, Damian could hear rattling, low thumps.

“What the…” That was Dick. Damian turned his face towards the sound, could see the nightstand shaking, Dick glancing between it and the rest of the room. “Damian? Damian, is this you? Are you okay? What’s happening?”

“I…” Damian found himself answering. Image shift. He can see Bruce, leaning over him, staring expectantly, hopefully. His other brothers, and Gordon, and Pennyworth and Titus. Suddenly Bruce morphed back into Aris, who was also staring down at him with mild concern, though it appeared to be quickly transforming into a gleeful realization. “I don’t know, Grayson.”

“I think I do.” Aris whispered. “Brother, you are…well, flickering.”

“W-what?” And suddenly Damian felt like a five-year-old. Terrified and unknowing.

“Or perhaps fading would be the better word.” Aris let his mask fall, let the bright grin wash over his face. “Damian, I think Father…I think he’s succeeded.”

The scene didn’t change, but Damian suddenly felt hands on his shoulders, the sensation of being lifted. A distant excited bark. And with the sensation of new hands, Damian realized he couldn’t feel Aris’s anymore.

“No, I.” He rolled, tried to sit up. Lashed out with his other hand, taking Aris’s elbow. He could see it, he was holding him, gripping his little brother as tightly as he could. But he couldn’t feel him.

He heard the squeak of Dick’s bed as the man stood. “Damian?”

Damian stared at Aris, stared as he realized the child was correct. But it wasn’t him fading. No, Aris was. Grayson was. This room was. Damian squeezed Aris’s arm and hand tighter. Could feel himself starting to slip through the little boy’s skin.

“…I’m not ready.”

It blurted out before Damian even attempted to stop it.

Aris laughed, legitimately amused. “I don’t think you have a choice, Brother.”

Damian frowned, stubbornly pulling Aris into an embrace. This, he could feel. Barely, but it was enough. “I’m not leaving you here. I won’t.”

“Damian-”

“Either you come with me or neither of us go.” Damian declared with an air of finality, hoping to
trick the gods with his confidence, but knowing he couldn’t.

“That’s not how this works, I don’t think.” Aris said gently. And for all his own bravery, Damian could tell the boy was already beginning to mourn his loss. He held Damian so tightly, he began to glow with his purple aura. “Go, Damian. You deserve this chance. You deserve to be with Father.”

“So do you.” Damian muttered, a slight tremor in his voice. “So do you.”

There was another burst from the stab in his chest and suddenly everything stopped. There was no more flashing between scenes, no more overlapping voices. It was suddenly black, and there was just him and Aris.

“Take care of Father for me.” Aris breathed. “And tell him I’m sorry. For taking you away from him in the first place.”

Damian nodded silently.

“I love you, Damian. I’m so glad I got the chance to properly meet you. Even if it was in the afterlife.”

“And I to you, Aris.” Damian gave him one final squeeze, one final kiss on the temple.

“Please don’t forget me.” Aris asked softly, like he wasn’t allowed to do so. “Promise me you won’t, Brother.”

“Never.” Damian swore as Aris pulled back, staring up at him with watery brown eyes. “So long as you don’t forget me either.”

And despite it all, Aris smiled. Laughing as tears dripped down his cheeks. “Never.” He repeated. “I will never forget you, because I will never leave you. I will go find Grandmother and Grandfather as soon as I can and we will return to the manor right behind you.”

And Damian felt relief at that. He didn’t know why, but he did. He reached up, wiping away one of Aris’s tears as the boy slowly dissipated. “Until next time, little one.”

Aris opened his mouth to respond, but was gone before he could.

Slowly, Damian swallowed the lump in his throat, leaned back so he was lying flat in the darkness and closed his eyes. Nothing touched him, but he could feel the atmosphere changing. Could feel depth appearing around him, could hear the breathing of other beings, the beeps of a computer, the dripping of faraway water.

One last pulse of the pain between his ribs, only this time it continued. One after the other, badump-badump-badump-badump. A rhythm he’d forgotten he’d ever owned. A heartbeat.

“…Damian…”

There were hands on his face. Large, gloved hands. Familiar hands. Hesitantly, Damian opened one eye, then the other. Bruce stared down at him, eyes wide and light. Nervous. Hopeful. Excited.

But Damian still wasn’t sure. No way. They weren’t this lucky. Bruce wasn’t this lucky. He wasn’t this lucky. This had to be a trick. Some sort of malicious vision. He’ll pop out of it soon, and Aris will be right there to comfort him.

Gradually he reached his hand up. His hand that actually had weight, wasn’t light as a feather,
wasn’t transparent. He touched his fingers to Bruce’s face, felt his father’s stubbly cheek, even pushed against it to make sure. And Bruce’s face melted. His shoulders dropped in relief as he closed his eyes, as a small smile twitched onto his face and he leaned into the touch.

Damian heard Titus give a short whimper. Heard at least two people gasp behind them. And that’s when he knew.

Without another thought, he lurched upwards, wrapping his arms as tightly around Bruce’s neck as he could. Bruce instantly returned the gesture, holding Damian in a grip that threatened to never be released. Damian was okay with that, because he never wanted to let go either.

“Father.”

He was alive.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

And four nights later, he still wasn’t used to being alive.

Chapter Notes

And that’s it! Thanks to everyone who has ever so much as read one chapter of this story, you all mean the absolute WORLD to me. I hope you all enjoyed this as much as I enjoyed writing it. For me, this ‘verse is done, but I’m still debating if I’ll ever take prompts for it. Depends on the interest I suppose. But thanks again! <3 This one would take place probably towards the end of Robin Rises: Alpha, technically. But before the graveyard scene.

Can’t…can’t move! Mother…Mother, no! Stop! Grandfather! Stop, please! I won’t…you can’t make…you failed, you all failed! Stop…stop…STOP!

Damian jerked awake, nails digging through the fabric of his sheets and mattress, and even snapping the metal springs below that. He wished he could say it was the first time that had happened.

Property damage, that’s what Alfred had said.

Yeah, well. What about mental damage. Looks like superpowers weren’t the only side effect of his resurrection. Nightmares came free of charge, too.

Damian sighed, gently tugging his fingers back out of the squishy material. As he did so, he took in his surroundings. He registered that it was still dark, probably three or four in the morning, if he had to guess. Titus was still draped across his feet There was a chair next to the bed, currently empty, though he knew it belonged to his father. His father, who seemed a little bit unwilling to let Damian out of his sight.

There was another chair at the foot of the mattress, one that the first few nights had been occupied with Alfred Pennyworth. Now, however, it was full with one Timothy Drake and, burrowed into his side, one Colin Wilkes. Both were sleeping, both had cats on their laps – Alfred on Colin’s and Desdemona on Tim’s – and while Damian didn’t know why either of them were in the manor, he couldn’t help but feel that both deserved the rest.

At least…he thought they did.

Ever since Damian untangled from Bruce’s arms, there was no mention of the in-between. Of what happened between Damian’s death and his rebirth. And that was probably for the better.

Because Damian was starting to forget.

Not everything, of course. Just…well, bits and pieces for now. Some of the places he went, some of
the people he met. How long he followed Dick around and...when did he realize Tim could see him? After all, Tim could see his spirit. Right? Or...wait, was that Jason?

He shook his head, glancing out the window. The fireflies were all still there, floating against the glass like they were stuck, blinking constantly, so there was never a dark moment. Damian felt himself relaxing, just a little, and giving them a small smile.

He wondered how long they would continue to follow him.

(He hoped forever.)

He heard a sudden, sharp inhale. The mew of a disturbed cat. Then a mumbled, “Damian?”

He turned back to the chair, where Tim was blinking quickly, raising his head from the back of the seat. The elder glanced down at the boy and animals in his arms before returning all of his attention to his brother.

“You okay?”

Damian shrugged. “What are you doing here, Drake?”

“Colin needed a ride here. He didn’t just take my word for it that you were alive.” Tim chuckled warmly. “You were already asleep, but Colin said he would wait until you woke up. Heh. Guess he didn’t quite make it.”

Damian continued to smile. “No, I guess not.”

“He missed you,” Tim muttered absently. “He missed you a lot.”

“I...” Damian frowned. “I know that.”

(Did he? Really? Why did he know that? He...did he see Colin while he was dead?

Yes. The diner. Where they had cake with Grayson. Of course.)

“I figured you did.” Tim returned, smile slipping from his face as concern immediately replaced it. “Damian, are you sure you’re alright?”

Damian sighed, looking back out the window, counting the blinks of the fireflies.

Yes, he was forgetting. He was forgetting a lot. Hell, he might even forget it all. Isn’t that what Todd told Drake that one time? He was dead for years, could barely remember three moments.

“Damian?”

But there was one thing he wouldn’t forget. One thing Damian couldn’t, because he’d promised. Aris.

With that thought, the haze in his mind halted, cleared ever so slightly. It wasn’t Jason who could see the dead, it was Tim.

“Have you seen him?” Damian whispered, not taking his eyes away from the lightning bugs.

“Him?” And Damian could hear the rising panic in Tim’s voice. Because him could be a whole lot of people. Him could be the brother that, even four days later, no one has so much as even
“Him.” Damian confirmed. “Aris.”

“Oh.” Tim’s relief was palpable. “Um, yeah. Actually, I have.” Tim paused, and Damian could hear him trying to shift Colin and the cats into a more comfortable position. “You…I mean, with your powers, you…can’t?”

Damian only blinked. “No.”

“Oh.” Tim repeated. “Well. I can promise you he’s been here. Hasn’t left your side, actually. I saw him in the cave during that thing with Kalibak, even.”

Without moving his body, Damian shifted his eyes, searching the room. Maybe if he just tried harder, he could…

“He’s not here right now, though.” Tim stated, looking around as well. “He, uh…well. It’s weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“Earlier tonight. I talked with him, after Colin fell asleep.” Tim explained, scratching at Desdemona’s ears. “He was frustrated. Said there was something else he could do. Something more than just watching, that could keep you safe.”

“What?” Damian was instantly alarmed. Titus opened one eye in curiosity. “No, Drake, you…you have to find him. Have to tell him not to do anything dangerous. Not for me.”

“I did, I did!” Tim raised his free hand in surrender. Alfred the cat yawned, stretched across Colin’s legs. “He said it wasn’t dangerous. That…that Thomas told him about it.”

“…Grandfather?”

“Apparently.”

“Did he say what?”

“Y…es? Like I said, it was weird. And I don’t know how much of what he said I believe. But he did say that…that if he succeeded, you would know.” Tim finished. “Or, that he thinks you would know. But if you didn’t, that was okay, too.”

“Huh.”

“Look, Damian.” Tim’s tone suddenly became gentle. “Go back to sleep, okay? You need it. If Aris comes back, I’ll be sure to tell you.”

Damian nodded, leaning back against his pillows. He had no intention of following Tim’s suggestion, though, and soon enough, he could hear his elder brother’s slow, dozing breaths.

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He wasn’t alone for long.

About twenty minutes later, there was the soft whoosh! of the door swinging open, followed by the muted shuffle of his father’s feet. Damian rolled in his bed, watching as Bruce reclaimed the seat by his pillows with a yawn. Bruce noticed him staring and quickly tried to stifle, while giving the boy an almost shy smile.
Damian returned it just as warmly as he asked. “Father?”

“Hm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything you want.”

“When will Grayson be returning?”

Because there wasn’t actually just one thing. There were two. Two things he could never forget from his time dead, and never wanted to. One was Aris. The other was Grayson, and the simple fact that, despite appearances, the fool was still alive.

Bruce’s face melted, and his expression floundered, clearly unsure as to which emotion he should be showing. But Damian didn’t mind waiting. He’d already waited almost a week for this, he could wait a few more minutes, too.

“Damian.” Bruce’s voice was soft. “I…I don’t know how to tell you this but…Dick, he…”

“No, Damian, he…” Bruce sighed, glancing over to Tim and Colin, as if the two sleeping boys would be able to help him. “The Crime Syndicate, they…Dick was taken, and he…before I could get to him, he-”

“Last I remember he was in some sort of school.” Damian scrunched his face in mock-thought. “Was it in Germany? Or, no, it was Scotland, correct?”

“Damian.” Bruce ordered.

“Father.” Damian countered with just as much authority. “I would request you not treat me like an imbecile. Now the others may not know, but I do. I know that Richard Grayson is alive, and I wish to see him.”

Bruce tried for two more seconds to keep the stern façade up, but in the end couldn’t handle the stare-down with his son. He exhaled once more, flopping his head against the seat back before, surprisingly, letting out a few snorts of laughter.

“Nothing gets past you, huh?” Bruce asked with an amused tone, glancing back down at Damian.

Damian couldn’t help but smirk, sitting up slightly against his pillows. “I was trained better than to let that happen.”

Bruce looked over at the sleeping duo one more time before shifting forward, leaning his elbows on his knees. “Promise to keep it a secret?”

“Perhaps.” Damian said slowly. “What’s in it for me?”

Bruce chuckled again as he stood, rubbing his hand gently across Damian’s hair. “Give me two minutes. I’ll be right back.”

Damian didn’t respond as Bruce practically trotted out of the room. The smirk remained plastered on his face, though, as he settled back into his sheets. He stared up at his ceiling as he slowly inhaled, and then exhaled.
He missed doing that.

He missed the weight of a beating heart in his chest, the actual *feel* of things around him. He found himself continually touching things, grabbing onto fabric and fur and metal and wood. He was still having trouble believing it. Even almost a week later, he was struggling with the idea that he had died. Over a year ago had been *killed*, and now he was back, he was *alive*.

Life wasn’t supposed to work like that.

Not that he was complaining, of course.

There was suddenly a noise, a light clacking, and it wasn’t coming from the door. Titus raised his head. Alfred and Desdemona opened their eyes. Damian jerked around, searching his room, before his eyes landed back on his window. All of the fireflies were still there, still blinking, but they’d moved. They were now creating a circle, a sort of halo around the bottom of the glass.

Sitting on the windowsill, in the center of this mysterious presentation, was a small creature. An animal, Damian guessed immediately.

A tiny bird.

A…a robin.

It was the robin that was making the noise, jabbing at the window with its beak and waving one of its wings. Even in the darkness, Damian could see the other wing was injured, unusable.

And Damian didn’t think as he leaned over and unclasped the lock. Didn’t think as he pushed up on the window. Didn’t think as he cupped the bird with his hand and pulled it inside. Didn’t think as some of the fireflies followed the robin into the room before he closed the window.

The robin was still flapping its good wing, though it didn’t appear to be in fear or fight. It almost seemed…jovial.

A feeling began to grow in Damian’s gut. But he tried to squash it, because it was impossible. There was *no way*…

The bird began chirping. Singing, really, as it hopped into Damian’s hands, nuzzled against his fingers.

The noise was soft, soothing even, but Tim heard it anyway. He jumped slightly, but turned, leaning his head against Colin’s to go right back to sleep.

“Drake?”

Tim grumbled a response.

“Aris told you he was going to try something.” Damian whispered quickly, as the bird continued to cuddle. “Are you sure he didn’t say *what*, exactly, he was going to try?”

Tim made a noise that indicated he was thinking before his voice bubbled lowly. “Possession.”

Damian’s eyes widened. He ducked his head, while simultaneously lifting the bird closer to his face. *There was no way.*

“…Aris?”
The bird tweeted loudly, excitedly.

The fireflies began to disperse, floating aimlessly around the room.

“Oh my god.” Damian breathed, smiling in disbelief as the robin pecked lovingly at his nose. “Oh my god, oh my god.”

Spiritual possession was never something he and Aris tried, or even discussed. But from the evidence making itself – himself, because that is Damian’s clone encased in that little bird body – comfortable in his grasp, the situation wasn’t too hard to figure out. Aris came across a little injured animal, maybe even dying, and worked his ghostly magic.

“I will never forget you, because I will never leave you.”

Aris had been serious. Damian just never realized how much.

“A robin. Good choice.” He laughed as he leaned back into his pillows, as the bird – as Aris – hopped onto his chest. “Guess I’ll have to make you a little yellow cape, like the rest of us had.”

Aris trilled. Tim let out a snore. Colin, Titus and the cats just kept on sleeping.

Bruce appeared in the doorway once more then, carrying a small tablet in his hand. He didn’t look up as he walked across the floor, as he plopped down next to Damian on the edge of the mattress while stabbing at buttons. Colin let out a light grunt and Bruce peeked upwards only momentarily.

A few more seconds, and then – “Mister Malone to Birdwatcher.”

There was static. Light and droning. As it buzzed, Bruce handed the device to Damian with only a brief, uncertain glance at fireflies suddenly overtaking the room, and the bird crawling up his son’s shoulder. “Try not to wake the others.”

Damian nodded, and was going to answer, but suddenly the screen burst to life. Dick was sitting at a desk – a desk Damian knew he had memories of, but they were fading, and fast – leaning on the back two legs of the chair, staring absently out the window.

There was a light ping on Dick’s side of the call, and he dropped his chair back down to the ground. “Mister Malone, this is Birdwatcher. I’ve got you loud and-”

Dick turned to look at the screen and stopped cold.

Aris tweeted happily.

“…clear.” Dick’s shoulders dropped as a smile washed onto his face. A bright smile, one of the brightest Damian thinks he’s ever seen. Dick leaned forward, resting his chin in his hand as his eyes became misty. “Hello, Damian.”

Damian couldn’t stop his own grin in response as he felt Aris settle against his shoulder, as he could see his animals, his best friend, his brother and his father totally surrounding him.

Alive. For once, in what seemed like eons, they were all alive.

“Son,” Bruce murmured, tapping the mattress with his finger. The mattress Damian noticed he was suddenly floating a few inches above. Aris chirped in amusement as Damian quickly lowered himself once more. He moved gently into Bruce’s space, partially to keep himself grounded but mostly because of the peace it brought, and leaned his head against his father’s shoulder.
“Hello, Grayson.”

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