Fracture

by wintersnight

Summary

Tim Drake has come into his own. He's a soldier, a leader, a vigilante. Somehow, the Batfamily missed how far away he'd gotten.

**On a temporary hiatus**
But! With a Podfic:
https://archiveofourown.org/works/14099280/chapters/32485611
"Red. Respond."

The needle goes through flesh so easily. Blood stains in a grotesque puddle around the bathroom, brighter since his vision is starting to fuzz around the edges, whether from blood loss, lack of food, lack of sleep, he isn't sure. The end result leads to a bad patrol regardless; add to it that he's back here in Gotham and his mood is that much worse.

These days leaving the team, leaving San Francisco, makes him uncomfortable. Going back to the streets was never the problem--that's where he started as Robin. Something about the unknowing, the drug pushers, being on the low, the gangs, all of it was exercising a different part of the brain, a different strain of adrenaline. When he was antsy, when he needed that part of his past, he went to the streets in San Fran or came back to Gotham so he could work the need out of his system. Like working out a muscle when the memory starts to fade.

But, coming back has its own risks: running into one of the bats, Bruce or Dick (since he, Jason, and Dami aren't at each other's throats as much anymore: keywords as much). Other than through email, few instances of gathering to prepare for the bigger fights, listening to them on comms while his stays mute (and off O's radar), he hasn't spoken to those two, his old mentors, in almost two years. Dami and Jason…he'd come for, responded automatically when the call went out.

He hasn't been back to the Manor in as long as he'd spoke to Bruce, and he didn't need the message any clearer than that. Not a problem. It was fine.

Bruce, Dick, Jason, and Damian all back, all fighting together with Batman Inc. and tighter than ever. It was good for them; their family was finally working. So he, the Stand-In, the Replacement, just needed to stay the fuck out of it and not screw it up for them. He gets it, really he does. He's the Intel guy, the soldier, and he would keep up fighting the good fight in his own way because it was too much a part of him now. He couldn’t just give it up, but he couldn’t go back either. The Bats had moved on and so had he.
"Red Robin, please respond." The Bat comm on the sink goes off again, not like he's answered it yet.

Since O saw him on some security feed, she hasn't let up. He should just crush the damn thing; he shouldn't keep one for the 'just in case shit goes down.' He shouldn’t keep putting it in his ear when he comes back to Gotham. He should stop hacking it to keep them from tracing the signal since, well fuck, why bother?

As if O has camera in his bathroom (she doesn’t, he checks constantly), she keeps at it. “Red. I know you’re in Gotham. I know the comm is on. Please respond.”

She's not going away if she hasn't given up by now, but he still doesn’t want to talk because he hasn’t needed to. He’s a better hacker. He only sends emails with data, intel when he gets it and thinks it relevant to Gotham or when she requests it from him. Other than that, he’s only heard her voice talking to the bats with the wheres and whats.

He knows he’s making a mistake even as he picks the damn thing up and fits it in his ear to keep his hands free. "Red Robin."

The sigh on the other end is more relieved than he's comfortable admitting.

"Red, finally. Thought we'd have to send out a search party."

He doesn't respond to that because it was just lip service anyway. A tight smile crosses his face, Dami might, Jay might, but only…

Don’t go there, Drake. Move forward.

"All right, got him. Go ahead."

Shit. He knows what's going to happen, but is too busy with gauze to turn the damn comm off.

"Red Robin. How's it hanging, Baby Bird?" That voice, the same easy familiarity, kicks up dust in Tim's brain pan.

"Nightwing," he acknowledges, followed by the usual, "what do you need?"

His past best friend, mentor seems at a loss, "oh, um, hey." Strange since Dick is normally a fountain of word vomit. "I…wanted to check on you." The voice goes rough, "it was a hard night for everyone."

"It was." Tim agrees, folding himself down on the bathroom floor; he wonders how Nightwing knew, he’d been pretty far away from them during the whole thing.

"Well, yeah. I saw you take some hard hits. You okay? Get taken care of?"

Why the fuck are you asking me this? "Yes."

"… Good. That's good. I mean you didn't stick around after the bad guys were all rounded up so…”

I haven't in over a year, Dick, but he doesn't need to point that out. He just waits until the older man spews out the real reason he's calling.

"So, uh, glad you're okay."
"Yes." He's not even trying at this point because he’s had enough of it; other than "get down," "he's got a ray gun," "I'm alive," "no, a colon doesn't look like that," or "I'm sending the file you wanted," this is the most he’s spoken to the man in a while. He’s kept it coolly professional.

“Oh. Well, yeah…” Finally, the acrobat is uncomfortable too. Good. Hopefully he'll get the hell off comm and let Tim sag against the wall to hurt. "See, it's movie night tomorrow and you should-"

"Can't-" Tim interjects smoothly, "running comms for the Titans."

"Oh well, yeah. I get that. After then!"

"No, Nightwing. Thank you but no." He's firm, not rude about it, just professional. It's the job, remember?

"You haven't been over-"

"In a while," he interrupts again, "so again, no. Red Robin out."

"Hold on-!" but Tim already taps out, turning the damn thing off completely, taking it out of his ear and staring at it hard. Usually it stays in Gotham in a drawer until he comes back and like clockwork, disables the tracker, mutes it, and puts it in before he starts with patrol. He listens to the banter sometimes, respond to distress calls or reports of something breaking out while the others have their hands full.

Other than that, he's not sure why he comes back anymore…

Still, Tim looks down up at the comm and sighs. Nope. He's been moving forward, not back. He's not a bat anymore, so he's not indebted to Dick or Bruce or Damian. They'd all gotten along fine without him, so they'd just have to keep at it.

Tim picks up his discarded harness and disables the security locks; he pops open the lower compartment for his smart phone (not the Tim Drake, CEO of Wayne Enterprise phone), and checks the time. The program will run for twenty-five more minutes, crunching the numbers to give him the composition of the new drug, help him track the origins. Twenty-five minutes will give him time for a power nap without nightmares. Perfect.

He sets his alarm for time, draws up his knees to brace his forehead on an arm and breathes out slowly. A few moments of meditation to force himself to relax enough to slip into sleep.

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"Normally, I'm an equal opportunity asshole, Big Bird, and I'm doing it because it’s you that asked, but I gotta tell ya, this is not okay with me and that’s saying something."

Red Hood is kneeling by the hidden garage door, carefully disabling the security system. Once he started respecting the damn kid, he'd made it a point to trying finding out all the necessaries: where the majority of his safe houses were, his new patrol routes, some of his little hidey spots, the security he used. Well, Hood had gotten as much Intel on the Replacement as possible considering the kid didn’t come back to Gotham much anymore, at least as far as he knew. The only one that has any kind of bead on him is O and even she doesn't have very many deets on Red Robin’s exploits (something that made her a special kind of pissed off that only Jason and Dick’s dumb assery had been able to accomplish in the past).

"I mean," Hood continues, "he used to be a Bat and all, you know? Usually don't do stuff like this to our own unless someone goes ape-shit or something." Hood stills abruptly, “hold on. Before I break down his fucking door, he hasn’t gone balls to the wall or anything I should know about?”
Dick, as Nightwing, just stares at the top of the helmet. "He IS a bat, not 'used to be,' Little Wing, and no. Not I’m aware of."

Now it's Hood's turn to stare, freezing mid-lock-picking motion to give Dick the weight of his eyes behind the mask. After an uncomfortable moment of not saying shit so Big Wing gets the picture, Jason goes back to it.

"What's that about?"

Jason snorted, and the sound echoing, "nothing, Big Wing."

"I know you're giving me that look."

"Yup," Jason doesn't bother to deny it. The system powered down and the garage door starts to rise. "I only give you that look when you say some ignorant shit, you know."

Red Hood starts into the garage with Nightwing at his back.

"It's true-" Dick starts, thinking he’s actually defending Baby Bird or something.

Hood turns on him, one finger in his face, just almost in the fricking lens of his domino because he understood what it meant to be forgotten. "Really? Why didn't you know this is Baby Bird's nest, then?" His other hand punches the inner mechanism so the door slides down again. "Why'd you have to call me in to get past his security if the guy is still on Bat role call?"

There. The asshole draws back just a little so the zinger hit. And Hood, well, Hood knows more now about how a bunch of the shit that went down between him and the main Bats since Baby Bird became part of the Former Robins Club (and, well, since Jason hasn’t actively tried to kill him in months; Tim even made him a sign for his fridge. Yeah, yeah, it’s there in one of his safe houses). The more sane and less serial killer-ish he’d become around Tim, the more the other guy had started swooping in to help him out with cases and fights; hell, he’d crashed on the couch upstairs multiple times, had even gotten the guy to come clean with some of the bad vibes going on between him and Bruce, Devil Spawn, and Golden Boy. Tim didn’t talk much about it, would deflect like a motherfucker when Jason put the hard questions to him, but at times when sleep dep was riding him, he would give some sparse details. Dick taking Robin instead of treating him like an equal, wanting Tim committed for thinking Bruce was alive somewhere; Bruce coming back to his son and maintaining the status quo of letting that brat push Tim out of the Bat radar; the last few times he’d reached out for help and no one even…

"Why the fuck didn’t you put out a distress call on the comms? Fuck, Red, the Bat would have been here in—"

The reply had only been a quiet, not funny-ha-ha laugh while Tim’s shaky hand stitched his own shit closed. Jason read the lines in his face, the hard set to his jaw and knew that Red had tried… from then on, Hood hadn’t berated him again.

And since he does fucking gets where Baby Bird is right now, not that it’s something of his own making, Jason (as much as he’s always looked up to the first Robin and wanted Bruce’s approval) gets close enough that he can tilt the helmet up to look right up in Dick’s grill.

"While we're at it, Big Wing, tell me how long it’s been since the kid's been to the Cave for wound checks or to the Manor for dinner, huh? When was the last fucking time HE called a Bat for something?" The Hood just shakes his head at Dick's grim frown and that’s fine because Dick has always had a problem recognizing when he’s being an asshole.
It never hurts to remind him.

Hands planted on his hips, he takes a step back so Dick eases down and actually thinks. "You just really take a few to think about that shit, Big Wing, before you start this rigmarole."

Hood turns to start up the steps, gingerly, silently, listening for any noises that might be Baby Bird walking around upstairs because he was probably gonna be mad. He’d give it a 78% possibility, higher if Dick was right and the guy was having a shitty night. Then Hood helping to break into his place, knowing enough about the security system to be able to disarm it, would probably not be a thing he should lead in with. In the meantime, Dick must have gotten it together because he is just suddenly right fucking behind Jason when they come to the main door. He eases it open, using his senses like a true Bat before stepping inside the open floor; dim lighting in the kitchen area is the only illumination. Just as he happens to pass the low side table, the copy of Homer’s *The Iliad*, is sitting there waiting for him. Hood pauses just long enough to glance down at the cover and take in the newness of the copy then back to moving.

Jason skirts around obstacles with knowledge; he’d been here before and more than once, Dick realizes as he follows behind, the two moving down the hallway. But he…hadn’t even known where Tim’s main operation center in Gotham was, and, wow, he feels like an ass.

"Know you’re here Baby Bird," comes from the Hood. “Come out and visit."
"Maybe another safe house?"

But, the bedroom door is open and a light from the joining bathroom. Hood comes to the door, automatic in both hands faster than his normal prep-and-pull. He darts in the doorway and…stops.

Still taller than his brother, Nightwing peers over his shoulder and there is Tim, on the floor by the shower, knees drawn up, head on his arm, and asleep.

Tim Drake is more pale than the last time Dick saw him, more gaunt, more worn, more beaten, and the acrobat's heart stutters. Tim is more and few of those *mores* are good. The dark circles of exhaustion are black against his cheeks, the hollows noticeable now that he’s looking without the cover of a cowl or domino. Tim’s got a dusting of stubble on his cheeks and throat that looks very out-of-place for the teenager that came to Dick what seems like a lifetime ago, trying to convince him to return to Bruce as Robin because that’s what Batman needed at the time.

That boy had laughed, had worked hard, had been the smartest Robin. Now, without Dick even realizing it, the boy was a man, taller, leaner, more muscular and less willowy. He’d filled out in mind and body, marked with more scars than Dick had imagined when the kid was sixteen. Shit, it had all happened while Dick’s back was turned to him, and he could barely fathom how much of Tim’s life he had missed.

"You were right, Big Bird," Jay interrupts Dick’s thoughts softly, "looks like a bad night after all."

The white gauze pad taped to his side (only specks come through from whatever injury is beneath) is the only bandage but under the harsh bathroom light, the plethora of new scars on the bare upper body is hard to miss just as is extensive bruising he can see running from shoulder down over Tim’s chest where his knees around drawn up.

He’s moving before he realizes it, taking a step around Jason’s big shoulders, already sliding sideways to get through the doorway. He’s berating himself in different languages (already filing away the observations and pounding questions in his mental rolodex) not that it'll help anything.

Just as he gets a leg through, the phone in Tim's limp hand goes off, startling both vigilantes to jump back into the shadows of the bedroom and back off near the door. At the onslaught of dubstep, the
teenager on the floor to wake abruptly and without a sound. His hand twitches around the phone, thumbing the alarm off automatically while his brain boots up again, coming back online.

It takes him less than sixty seconds to realize his perch has been compromised; less than twenty more and he has his moves planned.

With flawless acting (since he was the best out of them in any undercover scenerio), Tim stands to pseudo-stretch as if powering back on and makes like he’s going to bend over the sink to wash his face, even turns on the tap. Less than a blink and he maneuvers, contorts his body low dive out the door, coming up in a handstand across the bedroom to put him right in front of the first shadowed figure right outside the doorway; flying kick to the face that hurts his foot more than flesh and bone should. Some kind of mask, so he’s got to get the next down fast to come back to the first before he shakes off that blow. They aren't going to just wait around and tap each other in or out.

"Shit-!"
He ducks, comes around for the other already out in the hallway, upper cut that's dodged, kick that's blocked, so Tim's sliding between the bent legs on his back, twists his torso to bring his legs up around the planted one to keep the guy’s balance so he can put this second guy the fuck down.

The move almost doesn't work, the second guy is good, knows the lock, but Tim tightened his hold and plants his heels enough to put pressure on the hip joint and force the fall. As he expects, the gasp is pain caused by his grip and the abrupt landing. His free arm goes to pin the other leg before the guy can get it together enough to kick him in the side.

"Godammit, Replacement!"
Tim freezes, his hold doesn't even slack. "Hood?"
"Fucking, ow. Yes! Jesus, who else can get into your place without tripping the alarm, motherfucker!?"
The leg in Tim's grip, the one straining against Tim's feet nudged at the hip joint to pop it out if need be, slacks a little, goes limp.

"Okay, then. Good one, Baby Bird, but let go now. Please?"

And shit. What the hell is Dick doing here? Tim rolls his eyes in the dark and takes a deeper breath. Well, that boot had felt familiar.

Gingerly, Tim calls, "lights, 50%" before he rethinks what a good idea that isn't.

However, the hall light absorbs the Nightwing costume, Dick giving him a salute from the floor, leg still trapped in Tim's hold. Like the asshole really had a good reason to be there, and just—just for a second, Tim thinks he could…

Throwing that thought away, Tim lets the leg go, straining his abdomen to slide himself away from Dick, and gets to his feet as steadily as possible. He puts his back to the wall so he can keep both vigilantes in sight.

"All right, what is it?" The weariness in his own tone almost makes him wince. Almost. He's too busy rubbing the bridge of his nose and hiding the extensive scar tissue on his back to be nice. "Fuck. At least tell me it's not aliens."

Dick rolls to his feet smoothly, not even a hitch. Jason takes a less graceful approach, triggering the lock on his helmet to give Tim an intense once-over with his own expression sour.

"You look like a pile of shit warmed over, Baby Bird."
Because Jason, he just showed he cared by being a douche sometimes.

"Yeah, I love you, too, Jason. What do you need? Intel or what?" Rote response Dick realizes belatedly, staring at the taller, leaner figure of his younger brother.

Every conversation he's had with Tim in the last God knew how long started the same way, 'what do you need?'. There was no banter, no play. No patrolling together for shits and giggles, no having each other’s back unless the mass call went out from the main guy. There hadn’t been phone conversations over daily life in so long. No sparring in the ‘Haven or surprise visits with movie marathons and junk food. Hell, he’d never even been in this apartment before tonight. With Tim, it had started coming with a mask of one type or another; it came with, ‘what do you need?’ (and when the hell did that start happening? Why didn’t I notice? Why didn’t I do something about this sooner?).

The realization makes him a little sick inside, combined with Jason's insight, and the fact that Jason of all people knew more about Tim than he did now. Man that he is, Dick makes a small movement to the young man against the wall, wanting to do nothing more than give him a hug, something else to lean against when he realizes Jason has a point: Tim looked like shit.

Dick clenches his fists inside the Nightwing gloves, stops himself from moving since he’s not really sure if Tim would punch him or not.

Hood takes a second to just stare, arms crossed over his chest and eyes narrow. "I'm making you coffee. You need it." He turns on his heel, dented helmet in one hand.

"Shit, nothing good then," Tim sighs, "I need a shirt for this at least." He walks past Dick quickly, closing the door behind him (but he hears the noise when Dick really sees).

Fuck it, is Tim's thought process while he gets a nerd T-shirt and sweats over his aching body. He takes a breath to calm himself. At least there would be coffee.

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Dick had taken off his domino and changed into street clothes Jason pointed out in the spare room, just jeans and a t-shirt (that are a little too short because these are Jason’s clothes in Tim’s guest room). Jason's jacket is on the back of a kitchen chair, covering his holsters like he’s still wearing them. The Hood is on the kitchen table, a dent from Tim’s foot in the side of the forehead. It’s an impressive dent, one he’s going to have to bitch about later.

Tim stops at his system to check the results and inhales the data. He’d send it to the team later once it was actually a decent hour. This would give them the info they needed; from here, Tim could start tracking the drugs infiltrating San Francisco back to whatever foreign supplier was spiking them with death powder. Same thing coming into Gotham, probably being funneled through to go to the major cities, someone’s own little type of chemical warfare with a much more widespread implication. He’d still need to go to the harbor tonight after he ran the team to check San Fran’s warehouse district where he traced the last shipment. If he could get another sample from here in Gotham to test, then he could be sure of the theory. Fuck, maybe I should get someone else involved in this, start the thing running with some ABC institutions, but damn I hate trying to get them involved in anything and staying out of the way of their systems—

"Here, Baby Bird." Jason’s voice jars him completely out of his thoughts like a punch to the kidneys. By the look on his face, it's not the first time Jason’s said his name, and as tired as he is, he could have been just standing there plotting his next move for an hour. Shit, he usually tried to be more on his game in front of other people than this.
His mug has been put on the table on purpose, the spot right across from Dick, who is also looking at him with a blank expression. That’s Dick’s ‘I’m hiding something’ face. Tim just blinks and moves to pull out his own chair while Jason makes another cup in his own mug from the cabinet. Dick sips out of a plain ceramic one. Strange, at his old safe house, he'd always had a special mug for Dick. Now, he had one for Jason instead; times had indeed changed.

Tim wraps both hands around the steaming mug, letting it warm him. First drink and it's perfect (since when did Jason know how to make coffee the way he likes it…? Maybe that time with the terrible omlets?)

"So," Dick's voice is strained, not his usual jovial tone.

But, here it comes, the reason why he's here tonight.

"Still want you to come to movie night, Tim. It's good to convene when we've had a hard couple weeks… and, the Birds of Prey are going to take up the normal Bat patrol for a few nights, so it would be perfect to just hang out. It's been a long time since we got to do that." The smile doesn’t reach Dick’s eyes.

Keeping his expression neutral, Tim just stares blankly for a few second (it has the desired effect, making Dick uncomfortable), "already have commitments, Dick. I appreciate the gesture, but no."

Dick’s brows furrow and the guy glances at the quiet Hood who isn't looking at either of them, just sipping his coffee like he wishes he was anywhere else but right here.

"Another time when I’m not in the middle of a case," Tim placates even though he doesn’t mean it. Sadly, he can hear the bullshit in his own voice (once upon a time, he'd never even thought to lie to Dick).

Finally, irritated with Dick's dumb ass, Jason snipes, "goddammit. Seriously, Big Wing? Baby Bird, look okay, Dick’s just figured out he’s an asshole." Jason makes it sound like how could he not have realized it before. "You’ve been out of Bat Dad's immediate radar for almost two years and none of them noticed until now. So," with a flourish of hands, Jason shuts up, point made.

A slow blink is supposed to give him time to formulate a response, one that would mollify them both, and maybe get them the fuck out of his apartment with the least amount of fuss, but Tim is just out of bullshit at the moment. On his best day, he could convince an atheist that there’s not only a God, but that God would rain down hookers and booze from heaven for the right kind of sacrifice.

But, he’s been moving down a long row of working too hard, dealing with the hell his life has been for the last year, and now, he's staring down the man he once thought was his friend (not so) has come out of nowhere to try being nice--not something he wants to deal with.

"I'm 19, Jay, not a minor. I'm not anyone's responsibility. Not B's, not O's, and not yours," his eyes go to Dick's, making his point. Don't come here like you think you owe me something.

And because, well, Jason, "shit. Baby Bird…I'm sorry I missed your birthday."

That makes two of them.

Tim blinks, "that's what you took from this?" The kid sighs. "It's fine. Thanks, man." Tim's glance at Dick becomes assessing, "did he send you for this crap?"

Slightly offended, Dick’s brows furrow. "No. No, I came because I wanted to, Timmy. Honest."
Dick's hand twitches on the table, an aborted move to reach out (like he realizes how long it's been all over again). "You haven't been to the manor in I don't even know how long, and hell, I haven't seen you without a domino or that cowl in months. I mean, that's a pretty good sign I've been shit at being your brother recently."

In response, Tim's smirk is brittle, worrying, and he looks back down at his coffee so he doesn't say something damaging, something he's been aware of for a while. And Dick has no idea what's going through his head at that expression. This time, he can't stop himself from reaching, laying his hand over Tim's, squeezing.

"I'm sorry. Please believe me, Timmy."

Gently, Tim pulls his hand away, rolling his eyes over without turning his head, "again, it's fine, Dick. I'm a big vigilante now, so no harm, no foul." He sips his coffee again, considering the matter closed. But, he said nothing about accepting the apology, and Dick has a moment of panic, wondering if he wasn't too late and Tim had been on his own too long…

The system behind them emits a series of beeps, and Tim’s whole demeanor changes (in a move scarily similar to when Bruce just becomes the Batman without the cowl); he becomes Red Robin in mind and body, already up and moving away from the table. He touches a few panels on a blank wall in the living room, his system kicking online; the wall shifts, parts and allows four flat screens to slide out and lock in place. Tim waves a hand and the screens kick on with a live feed.

"Red here."

Superboy, Kon-El or Connor Kent, appears on screen with team mates Cassie and Bart beside him at the table in the common room of Titan Tower.

"Hey Rob—" Kon starts with a wave.


Kon elbows the speeder without looking away from the camera, talking right over Kid Flash without a hitch. "Just checking in. How's the city that never gets a break?"

And these guys, really. Tim smiles faintly, wondering when they'll just calm down and act normal again. Seriously, he hasn’t almost died in weeks.

"I'm all good here. Running some Intel on the case that has tendrils in San Fran but nothing too exciting. Shouldn't be more than a few days." There’s the inside joke, nothing too exciting, like taking out hundreds of alien invaders before Rob figured out their hive mentality.

Cassie leans forward a little, smiling softly at him and in her eyes is the knowing. She was still too raw from the team mind fuck the invaders put them through, and, unfortunately, Cassie got the brunt of memories from his torture at the hands of the White Triad. He got just pieces of her battles, of her regular life when they’d stepped on each other’s mental traps. Maybe he got hit with a lesser effect because he was so focused on trying to divide his mind (with Miguel shielding him just enough for him to concentration) to formulate a way to get them all free of the hold while the others were locked deep inside the mental minefield of memories: at times, their own; others, someone else’s on the team.

Of course, he’s Red Robin, usually the man with the plan; this plan just took some time to work, and the team got a little emotionally roughed up in exchange. The mass of it hadn’t been so bad, but for
Cassie, it had been a horrific experience.

When they finally sent the insurgents packing and everyone else broke to clean-up post battle, Cassie had pretty much run to wrap her arms around him, not even holding back her tears. He hadn’t known what to with her coming apart (Kon had been the only one to hang back in case she came apart as in the good ex-boyfriend mentality or something).

And Tim, Tim just sighed at the time because he felt like shit (still does) she got a dose of the worst.

“I’m sorry.”

“Wh—why would you apologize?!” Even though her voice is cracking, she sounds indignant while soaking the shoulder of his suit, probably getting blood and dirt all over her face.

“Because no one should see—should go through that. I’m sorry you happened to trip over my memories, Cassie.”

Her arms tighten enough that he realizes her arms are trembling slightly against his back, and it’s just so absurd because Cassie could literally crush him without even straining hard. She, like Kon, are powerful in ways the rest of them just weren’t, so it’s telling as to how much she’s been affected.

“Tim,” she sobs gently, “I’m sorry we didn’t find you in time. Oh…goddess, I’m so sorry, Tim. I’m so, so sorry.”

Tim sighs and puts effort into pulling off his domino (cowl foregone so he could wear the wing pack for the fight) so she can look him in the eye. She does, and her blue eyes are watery and red, her face blotchy, but her expression is so broken for him. For him, the one that fixes thing, there’s really no way to make it better, so he bites the bullet and just holds on to her tightly, pulling her right back into the crook of his neck to cry for him.

In the here and now, Cassie is still trying to coddle the shit out of him since she experienced some of the same things (please not that, please don’t say she had to go through the worst part of it all…) he had during his little vacay eight months ago because aliens are just, you know, asshats.

"Hey Rob, we just got worried, you know? Turn on the camera for us, okay?"

He chuffs a little, hands on his hips, “and here I thought we agreed, no more sensors in my suit.” Sure he knew they were still there because, well, the team worried (not that Kon had removed the tracker in the hem of his jeans either or well…Bart was problematic, but Tim was nothing if not resourceful. The rest of them had been laughably easier—not that he’d ever point out how often Raven was in Gar’s room or when Miguel was off on one of his ‘adventures’).

Bart gives him a patient look and just crosses his arms over his chest. But Tim already reaches forward and flicks the main switch for the webcam so they can see him standing there in his t-shirt and sweats, bare-faced, and actually in one piece. Their gazes move to where another monitor is located and scrutinize. Tim doesn’t even look at himself because he knows there no blood for them to see.

"Perfectly fine,” he assures with a more gentle voice, fond, “you would have seen me later anyway. We’ve got some headway in the suspicious ODs. I’m still tracking, but you guys can check some leads for me."

"Hey, can’t help it,” Kon replies with a shrug, "you are the king of getting messed up juuuuust enough not to die."
Good-natured ribbing with an undercurrent of truth, Cassie and Bart are chuckling. In the background, he can hear Gar and Miguel laughing their asses off; Raven is probably trying not to (and failing) look amused. Why do I go back to them again? Because they would die without me… right.

"Not all of us are invulnerable, you know," Tim jokes back.

"You're supposed to be taking time off," Bart points out with a finger pointed at the camera. "The last-"

"I'm taking it easier than I normally do, okay? Promise. I'm going to sleep soon." Tim interrupts, cutting off that train before Dick or Jason get too much. They already have enough to jump to conclusions.

Kon's eyes narrow and Cassie isn't smiling anymore; their eyes go back to the other screen, obviously looking for someone in the shadows of his Gotham perch, maybe an assassin or two lurking behind him because Ras just really has to take offense when his installations are bombarded with translated episodes of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* on repeat—for days. *Days.*

"Okay, then. Glad you're all right, Rob. We'll talk to you tonight then."

"Of course. Everyone get some sleep before we go hunting, and stop worrying. I'm fine."

The three wave and bid him good-bye; other voices chime in from the kitchen away from the monitors. Tim just shakes his head and presses the right series of panels for the flat screens to slide back into the wall.

"Hm," Jason's eyes are pensive when he comes back to the table, and Tim can pretty much see the wheels turning. Added bonus, his coffee mug is refilled, and Tim takes it gratefully. "Those guys got a leash on you, Baby Bird."

Tim's eyes dart away from Jason's gaze and not because the guy had tried to kill him multiple times (the scar on his throat has faded enough that it doesn’t bother Jason to see it anymore, Tim usually covers it with concealer anyway, just by habit). But, really, he and Jason were actually on a more even playing field. In the last year, the Red Hood has been getting his shit together (i.e. not killing, not all about hating the bats, taking on certain aspects of vigilantism the correlated with his old Robin persona). It wasn’t easy for the guy, and Tim had always understood that, more so now because he knew how it felt to be displaced in the family not to mention the whole come back from the dead, being thrown into the Lazarus Pit, and the mental torture at the hand of Talia and Ras. All an equation that Tim added up to being fucked in the head.

When Jason started changing up his pattern, had stopped fighting him so fucking hard after the Battle for the Cowl, Tim just took it as finally the right time. Something in him breathed when Jason as the Red Hood faltered for a kill shot, easing his trigger back instead of putting a few rounds through Tim’s chest. When Jason had been on the losing side of any random fight in the usual alleyways and accepted Tim’s hand, Tim’s help in getting him back to a safe house and cleaned up, it was like he was finally on the road to being forgiven for taking something that never really should have been his in the first place. Something that should have gone straight from Jason to Damian.

After that first clean-up, the Red Robin has been there for him (silently at times, other times as a partner) to help when he can, sometimes coming back to Gotham only when Jason finally picked up the phone to call him for insight. One year had become two, and he can actually say they’ve run together, pulled each other out of the fire. It's a good working relationship (similar to the one he has with Dami now, just with a hell of a lot more smart ass commentary and patching Jason up on the
So, it's Jason he feels the need to answer, "They…worry. I'm the main non-meta of the team, so-"

"Horseshit, Tim." The face takes on a knowing look over the rim of his coffee mug, and Jason’s eyes are more scrutinizing. "That clone kid called me, you know, after they realized you’d been snatched."

Dick freezes, mug almost to his mouth, and Tim's muscles tighten reflexively.

And *fucking Jason* knows the rest of the Bats are in the dark about it; probably knew that Tim didn’t want any of them asking questions. *He wasn’t their fucking responsibility anymore.*

"He let me know you'd gone missing between there and Gotham. Called again to tell me they'd picked you up almost two weeks later, said you were pretty fucked up, Baby Bird."

Very carefully, Tim wasn't looking at either of them, "no one told me."

Jason hums again, brow arched.

"I survived," he drinks his own coffee, trying not to give anything away, but he has the nightmares. They all had nightmares, but his had electroshock, waterboarding, his body breaking apart, and—and… *Stop, stop it. Don't go there. Just stay away from that.* He’s stronger than this.

"Who took you?" Dick asks quietly, a new light making his eyes more intent. He wants to draw out the answers, but Tim can't, he just can't do this with Dick, not anymore.

"I don't talk about it." The admission is gritted out between his teeth. "At all. They took the CEO of Wayne Enterprises, not Red Robin."

Both vigilantes just stare.

"Holy shit, Tim," Hood's face is…fucked with that expression because all the implications are a little closer to the surface and he hadn’t wanted to give any of it away. Fucking sleep dep messing with his brain, so now Dick is going to go to Bruce or Tam and *he should have kept his mouth shut.* The ordeal was supposed to stay buried, and there's Dick Grayson with his angry face on.

"This was a fun chat," as dry as he can make it, Tim stands to put his mug in the sink. "I'm going to bed. I've got meetings tomorrow. Lock up before you leave."

"Tim!" Dick's on his feet too, one hand stretched out in the gap between them.

"Nope! Not your responsibility, Dick. Good night."

He waves over his shoulder and goes back down the hall to the bedroom, not bothering to even look at the guy that used to be his brother.

**

Jason’s face is grim, but he chugs the rest of his coffee and gets up from the table after Tim closes his bedroom door with finality, and the familiar anger wells up in his chest as he sets the mug in the sink, taking out his pack of cigarettes. The drawer by the dish drainer has his ash tray in it and clinks when he sets it on the table. Quick cig and then they’re getting out of Baby Bird’s space. Doesn’t matter if he has to knock Dick the fuck out and fireman carry him out; that motherfucker is *leaving.*

Lighter flares to life and the tip of his cig burns while Dick just stands, staring down the hallway with something dark and ferocious in his expression. Jason blinks up at him while he huffs in, taking in the fisted hands, the very Bruce-like tilt to his chin when someone fucked with his stuff, and *oh shit.*
Jason’s eyes go from Dick to the dark hallway and back.

“Big Bird,” those blue eyes slide over, but the acrobat hasn’t moved. “C’mon, Big Bird, sit down for a second while I smoke, then we’ll go.” Very carefully, Jason keeps his hands above the table where Dick can see them, not wanting to trigger aura of ‘shit is going to get fucked’ that Dick Grayson is capable of. . His natural acrobat ability made him a shitty opponent when he put his mind to it (because, see, who won the cowl in the end, right?).

Moving like his whole body is wound tight, so carefully controlled, Dick finally takes his seat, obviously thinking hard about what he’d learned tonight. The apartment is still, silent except for the sound of breathing, the computer in the corner humming gently, of Jason taking it easy with his cigarette (since he’s gotta put the helmet back on when they go outside and he’s not getting one after that), and the earlier reproach.

Now, the daft bastard is getting the picture and really, he’s only got himself and Bruce to blame for it, really. Shit, even that little demon spawn hit Tim up once and a while just to make sure the guy wasn’t dead in a fucking ditch somewhere. Him and Dami just didn’t, you know, make the guy talk about whatever like Dick and even Bruce used to make him do sometimes. Nope, they just joined him to beat the ever-loving shit out of some run-of-the-mill criminals (and even the ape-shit crazier criminals) and let him mother hen over them when they got hurt. He knew for a fact Damian had been here more than once with Tim digging glass and metal out of his stubborn ass before sending him home or taking the kid back to the Manor himself, just dropping him off at the front door.

Dick and Bruce, though, different story. Maybe they both knew Tim was still doing the night patrol thing while he was in town; maybe they figured he was too busy with the Titans now, so they didn’t bother to pay him a visit. There could be a lot of reasons behind it (considering what an epic pain in his ass all three are) but none of it mattered in the long run because the end result is what it is. Baby Bird grew up too much in the last two years, and now, he just didn’t need the Bats anymore.

As much as it sucks, Jason knows exactly how it feels.
Broken

Chapter Summary

Maybe answers are required

Chapter Notes

Yeah, multi-chap fic. First one for this fandom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dick doesn’t even stop at Bruce’s greeting from behind the huge computer (the system Tim used to upgrade every week) but goes up the stairs, completely ignoring the ‘no suits outside the Cave rule’ Alfred instilled from waaaaaaay back in the day. He can’t bring himself to care.

Jason sighs behind him, taking off the helmet and going to his own workbench—the only Bruce built for him specifically to take care of his gear and make his own throwing discs of ouch, ouch, fuck that hurt. The Cave is big enough for each of them to have their own space with tools and worktable; Dick has one closer to the gym equipment, Dami’s is by the staircase so he can snag cookies from Alfred first, Bruce’s is closer to the back near the Batmobile parking, and…the one that’s never been used is only a few feet away from the main consul powering the computer. It’s fully stocked (always has been) and is neatly organized in the way Tim was at work but not at home. Jason eyes the worktable for a minute before sitting down at his own with his head in his hands.

That should have gone better.

Bruce doesn’t even hesitate but comes over, clears a spot on the edge of the table, and boosts himself up. The bare hand on the back of Jason’s neck is a patient strength, one that also crushes the bones in a bad guy’s hand or knee, one that can hold on to the barest purchase to keep himself from falling through the sky, one that can grip the fabric of a cape to make sure the littlest ones live. The last year for Jason Todd has been remembering the times not tainted with the Joker’s last hurrah; he’s been acclimated into this family unit, strange and fucked up as it may be. He still has his moments of insanity, of just rage, of red painting his vision and laughing in his cerebral cortex. He still lashes out, he still fights against their hold sometimes because he just fucking has to, but Bruce, Dick, and that little shit won’t let him go.

They won’t let him fall again, and fuck if it doesn’t make his chest all tight sometimes. He still keeps his own schedule (he still runs with the Outlaws, he still flies by himself, he still tracks the mobs and the gangs and the dirty motherfuckers to their nasty hidey-holes), but he has a place to come back to. The Bats have made certain he has a home. The word tastes strange on his tongue sometimes.

“What happened tonight, Jay?” It’s the voice Bruce used to use on him when he was a little shit and had zigged when he should have zagged; it’s the depth of Batman with the concern of the real Bruce, his father.

Under that hand and the questioning, Jason’s chest lifts in a heavy sigh. “You really don’t want me
to tell you, B. I mean, really, okay? I’ve already done an awesome job of pissing off Dick even though he’s an ass and it’s his own damn fault anyway.”

Bruce laughs a little, “you’re his little brother, Jay. It’s a part of the job requirements that you piss him off. Often. What did he do?” this time remains unsaid.

Finally, Jason looks over, no hood, no domino, and Bruce’s brows draw together on what face he must be giving. “Did you tell him where to go tonight? Be straight with me, B.”

“He was just going to hit the normal patrol routes for Sector 7, Stephanie and Cass were taking the rest of my usual. Why? Jay, what happened out there?”

“He asked me to go with him to break into Tim’s apartment.” Jason’s eyes narrow up to Bruce’s surprised expression.

“Why would he need to break in?” But, the detective already gets that there’s something under the surface, not just from Dick’s stiff back and blank expression but from Jason’s long-suffering sigh.

“Bruce, c’mon. Enough with this.” Jason massages his temple with one hand. “That kid—“ but didn’t know how to finish that sentence. He really doesn’t have a right to worry about him anyway, who else gave him that totally matching scar across his throat? Or the others that are certainly bullet-wound or knife shaped.

“I take it Tim is back in Gotham then?” Bruce suddenly get the ah-ha light, “movie night. Tim already said no.”

Jason nods.

“It didn’t go well.”

Open mouth, what the fuck was he supposed to say to Batman? ‘Your son thinks he’s not you responsibility anymore.’ ‘He doesn’t think he’s a Bat anymore.’ What comes out, “Baby Bird basically told Dick he wasn’t part of the family.”

Bruce draws back, brows furrowed, silent, and fuck if that doesn’t make him spill more of his guts. “Jesus, man, I mean that Superbrat called me when they found him but I didn’t know they took him, not Red Robin. Shit, Bruce, Dick didn’t know he’d been snatched at all. How could he not have known—?”

But the unnatural stillness brings his gaze back to Bruce and that look, “oh fuck. You didn’t know either…”

**

“Master Dick, honestly.” Alfred puts a gentle hand to the younger man’s shoulder and lays a plate slightly above the right hand splayed around a cup of coffee. “Food is necessary for the working vigilante.”

His old t-shirt and sweats are usually comfort triggers for him; a reminder that there’s more behind the mask. There’s a man that does things, that likes movies, terrible B-movies, amusement parks, museums, concerts, sitting in a bookstore with the latest mystery or magazine; there’s a man under there. Being Batman used to be his greatest fear, his greatest burden because the weight of that mantle was crushing; being that was an all-encompassing thing, it consumed. Only a man like Bruce could bare it and keep his sanity, keep a semblance of something separate from the shadows.

When they all thought he was gone, dead, and the fighting started for who would be the next in line, it was never Dick’s intent to fight for something that would eat him alive. If Jason hadn’t…” then he
would never… Tim would have been so much better… But, he was the oldest, the longest in this life, and when he’d taken it on, taken Damian as his second (utterly crushing his younger brother), he had re-made Batman to fit him instead of caving to the Bat. The experience had been jarring, that he could re-make the Batman in his image.

“Dick?” This time, Alfred’s voice is gentler, more insistent.

“…I fucked up, Al. With Tim.” He stares into the darkness of his coffee, “I went there and it’s like he’s not the same guy. He didn’t even…I—I don’t know where to begin trying to fix this. ‘I’m 19, not a minor. I’m no one’s responsibility anymore.’ Dammit, is that what…?” Dick closes his eyes. “Jason asked me how long it’d been since he’d come here for wound checks or dinner or called for help, and I had no idea, have no idea. That’s how long it’s been. I don’t even remember.”

The older man’s expression softens just a bit and he glances around before gently sinking into the chair next to Dick (and it’s one of those things only Dick Grayson can make happen: he can make Alfred Pennyworth step out of the carefully cultivated role for a few minutes and be family).

“Master Timothy has always been…” even Alfred seems at a loss, “independent by nature, Dick. It is part of his being, to take on more burdens than any man should bare; to find the answers to his questions himself and take action. Of course all of Master Bruce’s children are unique in their strengths and weaknesses, all have made exceptional partners for his other life, and have saved him from himself more than once, for that is the nature of the Robin. But, for Master Timothy…I believe he has seen his tenure as Robin, not as the Batman’s sidekick, but as an entity unto itself. For most of his time, he operated separately from the Batman as a matter of course, not merely as necessity. In effect, he may have become accustomed to being the son without the same ties to the family as you, Jason, and even Damian. Perhaps this has lead him to this path, one in which he does not see a place for himself in the family any longer.”

Dick looks away from Alfred, burying his head in his hands again, turning Alfred’s words over and over.

“However, it is highly possible Master Tim has partially separated himself from the family to try forgetting the events leading and following his…retirement from Batman’s Robin since you as Robin and not the Batman happened to be his first real hero, his reason to later take on the mask and cape himself.” Alfred smiles gently down at Dick’s bent head, “once the family seemed to come together after Master Bruce’s return while Timothy stayed in Europe, he may have seen no reason to come back.” The butler just gives him that Gallic shrug that means everything and nothing.

“None of that tells me how I can fix it, Al,” Dick replies without raising his head.

“Very simple, Sir,” the butler finally raises a hand to the back of the younger man’s neck and squeezes, “give Master Timothy the right reasons to return.”

The clock in the other room opens and Alfred returns to his post, returning to the kitchen for “dinner” when Bruce comes through the doorway in his own pair of cut-off sweats and an overly big Superman t-shirt (because Clark always had to give gag gifts for special occasions and you bet Bruce was going to wear that shit).

Dick doesn’t raise his head as Bruce pulls out the chair next to him and sits down. The bigger man just runs a hand over his oldest son’s shoulders and back, lending his silent presence as a comfort, just like when Dick was little and had a bad night out as Robin. Some nights when he would see something horrific that they couldn’t go back in time and fix…

Dick sighs again.
Bruce hums, “not just you, Big Wing,” he assures in that voice reserved for his first son, his first real partner. “I missed it too. Luckily, we have Jason to keep us on the straight and narrow.”

At that, Dick burst out laughing, looking over at the smirk on his father’s face. “Geeze, Bruce. Why you gotta…well, yeah. Yeah.”

“I missed out on it all too, Dick. The League knew the Titans went through hell with that Insurgent Crisis, but no one wanted to push after we saw them come back from it. I had my chance there to go to Tim, bring him back home for a week, hell, a month to recover himself like the others. Clark took Kon out into space, Diana took Cassie back to the island, everyone took their protégés out of that damn Tower to help them deal with whatever the alien race did to them. At the time, Tim didn’t even look at me while the others were leaving—“ Bruce sighs, “I should have realized right then how far out of hand I’d let it get. The second Tim turned his back on me and went back to that Tower alone, I should have—”

“Not just you, Bruce!”

The elder Wayne hikes a brow at his son, “two years, Dick. I’ve been back for two years, back as the Batman for half that. Tim comes whenever we call, picks up when I need intel, shows up when one of us is in a tight spot. He still runs WE in my place, but I honestly think the last time he was here was…when we went to get Damian back from Darkseid. That’s the last time I remember him in the Cave.”

Dick nods miserably, staring down at the table.

“He really told you he wasn’t your ‘responsibility’ anymore?”

“Said he wasn’t mine or O’s or yours,” Dick shrugs one shoulder, “he’s just not Timmy anymore. He’s this adult now with a blank expression I’ve never seen, and he would barely look at me, talk to me. I’m the worst brother ever.”

Bruce shakes his head gently, “I think it’s more we gave him too much, Dick. You wanted to give him time to become this new vigilante so he could be your equal, and I wanted to give him time to heal from choosing Damian as my Robin over him even after he pulled me back here.” The elder braces his elbow on the table, lays his cheek in one hand to look down at the top of his son’s head, “I didn’t explain, but I rarely do, so it would make sense he’s been nursing some heavy hurt. And Tim has a tendency to—”

“Internalize. Over-work. Isolate himself.”

“Yes to everything, but at least he hasn’t completely cut ties, like Jason originally did. He keeps up with his own sense of responsibility with being our intel guy, coming when we call.”

“That doesn’t make it any better, Bruce.”

“No, it doesn’t, but it gives us a way to get him back.”

Dick finally puts his elbow up in the same way, looking into his father’s face, “okay, so we do this the smart way? We do the research and then..?”

Bruce actually grins at him, “and I thought I only trained one detective in the family. Yes, we do the research first. Once we find out what it yields, we go from there.”

“Plans make me feel better, you know that right?”

“All this from the kid that just threw himself off anything more than three feet tall? And still does to
this day.”

“Oh please, twenty feet if anything.”

The two share a laugh as Jason comes through the hallway and gingerly eases down in his chair for dinner. He carefully doesn’t look at the two, folding his arms on top the table to give off a completely relaxed vibe and hope he doesn’t get pulled into this whole ‘Tim’s a big boy’ shit now—

“All right, Jason. We’re starting with you. Spill it. Everything you know.”

_Fuck._

Very slowly, the Red Hood slowly raises both hands up to his shoulders, palms out, without looking at either of them. “I reserve the right _not_ to incriminate myself—“

“All right smart ass,” Dick finally grins a little as Jason drops his hand and tilts his head to the side with a smirk.

He sighs and sits back, crossing his arms over his chest, hair flopping over his forehead, “so, about Baby Bird, huh?”

The two older men don’t even have to comment; however, as if he was listening at the door, Alfred comes out of the kitchen at the right moment, making final preparations for the meal.

“He—uh, kind of started it actually.” He looks up at Alfred in thanks when the mug in front of him is filled with wonderful smelling coffee. “After everything I’d done to him, all the injuries, well, _all_ of it, I never expected him to come and pull me out of a gun fight gone really bad, but,” Jason shrugs, sipping the dark brew, “he did. Got a good one himself in the process, but once he latched on to my weapon’s harness, that little shit didn’t let go. I dunno, I think that’s where we started being okay.”

Roast chicken, potatoes, vegetables are all laid out and the plates handed around.

“It was…small things. He’d show up on my rounds, maybe offer to grab some food or check out any leads, running tests for me. Then he just started patching my ass up after a while, you know, make me come back to his perch because,” Jason uses both hands to make quotation fingers, “‘my supplies are shit’ and he can have his systems running on whatever case he was working at the time. He stopped being worried I was going to slit his throat, put new holes in him, or whatever. Like, I got _couch_ rights, man, and that little fucker downloads new movies, like every week.” Jason grins while helping himself to potatoes, accepting the bowl from Dick.

“And…last year, I couldn’t get around the Blade Squad because, yeah, they’re a gang of techno-assholes, so I called him up while he was in San Fran. Next thing I know, he’s in trashed civvies at my safe house with those stupid earbuds, ‘cause that’s what _muggers_ look for you know? I mean, hello _Red_, what the fuck? I dunno, maybe he was just spoiling for a fight. Anyway, I got no idea how he knew which one, since it wasn’t one of the BI’s but the Hood’s and there he was with a beat-up laptop bag, glaring at me.” Jason huffs out a laugh, remembering that kid in torn jeans, worn old hoodie with the hood up to hide his face, and appropriate skater shoes since he was also carrying an old board. It was the most chill he’s ever seen the kid. Course, Wayne Enterprises CEO Timothy Drake-Wayne wouldn’t be caught dead with a backward hat and Shaun White backpack (with random pins all over it), so he literally stared at Drake for five minutes, mouth agape before the 18 year old shoved past him.

“Yeah, I think that’s the time me and Baby Bird agreed we were cool.” Jason glances over his shoulder, “hey, Al. This chicken is the bomb-shit, seriously. You need to teach me how to make it
some time.”

“Of course, Master Jason, since I am very well comfortable with you in my kitchen at least.” An arched brow at Bruce makes the master of the house duck his head and take another bite. Dick makes a momentous effort not to choke.

“So…” Dick starts, cutting his chicken, “the Titans called you when he was kidnapped? Is there anything…”?

The other man stills, the creepy Batman-type stillness. “Super Clone wanted to know the last time I saw or heard from Red. Said he shouldn’t have called a Bat anyhow since... well, Red told ‘em not to call any of us.”

Dick’s brow arches (which explains why Raven of all people didn’t call him when shit hit the fan for Tim); Bruce’s eyes slide over to him since it was The Titans and all.

“But, got a text saying they found him and basically he was tortured, beat pretty badly. Red wouldn’t tell me anything about it and well, shit, I didn’t even know they took him as Tim Drake until tonight actually.” Jason’s face shuts down, his expression bland. “I have no idea why they would want him and not send any kind of ransom demand or anything. That’s something you’ll have to get out of Red or the Titans.”

Bruce is chewing thoughtfully and finally nudges Dick, “see? Jason is the one keeping us on the straight and narrow.”

Jarred out of his thoughts, the second son barks out a surprised laugh, “wow, seriously, B? Well, you know, come to think of it, yeah, I do. You two assholes are lucky to have me.” He points a fork at them with an arched brow and grin. Amused, the two other Bats just grin back.

***

The gap the divided them seemed too far to bridge at this point. Dick is starting to get desperate, searching for any reason to seek his younger brother out, taking rejection after rejection with calm acceptance and determination to keep trying. To stop letting Tim fall through the cracks of their busy lives.

Damian, for once, seems to support the effort, but then again, the youngest apparently has some sort of agreement with Tim as his usual sarcastic tongue lacked the old bite. Well, truth be told, once he started going over the comm records and reports Bruce requested from Babs, he found that Damian had been talking more to Tim than Dick had been in the last year. At least Dami had remembered his birthday:

'Congratulations Red, you live to annoy me another year.'
'Only if you don't decide to kill me in my sleep, R.'
'-- then you wouldn't be around to pester.'
'Aw. I love you too, you know.'
'You're a fool, Red.'
'Everyone had to be something, R.'
'Sigh. Do not let this go to your ego, but you do have a point... Red, I assume you have plans?
Others with which to celebrate?'
'... I'm good, R. Thanks.'
'Red,-'
'You have school and it's already late... But, thank-you. Thank-you.'
'I do not approve of this. You should not be alone.'
'Heh. My gift to me is sleep. That's going to be pretty good.'
'Call me should you change your mind.'
'I will. Red out.'

Tim never called, he was sure. More disturbing for Dick, however, were the instances Oracle outlined at Bruce's request. The last time Red Robin called out to any of the bats for help or back up was eight months ago. No one responded. Oracle's report stated he was able to get away without compromising his identity, but the audio recording was a nightmare of bludgeoning (he must have been sleep deprived and running himself ragged with the Titans and Gotham. Why the fuck didn’t anyone get to him? How did it happen? Where had he been? Where had Bruce been? Dick is still digging into his own records trying to find out.) and jeering from the group.

Tim had been out of commission for a week after that and had gone back to the Tower for over a month afterwards. His comm was either on mute or off after that, O reporting that she was unable to trace Red Robin's whereabouts or hack back into his private comm. He had upped his security and encryptions; he hadn’t wanted to be found while in Gotham.

However, nothing in her records had indications of his abduction, and Dick needed to know more. So, he decided to go to the next step, contacting someone outside the family before he went back to Bruce to compare notes. His first stop is Tam.

After hours, he's Nightwing, sitting on the fire escape of an abandoned building with his instant noodles still hot and the phone between his ear and shoulder.

"Dick!" Tam's voice is warm and professional. "Hey, how are you?"

A few minutes of small talk gives him time to slurp his noodles and catch up on how she is, how Lucius is doing ("he hates retirement"), how WE has been progressing, the new man in her life, the lack of love in his, and the usual teasing, flirting banter ("I should have just asked you to marry me," he bemoans and she laughs).

After a while, they get down to it because there's still patrol to finish and a beat shift tomorrow. "So-"
"So, you're going to tell me why you're calling, huh? You know, my boss is a real hard ass so I need sleep at some point."

He laughs, "I know, I know, that Wayne guy, right?"
A significant pause, "You mean, Drake, right?" And her voice sounds odd.

"Well, yeah, Tim's-"
"Dick, he legally dropped the Wayne part months ago. He keeps it for morale and company image, but Tim's not a Wayne anymore... Oh, you—didn't know that?"

A piece of him numbs, "no. No I didn't. I don't think Bruce knows either."
"Oh. Damn it. I shouldn't have said anything."
"It's okay," no, it's not. The more he uncovers, the less okay things are getting. "He's the reason I'm calling Tam."

"Oh no. Dick, Dick where is he? I'll get in the car now, I can come-"

"Not that reason, Tam, honest." (How many times has she gone out to get him when he's injured? Why did he risk her?) "He's, well, he won't talk to me anymore so I'm kinda-"

"Uh-hu. Whose fault is that?"

"Believe me, I know. That's why I'm trying to get deets, Tam. We're all trying to fix this with him, no
lie. Me and B are trying to get back into his life if he’ll let us, but…he's this completely different guy now, and I don’t even know where to start."

"Yeah, yeah he is—very different now, isn’t he? Even in the last few months, I’ve seen it, but there's well, he's been through so much, Dick, and…he just keeps it all in. He just keeps moving to the next thing. I tried, believe me, I tried so hard with him, but I just couldn't reach him, you know? I mean… the, that part of his life is too much for me. I’m a regular person, and that—I just can’t help him with it. I tried to be there for Tim Drake, but I can’t be there for Red. I don’t know how to be there for Red."

"I get that," and Dick's voice is wrecked, "and that’s okay. He’s had girlfriends out of the life before, so it’s nothing new. I hated to hear he couldn’t make it work with you because you’re a good person, Tam. But, you can’t blame it on yourself or him. It’s who we are. This life is a big part of us.” Dick swallows around the lump in his throat, “that’s part of why I’m calling you. He used to tell me everything and now I can't even get him to tell me where he'll be for the night. He won't come for dinner or movie nights, won't let me bring him take-out or anything. I mean, I'm finally in Gotham full time now, but he isn’t, so it's just—"

"Making you crazy, huh?"
He sighs in answer.

"Okay," and she breathes in too, "okay. I’m, really I’m glad you and B are going to try with him, seriously. So, I'll give you a little I know and then some advice, how about that?"

"I'll take anything at this point."

Tam just gives a little laugh, “well, where to start? Hm, all things Tim Drake…so, you know that Tim hasn’t lived in the Manor for a long time, and it’s kind of where I remember all of it starting. And, I remember this, Dick, because of the look on his face when he, um, said he moved out because wasn’t his place to be there.”

Dami, Dick answers his own question.

“He just looked so lost when he told me not to send his mail to the Manor anymore, he’d have to have it forwarded somewhere else. Then, I went with him for a while, when he was on the hunt for B, you know? Not for the whole trip, he did make me come back before ‘I got hurt,’ his words. Then, he sent B back to Gotham and did the whole training thing? With very scary people that I’m not going to name on an open phone line? Well, he called me, asked how WE was doing and let me know he was going to stay in Europe for a while to get his head on straight.”

Bruce told him he was going to keep Damian as Robin; that’s why he didn’t come back.

“When he did, finally, come back to Gotham and work…that kid, that little smart ass, was just gone, Dick. I can’t explain it other than that. Tim Drake left and this older man came back in his place. He got the apartment when he has to be in town for WE business or to do his thing around the city like you do. And he started hanging out with a new crowd, like those scary people that, again, I’m not going to name, but the same ones that found him when he lost his spleen and—”

“Whoa,” Dick puts his hand out like Tam can see it, “he lost his spleen? How the fuck do you just— just how?"

“Oh…yeah. Yeah, Dick, he did. But, he takes some vitamins and low level antibiotics to keep his immune systems up and he told me he really doesn’t need it to live, but—“
“When? How?”

“When he was trying to find the missing person.” Her simple answer. “That’s where some of the new scars came from, I mean, did B tell you anything about it? Well, Tim probably didn’t tell him anything about it, so why am I surprised.” He can just imagine Tam trying rein in her temper next time Tim comes in the office for meetings. Wow, he wish he could see that.

“So, after he got back from his training mission and just, wow, had all these crazy moves, he kept his cowl and that new identity, came back to lead the company…and looked for places. Safe houses for BI and a place for himself. He—I think it was significant because he just figured he wasn’t supposed to be there anymore now that the family was getting back together.”

The noodle cup is by his boot, Dick rubbing at his temple.

“Okay,” Dick encourages.

“Well, he went back to see the Titans, too. He…he told me back then that he needed something outside Gotham because eventually he’d leave all together, so the team was happy to have him back even with the new uniform.” She pauses, obviously thinking about how to say the next part.

“He didn’t get the same reception,” Dick supplies helpfully.

She scoffs (so, not that helpful), “no, no, they were all really happy to see him, that he was okay. The one friend with the lame uniform was pretty pissed at him for just disappearing, but yeah, they were happy to have him back. They wanted him to take point and he did, still does.”

At least he has them, at least he has someone.

“I get that you don’t know much about the Red part of his life, but…what can you tell me about the kidnapping? Did WE ever get ransom or anything?”

Tam’s voice goes strange again, “Dick…I, I’m sorry, but I promised him I wouldn’t tell you or B anything about it. Nothing.”

Dick perks up at that, little asshole knew they’d go to Tam eventually. “Tam, Hood said he was tortured.”

“I can’t. You’ll have to get it directly from him. I don’t even know it all.”

More frustrated than when he started, Dick sighs into the phone, “anything about his general life? I mean, is he dating anyone, taking up any crazy hobbies?”

“He really likes his ‘play’ days in R&D when there’s no meetings or CEO things he has to worry about. I mean, his work with our experimental tracking system was crucial for the military contract. The first demonstration wouldn’t have even happened if Tim hadn’t done some work on side to get the system functionally stable. As for seeing someone, well, he hasn’t mentioned anything to me, but then again, Tim’s been pulling away from me too.” It’s her turn to sigh in his ear, “Dick, I don’t see a good end for him on this road. I don’t care how well he can take a beating and still walk it off. I just, I don’t know how long he can keep going.”

“I…hadn’t realized it’d gotten so bad for him,” Dick admits, swinging his legs. “The last year has been pretty crazy for everyone, trying to get Jason back, B taking up the mantle again, Blüdhaven falling and me coming back to Gotham, well, and Damian back…it’s just, I’m not going to make excuses but—“
“Tim got lost in the shuffle. I get it, but you and the rest of those guys need to get it too, Dick. He’s not the same guy, period. It’s been a bad year for you? Check out the papers on how bad the Titans had it with the Insurgent Crisis, and before you say anything, no. I’m not tell you about it either. I’ve brought you up to speed on all things Tim Drake, well, as much as I can anyway.”

“I know, thanks for talking with me, Tam. So, where’s the advice portion, huh?”

“Easy, Blue Eyes, dog the hell out of him. He’ll give in eventually.”

The night echoes with his laughter.

**

“On your right!”

Luckily, he’d taken a slight detour on finishing his ‘night shift’ and just happened to find Red Robin in the middle of an epic bruiser down in the Square because, you know, Gotham. His resolve bolstered by Tam’s advice, Nightwing didn’t even hesitate to drop in on the party sans invitation.

“I’m so hurt, Red,” he’s saying while jumping over a guy, both legs out to kick two in the face, “I mean, I didn’t even get an email to come out and join the fun. Do you have any of those little cucumber sandwiches?” The back of his fist nails the next guy in line right in the nose. By habit, he moves just enough to avoid the inevitable spurt of blood.

“I thought you were more of a pigs in a blanket kind of guy,” Red Robin deadpans (really, double entendre, much?), and makes Nightwing grin for more than one reason.

Well, it’s the first time in the last two weeks of Plan: Get Tim Back that the guy has comeback with the old hardy-har-har and second, Nightwing can actually see him in his element, taking in the other hero’s new fighting style. If they ever got to that point again, he’s be a whole different guy to spar with.

“Hey, Red, free food is free. Who am I to be picky? But, really, next time try for a different venue.” Spinning back kick, his heel busting someone’s jaw, sending the random Bad Guy #12 flying.

“I didn’t have time to stop at Party City, next time I’ll have streamers,” Red returns, bo a blur of motion, as the guys around him just keep falling and wow. He’d gotten so much faster, moved more and more fluid like Bruce or Dami; no flare, just lightning fast hands and feet.

“For sure. Those always liven things up.”

“Are you guys for real?!” One of the men on the ground sneers, “get a fucking room and be done with it!”

Nightwing’s brow arches over his domino, “well, if mean guys like you would follow the law, we wouldn’t have to be out here kicking your asses.” He cheerfully smacked the guy through a loop.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Red delivers a stunning kick to catch the final man a crazy uppercut, a gust of wind catching his cape enough to billow it out while he pushes the bow back to the length of his forearm and stashes it somewhere in that harness. He’s already moving to start tying up the bad guys so the GPD can come and round them up (and Office Grayson can finish up the paperwork on them all during his beat shift tomorrow, sigh).

Neither banter while they round up the baddies, just doing the dredges of the job. Red Robin finally hits a few keys on his “work” phone that sends an auto distress call to headquarters with technology that makes Nightwing scratch his head.
And the guy, *this guy that just fought with him*, already has his back turned and a grapple in hand, ready to leave in the same 'I'm even going to say good-bye' manner he's been using for the last who fucking knew how long.

“Hey!” Nightwing walks around the bundles of tied up guys, dodging the piles of weapons, “we should totally go for some Chinese to celebrate—“

The cowl’s side view and one white lensed eye greet him over Red’s shoulder, mouth downturned, “I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing,” and it’s almost the old Robin voice, darker in tone, “but this shit stops. I don’t need a babysitter, haven’t for a long time. If the Bat wants to know if I’m still up on my game, then he can come tell me himself.”

The loud bang associated with the grapple shooting out makes Nightwing blink behind the domino, at a loss from the acid in his brother’s tone. Red takes flight, cape fluttering behind him, and Nightwing...Nightwing just plops his ass right down on the sidewalk beside a pile of still full magazines they taken out of the autos, staring up at the place where Red disappeared. His chest aches.

The footsteps behind him are familiar, obvious, and that’s the only reason he isn’t on his feet in a heartbeat with the escrima sticks at the ready. Instead, he just sits there as a gloved hand squeezes his shoulder.

“Don’t take it to heart, Big Bird,” Red Hood squeezes against for good measure. “C’mon. You’re done for the night anyway, gotta work tomorrow, right?”

A shift in the shadows is his nod, his shoulders lifting in a deep intake of breath. “Yeah, yeah.”

Sirens are already echoing off the buildings. Hood moves around to stand in front of him, drawing Nightwing’s gaze up and that gloved hand is shoved out, an offering. A reminder that he has at least one brother that doesn’t hate his ass. With a small smile, the vigilante takes the hand and lets Red Hood pull him standing.

Chapter End Notes

Dick’s an asshole, but he’s not that bad, really. Bruce has a sense of humor and also, not really an asshole. As for the pairings, I had originally meant for it to be Tim/Dick but I'm still considering ;) Thanks for reading.
The feeling slides down his spine, and he turns from his place in the shadows to face the new comer to his perch. Others had taken on his old patrol route, his old hidey holes to sit for a minute, grab a power bar and a drink before going back at it. His new route (when he's in Gotham) came with new hiding spots too. Trust the Batman to find them.

"Red Robin," the dark knight greets, half in shadows.

"Batman," the younger returns without coming out of the shadows. "What do you need?" Rote.

"I'm with you tonight." And that's it. Almost two years patrolling by himself and all of a sudden he's got the man himself coming out of the woodwork.

"You're on the South side with Robin. My business is taking me East."

To his credit, the Bat doesn't show he's surprised Red Robin knows their patrol schedule (if he is surprised at all).

"Change of plans. Robin is with Nightwing. I'm with you."

"Unnecessary. They're have a small group, it's more Intel than fighting."

"Regardless," is the only response.

Finally, he turns to face his old mentor, both with cowls to hide themselves.

"I don't know who's been talking to you or what's going on," it's the Red Robin voice, "but I don't need a babysitter."

Unruffled, the Batman gives no outward reactions. It's strange, he used to be able to read the smallest tick, used to be able to find the emotion even when he was the Bat. Now, it's like he's looking at a stranger all over again...

"I've been told you've stopped checking in when you're in town." A mild observation, but Red Robin is a detective in his own right now and he can read between the lines.

"I patrol whenever I come back."

"Not the point."

"It IS the point, Batman." He returns. "I haven't 'checked in' for over a year, and it's just now an issue. Why?"
Silence. Because of course the Batman didn't like to be called out, but Red Robin wasn't one of his anymore. He wasn't going to blindly follow; he has his own team, his own agenda, his own way of doing things. They weren't partners anymore (but were you ever really, Replacement?).

“Quiet is not an answer.” Red asserts patiently, crossing his arms over his chest.

"No one has patrolled with you since the last crisis. It's a good strategy to know how my fighters work when we need to be paired up or the team united."

"Good strategy," he keeps his voice carefully empty, forcing himself not to tense because the team. "Agreed. I'm still part of BI so my profile is there and it hasn't changed. I work well with Hood, Black Bat, and Oracle. Even Robin and I can get along." There. Now he can be on his way.

But the Bat isn't done. "Then I'll be more direct." He steps out of the shadows to come closer, "I've made a grave error in the attempt to give you what I thought you needed: space, time. You needed to figure out who you were and where you needed to be, just like Dick when he left Robin behind."

Red Robin stays silent, back turned to the Bat.

"But it's been two years since you found me, brought me home, and I've finally got the full account of what happened while I was gone. Dick took Robin from you--"

"This is an old story, Batman." And the tone is there, the 'testing my patience' tone.

"None of us expected you to leave the family over it, Tim."

His spine snaps straight, angrily, and it gives the Batman pause, looking at his son.

The laugh is bitter, "sure. That's what you want to believe, then not a problem. I left the family. I don't call for help on comms anymore because why bother, really? I don't come when there's a call or spend days getting the data you need. I don't take care of business to make sure it stays in your family. Sure, Batman, I just left. So, you've got no reason to follow me then, right? I'm the stand-in between your sons, so I'll pull my file from BI and be on my way."

His grapple is already shot, he's already flying while the Batman is left standing with a highly unusual sense of guilt the Bat normally didn't feel. Those things were left for when the mask came off. But those words came back to him, a stand-in between your sons. The situation with Tim had degraded more than he initially realized and the Bat got out his own grapple, firing with an outstretched arm. The tracker he'd managed to peg on Red Robin is already working.

He would still follow. He would follow Dick's lead and work on trying to fix the obvious break in their family.

**

Wow, now he's completely fine with a bad guy beat-down.

He'd already snuck into their 'office' and cracked the password; his transmitter sent the data to his system for later. When he looks at the security feed, the pissed off hits. Batman is doing his stand in the center and be creepy before the fight starts thing, and Red Robin swears, loudly.

Guy wants to do this, fine. Just, fine. Red moves out of the office, not meeting anyone (pity) before he came to the main storage place for the drugs. The small group of bad guys turned slightly larger at, well, 'shit, shit, Batman.'
And watching Batman is like watching water run, smooth and consistent, never stopping. He goes from one thug to the next, one fight to the next without a hitch, and Red jumps, summersaults, comes down with a kick to enter the fray.

He doesn't default ("back to back, Robin"), but takes his section of them and works through the mass. He uses what he has, doesn't try anything fancy, and he not end-of-my-patience brutal. He doesn't fight like Robin anymore, he fights like Red Robin.

By the time Batman is done, his section tied and ready for the police, Red Robin's are tied and he's gone, moving to the roof for the next stop in patrol. The tracker is neatly placed on top of a crate.

****

When the Batman returns to the Cave after a night of chasing Red Robin's spectacular distractions, the email from Oracle confirms the Red Robin profile is gone from the database.

Chapter End Notes

I meant for this to be short, so no worries ;)

Bequeath

Chapter Summary

Because it never really was his.

Chapter Notes

This literally came from out of nowhere, and yes, I was tearing up while writing it. Thus, short, but worth it.

Four months after Bruce’s return:

It’s… Fucking painful but necessary. Tim stands in his underground garage beneath his new main perch in Gotham, eyes moving over the massive lump under the dust cover. He hasn’t been here long, is actually still moving things from the storage locker he’d gotten not long after the Battle for the Cowl. After Dick took Damian as his Robin, Tim had just known it would be a good idea to start moving the majority of his things out of the Manor to somewhere safe. This had been just stored in the back of the unit, waiting to take up the good fight again.

His chest lifts in a sigh, but, well, it’s long overdue, and he's got to be a good guy about this. He’s got to be the bigger man because…he’s not the same one that left Gotham months ago to look for his pseudo-father. He’s a very different man now. There’s a whole lot of broken everything in him, a lot of pieces he’s spent the last few months trying to glue back together. He used to be a scrapper, digging his heels in with every ounce of stubborn will; he’s learned a better way, learned the hard way, to flow, to direct things his way instead of standing to let the water surge against his back. He’s a very different man in more ways than one.

But still, this is a bitch. Determined, he reaches out, grips the dust cover, and pulls it away. The Red Bird gleams at him, wasting away for…too damn long. His old R on the back fenders are long gone to make room for the new R that belonged to someone else; the old dings and scrapes (memories of better times) have been fixed for ages, hammered out, repainted; the computer with his previous files have been wiped for just as long so when the time finally came, he could give it up with a free conscience because really…it isn't his, never should have been. He sees that now.

So, it's time. Fuck.

Tim takes a breath, one hand over his face in a moment of weakness.

Squaring his shoulders, he moves to the smaller bike for undercover work more than for the night job, and walks it to the back of the Bird. A few this and that’s to hitch it to the back because he sure a as fuck isn't going to wait around for a ride back to town, not to let anyone see how much this screws with him. The Bats aren’t going to get that out of him, no way in hell.

Then he’s in the reinforced locker, takes his time getting into the new uniform, the newest version he created himself. Under-layer is first, then body armor with the usual fabricated weave of Nomac and
Kevlar, gloves then gauntlets, locking in the security features, tightening the harness, utility belt around the waist. Cape and cowl are last. Then, nothing left but a whole lot of time to go. He's burning night.

Red steps up to the driver's side, hand faltering a little on the door. Red Robin has never been in this car; it was never his place, not his memory. This was another lifetime. It and the old uniforms buried in a box upstairs somewhere (or was it in The Tower?) is what he has left of that time when…

Silently reprimanding himself (and pissed off he’s being a pansy about this, it’s just a fucking car, Tim, get it together), Red opens the damn door and slides in, ducking down since, shit, he's apparently taller now (who the fuck has a growth spurt this late in life anyway?). He fires it up, forcing himself to keep his mind on doing the right thing instead of seeing ghosts of Spoiler or Nightwing or… Nope, the passenger seat is empty. keep with that. No one is there beside him anymore. It’s not fine yet, but at some point, it would be.

Another breath, the best part of his life, when his place was defined and valued, is still here. Was. Red lowers his head a little to lay against the steering wheel while the engine idles gently.

He taps a spot on his harness without raising his head, and the hidden garage door slides up. Straightening, Red Robin backs the car out, careful of the bike hitched behind.

**

The hidden way is permanently burned in his mind, a map that will always exist no matter how long it's been since he's been ‘there.’ He also knows how to avoid all the other trips to stop someone on the outside from finding the place, the security feeds that go off when someone is approaching.

Unerringly, he turns to the slight right instead of going on into the Cave’s proper, coming on the rows of cars for all possible uses: daytime Brucie (the Rolls, the Lexus, a nice Jag), nighttime undercover (beaters, an Audi, the old Honda Civic), two GPD cruisers (who knew where they came from), car for pick-ups (bullet proof glass and the darkest tint; souped-up engines to outrun anything else on wheels), the extra Batmobile, and now a spot for Dami’s new ride once he gets old enough for Bruce to hand him the keys.

Red parks it in the back, obscured by the ambulance Alfred sometimes uses when the shit hits the fan in a big way, and affectionately pats the dash. His hand lingers longer than it should because fuck this is hard. So many memories to leave here.

But, he gets out, closes the door behind him. The niche built into the wall houses the keys for all the cars, and Red hangs them up at the end of the row, his R keychain gone, back in that lost box somewhere. He digs out a car cover and shakes it out on his way back.

Once the Red Bird is covered again, he heads to the back and unhooks the bike, stores the rigging he used in the compartment under the seat. Even though his chest hurts again, he walks the bike away from the ledge without looking back.

Once he's good for takeoff, Red swings a leg over and bows his head for a moment. Really, it was literally a breath… but long enough for footsteps to approach, and he snaps to attention because dammit he shouldn’t be here, no one was supposed to catch him.

That voice though, "Master Tim! You've returned from abroad. Ah, Master Bruce didn't-"

He doesn't get off the bike, doesn't turn around. "Alfred. Yeah, I'm back," he interrupts needlessly. "I've gotta get going. Already late. We'll catch up soon."
He's already firing the engine before Alfred has to force himself to ask Tim to leave with *that look*, the one where he doesn't agree with the choices you're making, like he knows better, but is going to let you figure it out on your own.

His chest burns. His eyes are hot under the cowl, but fuck if he was going to let it get worse. Burst of speed and he's gone, going back out into the night.

**

More than a year later, and the same butler is staring down at the still-covered vehicle. His eyes are distant, remembering that interaction, the last one he’s had with Timothy Jackson Drake without the others milling about during the usual end-of-Gotham/the world crisis. He hasn’t had a moment to with the boy since and has not seen the boy without a mask.

But that night…that night has taken a special place in his library of memory, a marked page in the volume. Alfred’s arms, loosely crossed in front of his chest, elbows cradled in his hands, tighten at the memory of that tone, of that boy’s straight back before he started the bike, *like that child expected to be reprimanded for being in the Cave*. As though he would be cast out like common refuse, and in looking back on it, on all the events that lead up to that moment, Alfred could deduce that’s exactly what the boy expected.

“I read this completely wrong.”

The boy he raised to a man steps out of the shadows, head lowered a bit with the cowl shoved back and still in his work clothes. Of course, the Master would seek him out if he wasn’t in the Cave waiting their return; it is such a part of Bruce’s nature to seek out, to protect, to *make sure*, that Alfred looks over with a slight smile. The man’s instinct will never falter; the butler, however, feels a bit negligent since the time has apparently passed more quickly than he imagined. Obviously, he’s been here longer than intended.

Bruce stands beside his oldest friend, also looking down at the lump. “I thought this was a sign he was moving on, that he was letting go of old things, and starting to *grow*. I was so hopeful that…” Bruce just sighs through his nose, looking older with those blue eyes twisting. “I was wrong.”

Alfred just chuckles a bit sadly, “we are all *wrong* at a point or two in our lives, Sir. It is the nature of humanity.” And, as it is just the two of them, Alfred reaches an arm out, wrapping it around Bruce’s shoulders, pulling the younger man into his side. The grip is just this side of tight with the purpose of keeping the vigilante out of his thoughts. Bruce doesn’t move out of the hold, just stares.

“I should have—”

“We all should have, Bruce. ‘Should haves’ will not fix the problem, will it?”

“No,” and yes, still a petulant little boy at times, but one that will always own a large part of Alfred Pennyworth’s heart since this man is just as much his son as Thomas and Martha’s.

Alfred hums in agreement, “then, as I’ve already advised to your oldest son, work on giving Tim a *reason* to come back, Bruce.”

“If it’s not already too late,” and the apprehension is there, a slight thread to that tone that only Alfred can pick out, “he might be too far gone, farther than Jason.”

“Death is quite far, Bruce,” the butler replies with a bit of mirth, a smirk.

It succeeds, gains the desired effect, the younger man chuffing out an abrupt laugh, “true.” A sigh
lifts his chest and Bruce steps out of Alfred’s hold to latch on to the dust cover, to pull it off and look on the car he’d spent a month putting together for Tim, *to make sure his third son didn’t end up like his second*.

Bruce’s gloved hand pats the hood gently, and he catches the slip of paper stuck under the wiper against the windshield. Curious, he plucks the note and unfolds it.

_Damian,_

*Take care of her.*

No name. No need for it; anyone would recognize Tim’s terrible chicken scratch. Bruce hands the short, sweet note over to Alfred and stares down at the car, mind going back to the old security footage of Tim sitting behind the wheel for the last time, the downturn of his mouth, the tenseness in his back and shoulders when he hung up those keys, walked that bike out, and got on. Everything in that video screamed *pain,* and he just hadn’t acknowledged it at the time because *Dick had been in pain when he gave up Robin, too.*

The next step takes shape in his mind as Bruce stares down at the Red Bird, noting the R decals are gone, making way for Damian’s…but, that wasn’t going to happen.

“I know that look,” Alfred teases lightly and the younger man turns, blue eyes a shade lighter with his thoughts.

“I’m going to need a few weeks and some tools. Some heavy tools,” Bruce muses to himself. The two men share a grin and look back to the Red Bird with soft eyes.
Savior

Chapter Summary

Because he made promises

Chapter Notes

Snippets of life before the events of Chapter 1 "Tim."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He always had a plan. There's variations, adaptations, risk calculations, and more that go into any plan. One of those calculations—well, multiple—is the bats. Hood and Robin first.

This is a deviation from the original plan, but it's too late for recalculation now. His body is an arch of muscle and bone, viscera, weightless in mid-air while the ticking echoes inside his skull.

He doesn't move from the target, but a hand flicks back to throw a sharp-edged blade behind him as the shoulder of that arm hits Hood in the abdomen. At the same moment, his free arm snags Robin. His momentum throws all of them over the edge of the second floor and down, down to the cement floor below.

He twists the two in mid-air, tangling his arms in theirs, turning so he can take the impact with his back. The two yelling at him goes over his head as the explosion rocks above them, sharp and fierce. "FUCK! Why do people always want to blow me up?!" From Hood.

"Red! The line!" From Robin, but he hasn't added that to the equation because he would have to let go of one of them and that wasn't going to happen. He'd made a promise after they went after Damian, after he put that R back on his chest for just a while (promising the moment he had that he'd hand it over of his own free will this time), that neither of them were going back down that tunnel of death. He'd do everything in his power to make sure neither one of them ever went into the forever-dark. They called and he would always come.

It's a promise no one needed to know.

The impact is seconds away and his arms automatically tighten, bracing the two for it. The abrupt stop jars all of them, the force rattling his teeth, spikes of pain all over, but none of it stops him as he rolls them, tucks the two under his body to form a shield from the falling, flaming debris.

The helmet pressing into his chest and neck is colder than he thought it would be, a hand in his shoulder is clenching so hard it makes the joints creak.

"Let up, Robin," he finds himself saying against Robin's sweaty hair.

"Red…" And the kid's voice sounds wrecked (he'll never admit it) and shaky, "why? WHY?"
“Goddammit, Replacement! Get up.”
With a grunt, his arms find the strength to push himself off them, to look over his shoulder at the carnage. Pieces of wood and metal mostly fall off his back as he leans back up.

"Fuck," Red is already up on his feet, eyes wide behind the cowl because they wouldn't have survived that blast. "I've gotta check it out. One of you hit up the PD." Fire squad on site would just be peachy right now.

He's moving before Hood's glove latches on to his cape. The material just sides through as Red is leaping on anything he can to carry him back to the top (can't trust the grapple, not with the upper floor about the come down in a ball of fiery holy shit). His legs are longer now, taking him higher with each leap.

He comes to the expected mess at the top, landing at a crouch, one hand out and fingertips on the floor, feeling for vibrations. His eyes scan, taking in the details through the smoky aftermath and. Gingerly, he moves through over the downed supports and pieces of old crates, stepping over a still smoking freight dolly. He hops out of the way before part of the floor gives way and crumbles.

Every piece of the bomb he comes across goes in little bags and stuffed in his harness somewhere, but the smoke and the heat are getting worse, obscuring everything. Sirens are wailing into the night, coming closer (leave some things for their forensic people to find). Time to get out.

Decisively, Red jogs back to the balcony and dives over, effortlessly catching himself this time without the weight of two other people.

He lands without fanfare and lets himself breathe without smoke his face. After a few moments, when the dizziness abates he can stand. What he doesn't expect, however, is for Red Hood and Robin to be dragging unconscious thugs through the warehouse wearing their rebreathers like good soldiers. Fuck. Well, whatever.

He moves, cape swirling around him to grab two from Robin so they can get the fuck out. The good guys are closer and more sirens split the night open.

Red drops his two outside the door, looking back to make sure the two Bats made it out. The other baddies are tied back to back, making them easier to spot, harder to get away if they come to.

Done with that piece, Red coughs again into his forearm, grapple extended for the shot.

A tug at his cape turns him, Robin with a fist-full, eyes hidden behind the domino.

"Red…thank-you," stiff, formal with a hint of sneer. Just like Damian from the moment Dick put him in that costume, chose him. Behind him, Hood is creepily still, hands still hovering over his holster like he’s considering the usual grab and pull but can’t make up his mind fast enough.

"You call and I'll come," is all he says. The grapple explodes and he's flying, cape jerked from Robin's hand.

**

(Two months ago)

A year after that warehouse, and he still means it.

The muted, hacked Bat comm just happens to be on his desk when he's suiting up for a night in Gotham after a day of negotiations and political maneuvering that leaves him feeling like some asshole and…whatever. He'll keep doing the job, he'll keep moving forward.

His harness is attached and the cowl (only worn in this city; he wears a domino in San Fran) comes
down, breaking the CEO mask wide open.

For probably the tenth time, he looks over at that stupid comm usually sitting in his damn drawer and shakes his head to himself with hands on his hips. Red picks up the fucking thing and fits it into his ear under the cowl. A grimace and he flicks it on, leaving it muted.

Noise and calls explode, so it’s a busy night for the Bats.

He's already downstairs, jumping the steps to save time and moving to the special Ducati.

The mass is usually O calling out the what’s and where's, sometimes with replies from the Bats on who can or can't fly.

"Got Robin boxed in," O cuts through with static behind her, like Robin's comm blanked out. "The three West Side groups are converging. GPD can't even get there for -"

The rest is white noise as Red opens up the Ducati and flies.

**

It’s worse than he expected, wading over the dead like an obscene river. Spent shells are everywhere and no sign of the kid. Red’s senses are on hyper alert because he’s got to pull Robin out before anything else can be done. Sirens are echoing everywhere, throwing off his perception of how close.

“Little motherfucker.”

Yup, they have to be talking about the kid. Red’s on the fire escape overhead and moving around the side of the build where the two merge and box Robin in. He’s got major damage to the leg, blood pooling under his and the tights wrecked, but he’s still a fighter by nature, baring his teeth in a snarl at all those guns less than a few feet from his face. A wrong move will be the end, Red calculates for less than nine seconds before he moves.

He jumps into them like a bowling ball into pins, throwing the aims off, taking the guns out of the situation first so the heat comes off Robin. And maybe he’s a little…rough with the bangers, maybe he goes for the guns hands because he’s a little pissed they were going to shoot Robin.

And, he wastes too much time because the red and blues are flashing right outside the alley and the kid is pale as hell and panting, looking more shaky than the usual ow, that shit hurts. Red huffs a breath out his nose and gives his hands a flick to get some of the blood off his gloves (didn’t help). He grabs a tourniquet from his belt, moving Robin’s hands and wrapping the leg tight, earning a strangled noise. With it on, the kid tries to shove himself standing because he’s a pain in the ass (like Father, like Son). He just buckles right into Red’s outstretched arm like planned.

Grapple is already pulling them skyward as the uniforms yell from the mouth of the alley. He's not going to be able to hold Robin and pilot the bike, so swinging and running it is. Besides, the bike is in a good hiding place.

“Dammit,” the kid is slurring against his shoulder, “why the hell are you doing this, Drake?”

Arching his body with the added weight, Red is aiming for his apartment because Robin’s not going to be stable enough to get to the Cave or Manor.

“Told you, call and I’ll show up,” is the only reply he’s got and hits feet first as the kid finally gives up the ghost and passes out. Not stopping, Red’s running full tilt, leapfrogging to the next roof, keeping a watch around them, under them, over them. Limbs dangle bonelessly against him as he sprints.
Not part of the plan, but he’s got the windows tinted and Dami sprawled out on his bed when Tim’s ripping the tights out of the way. Forceps, unopened packages of surgical needle and thread, knock-out juice, antiseptic, all the essentials to a crime fighter’s goody bag.

He works fast when the tourniquet comes off, dodging a muddled punch without really thinking about it because the kid is riding the blood-loss train and Bruce’s usual training regimen included fighting by instinct while drugged up so the baddies still get their nightly ass-kicking.

“Drake,” the kid slurs while Tim is already putting the needle in the leg and pushing the plunger.

“Damian,” he parodies while picking up the forceps, “you’ve got lead still in the leg. Then, I’ve got to stitch the bleeder.”

But the kid is already back out on his bed, Tim focuses on making sure the kid is out of pain and not going to come to again with fists flying (because, you know, he hates me); it doesn’t take as long as it should. The bullet isn’t nudged against anything important and an artery was nicked, not cut, so a lot of blood but relatively easy clean-up.

He smears more healing goop on his row of neat stitches, hitches on knee up on the bed so he can brace Dami’s on top his, and start winding gauze, tight but not too tight. Tim ties it off on the opposite side of the entry wound and stands, his spine emitting a series of sharp cracks. He lets Dami be for the moment and goes to his own closet stepping inside with the door mostly closed and starts disarming himself.

The hidden compartment in the back of the closet houses four of his extra uni’s and another set of the harness/utility belt combo because, well, be prepared, right? Nifty enough, the one time he had Kon in one of his spares during a fight with Ra’s to act as a distraction had proven he should have been a fucking Boy Scout (because Kon could act when he needed to).

He throws on the generic jeans and t-shirt combo, hiding his uni away to clean up and restock later, once he gets the kid back to—

Fuck, he’s going to have to take Damian back to the Manor himself. Tim pauses at that thought for a very important moment, eyes just staring at the hidden cubby already closed. He breathe in slowly because it was better for him to sneak the kid in the Manor than for the Bats to come pick him up. He throws on a hoodie decisively and snags a thick flannel blanket from the top shelf.

Standing over the kid, over Robin, alive and breathing, Tim is momentarily, absurdly glad he happened to be in Gotham tonight. As much as he used to hate the kid for getting him kicked out of the family, he’s come to realize that Damian is just a fucking kid. A kid with a psycho mother and grandfather and a whole lot of shitty parenting and death under his belt; had Tim been in his place, how would he have done anything differently? He would have fought to have a place in his Father’s legacy, too. Would have tried to take out the competition, so yeah, just like with Hood in the last while, Tim’s figured out the motivations behind Damian too.

He gets it now. It’s just another step in that whole, I should never have been Robin in the first place thing. The Legacy that never should have gone to him, should have always been Damian’s, the True Son. The Stand-In should have just fucked off, right?

Shaking himself (if I’d never been Robin, I wouldn’t be here to make sure the team keeps moving, to make sure these two assholes don’t die again), Tim gives the blanket a rough flip and eases Damian up to wrap it securely around him. He pulls off the domino in case and is carrying the kid through his apartment to the set of stairs leading to the basement. He has a professional car down there (not for night work) since dawn would be creeping over the horizon by the time he started back.
Damian’s out cold in the backseat, stretching out because the kid has grown and he’s not a short little bastard anymore. Hell, he’d probably outgrow Tim in the next year or two because genetics could suck it.

On his way out of the Gotham proper, he’s hacking into the Manor’s security system on his phone; kind of half-assing it because Bruce will figure it out after patrol anyway (and why wasn’t Dami wearing his comm?). The timing really couldn’t have been any better, Alfred would be in the Cave, anyone on patrol would still be out, and the camera are on a loop for five minutes longer than it would need for him to get inside with Damian carried against the front of his body.

The kid’s head is on his shoulder while Tim is standing at the front door, staring at it. He’s getting all shaky again, emotional with too many bullshit things, the wow, it’s been a while; the I shouldn’t be here, I never should have been here; the I wonder if they made my room a den or a guest room?

Four minutes until the loop ends.

Tim makes himself get his shit together because it’s fine and grips the handle and eases the main door open, slipping inside. He doesn’t pause to take anything in (his unconscious memory records nuances maybe); he moves to the grand staircase on silent feet. He takes the second floor like Red Robin, forcing himself to focus on equations so he doesn’t even look at the closed door to what used to be his space, the room next to Dick’s. It’s a fucking storage room for old shit now, Tim, just get the kid in bed and get the hell out.

Damian’s room is still in the same place (like the wicked katanna in the corner isn’t a dead giveaway). Tim throws back the covers with one hand and lays the kid down easy but fast; his phone is already in hand while the other throws the blankets over.

Hey. Need you to get A or B up to demon brat’s room.

*Stabby McSlitMyThroat*: Baby Bird, you seen R? B is freaking th fuk out, man

@ the Manor. Upstairs.

Tim’s already got the window open, got himself up on the sill when he hears the feet approaching and glances back at the bed to see Dami’s eyes open, dazed, but looking right at him. Tim drops out the window. He’s already in the car and gone before anyone comes outside, taking the road back to Gotham with his knuckles white on the steering wheel. Tim shoves the hood back from his face and turns up the music because, yeah, metal is good right about now.

*Stabby McSlitMyThroat*: B wants your personal cell so he can say thank-you. Said you weren’t answering the comm or Red line

Texting back with his thumb, Tim lets the night close in around him and the car. Not necessary. Tell him I got the message.

That should have been it, right? Tim just focuses on driving when the thing goes off again.

*Stabby McSlitMyThroat*: B said come back and chill for dinner.

Can’t. Other commitments.

*Stabby McSlitMyThroat*: B looks like I kicked his puppy

Titus is too big to kick effectively.
The phone vibrates in his hand a few seconds later, and Tim sighs at himself. He shouldn’t have started it and just fuck. The music goes down and he hits speaker phone.

“Red.”

Fuck, I hope this isn’t “you should have…” speech. “What do you need?”

“Thank-you for picking up Robin.”

“Yes.” And he could see Bruce standing over the kid, still in his under armor, checking out the entry wound under the gauze.

“…Tim.”

“Bruce?”

“Come back,” the request is a quiet burr over the phone line.

No. “Another time,” his default response when any of the Titans ask him to come home with them instead of coming back to Gotham.

Bruce sighs, “soon, Tim. Soon, okay?”


“Good-bye, Tim.” His nerves ease down because he really dodged a bullet there.

Chapter End Notes

So, a lot of positive thoughts and comments and just, wow. Thank-you, thank-you. It all goes to feed the muse, promise. This just started out after some really helpful people said Tim got the shaft, and I agree with that.
Team Dynamics

Chapter Summary

The new scrutiny isn't just creeping Red Robin out.

Chapter Notes

Can we all just take a second to remember Tim's still a teenager (mostly?) that moves like Death incarnate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He seriously hates them.

"So, when you say 'stalking,' what you’re trying to say is…?" Kon's brows rise, lips pursed in thought.

"How many definitions exist for the word 'stalking'?" Tim just shakes his head, leaning back away from his system and giving Kon the look.

Bart is idly kicking his feet just doing civvies and stretched out on the couch in the Perch, “to be real, Rob, you’ve got more stalkers than should be healthy. I mean, immortal guy with a green fetish is like, creepily obsessed with you. What is he, like 800?”

Well, Tim can’t argue there. “It’s like a Holmes/Moriarty thing with Ra’s, okay? He does something crazy, I have to stop him, he has to try stopping me from stopping him, I fuck with his tech and his bases, he gets mad and calls me Detective. He wants to combine our bloodlines, Black B helps me escape. Meh. It’s like, a Wednesday, you know? I hit mid-week when I foil his dastardly plot.”

“Dude,” Bart peeks over the top of his comic, “that does not make it any less creepy or stalkery.”

“‘Stalkery’ is not a word, asshole.”

“Sentiment still fits, Baby Bird.”

Kon can hear Tim’s teeth grinding at that (yeah, because Bart can be a dick), and takes up his previous train of thought.

“So, you’re saying Nightwing is into stalking now? I thought that kind of went against the whole Bat-credo? Do you think he hangs around while you sleep and just watches? Goes through your garbage to, I don’t know, lick your old banana peels or something?”

Now Tim and Bart are staring at his grinning, unrepentant face.

“That’s a level or stalker I never want to think about in association with Nightwing or anyone else,” Bart makes a face and ducks back to his comic with a shudder.
“I could see Gar doing it.” Tim deadpans then his face splits into a grin as Kon and Bart chuckle.

“Totally how he landed Rave. Shit, that’s funny—“

“Now, I’ve got that mental image, thanks douche.”

Tim just waves a hand, eyes slowly moving back to his screen, but Kon and Bart aren’t deterred. The guy was up here before anyone else got back (yeah, the whole team gets a text message when someone logs back into the Tower’s security system Rob), so he’s already had plenty of time to work. Besides, the answer as to why he was back so soon is already intriguing.

Of course, it wasn’t a secret, hadn’t been since Tim’s return from Europe after he pulled the Batman back to the right time/space/whatever. He’d come back as Red Robin with the new uni and cowl and darker persona. Watching him move, watching him fight after he first got back was...a little scary, even for the metas because Red Robin moved like Death incarnate, faster, graceful, more brutal, more efficient than the old flare for the dramatic that he'd learned from Dick or the street fighting he may have picked up from Bruce combined with the pseudo-martial arts from the Snake guy Tim had mentioned. Red Robin was a whole different league of fighter, vastly different from the old Tim that everyone needed training time to get used to this new rhythm, the new guy. Not to mention the guy under it, the new Tim, was also a very different guy, and a lot of the old ways were gone; he’d left that kid behind and grown up while the rest of them still went to school and hung out in their normal lives when they weren’t gathered for some crisis or another. Tim didn’t go back to school when he came back, just on-line classes while he was doing the good son CEO thing.

Then Tim took up the leader position again (to have a place to go outside Gotham), and at the first team meeting, he’d told everyone in no uncertain terms the Bats were off his emergency contact list, like, don’t call them no matter how fucked up I get kind of thing. With all the rumors coming out of Gotham and Tim’s half-assed explanation of the events after the Batman vanished (like, you’re not Robin anymore? Dude, you were the first Robin with pants, WTF?), not even Raven or Gar argued with him no matter how tight they were with Dick. Tim’s separation from the Batfam didn’t make sense until a year later, after realized Tim had been snatched and miraculously got himself out with no Bats in sight. So, no calling the Bats in anymore; Tim’s just been flying solo, and as much as it wasn’t cool, it just was.

Thus, Rave poofs in his closet to put the trackers and sensors in his suit because it was just too fucking bad if he didn’t like it. Kon had called it when the guy just kept not dying but missing the margin by a hairsbreadth.

Now, however—“So, he’s just been showing up when you’re patrolling Gotham and, what, trying to get you to go out for food, do movie night, and stuff?” Bart pushes. “Like, he’s trying to be your big bro again or something?”

Tim turns away from the data again and sighs, brows furrowing, “it’s—I don’t know. Him and Batman. It’s…sudden. I’ve already disabled the tracker in the comm, I change the frequency coding every time I go back so Oracle can’t trace it, and they still find me. I’m sure I’m hitting some security camera somewhere she can see, but it’s just—“

Kon crosses his arms over his chest and folds his legs to he can float crossed-legged in front of his best friends, “well, what did they say? I mean, did they tell you why you’re just suddenly Employee of the Month?”

Tim gives a half shrug, “something about being off the radar too long from Hood’s estimation. Batman, well—“
Bart and Kon exchange an *uh-oh* look.

“Batman said he didn’t expect me to leave the family because of the whole “Robin” thing, but…I mean, that’s not—” Tim sighs and shakes his head. “It’s fine. I’ll deal with it.”

And, that blank expression is back, the one Tim started adopting after he escaped from—Kon’s chest aches for him because that flash of memory, of just Tim laying out in his perch unconscious on the bathroom floor with blood everywhere and…

The meta just forces himself to grin, to shove that moment back in a box in the corner of his mind, and hold out both hand, palm up, “okay, okay. How about this? Maybe…just *maybe*, all the Bats are really Pod-People and you’re the *only* one that can out them? Eh? Ehhhh?”

And Tim…Tim just stares, again. Since it’s one of the rare instances he’s without a domino and in full suit, so Kon can be fully aware of the *you’re a dumbass* expression because, you know, he needs to be reminded sometimes. The meta is just grinning away, completely ignoring the look.

Bart just blinks, “what the hell are pod-people?”

Both heroes slow turn to stare at him, horrified. “You’ve never seen *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?”

Bart just arches a brow at them and sighs, ignoring their terrible B-Movie obsession (really, it’s unhealthy, you wierdos).

Not that he wants to be a dick to Tim or anything because the guy *is one of his best friends*, but as he seemingly goes back to his new issue of The Ultimate Avengers, he finally gets that it might be time for some tough love because *fuck those guys*. Wally and Barry had seriously come through for Bart when the insurgents were beat, the old and new Flash running him out of the ‘my head is still screwed because I can’t stop thinking about Gar’s memories’ while Bat-bastard just turned his back on Tim like…Bart just breathes through his nose, slow and easy (besides, Barry didn’t want to hang with his old sidekick anymore anyway).

“Seriously,” he deadpans, “you two are morons. Tim, dude, man, compadre. I love you like a brother, but this foreplay between you and them has gotta stop.”

Tim doesn’t even look away from his system and whatever detective shit he’s obviously trying to do to ignore them, “what is that supposed to mean?”

Bart is staring at Iron Man’s repulsor blast panel, but he’s got that image too, of cleaning up the mess that was Tim’s back and no one in Gotham even *knew*…

“Stop. Helping. Them.” The speedster bites out. “*Period*. You get a call and go running or you spend days doing *what the fuck ever* to get them what they need. Stop. It. Throw away the damn Bat-Comm, change your celly, give ‘em their system admin rights, give ‘em that stupid company, and just *let them handle their own shit*. Move your stuff to the Tower, make this your main base, and tell them to suck it. Tim, man, *bro*, dig their claws out, kay?”

Tim’s eyes stay on the big screen (even though he’s not working anymore), mouth tight, and Bart just sighs.

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“The only one that calls is Hood, and yeah, I go back for him.”

“*And for business crap,*” Bart adds.
“And the annoying kid,” Kon corrects, and well, shit, neither of them are wrong.

“Because reasons, right?” Bart snarks at him.

“Hey, B, I already pulled my damn profile from BI, okay? I took myself off their roster, so that shit is half done anyway.”

Kon and Bart both freeze, eyes wide at the guy that used to sing the Batman’s praises. The two do that eye-slide thing where their heads don’t move.

“But, yeah. Hood and Robin, I just…I’m not going back on it, okay? If one of them calls, I’m going to go.” He doesn’t mean to be so harsh, but yeah, it’s not loyalty that keeps him moving. It’s that fucking promises he made back when Alfred offered him that R for the trip to Darkseid. It’s not something he can back down from, not any more than he can walk away from hitting the streets. He can’t just give up Gotham yet. Someday maybe. Well, someday sooner than later if shit keeps going like this.

And then, the little voice reminds him Jason and Dami are back in the family now. They don’t need you watching their backs anymore.

“Tim—,” Bart sighs at Kon’s angry (unfuck this) face, “man, don’t take it like that, okay? I know you got your start with them, right, because I was there for some of it. I get what they mean to you. But—but things just change, people change, and that’s okay if you outgrew them or they outgrew you or whatever. Look, I don’t hang out with Barry anymore either because he’s not the same guy since he gave up the big F, so I’m with you on that level, you know?” KF finally tosses the comic book, sitting up to look at his team mates because, well, they didn’t know about his break with Barry (Tim feels instantly like ass that he didn’t know).

“I’m sorry, B,” Tim gives up on trying to get anything done with these two and stands from the system, moves to stretch out beside him on the couch, leaning over to brace his elbows on his knees. “I thought you and Barry were still tight.”

Bart shrugs a shoulder, giving a tight smile that is very out of character for the kid, “like I said: things change.”

Tim doesn’t even hesitate, but slings his arm around KF’s shoulders, pulling him in (watching to make the gauntlet doesn’t nick him). “Well, it doesn’t help that you’re a little pain in the ass, you know.” But, Tim’s eyes are twinkling in mirth.

Bart barks out a laugh, “dude. I hate your face.”

“Nah, if I didn’t give you shit, you’d think I was mad at you.”

“True.”

Kon just easily floats over to Bart’s other side, arms crossed over his chest, “so—?”

Bart averts his eyes, “Wally. I’ve been…yeah. Wally’s the new guy, the new Flash, so, you know. I told him I’d go back to the Impulse suit if he didn’t want me keeping it, I mean, I get that, right? He didn’t choose me or anything. And, Wally just stared at me like I was crazy, said I’d earned it just as much as he did, so I could go back if I wanted to but he was fine with me keeping the ident. I mean, the Speed Force and stuff.” Bart shrugs again, “he’s been cool, chilling with me when we break, so I’m not just out there running or ditching school, okay? We work together, it’s…more than I expected. It’s totally fine.”
Tim and Kon believe him because he’s actually grinning, the real thing. “Actually, it’s been real—I dunno. It feels like we work better together, we have the same hobbies or something. We get along better than Barry and I did. Wally doesn’t act like I’m this terrible responsibility, you know?”

Tim’s brows draw together in that way and Bart instantly wishes he’d kept his mouth shut because Red Robin is in that guy’s face right now (he should call Barry later, just in case).

“And I can be, you know? Super metabolism,” Bart hurries. “It’s good now because Wally just gets it more. We’re a team.”

That appeases Tim who doesn’t lose the look necessarily (yup, still calling Barry to tell him to watch his back because reasons) but seems more relaxed.

Kon just floats over to give him a sharp rap on the back, “KF, you can always come and visit. Ma and Pa like the hell out of you.”

Bart rolls his eyes, “I can get the day’s chores done in, like fourteen seconds, man. Of course they like me.”

“Dude, don’t ever milk Bessie again. Like, ever.”

“Hey, I learned!”

“Don’t care what you learned, just no. But, you’re the only friend I have that helps Ma cook.”

“Because she rocks at making pie.”

Tim nods in solemn agreement. Ma Kent’s pies are legend (Alfred would hate him for life if he ever heard Tim say it out loud).

But, the two younger Titans just look over at Tim, something in their eyes that makes the instinct in him flinch because he wasn’t anyone’s responsibility anymore, right? Not even the Titans.

“So, what are you going to do about Stalk-Wing and Bat-Creep?” Bart props his cheek up in one hand, a brow arched.

Tim gives a one-shouldered shrug (he still has the slow motion trap somewhere in the storage room because that would really suck for a former Flash, wouldn’t it?).

“For now, I’m going wait for whatever is going to fall.” Not the easy answer because at the end of the day what else could he do but leave Gotham behind? If he’s looking at this in the right light, and those two are watching him to get an excuse to take away his vigilante card, then he’d deal with it too.

**

“Red.”

Not who he expected. Even though he has no need to, Tim’s eyes go up to look at the speakers in the ceiling of his perch because, really, this didn’t happen often. It had in the past, the kid had called him out of San Fran, but the instances were few and far between.

“Robin. What do you need?” His hands automatically still rather than go on typing a report (instead of trying to dig into the last instance of The Light that came very close to taking out Bart).

The hesitation is enough to make him furrow his brows, “Robin?”
“Drake. When will you be returning to Gotham?”

Okay, so we’re not going by the pseuds, whatever. “Next month, no board meetings until then. Damian,” and he pauses, “what’s wrong?”

The youngest Bat gets the huffy pain-in-the-ass mask back on because he’s pretty harsh when he snaps, “is it true, what Father has claimed? You removed yourself from the mainframe completely?”

Now, Tim’s the one hesitating, crossing his arms over his chest and slightly relieved they’re not in person for this. He and Dami just didn’t have a good track record for talking calmly. “Yes, it’s true. “

“Damn you, Drake.”

Pause. See? Terrible track record.

“Dami,” he stands, the cape falling around him, the domino showing white in the reflection off the big screen.

“You are a fool.” The younger seems like he’s getting exasperated and Tim’s got nothing, absolutely nothing on the why or what for of this whole conversation.

“That’s kind of mild for you,” Tim observes, “now what the hell is this about?”

Just like the rest of the Bats, Dami deflects with the best of them. “Come back to Gotham. The sooner, the better.”

“I’m going to say it again: what is this about, Damian?”

“I will tell you when you arrive. Send a message to my cellular phone the moment you are in town.”

“Dami—“

“Drake, I am not joking. You are needed here. Come. To. Gotham.”

“Fine. I’ll leave in a few days,” he tests out. If it’s a case, the kid would start on the timeline.

“Which words in ‘the sooner, the better’ were too complex for you to comprehend?”

“Well, if some angry troll would give me the details, maybe I would feel like putting my ass in gear. But, all hush-hush stuff, right?” Not like B or N is going to let me get back out of Gotham with my fucking cape anyway.

“Drake. You have said you would come should I call. Here I am calling.”

Little fucker, Tim sighs through his nose. “I’ll be as fast as I can.”

“…I will await you.”

Chapter End Notes

Meh. This one kind of puttered out.
Coffee

Chapter Summary

Because coffee just brings people together and not always for stabbing purposes.

Chapter Notes

This is ANGSTY AS HELL. Oh my goodness! ANGST WARNING: Boop Boop Boop…but seriously, there has to be a turning point somewhere.

Oh and with the Holiday fast approaching, my cute but time-consuming two-year old, as well as the other story I have totally been neglecting, the next update will be a minute. However, all the kudos make me warm and happy; all the comments drive the muse into the next phase of whatever this may turn out to be. Thank-you all!

Oh, and Dick might cry, just FYI.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s early or late, depending on perception. With the sleep dep he’s riding, his brain is running at more than full capacity because sometime that’s what it takes for the detective to see another angle; it’s all about another perspective. He’s always known that, why the hell else would he screw with his body and stay awake for almost 80 hours at a time (because nightmares, asshole, yeah well, that too). He hadn’t slept on the plane, just worked, and held himself away from whatever the hell he may be walking into, why Dami just suddenly wanted a pocket-detective. The implications aren’t good. Regardless, he texted the mutant before deciding he needed to just do something other than wait to go into WE for the day. Hell, the kid might not show up for days, with him, who knew?

He’s wearing his old favorites: ripped jeans, faded periodic table t-shirt, grey hoodie fraying at the sleeves with the hood pulled over the backwards cap, and beat-up DC’s, black and orange. He feels like he’s in his own skin again, not the tailored-suit CEO, not the body-armored vigilante, but the regular guy named Tim. He’s got his iPod and ear buds in, the beat-up skateboard in one hand because he’s only going a few blocks away from the apartment and there’s no need for a car or a bike. Low profile.

Besides, the last time he boarded in San Fran was a catastrophe. Seriously, hills from hell. Kon laughed like a douche, Tim had pleasantly held up the (empty, no kryptonite on campus, dude) leather pouch in two fingers, guy immediately shut up.

Here, though, he moves with the board like a natural instinct, like breathing deep. His mind doesn’t have to think about it while the techno-punk is rattling around in his brain pan; his legs and feet know his center of balance, his body is taller, broader but still moves with the grace needed to ride; the same grace needed to fly, needed to walk a thinning rafter, the ledge of a building. It’s a slight comfort that some things don’t change.

He promptly thanks whatever powers that be for 24-hour bakeries when the lady hands him his box,
and he flops the board back down to ride back. He’s got coffee in one hand and the box held up in the other. The music changes up to metal, *Five Finger Death Punch* and after that, *In This Moment* because Maria Brink. Enough said.

The *Tim* he is in this moment is the old school skater punk, but that doesn’t stop the ingrained instinct from flaring at the shadows in his peripheral (*Jason’s silhouette as the Hood sitting on the fire escape across the street*). Nor does it stop him from taking a second to consider his response to Bab’s tersely worded e-mail from last night.

*Stop hacking my databases. All you had to do was ask.*

And he could have. He could have told her to remove his admin rights from the BI mainframe, could have told her it was time to start separating himself for the final move *out* of Gotham proper (*just keep one safe house in case you get another call…*). All in all, he could set up in some other big city, maybe just get his own place in San Fran away from the Tower and insist on video conference meetings from out there.

No, not with the Titans there because he’s never escape the constant tracking, worrying, spandex-clad worriers. Didn’t mean he couldn’t set-up in New York, Chicago, L.A., any of the criminally-charged places in the US (*none of them would ever be home, but after a while, anywhere could be close enough*). He could sell the last things his parents left him (the house, creepily more empty than his childhood mind remembered), so there’d be nothing to hold him, nothing to come back to, and he could go with a clear conscience. He could ask her to remove his profile once he’s out and move on with his day.

His feet tilt the board to make a wide semi-circle around to the reinforced garage doors (*Oracle, it’s time. Remove user from all systems. Sorry it’s come to this.* Sounds too much like he’s giving up the gig. *O, Giving you all Admin Rights to BI, remove me from the sys. Will be leave G to the Bats. Nice working with you. That…didn’t sound any better. No time for BI admin, take me out of the sys. Your baby now. Somewhat better, less dark.*). He kicks down on the board to make it pretty much jump into his hand with the coffee on top the bakery box and glances around (using his “feelers”) to make sure no one’s around to watch him open the key pad and tap out the new passcode because *fucking Jason.*

The door slides up silently and back down once he’s inside. New motion detectors FTW.

Balancing the coffee on top the baker’s box is done flawless and without conscious thought, skateboard in the other hand as he takes the steps two at a time to get to his main floor. While he’s waiting for the next whatever to fall, or Dami to show up, for a business day to start, he has some data to work on and a new boxed set of *Firefly* to watch while crunching the usual numbers. If Damian didn’t call in a few hours, he’d get dressed for his day at the office and have to put on an entirely different mask.

For the moment though, he revels in chugging the coffee and the sweet smelling baker’s box because really, he doesn’t do junk food anymore, just once and a while with the Titans after a bad run of *holy shit, we lived through that* (the kid is the one with the sweet tooth now, not to mention Jason always seems to have some kind of ESP when it comes to fresh doughnuts; funny considering he’d think Dick would be more the picture of the stereotype).

Speaking of which, the knock on the door is right on time for Jason’s doughnut obsession and Tim huffs out a laugh while the dredges of the coffee settle on the back of his tongue. He doesn’t bother taking the hood down as he crosses the room and unlocks the deadbolts with practiced hands. His mind doesn’t process *door versus window* because, shit, everyone has an off night.
So the smart ass comment in his mouth dies abruptly when he swings open the reinforced steel door and every muscle tenses in a fight instinct because reasons; but in all honesty, he really should have expected something like this to happen eventually since Dick has been making too much of an effort to seek him out (actually he did, but he anticipated them coming through the window in the normal theatrical way further down the line, you know, when he was already on his way back to San Fran). Not to mention the Batman had to make an appearance to “help him out.” No coincidences with the Bats; something is brewing for them to start coming around again out of nowhere, and he’s been fine with waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Then again, who could even predict they would just show up at his front door knocking like regular people? Like an idiot, he answered the damn door without checking to make sure it was Jason or Dami. Fucking sleep dep.

Dick is in jeans, sunglasses, T-shirt, and jacket; Bruce in jeans and a hoodie (that’s right in a hoodie) with the hood pulled up, but it’s Dami that pushes his way past the two grown men at his door to level a look at Tim.

"Here," he digs around in the market bag and pushes a pound of ground coffee into Tim's hands. "Consider this a housewarming gift. I assume your machine is still in the same place, Drake."

Blinking in aforementioned sleep deprivation and surprise, Tim actually grins down at him. "Yup. Knew you'd be pissed if I actually got rid of it, you know."

The youngest Wayne huffs and walks past Tim into the apartment, going for his kitchen by previous knowledge.

"It's always a pleasure when you do something with good sense," in his teenage years, Damian’s tall enough that he doesn’t have to hop up on the counter anymore to dig around for the small espresso cups. He knows where they are by habit and turns to the machine to start it up. Of course, he ignores the perfectly normal coffee already brewed in the pot because anything less than espresso is ‘dirty water’ to him (and is why he will always be a little shit).

Tim doesn’t bother giving the older Bats a second look because neither of them called him back but just follows the kid to the kitchen with the bag in hand (putting his back to them was hard), letting them find their own way in and closing the door behind themselves. Tim opens the bag, inhaling the rich scent. "This smells really good."

Dami glances back at him, satisfied. "It is an excellent choice, yes? Pennyworth purchases it for me as well."

Tim hums and sets the fresh box of doughnuts on the table while Dick and Bruce hover at the threshold from the entertainment area to the kitchen, probably unsure of their welcome (don’t break in next time, Dick).

Damian hands Tim the first cup and takes the second one for himself, inhaling the richness because, well, coffee just brings people together and not always for stabbing purposes. The two move amicably to sit at the table in agreeable silence until Dick takes a chair out to sit with them.

"None for me?" He asks with a feigned hurt look.

"I'm sure you and Father can figure out how to use the machine without destroying it," Damien returns pleasantly (Tim arches a brow at the kid, wondering what the elder Bats did to piss him off but realizes it’s really not his business and goes back to savoring his espresso).
"Cups are there," he waves a hand in the general direction and pushes the box of sweets at Dami because the lady just gave him two peanut butter crème filled ones (not that he’d given a vague finger point because the little shit loved them best).

Dick just grins and looks closer at Tim, who is engrossed in his coffee. A chuff might be a laugh from Bruce who has taken the hood down but ambles deceptively calm to the counter.

Dami opens the box a little and peeks in, then his face twists into satisfaction with the prizes inside. Tim opens the lid, discreetly pointing at the two with fluffy-looking light mocha cream coming out of the tops; the kid snatches them both as he predicts.

The machine finally goes still as the two elders get their little cups, and it seems like Dami is waiting until they find seats before he starts, one of the creamy delights already gone because, well, he’s a teenager now, right? Endless pit of hunger.

"Drake," the kid begins formally, “we are here…to make a request of you."

At some point, he'd been sitting with his head in one hand and his eyes start to slide closed on him. At that, a request from the Bats, the pressure of sleep eases up and Tim straightens, blank expression.

"You made it sound important on the phone, so what do you need?" Rote. He sees Dick flinch out of the corner of his eye. It doesn't bother him anymore because the way Damian is assessing him is the reason he’s back. "I'm going into WE this morning to check up on things, then I'm going to head back to the Tower. I can finish up whatever you need from there."

Dami hesitates, eyes darting away. "Actually, we need you in Gotham for this, Drake. Is your team waiting for you to return?" Damian’s careful way of asking if they had the usual shit storm of baddies or Tim’s tendency to deal with run-of-the-mill crime.

But, no. The Titans were all leaving today to go back home anyway (they had, you know, lives), and in the interim, he’s just doing the usual something to fill time before the next big bad comes to his doorstep because it always does.

Nope, he’s leaving to stay away from THIS. This new and uncomfortable scrutiny from the Bats because he knows what’s going on here, can feel it coming down the line (which would explain why they’re all here now: Sorry, Timmy, but it’s time to give it up, hand in the cape, try being normal for a few years and come back if you’ve still got the backbone for it. No, no, not that you aren’t capable or anything, but why not just be the intel guy, get off the streets for a while, take a vacay, take a break). That’s why the sudden… interest.

His forces himself to keep calm while his heart already picks up, his mouth going dry at the many implications this conversation may have. There are too many “requests” this could be (like a one-way trip back to Arkham if Dick still thinks he might be a little fucked up in the head and by the way the guy is eyeing him, could be a likely scenario).

He’s already working plans, multiple ways of taking each of them down, if they’re here to detain him because who fucking knew.

Carefully, Tim lays his hands on top the table, muscles deceptively loose under his hoodie. "Tell me what you need and I'll weigh the workload," he offers.

Dami’s eyes, now a dark and pressing jade from his own time in the afterlife (Jason’s faded back to his natural color after a few years but always go back when the Pit's influence is riding him), are clearly calculating as he sips at the hot drink. More calm than Tim can believe, the kid just starts
with, "before I tell you this, you must swear you will listen to everything before giving an answer. Do you agree?"

Getting answers the hard way, but Tim nods as Dick takes a doughnut and Bruce sips his espresso. He keeps his eyes from automatically going to the third cupboard on the right with the false back, the escape route none of them knew about. The drawer above it has a latch, one knock to it, and paralyzing pellets would fall. The counter has a spot with a retractable bo hidden (ironically, a gift from Ra’s when he took down the Seven last time to save Tam).

He has options, but none of his planning prepares him for Dami’s very tight statement: "Father, Grayson, Todd, and I request you give us another chance."

Tim blinks, uncomprehending. Very not what I expected.

Maybe he is more tired than he thought? Certain lengths of sleep dep can start up with the hallucinations (that man coming for him in his own bed; Kon covered in blood, reaching a hand out; his Dad with a skeletal smile; the Joker’s crowbar with his name all over it). His mouth opens slightly, breathe in, closes again with a ‘click.’

Dami holds out placating palms when there is no immediate response and Drake is just staring at him; he is uncomfortable with that look on the older man’s face. "We are requesting you allow us the time and the cooperation we require in order to earn your trust, Drake. Nothing large to begin with; rather, we shall start small. Patrol with me tonight, just tonight, then return to your team. When you are in Gotham next, patrol with Grayson for just one night, even though I am fully aware of his propensity to be nothing short of annoying, it will be a start."

Dick gaps in mock-hurt, but Dami just levels a look at him. "I do not like to be hugged into submission, Grayson. We have had this discussion more than once."

Back to Tim, and Dami’s eyes change just a little at the blatant surprise/disbelief that is still there, skepticism, assessment, anger, he expected, but not this. Drake draws back in his seat, like he does not know how to take such an invitation; as though he doesn’t not believe.

Perhaps Grayson and Father have a point in this course of action, the youngest grudgingly realizes while looking directly at Drake’s face closely, watching for the reactions coming across. He…does not like what he sees.

"It is…a great deal to ask for, Drake, I am aware; however, take a chance to contact us, just once for back-up should you need it. Come to the cave for medical treatment just once. If you are able to feel more comfortable, then tell us how you escaped your captors as Timothy Drake-Wayne months ago. Or, tell us about the Insurgent Crisis of which we know little but... with a reputation that proceeds itself. Give us pieces of these events if the full story is...unsettling.” Dami sighs a little at him and that irksome expression, "This is what we are asking of you. Allow us the opportunity to show you that you are indeed part of the family, have always been."

Tim keeps staring, silent and assessing, but a muscle in his jaw ticks where Father and Grayson cannot see.

"Call it a trial of sorts," Dick supplies.

Dami nods with a 'there you are,' flourish of hands. "Should the family fail you, then by all means, return to being a lone vigilante and we will not bother you again. You have nothing to lose in this."

And the fuck he doesn’t. The utter ridiculousness of that statement just makes him chuckle darkly,
no real mirth in it. “Nothing to lose?” He draws out, looking up at Dami and the kid looks a little uneasy, like he’s reevaluating those words. It's funny because it's fucked up how Dami doesn't get it, the impact, because he already lost it all once. Bruce and Dick, they're waiting for an answer, but his throat is just suddenly thick with things left unsaid, the past he used to choke on. The things he moved on from.

"I'm surprised this is coming from you, you know," he's so proud of how normal he sounds, how quiet his voice is when he should be fucking screaming. "Considering our history…I thought you'd be fine with how things are now."

The youngest Wayne blinks at that, and for an almost thirteen year old, he looks a little too worn around the edges.

"Timothy," and that's Dami, saying his name. Really saying his name. "I do not need to tell you that I was not a good person in the beginning. You already know this, but I had believed…had thought you and I are finally at some kind of understanding. It has taken us time to get there, and it has not been easy for either of us; however…I would not give you up willingly." And it's so very stark that Tim’s more than a little shocked, Dami of all people wouldn’t… Tim doesn’t know how to process it because he’s the one that made the promise.

"When I first, when Father went missing and presumed dead …well, perhaps you were right to fight with Grayson about Robin because I—"

"No." Tim’s voice is Red Robin: hard, unyielding, cutting the youngest off, and now it’s Dami’s turn to just stare. “No, I goddamned wasn’t. At the time, I was an asshole, okay, so just no. ” Because I didn’t see how much you were mourning the death of your father, like I mourned the death of mine and Bruce and Steph and Kon and Bart. . . "Fuck no. Look, Baby Bat, really, I don't need—"

"You do," Bruce finally speaks up, "believing you'd been thrown away speaks for how much you need to hear this, Tim."

He looks at the older man and whatever is in his expression (because Bruce usually sees beyond the bullshit) makes the man under the mask reach for his hand and squeeze, not immediately letting go afterwards even though Tim seizes up with the instinct to pull back, forces himself not to.

Dick takes up the torch, his knee bouncing with energy under the table, and it takes a good second for Tim to be able to look at him without the automatic response to get up and move away. But, yeah, Dick’s had his shit kicked around in the last few years too, hasn’t he? The joking pain in the ass is more of an act, a desperate attempt at being his old self than the real man. Being the Batman took its toll.

"I did it all wrong," Dick’s eyes catch his and latch on, “and I admit that. I told you that you were my equal, Tim, and I meant that, still do. At the time, I didn't treat you like it. I took Robin from you by force and that was wrong. We should have talked and agreed together on how to handle what I knew would be the right call. I should have let you hand Robin over on your own after you got where I was coming from because Dami did need it. He needed it just like I did all those years ago, and Jason needed it, and you needed it. I saw it coming when we thought Bruce was dead, that the kid was close to the edge and something needed to happen to stop him from going over. Robin was that thing, but I never told you any of it. I just expected you to do what I asked because you always did.” The sadness behind you always trusted me is there because, well, he doesn’t now, and Dick finally realizes it (he sees how things are now).

Tim jerks his eyes away, sure he’s still schooling himself. "I get that now, Dick, and Dami's done the
Legacy proud. He’s an awesome Robin." Tim massages the bridge of his nose. This is all very…not what he expected coming back to Gotham, a case, a fight, a pull of his vigilante card, sure, maybe a few hours sleep, work on the sims he’s developing, but the Bats have him at a total loss because fuck who asks for another chance in a family (nope, sleep’s not happening tonight, not after this)? "It’s not an issue." Anymore.

Dick just stares at him because he knows this is where everything started to go terribly wrong, where the teenager started getting his resources together to be able to stand without a safety net.

Damian clears his throat uncomfortably, "you have…Drake, you have come to my aid multiple times in the last year, so I have assumed we were on more amicable grounds." Damian's eyes go dark, distant, "I was the one… surprised when you came for me, with the others." Enough said because the teen’s voice goes just a bit…wobby, like it does when he even mentions his time on the other side.

Tim's gaze sharpened at the teenager. He opens his mouth, but the youngest seems on a roll now,

"The last gang war, the Triple Threat attack, should have been another instance of my stupidity," Damian’s staring at the table but his eyes, “and yet, you pulled me from death in the cross fire and made certain I was tended." And for Damian Wayne, the memory is there because as Grandfather always said, fear is the etching in a good novel. He can tell himself he was foolish for getting pinned down, for not being fast enough to avoid the round that took his leg out of commission. The four members of the Scion Sect were right up on him, automatics out, and nowhere to go; he had flashed on the moment he died the first time, of the pain when that sword penetrated his body with a sickening twist, but he did not fear it. Instead, he feared that Father would fall apart and descend into madness, feared that Grayson would change even more (would lose more of himself), feared that his death would be in vain—a useless thing, feared that he would never be allowed to set the wrong things he’d done in his life right (The Year of Blood and the damage done to Timothy Drake).

But, the Red Robin had stepped between him and death that time; the elder vigilante appeared out of the black, snarling while he made perfectly certain none of the four ever would hold a gun without pain. His memory fades when Red comes back to him, picks him up because he recalls how hot the metal of that harness was against his cheek; there’s vague instances of coming around in Drake’s room of this apartment with a fight as all Robins were trained to do. The eyes and face had eased him, even with his blood on those hands that were digging fragments out and stitching him up. The last instance of being carried to the front door of the Manor, looking up to see Drake’s bare face twist into something distressing for an instant before he snuck them into the entry and carried him up to his room. Drake had put him in bed and been out the window too fast for Damian to call out to him; moments later, Todd opened his door without knocking, Alfred in tow.

The eyes finally focus on Tim's face, and he’s a little shaken that Dami looks so oddly fragile. "I am determined to make amends for the wrongs I have committed, Timothy. There are…many during my tenure with the League of Assassins, but here in Gotham, my treatment of you is my greatest regret. I did not understand how family was supposed to function since I had no reference, you understand? I was wrong, and I am not ashamed to admit it. Allow me this opportunity, Timothy."

It’s so earnest, so bare and raw that the promise rears up again. Tim's fist works in and out of clenching on his leg; his voice this side of hoarse. "I'll always come, Damian. Always." The eyes take on a darker blue and he's vehement, "because it's not going to fucking happen again. Not to you, not to Jason, not if I can stop it. You call, I'll come."

It's no small promise. The Red Robin has his share of changes; Ra’s understands he's a force to be reckoned with now. Fuck, most the criminals in Gotham were starting to take a step back when the
Dami made his excuses to go down to the same all night bakery, something about picking up things.
for Alfred but Tim knew it was part embarrassment over the hug and part Bat planning as Dick and Bruce eye him rather than watching the teenager head out the door.

"We're serious about this, Tim." Bruce keeps his voice gentle, eyes for his third son.

"I can tell," he doesn't look up, doesn't look at either of them. "Siccing Dami on me, that was a risk."

Bruce just arches a brow and Tim has to wonder.

"I'll play it by ear. We'll see how it goes."

He's made himself another cup of espresso just to calm himself because just Dick and Bruce make him edgy as hell, and he knows better to make any promises.

"There's a lot more we don't know, isn't there?" Dick tries to make his voice gentle, the 'concerned big brother' that hasn't been there for a long time.

Tim pauses mid-drink, his free hand by his leg clenches. He deflects with the best of them.

"Why now?" And it's the question he's wanted to ask since Batman showed up as his 'partner' for patrol. "Things were moving fine and now I've got Bats everywhere. Even in my damn window, Jason."

A gloved hand slides under the crack (that wasn't there when he got home or even when he originally opened the front door) and nudges the window up so the Red Hood can ease himself in.

"Hey Baby Bird," the guy comes to sit across from Tim and tap in the codes to release his helmet.

Tim just shakes his head, "you can always come in, you know. We had that talk about it. Don't kill me in my sleep and you can totally kype some cereal and crash on the couch."

Jason just sighs with a wiry grin, "I know, I know, but it's all about the temptation."

The two share a laugh over it, and Tim waves him away to raid the regular coffee pot and box of doughnuts. Jason takes his cup down and pours sugar in, and Tim graciously doesn't say anything about helmet hair.

Quietly, he talks over the pouring, "They've just figured it out recently, Baby Bird. That's why they're here."

Tim stares at the table, not at any of the Bats around him.

"What set this off?" He asks instead.

Jason shrugs as he pulls out the coffee creamer from the fridge and lies like butter won't melt in his mouth, "not sure. How about it, Bat-dad? Big Bird?"

Bruce's eyes hadn't left his two sons being more amicable than normal when he's called out again.

"I have a list," He admits, "a long list before Dick broke into your place. Instead of pushing, I was waiting for the right time, Tim." Bruce ducks his head a little, but his third son still doesn't look at him and the hood is still in the way of his face. "Like I said, I thought giving you time, space you needed to be the vigilante you wanted to be was the best choice. I was wrong. After your team went through the Insurgent Crisis" Tim's shoulders tighten at the mention, "I should have—well, there's a lot of things I should have done. There's a reason no one but the Titans know about everything that
happened and refuse to speak of it, why there’s so little data in the League database. That's where the trail started for me. It became very clear I had lost a great deal when I knew almost nothing about the last year of your life, Tim, not to mention Tam always deflects for you when I show up at Wayne Enterprises. That's more of a bad sign than I'm comfortable with.

Jason slides into Dami's old seat, picking out a doughnut. "You've got Tam sending away Bruce Wayne from his own company?" And he looks like he's trying very hard not to laugh.

_Dammit, Tam._ "No," Tim replies quietly, rubbing his temples because he never actually told her to keep Bruce out of his hair, "Tam was probably… I don't know, panicking. Or questioning my sanity, or-"

"Panicking?" Dick makes it a question.

He hesitates, "either I was out of commission in the back office or she didn't want me to mention the authority change. I've had the paperwork ready forever depending on who comes to take over. Tam knows it, know where it is. She's just…not happy about it."

All three of them blink at him, non-comprehending.

"To give Bruce back his shares, make him CEO again." Tim says slowly as if it should be obvious, "or Dick or Dami. Whoever decides to take over." He just shrugs at Jason, "I know you'd hate it so I didn't-"

"You're right. I sure as hell don't want it." The gloved hand tightens more at the implications.

Tim just sighs, "this was never supposed to be a forever thing, just temporary to save the company from the Hush and Ra’s. Well, mission accomplished. It's time for a Wayne to come back and take charge."

Bruce looks a little pissed now, _"you are_ a Wayne, Tim."

Dick's shoulders tighten, but Tim finally straightens and turns to look at Bruce, "No," he denies almost gently, "I'm not."

"You did changed your name," and Dick seems more upset about it than he should be (he thought Tam was saying it to get a rise...well, apparently not).

Tim just nods into his empty cup. He'd done it after...when the big call went out from the BI servers, calling anyone with a mask for the big bad preparations. Dami had told him he had no place there anymore, might as well meet them out in the city proper and _no one disagreed_. It had been fucking brutal, painful. The time he'd called out for help and no one had even...the beating had been pretty bad. Of course, he survived worse. He'd gotten out, he'd gotten himself safe, made sure he wasn’t going to bleed out before he passed the fuck out, but the realization had been just as hard: there wouldn't be a safety net in Gotham anymore. He was on his own.

Something must be in his face because Hood is leaning over to look at him again, giving the critical eye.

"Baby Bird..." and his voice is low, rough.

Tim stands abruptly, dropping his small cup in the sink, "it's fine. Not a big deal. Paperwork’s ready for the next person in line." Flippant works _because this is old shit that doesn’t bother him anymore._

"Fuck that, I wanna hear what you were thinking because it's very obviously _not fine_ if it makes you..."
look like that." It's so just Jason in that strange, makes-you-want-to-kick-him-in-the-dick kind of way he has, just making demands without considering the audience. Maybe giving into the Bats was a bad idea. Crazily enough, he kind of wishes Dami was back to act as a buffer (how fucked up is that?).

Instead, "Old story, Jay. That shit is already done. Point is, I dropped Wayne from my last name." Tim flops back down, rubbing his tired eyes and ignoring the angry furrow of Red Hood's forehead.

"You can talk about it, Tim," Bruce offers gently, "we're here to try and rebuild our relationship with you. Whenever needs to be said is okay."

Jason just gestures to Bruce with a 'see?' hand.

And as Tim looks over at the eldest Bats, he can see it right in front of his fucking face; they really didn't know why. So he just turns his gaze away to the terribly uninteresting muted shade of his walls and crosses his arms over his chest in an unconscious attempt to protect himself from this.

"I did. I changed my name last year."

"Why, Tim?" And Jason. Goddamned Jason. Of any of them, he'd be the one that knows ("Why the fuck didn't you call the Bats?").

"Because after the third time I sent out a distress call and no one came, I got the point. When Dami said I shouldn't be in the Cave or the Manor because it wasn't my home, not my place to be there, and everyone let it slide, I got the point. I. Got. It. Jay. It's fine. I got my ass handed to me a few times, so what? I got kidnapped and tortured for a few weeks, so fucking what? The Titans handled the Insurgents, and we survived it. I signed up knowing bad shit was going to happen. We all do." He breathes in slowly, trying desperately to keep him eyes from getting heavy because it'd been a real shitty two years.

"I'm the Bat's Intel guy, the back-up, the goddamned soldier, and that's fine. Not a problem. Now whatever in the hell this is just blows the whole system." Now his hands are fists and he wants to break something, wants to punch until his knuckles bleed and the stitches rip out of his skin. "I adapted. I got used to it, and it was fine. This screwing around with it is…uncomfortable."

"It's not fine," Dick's voice but Tim won't even look because damn it, that might set him off. He's not that hot-head anymore. "Tim, little-"

And there it is, that gives him the backbone to turn and look at that asshole, cutting his right off in mid-sentence.

"Don't even call me that, Dick. I'm not your fucking brother. I'm the Stand-In between the real sons here. Now that I get it, it's not a problem."

There it is. Thrown back into Dick's face how full of shit he is, but saying it still makes Tim's chest ache like he can't breathe; his voice is just factual, angry but to-the-point because he knows the truth from bullshit now, he knows how it's going to be. And well, that's fine too.

Only, Jason actually looks shocked, staring at him like he's going to be sick. Like he didn’t fucking expect that answer when he came in through the window, but really, there’s no other answer to give. Tim doesn't even address it because, well, the second Robin had been right all along. Replacement? Not even that.

His wrists crack audibly from the strain. "Fuck. I need sleep." Tim stands abruptly, a fine tremor in his muscles. "I'm going to bed."
And fucking Jason. "Tim."

The younger just looks at him, waiting.

"You're still going to do this? The second chance thing the Bats are asking for?"

For a moment, Tim just stares, his face closed off. "I don't see a need for it, but if you want to waste your time making sure I'm not completely useless as a vigilante and call it 'bonding' to cover it up, then fine. I'll deal with it, too."

A muscle in Jason's jaw jumps, but the man just schools his features and nods, "guess we got our work cut out for us."

Tim's got nothing for that and moves away from the table.

Dick stands up and his face is miserable, his eyes are deep, dark blue, but Tim walks right around him like he doesn't even exist. The older man watches him go, silent and grave, a very Dark Knight stance. Bruce's hand wraps around his forearm, gentle pressure until Dick is sitting again, staring down that hallway.

"We should go," Jason says quietly, standing to put his own mug in the sink. "That's all we'll get outta Baby Bird for the moment."

Bruce looks lost in his thoughts, weighed by his third son's trials and acceptance of being left behind. He's angry at himself for reading the signs all wrong, at Tim not fighting back to keep his place in the Bat ranks, at no one cluing him in on how far gone Tim was for them now. He has no one to blame but himself for the new scars his son bore, for the weight a nineteen year old boy shouldn't be carrying.

He should still be going to college, still living in the Manor and taking some nights off to do his homework. He should still be that smiling, joking young man with a girlfriend outside their secret lives and coming into the library to talk with him about cases he was trying to solve.

What he is, instead, is a lone vigilante taking care of a team in between being a CEO for a major company (a job he never asked for) and taking on his own duties as a crime fighter without anyone to catch him when he fell. He's an abandoned bird, broken wings healed with scars that go deeper than skin.

For an impossible moment, Bruce is worried he may be too far gone to come back. The broken trust between them may be too much for Tim to forgive, for Tim to come back. But, the real Bruce, the man once the cowl comes off, is a stubborn bastard. He's a man that doesn't give up.

After a moment, he stands fluidly, squeezing Dick's shoulder for a long moment before his oldest stands too. Bruce picks up the Red Hood helmet himself while his second son just ambles behind them, following them out Tim's front door and closing it behind them.

**

A few hours later, Tim is impeccably dressed for WE, getting to work on time even before Tam is at her desk outside his office. It's unusual for him, but the nonsense with the Bats made him too antsy to sleep, even after he heard them leave, so he ran his sims and decided to come to work instead. He needs to do something to make his chest stop this useless fucking aching because he already got used to how his life is now.

He gets his systems warmed up and goes to their private kitchen to make coffee, already going
through his nice lack of schedule today. No meetings, no real paperwork, so he'd have time to go
down to R&D and have some fun for once with the techs and engineers. His favorite part of the job
(or the part he adapted) is to see the new products, throw in his two cents at the designs, point out the
flaws, offer suggestions, and be with his real people.

These are the best days, so his mood lightens while checking the list of emails, printing ones he'll
need to follow-up with and categorizing the others.

Tam, at some point, gets there and gives his door a cursory knock.

"Come in."

Her smile still does crazy things to him but she has better now, doesn't she?

"Wow, boss is early. Thought you were off in San Francisco for a few weeks." She teases, sipping
out of her own mug.

He grins up at her, "change of plans. Besides, it's a play day."

"Ah. Going to be down in R&D all day, hm? I wish Dad could see how you are down there. I'd
never get you two out."

"It would take something epic," he agrees solemnly, jacket already thrown over his chair and
anticipating a day full of burying himself in creating, testing, being part of a team…

Tam waves him away, cup in hand, "all right! All right! Shoo!"

Tim's grin is huge as he vaults over his massive desk with style and heads to the door, walking
backwards with his hands in his pockets, "don't wait up!"

She laughs at him again and shakes her head. Once he's down the elevator, Tam goes back to her
desk and sighs, the conversation with Nightwing, Dick, is still a broken record in the back of her
mind. Like her father, she loves the Wayne family, respects what they do, would do anything to help
them and keep their secrets, but she shouldn't have told Dick anything, even if they were trying to be
better to her ex-boyfriend boss, she shouldn't have helped them. They should have had to do it on
their own.

She just gets to work and puts the rest out of her mind for the time being because at the end of the
day, all she could do is be there for her friend, her old flame, and hope she wouldn't have to pick up
more pieces of him. Or if she did, that he would let her.

**

The back elevators are for moments like these so Bruce can come into WE without all the fanfare he
normally gets from the whole building; today, it's so Tim can't see him coming and have Tam deflect.

The elevator stops at the hidden room in Tim's office, the 'just in case' room. It has medical
equipment, a bed, and a mini fridge, a few changes of clothes, and a small shower. Walking through
it, Bruce wonders how many times Tim had needed this place in the past year since he felt the Manor
and the Cave were no longer safe havens. How many times the middle son had stitched himself back
together because he had no one else to depend on?

Since Dick's first visit to Tim's apartment weeks ago, his oldest son had admitted to Plan: Bring Tim
Back to the Bats (or whatever in the hell Dick had called it), and Bruce was concerned about
pushing too hard, pushing him further away…until Alfred started helpfully giving him hints (like
'Shall I change Master Timothy's things, Sir? He has not returned to the Manor is well over a year and I am certain he had outgrown the current clothing in his room.'

A year? More than?

Then to Barbara, Red Robin's comm records (the comm can’t be traced? What if…?), but those dates couldn't be right. Had it really been that long since he called out? Bruce kept up with the research, logging into the JLA system to track the Titan's schedule and activity. Nothing to explain Tim's extended absences or lack of communication, cross-referencing the other's reports of his presence in Gotham.

Then he accessed all data on the Insurgent Crisis with two grainy pictures: one of Tim half buried in rubble beside Superboy and Kid Flash while the others dug them out and one of the whole bloodied team walking down the street for the final fight against the invaders (and that was his son covered in his own blood and sneering with disdain). None of them had contacted the JLA at the time, and he assumed they had good reason. The signal, the fight, had been flagged too late for any of them to get to the battlefield in time to help, but they made it for the aftermath, taking in the ravaged but victorious teenagers.

The picture of Tim almost buried alive haunted him, reminiscent of Jason. The next day, he told Dick he was on board with the plan. Damian stood angrily at the admission, but Bruce had gotten the inside story to that situation.

"I have attempted to reach out to Drake," his youngest son had snarled at the two of them, "he will not return to the Manor on his own."

He and Dick had agreed to invade Tim's apartment sometime after patrol.

Here he is now, looking around the empty safe room, wondering how many times the bin had overflowed with bloody gauze, how many times he had gotten himself stitched up just enough to pass out and not bleed to death. How close he'd come to the edge of his sanity.

Too many things are clear now.

Bruce sighs and opens the hidden door into the office's restroom. Nothing blatantly Tim here either, just a generic room like the one in his own office a floor below.

Bruce opens the door, ready for his son to be at his desk, on the phone, reading or typing away. Nothing. The office is empty.

*He could have taken the day, gone home to work a case or treat injuries.*

Bruce strolls to the door and opens it to confront Tam (who, of course jumps in surprise).

"M-Mr. Wayne!"

"Tam. Good to see you," he doesn't bother with the Brucie persona because Tam knows better, knows the big secret anyway.

"Same to you, Sir."

"Where's Tim?"
"He's…"

"Don't deflect for him, Tam. I need to speak with my son."

There. She draws back a little and something that could be distaste flickers across her expression.

"Mr. Drake is down with R&D today, sir."

"Thank-you." He's already turning back into Tim's office. "And Tam?"

He doesn't turn, "the paperwork Tim mentioned. Transfer of Authority, the ones that will give the stocks and title back to me or another of my sons."

Her voice is oddly empty, "yes, sir?"

"I want it all shredded and put on Tim's desk. He wants to give up the job, then fine. Have them drawn up again if he decides to pursue other endeavors."

"Y-Yes, Mr. Wayne."

"Thank-you, Tam."

He closes the door behind him as his phone buzzes.

"You're supposed to be off today," Bruce answers as he gets in the elevator.

"Doing research," his oldest son answers. "Alfred said you went to WE."

"I'm going to collect Tim. Lunch is a good start."

"Ah. Okay then, I'll be at the Manor at six. Dami has an…idea. Thought we should consider it."

"I'll be back by then. We'll talk before patrol."

"Okay. You'll want to hear this."

Now he's amused, "Damian always has…a different perspective. See you tonight."

He rides down the elevator to R&D, now curious to see Tim in action. He knows how well Tim has been leading WE into the future (he's seen the new direction into energy and technology) just by the profit reports, but he's rarely seen Tim outside the boardroom. This trip may give him new insight into the type of man Tim's become because any good detective knows that knowledge is the key to any case.

Of course, no one notices he's come out of the back elevator, and Bruce walks calmly along the far wall away from the workstations and testing areas. It really doesn't matter because the main body of employees are gathered around a mock engine closer to the front of the room.

"Sir!"

"Good here."

"Sir--"

"Really, stop worrying about it, Mike." Tim's disembodied voice come from somewhere around the mock.
"But, sir," and the please is there. Michael Danvers, Lucius' replacement in R&D, doesn't know what to do when the CEO wants to get his hands dirty apparently. Lucius hand-picked the man for his tech savvy, not his CEO wrangling.

"It's fine, Mike. I checked all the locks myself."

Bruce comes just close enough to hover on the outskirts and see Tim laying under the suspended engine block on his back through the tangle of legs and coveralls. He eyes the straps and locks himself; he can see Mike's point.

"All right!" Tim calls, "let's see it."

One of the techs moves and after a cough, the engine TIM IS CURRENTLY UNDER sputters to life. The initial start is rough but even Bruce can hear it leveling out, running evenly.

A few seconds of complete silence and everyone gathered starts the enthusiastic cheering of a real breakthrough. The techs are high fiving, slapping one another on the back, and one bends down to offer a hand to Tim and pull him to his feet.

From there, the techs are congratulating him, buzzing with excitement in what this could mean for the industry.

Tim holds up both hands for quiet (a socket wrench in one) and the idle soothing and quiet beside him, and Bruce finally sees his son, suit dirty with dark substances on his pants and shirt, some on his cheek, and hands covered to the forearms. But, he's smiling. A genuine wide smile that reminds him of the young boy Tim used to be, the Robin that was once his partner, his son, his friend. The boy that was on his way to becoming a true detective.

"Okay everyone. This is extremely exciting, I know. You guys have worked so hard to make this a reality, and I appreciate all the effort and stress and strain each of you have put into this project. We still have work to do, a lot of work, before I can bring this to the board, but, I want each and every one of you to take tomorrow off and celebrate how far we've come! Now, it's just a matter of time."

The team cheers again while Tim laughs and the expression is just as genuine as the smile.

"That mean you too, boss?"

Tim just laughs again, "I think there's an expression somewhere about the devil's work never being done."

The team laughs again and give another round of back-slapping before Tim finally spots him standing in the back, and the genuine bleeds out of his face. The CEO mask is there, nothing that reaches his eyes, nothing that gives him away. And this is the man Tim's become, one that can always hide, one that can lie.

"Bruce! What a surprise."

And the team turns; the usual reactions, shock, awe, guilt, and envy as the last blooded Wayne comes for a visit.

"Tim! You forgot our luncheon, as usual." He's grinning that Brucie smile. "It's a sad time when my own CEO forgets about me." He strides up, hands in the pockets of his ridiculously expensive suit, and has to give Tim credit when he doesn't even flicker an eye. The kid always had a good undercover face.
"Momentous breakthrough, Bruce. Business as usual at Wayne Enterprises."

Tim looks at the team, "your R&D department is going to put us ahead of the competition at this year's Expo."

"Oh? I would expect nothing less from the greatest minds in the business." The pleased flush from some of the team is enough to placate his middle son, who relaxes his stance just enough for Bruce to notice.

"All right everyone. That's a break for lunch so Mr. Wayne doesn't have to drag me kicking and screaming away." The general laughter makes Brucie chuckle as Tim lays the socket down and strides toward him, greasy mess and all. "Good work today. Keep it up."

With a wave to the team of techs and engineers, Bruce walks side-by-side with Tim to the regular elevator, keeping up pretenses by Tim starting with, "So, the quarterlies are looking great, Bruce…"

Until the doors slide shut and they're on the way to Tim's office when the younger man falls silent staring ahead with that blank expression.

Bruce let him have his time.

Coming out of the elevator first, Tim puts on that CEO smile for Tam.

"Anything pressing, Tam?"

She smiles back but her eyes flicker to Bruce, "no, Mr. Drake. The paperwork Mr. Wayne requested is on your desk."

Not even a flicker in Tim. "That's why you're the best, Tam. I'm going to catch Bruce up, so hold my calls please."

"Absolutely, sir."

Tim holds the door to his office open, allows Bruce to stroll through first.

Tim doesn't breathe until the door is closed behind them. The younger man's deceptive posture is loose, calm, but Bruce knows better just by watching the random twitches in his biceps and thighs (ones that keep him on his toes for the next move in a fight).

"What do you need?" Rote.

Dropping the pretenses, the older man strides to the hidden room and opens the door without a word, standing back. Tim’s eyes narrow in silent assessment, seeming as though he intended to wait his old mentor out, but Bruce is nothing if not patient.

Finally, Tim walks through on his own steam, standing by the simple chrome counter with arms crossed over his chest. He's giving Bruce the blank expression, and the volume of things left between them in that speech this morning looms in the forefront of Bruce's mind. It's time to break Tim's reconditioned responses, to reject comfort and care.

The older man doesn’t hesitate to invade his personal space without a hitch, two fingers reach out unerringly to press gently against the gauze pad still taped to his side. Every muscle in Tim's body tightens (and fucking Dick) because some kind of reprimand is coming.

"Let me see it," Bruce says instead, walking away to go for the cabinets, looking through them for
the supplies he wants. He takes off his expensive jacket and rolls up his shirt sleeves.

"Not necessary," the exact same words, the same tone from Red Robin.

"You're still going out with Damian tonight?"

"As planned,"

"Then it's necessary."

And fuck, it’s the ‘there will be no argument because I will win’ Batman. Tim’s seen the effect of fighting against it, knows he could probably force the issue if he wants to just remind his former mentor that he's not Bruce's responsibility. But, the thought comes unbidden, if he’s going out with Dami tonight as promised, Bruce might want to check that he’s as close to 100% as possible.

As long as he doesn't see... Tim hesitates a second before pulling his shirt out of his pants and starts on the buttons. Bruce comes back with supplies while Tim holds his dress shirt out of the way and pulls up his tank top underneath, showing just the gauze pad at his side.

Bruce doesn’t comment, just snaps on gloves, kneeling down to gingerly pull the tape off and reveal the stitches.

With this, his mentor checking him over after so long, Tim can't force himself to relax because he's not that Robin anymore.

Finally, however, he does start with, "you're waiting for something, Tim. My theory is your waiting for some kind of talk or lecture, but I don’t have any idea what you're expecting. You've done nothing wrong." Bruce glances up, noting Tim's not even looking at him. "It disturbs me, the fact you don't have very different expectations now."

Tim makes a noise in the back of his throat.

"I mean to say that you have none except for some type of punishment. You're 19 now. A grown vigilante with your own team that's done a lot of good. I can't ground you anymore, but I can be concerned for you. Just like I am with Dick and Jason." Bruce smears some healing concoction he probably got from Alfred over the row of black thread before re-taping a fresh pad over it.

"You can believe what you want about this." Bruce's voice is softer now, "but I'm going to tell you this once since you have always been a 'seeing is believing' type—we only want to prove ourselves to you. Dick wants to make up for his inattention, Jason probably wants to correct his previous behaviors, Damian, I’m sure, wants the same."

Taking this in, staring at the blank wall, Tim sighs, "and you?"

"...I want my son back."

That startles him, draws Tim's eyes down, Bruce kneeling by his side, looking up with sincerity.

"I've been working to get my children back for too long. Jason, Dick, Damian. Now, it's your turn, Tim. You've grown up into this fierce, powerful young man that I don't know. You're not the same teenager that started as my Robin, the other half of Batman with the mind of a budding detective. You are a detective now, and I missed too much of that process. I missed all the training you've done with other masters, I've missed bandaging you up when you're injured, I've missed helping you on cases, on getting your opinion on mine. I've missed you falling asleep in the library, on watching you eat like you could for days. There's too much of a gap." And it's like Bruce is saying the thing Tim
would never admit, *I grew up while you were busy with other things*.  

He blinks down at Bruce, at a loss, just watching his former mentor slowly straighten to his full height.

"It's purely selfish, Tim, but I want a place in your life again."

Just like he's still a kid, Bruce buttons his shirt back up (there's something he doesn't want me seeing), straightens his collar and lets his big palms lie on Tim's broad shoulders.

"For right now, I want you to go out to lunch with me, maybe make small talk about something other than work. Eventually, I want you to be able to trust me, so you can depend on me when you need to, but more, when you want to."

Tim blinks again and turns away, mind working at what other forces may be at work behind this. It takes a few long moments for him to decide, time which Bruce throws away the old pad, washes his hands, does little things to keep himself busy and give Tim the time he needs.

"Godf rebel's," the younger man finally breaks the quiet. "A few blocks away. They have good subs."

Still turned to the sink, a small smile cuts over Bruce Wayne's face before he schools himself in neutral lines. "Subs it is."

Tim steps up and scrubs at the engine grease and oil, silent as he goes to the closet in the back, flips on the light, and closes the door to change into a clean shirt and pants. When he emerges, Bruce slides his coat on and follows his son through the door, waiting ever patient for Tim to grab his necessities out of his desk drawer. And just stares at the impressive pile of confetti on the top.

Tim blinks down at it, catching words phrases, names, knows exactly what he's looking at. Slowly, his head turns to give Bruce the full weight of his gaze.

The elder simply smiles back while adjusting his sleeves.

Tim closes his eyes and rubs the bridge of his nose. Without a word, he slides on his coat and starts out the door.

Bruce counts it as a win.

Chapter End Notes

Wow... I hope you know, i was tearing up (still do) at several points in this part ("I got kidnapped and tortured for a few weeks, so fucking what?" and "I'm not your fucking brother.") because, wow. Tim gets it. Geesh. So, sorry, I have, absolutely HAVE to get a chapter or two done for "Forward Momentum," so don't hate me.

As always, thanks for reading.
Drabble 1

Chapter Summary

During the last two years...

Chapter Notes

Dammit. Okay, really, I have to work on my Avengers thing. But, here, take this.

During his time as a lone vigilante:

Tim got a present from Ra’s on his birthday. It was a book bound in human skin. Fluctuating between *ew, I should be wearing gloves, is this someone I knew?, wow, this is pretty well preserved, and is this some crazy kind of League of Assasin’s cookbook?*, Tim has never opened it. He’s pretty sure it’s supposed to be some kind of epic riddle or something because Ra’s, but it’s still sitting on his shelf in the perch, unopened.

Unknown to anyone on the Titan’s team, he pierced the top cartilage of his right ear with two small hoops in remembrance of Z and Owen. He camouflages them with the usual undercover techniques but has never taken them out.

Tim snuck into Ra’s main compound to search for baby pictures of Damian. There are only four. One of them shows the demon brat drools when he sleeps.

He names his concussions to make it seem like they’re *really not a big deal.*

“I hung out with Sam last night and that dude just sucks. Seriously, he’s terrible.” Cassie is never amused.

Tim flies out to see Cassandra at least once every few months (or she comes in to San Fran and hangs out in the Tower) because they have a great working relationship. Every time they spar, however, it’s the closest call she’s had besides her father.

After four days of consistent nightmares, Tim finally gave in and went to a bar in San Fran to drink a few. He ended up in a bar fight, got arrested (as Alvin Draper who is over 21), and still didn’t get to finish his first beer. His mug shot is hanging on the fridge in Titan’s Tower.

The Titans have a strategic “How to Keep Red Alive” Standard Operating Procedure drafted in secret meetings via Skype. Step 1 is *never believe Red when he says, “Sure it’ll work, just watch, and duck when appropriate.”*

Tim cross references bad nights in Gotham to make sure he’ll be in town when one of the vigilantes may be out of commission; he plans them so no one will try coming to visit.
Ra’s ninja squad now knows to never play Texas Hold ‘Em with Red Robin. That motherfucker cheats. His collection of won weaponry is getting too big for one floor.

**
For a span of four months, Tim took part in an underground fighting competition. They asked him not to come back.

**
Raven, Kon, Bart, and Cassie (via the Insurgent mind trap) are the only ones that know the extent of the damage done to Tim while he was in captivity; Tim’s default answer to any questions concerning those two week is he “doesn’t talk about it.”

**
Steph (still feeling like ass about Tim mourning her death) texts Tim often with random things just to have an excuse to know he’s still alive. Usually it’s just phrases and random facts that pop in her head when she’s punch-drunk because of blood loss.

**
Bruce has tried to get Tim to come to the Manor dozens of times in the last two years (using a plethora of excuses, from Alfred’s cooking to cases he “needs help with”)—he keeps buying his son’s terrible excuses because he’s afraid of pushing Tim further away.

**
Tim’s civilian “day” car is a beat-up Honda Civic, because, you know, reasons.

**
When the Clock Tower blew up that one time, Tim is the one that gave Barbara and the Birds of Prey his renovated theatre to use until their new perch was rebuilt. He had it set-up with wheelchair accessibility, security, and all the extras the crew would need.

Once the girls decided they really liked the old theatre, he just gave it to them. When Babs asked him why, Tim just shrugged and replied, “what would I do with all this space anyway? It’s just me.”

**
Dick had to break down and ask for Tim’s help with the Bat Computer because really, how did Bruce get so many Trojans? Tim was able to remote in, fix the system, and set a picture of Batman smacking the shit out of a very young Robin (take that, Dick) as the background and locked it.

Damian laughed for days. Bruce and Dick were not amused. They take better care with McAfee updates.

**
Three Months ago

“Red.”

Color him surprised.

“Robin,” in the Titan’s Tower, Red Robin sits back in his chair, listening to the newest Robin’s voice come over the speakers. “What do you need?”

The youngest Bat hesitates, “Batman is off world on League business and Nightwing is accompanying him. For this case, I am in need of a detective.”

You call, I’ll come.

“Tell me what you need me to do, Robin.” But, like he already knows, he’s standing out of his chair, command given to shut the system down. He’s moving to the closet, pulling the domino off to become Tim Drake.

“Come to Gotham, Red. For this, I cannot work over a distance.”

“Understood,” he’s already changing into jeans, t-shirt, hoodie. He’s got a suit in Gotham, he’s got other toys to stock his harness. He’s got what he needs. “Five hours, Robin.”

“What magic are you utilizing?” There’s the suspicion.

“None. I have the old Batplane here. I’ll break Mach I in no time. Meet me at my perch before dark, bring whatever you’ve got.”

“I shall…Red?”

“Yeah?”

And because Dami is still a little shit sometime, he’s grudgingly nice, “…Thank-you for this.”

“Told you. Call and I’ll come. See you tonight, Robin. Red, out.”
The safe house (off BI’s list) is outside city limits, constructed just for the plane. Tim’s spare bike is there for the ride back into Gotham. Luckily, this one is a ‘day’ model without a hint of insignia. He stops on his way to the apartment perch to get doughnuts with no intention of really eating them. As he expected, Robin was waiting on his counter with a fresh pot of coffee already made (why would he do that?).

Tim wasted no time, dropping his backpack and duffle by the door and the baker’s box on the kitchen table. He didn’t bother removing his hood, but just moved to get a clean mug.

“You will not be any help, Drake,” the little bastard sneers with a glare. At almost fourteen, Damian is still an annoying pain in the ass, but, hey, what could you do?

“If that’s so, why did you call me?” Tim replies calmly.

“As I have already said, I need a detective. You, however, are ready to pass out where you stand.”

“I’m good,” digging in the fridge for creamer, Tim doesn’t even give him a glance, “I haven’t almost died in two weeks. No problem.”

“Oh?” A brow arches over the green domino, “the news coverage of your foolish team states otherwise.”

Tim blinks very slowly, hand on the cold bottle of Italian Sweet Cream, naw, there’s no way—

“Saw that, did you?” He keeps his tone deceptively dismissive. “Just another try by N.O.W.H.E.R.E, we got ‘em. End of the day, we won.”

“You took a direct hit intended for that fool clone,” Robin sneers, “you did not even attempt to dodge, Drake. Sloppy of you.”

Another slow blink behind the shield of his hood while he pours the creamer in, “It was part of the plan. The strike gave them false security that I was out of the fight when I had time to activate the EMP and take out all their hardware. It was just a ploy, Dami.”

“It was stupid.”

“It was a perfect plan. I added extra padding and sensors to the suit before we even left.” Tim turns to face him finally, “all right, kid. What’s all this about?”

And the green domino comes off so Tim can be fully aware Dami is glaring at him, the Batman glare, “For you to be any help to me, I need you at one-hundred percent performance, Drake. And you,” a gloved hand waves to encompass Tim from head to toe, “are obviously sleep deprived, more than likely malnourished, and have been in a heavy battle within the last forty-eight hours.”

Okay, mostly true.

Dami jumps down from the counter, “you will sleep a full eight hours, eat, and then I may be persuaded to let you assist me with this perturbing string of thefts. Until then, you are waste of my time.”

Instead of that old irritation welling up, Tim cocks a brow at him while sipping on his coffee because seriously, this was kind of creeping him out. “Okay,” Tim draws out, “you want me to eat, sleep, and then play detective for you. Got it. Anything else?”
The kid just hops off his counter and strides to the open window before fitting his domino back in place. “Yes,” Robin hisses as he climbs on the sill, “make better plans.”

Then he’s off, leaving Tim to stare. The peanut butter doughnuts are already gone.

***

Now

Earlier in the night:

Damian is really a genius. That or he knows Tim too well by now.

"This is not something I was able to do before," the youngest asserts, answering Jason's question. "For this to work, the whole Bat family would need to be in on it."

"You could have clued us in on how bad it’d gotten, Baby Bat," Dick replies sorely.

But Damian isn't even moved, just crosses his arms over his chest, "what lesson would you have learned, Grayson? None. Had I or Todd tried to make you see before you were ready, given you the answers, this would happen again. Drake, while he may be an egotistical nightmare, does not deserve to be lost a second time."

Dick's got nothing for that.

"Not fair to Baby Bird," Jason points a finger at the brat. "That kid is probably as humble as they come."

"Tt- he is now." The kid snarks.

“You’re more of a pain in the ass than him.” Jay just grins and makes kissy noises.

After months of being integrated into Hood’s strange demeanor, Dami isn’t even shaken. “I am exposed to your blatant idiocy on a more consistent basis than Drake. Of course I am more peevish.”

"Back to the point, demon child.” And Jay’s eyes are still twinkling in mirth, “He saved our asses."

"More than once," The brat agrees, still standing beside his point. “The issue here, is what assurances he will need for the future. How can he be certain this will not happen yet again? What guarantees can the Bats give that will appease Red Robin?"

“Proof.” The three look at Bruce sitting by his own workbench, still in jeans and a tattered T-shirt. “That’s the way Tim’s always been. He takes action and concrete evidence over words.”

Dick just nods, “then we start with new protocols.” He starts slowly. “BI was Tim’s baby from the start, but there were only general rules set in place, hot spots for when the night might go bad, communications of the big bad is a bigger bad than one person can handle. There’s very little on the books after that.” Dick starts pacing, working off his nervous energy, “we apply them to the group, not just the family. For Tim, we get more personal.”

Bruce chuffs a laugh, “like you don’t already have Rachel and Garth as your spies.”

Dick pauses, both hands in the air, “you know better than that, B. I might be able to get some details out of Rave and BB, but they’re loyal to Tim. He’s seen them through some terrible shit, and I’m glad they have his back.” Because that meant Tim had someone to catch him.
Jay, still screwing with the security system panel in his helmet just makes a noise in the back of his throat. “We start out with checks on, Baby Bird. Weekly, get updates on his stats. Once he starts getting his feet more in Gotham than out of it, we assign him a shift on someone else, Big Wing or the kid. Then we work him back into time at the Manor, weapons upgrade, meetings on the new faces, the new tech on the streets. We make him take charge of one of ‘em. He’ll respond out of duty, but we work it differently later on.”

The other three Bats are just staring, but he’s not even looking up because he’s just thinking out loud more than anything (still strange to be in the Manor a few nights every couple of weeks, still so odd to have a single location to go back to at the end of the night. His room…his fucking room is still there, bigger bed, clothes that fit him today, more tech for his weapons. Shit, he hadn’t expected…). He’s had time to study his Replacement, knew how the guy ticked. He and the kid had a shit ton of issues with the Bats in common, so he got it, he really did. Once he realized Bruce had replaced him as Robin—without knowing how close B was to the edge of sanity—he’d understood betrayal in an ape-shit crazy kind of way, responded in kind.

Now that the Pit wore down in him, that he could be reasoned with and reason with that endless well of crazy inside him, he could let himself start falling back with this bunch of assholes. He finally straightens, working the sore muscles in his neck, turning on his stool to put the workbench at his back and lean his elbows on it.

“So, demon kid’s plan is a solid place to start. We just working the angle from there.” His hand gestures to the old, leather bound tome on the edge of his own workbench where the kid had finally put it down. Sure, it creeped him out to see one outside Ra’s library (where he’d spent some time while training with Talia) and knew the backstory on the older-than-shit tradition.

Dami sighs and looks at the book as well, one that had been through his time with the League of Assassins that could not be unlocked by anyone but him (even Bruce probably tried one time or another) and been carried into his current life; this, this a thing he could not give up.

He admitted to the habit with a quiet dignity. "This will be one way to exploit his weakness following a non-lethal tradition of the League of Assassins. This book has ever lesson, every skill I have ever been taught, even those in which I did not excel. Grandfather, Mother, Father, even to you, Todd, and Grayson. Brown and Cain. Drake has the least pages."

"I'm sure I don't want to really know this," Dick starts, "but why-?" and that statement could encompass why keep it after everything you’ve done to leave the League behind to why bother to record the Bats in it, Baby Bird?

"Knowledge is power, Grayson.” Dami turns those eyes on his mentor and feels that helpless stab of…affection for the older man, his Batman. Of course, Father would always be the pinnacle he hoped to one day achieve, but Grayson is one he could approach without caution. He could tell Grayson anything.

“Every great ruler or conqueror succeeded in his aspirations because of the right knowledge in his possession. Drake, like my Grandfather, has a similar mind set. It is his weakness, one I would be able to exploit. If I call, he will come, but will then leave at the earliest opportunity." The youngest shrugs. "He has created reasons to leave Gotham with more frequency; we have been able to discern Drake remains in the Tower while his team returns to their other lives and thus he does not have consistent justification to be out of the city. As Pennyworth has already told me, we shall give him the proper motivation to return. This request will assure he stays for longer periods until the pages are properly full."

"So," Dick readjusts his lean, "you've got every teacher in there?"
"Yes. Not just teachers, Grayson, every lesson that would improve upon my skill," Damian's hand skims over the cover, "as the Demon Head has libraries devotes to his accumulated knowledge, I have begun with this one. In my attempt to be an exceptional Robin, the chapters contains lessons learned from the moment I could properly recall. Yes, much of it is knowledge from the League of Assassins; however, several sections are devoted to what I have gained from you, Father, and Todd. Drake has the least entries with a great deal to offer."

Jason gives a little hum, "that's a pretty solid plan, Baby Bat."

Dami smirks and bows a little, "I am aware, Todd. I will propose this to Drake this evening and report back."

**

Now

Lunch was strange, Bruce not acting like Batman or Brucie, but just, well, Bruce. He’d been content to let his old mentor do most the talking, answering questions when he may have been silent too long.

(“I’m working on a pet project, having some issues with re-configuring a mother board in one of the cars. Maybe you could lend a hand once I’m further along with it.”)

“Whatever you need.”

“Hm. R&D, huh. Always knew you had an affinity for tech, what else are you working on?”

“…a tracking system. Something—something I’m toying with.”)

Now he’s at the top of WKKY (all Gotham all the time), a smaller throwing disc rolling over his fingers while he waits, crouching down in the shadows. Any other night, any other time, he’d already be flying, taking the first leap like it’s his last. He’s had time to get used to it, to like it (liar), to hold his breath in and let the air hit him just right. He’s better on his own, a better fighter, a better detective, a better vigilante, a better leader; he hadn’t realized it until all of it just came to be. The safety net had, in some ways, hindered him, just like Ra’s once said when he had pretty much taken over the League and coordinated their efforts against the Council of Spiders. Until then, he hadn’t really known his limits, of what he could do. He’d been forced to find out the hard way.

Part of him has reservations because the Bats, in many ways, made him weak (just like Ra’s always said); the other part was tired to trying to be the thing other people needed (because hadn’t Batman needed a Robin?). He’d done it from the start, coming into the Robin legacy because Batman needed something, someone to keep him from stepping over the line. From there on, he’d kept moving with a single-minded determination to make sure the mission, the Batman, kept moving forward. Even through the death of his mom, the murder of his dad, he’d taken some measure of comfort that he was still working for the end result, for the betterment, for the mission. It didn’t ease his guilt that he hadn’t been there to save them, but it gave him something to hold on to. That eradicating crime, saving Batman from the final darkness, the abyss, was worth all the pain, all the injuries, all the f**ked-up he’d lived through until Bruce had vanished.

His justifications ended the moment Dick thought he should see a shrink, that Dick stopped believing in him as Tim and started looking at him out of the peripheral (like waiting for the proverbial knife in the back). His perceptions had to change when he took up the cowl from Jason (and that little shit, the General) because he knew he would have to do things, be things Robin could never hack. It was the first time he had to compromise Bruce’s ethics, his ethics, to be what someone else needed; all of
it was still part of the fight to be what Batman needed.

From there, the spiral started.

The net vanished.

He couldn’t just come back.

He became something the Bats couldn’t forgive.

He realized he never should have taken Robin in the first place.

The soft noise would be imperceptible to most, but he just breathes (can I do this? Is this real?).

“I cannot leave those three alone for ten minutes and expect them to act with any reasonable sense,” Robin sneers in his usually bull-in-a-China-shop attitude outside of a fight. The teenager puts himself a scant foot in front of Red Robin, tilting to look up enough that he could see Red’s face. “What did they say to you after I left?”

Again, he has to be what someone else needs (but he doesn’t miss those three because Hood is officially back in the family, at least in the kid’s mind so also in B’s, and that’s a good thing; he’s absurdly happy about it).

“Am I here?”

“Well, obviously!” That sneer isn’t really for him, and now he knows the difference.

“Then it doesn’t matter what they said. I’m standing right here, Robin.”

“I am aware of your current location, Red, but it does not excuse—“

“It’s fine.” Red holds up a hand, “not something to worry about.”

“I believe our conversation last night proves that to be a fallacy,” Robin isn’t letting up, his fists clenching by his sides, working out some imagined slight. Yeah, he had figured the kid out all wrong and that image from earlier this morning, about what the inside of this Robin might consist of, still makes the protective instincts in him rise to the fore.

Red sighs, arms crossing over his harness, “they just wanted to know why I changed my name, that’s it.”

Robin’s eyebrow lifts into his hairline, “…this is it? They acted as though they were coming back from a death march.”

Red shrugs a shoulder, “I think we can agree—they’re assholes.”

Robin just sighs like the world if full of fools he has to suffer, “Crude, but accurate. I honestly marvel that any of you could deal with Nightwing for more than a few hours without giving in to the compulsion to throw him off a building.”

Red starts moving to the east side of the building, pulling his grapple out on the way; Robin paces beside him. The grin he’s sporting flashes white in the night, “You’re not fooling anyone, kid. Nightwing means a lot to you, too.” Because, really, kid. No one’s buying what you’re selling.
“He was your Batman, and a Robin should be connected to his Batman. Totally natural, you know? He probably feels the same way.”

Robin’s face takes a scary twist (because Red is absolutely right)“-Tt- as if. He’s is merely Father’s first son and thus would be overly upset should I kill him.”

Red tilts his head down and graciously lets the kid deflect like a motherfucker (because didn’t they all? It’s like a family superpower or something), “you know. For people that don’t know you, your brand of humor is kinda creepy.”

Robin smirks this time, teeth bare in a semblance of a snarl, “and what gave you the impression I am jesting, Red?”

Two grapples shot into the night and the Robins take flight.

**

Over comms, the two take their time to talk between the multitude of shit going down in the city (Red hacked Robin’s comm four fights ago so they could talk without O or the Bats listening in).

“I assume you are not ready to tell me the truth,” Robin sounds a little nasally, like that punch got him too close to the nose.

“Nothing to tell,” Red arches himself up harder and the muscle in his right thigh twinges.

“Red,” and the warning is there. “Hood has been living sporadically at the Manor for months now. I am aware of his…mannerisms. Nightwing is like a book. Whatever was said in my absence was damaging for both of them. Nightwing I would expect as he genuinely cares for you; Hood, however…I did not expect him to be so obviously disturbed.” Said with distaste, like the brat didn’t clench the back of his shirt like he was going to vanish.

Red sighs through his nose in free fall, the grapple releasing and winding back as he lands and the silent fall of Robin beside him a few seconds behind because longer legs until the little shit outgrows him (which will probably happen, dammit). He faces the kid, hands on his hips and the shadows eating up their figures, the kid’s head tilts up to give him full attention.

“Robin…”

And, damn that kid, his voice goes a little softer, just enough to notice. “Timothy, you have never treated me like a child. Do not start now. Tell me.”

And fuck, he’s itching to remove the cowl so he can look at Dami without the mask because this shit just sucks. “I told them why I don’t come to the Manor or the Cave,” he keeps his voice low, “I told them why I dropped Wayne from my name. I told them that I got it, that I understood it all now and it’s fucking fine, okay? I’m not one of the real sons and maybe I never should have taken on the R. Maybe I should have found another way, but at the time, there was no other way for me, you know? I’m the one that chose it, that came in with my eyes wide open to what was going to happen. B and Nightwing and Hood all got thrown into this life because of the turning wheels of fate or what the fuck ever, but I’m the one that picked it for myself. I’ve got no one to blame but me.”

And Robin just straightens, “ah. And is this why you told him not to call you ‘brother’?”

Yeah, he said that, didn’t he? “Nope. I told not to call me that because I’m not. My brother wouldn’t have…” his back teeth grind and he stops to take another breath.
“He betrayed your trust,” Robin replies reasonably, “none of it was ever settled, even with the return of the original Batman and his return to Nightwing. You were his Robin for a time when Father was injured, and as you said a Robin should be connected to his Batman. He left you to fly or fall.”

“It doesn’t matter-“

“It does to him. It does if the family is to attempt…making this,” and a gauntleted hand waves between the two of them, “the way it should be.”

After a moment of quiet in which there were no sirens, no screams, only the city working through the night, Red gives just enough to let his tight muscles uncoil from that powerful deadly. “It should have gone to you, from Hood to you. I get that now.”

“-tt- for one of the more intelligent Robins, your ability to sprout utter idiocy is truly astounding. Remind me how you are capable or caring for a team without tripping over your shoelaces?”

Red chuff a laugh out of nowhere, shaking his head slightly. “C’mon you little demon. I do all right.”

“After we are finished for the night,” Robin cuts in, “take an hour, perhaps more, to consider the lack of your presence during your Robin tenure. Imagine what would have befallen Father, Nightwing, Hood, A, Oracle, Black Bat, that idiot Batgirl, and Gotham itself had you never wore this,” and the kid taps his R with a finger. “Once you have contemplated this occurrence, call me. We will discuss this further. This may provide insight on your detective capabilities.”

Red just tilts his head (a very Tim action). He almost has another word out when screams split the night and both Robins jerk, move at the same moment, turning with capes fluttering, grapples extended, preparing for flight and fight.

**

Like a good father, Batman is there to pick up his Robin at the end of a grueling patrol, one that will have a fair share of bruises and aches and stitches. As they’ve been doing the last few months, the two Robins fell into an easy agreement, still in the stages of learning how to fight with one another (easier for Robin than Red since he usually has a consistent partner), and tonight gave them a step forward in the attempts.

Red lands first (again, longer legs for the moment) and his thigh muscle gives another twinge of pain from the steel pipe that met it earlier, but he wraps himself in his cape as Robin lands heavily beside him. The kid rolls his shoulder a bit and gives the Batman some signal in their silent language that keep the Dark Knight from approaching.

Instead, Robin is looking up at him, white lenses up so his eyes are even greener in the night.

“This went well,” the current sidekick waves a hand between them.

“Agreed.”

“Then you will give me the time I need to complete my chapters on you, Red Robin?”

While Red has had enough interactions to be fully aware of the Demon Head's library (and the prospect of adding to the heir's own memoir a little flattering), he sees where this may be going.

“Already told you I don’t mind when I’m in Gotham,” the older vigilante replies, “I’m still fuzzy on the part that you want to learn detective skills from me when you’ve got the World’s Greatest a few floor down,” Red waves a hand at the Batman without looking up, “but I’ll do what I can.”
“-tt- please, Red. We both know that you and the Batman are worlds apart as Detectives, and this is what I am looking to learn.”

Of course, Robin can’t see the eyebrow raise Red is giving him (seriously, like he doesn’t know a ploy when he hears one, honestly, Dami), but, he already said he’d give them two things: time and opportunity, so if the kid wants to go this here’s a fake reason I need you to come chill, then Red would just let him run with it. Well, that and he’s kind of intrigued on the whole idea of the League of Assassin playbook thing; he’d already got the kid to agree to let him see it sometime.

“I’ll do what I can,” he says instead, “on another note. The next one…Hood. I’ll take Hood next.”

The kid goes silent because regardless of what comes out of his mouth, he’s got that deep connection with Nightwing and the implication of I don’t want that guy at my back is right there between them. The kid allows Red the courtesy of not having to say it in front of the Batman, “I will inform the Bats of the order. Perhaps when you are prepared to patrol with…the others on the team, you will let me know.”

“Sounds good.”

Robin gives his version of a smile in the form of a smirk and turns to approach the Batman, feeling as though he has been able to accomplish something. A single step in a road.

Chapter End Notes

I just can't seem to let this one relax. I don't know, the story line for Tim just has me in thrall.
Eight months ago

The Red Hood is standing on the balcony of his safe house, smoking in the rain. He's only wearing sweats when his phone starts ringing. Since it's been a good night, and he thinks it might be one of his contacts, he answers.

"Hood." Nada. "Yello?"

"This… this is Superboy."

Jason's heart picks up immediately. "You found him."

The voice on the other end is strained, and Jason has a moment, a thrill of fear, an automatic panic that races up his spine. "Give it to me straight, kid."

"He's alive, functioning. Physically, he'll be okay. Otherwise, he's…different."

"Fuck. Two weeks. You'd be different, too."

"Well, not all of us have epic Bat-tech for person location or a group of adults that just believe and help out us when one of our own is missing." And the meta sounds a little more bitter than Jason would have thought him capable.

Movement inside the safe house draws his eyes, and through the shadows, he sees the bedroom door open. Dick, completely nude with scars on display and every muscle moving in a beautiful sync, wanders barefoot into the kitchen, opens the fridge, and takes out a bottle of water. Those cerulean blue eyes take in the shadows, seek Jason out, and find him through the glass door.

Jason gives him a wave to go back to bed, their own secret language that he would be back in soon. Dick cracks open the bottle and gives a suggestive shimmy of his hips as he walks back through the door. He pauses in the moonlight just long enough for Jason to see the muscles of his back and ass highlighted, his share of scars marring that perfect skin. All of it just a reminder that each of them have their own breaking points.

Maybe that's why he started coming back to the Bats, Tim may have started the process with his pain-in-the-ass tendency of the save and grab, but here with Dick, he has something more intimate,
more grounding. He has a connection to his old life, and even a way to integrate his new one. It was finally time for him to start moving.

"…tortured." The clone's voice brings him back to the present, away from the svelte body going back to his bed.

"Baby Bird…" Jason lets out a breath.

"Yeah," and the clone sounds fucked, voice thick with tears. "Yeah. He's moving, says he's fine, he's dealing with it."

"He's a Bat. That's what we'd all say," but Jason still has the inclination to hop on his bike and start the drive.

No. He'd still been trying to kill his replacement not too long ago, had only recently started seeing the patterns of whatever Tim was trying to pull, showing up with the grab and save just fucking because. He'd be the last person Tim would want right now, hell any of the Bats would be the last thing he needed.

"Don't tell the others. He'll do it himself when he's ready. Please Jason. I'm not sure what he'll do. Hell, right now I'm not sure what he's going to do in the next ten minutes."

Jason is nodding, inhaling the last hit. "I got it, kid. Do me a favor and text me when he breaks from San Fran to come back to Gotham."

"No promises."

Jason barks a laugh. "Pain in the ass." Then quietly, "glad you let me know."

Kon sighs over the line, "I shouldn't because he's not part of the group anymore but you asked me to, so you know."

"Yeah. Thanks, kid. Keep an eye out."

"Will do."

Jason finally opens the sliding door and runs a hand down his face, considering what he should do before crossing the room and going back to bed.

Dick is sprawled on his side, still awake and still beautifully naked. Those eyes watch him strip back down, set his phone on the bedside table, and crawl under the covers.

Dick opens his arms without hesitating and Jason easily slides against him, pillowing himself against the Bat's cuddle buddy.

"Business?"

And here is the thing he will regret like fuck later, "yeah. Working one that ain't what it seems. Still gathering Intel."

Dick hums, arms already folding around Jason, fingertips mapping out the curve of muscle, the indent of scars, the fine and sensitive skin of throat and collar bone.

"You could talk to him about it if you're ready, you know."

And there it is, the elephant in the room. B.
“...I don't know, Big Wing.” And he sighs, letting his body sink further against Dick's. "I know he's waiting, but I just need..."

"More time," and Dick gets it, still keeping up with the soothing motions. "I'm not trying to rush, just reminding you he's there."

And Jason stares at Dick through the darkness, eyes adjusted and his fingertips mapping the cut off the older man's cheekbone. He is better now, right?

Maybe, maybe soon...

**

Nine months later

He’s got the dom on over his eyes, helmet on the roof next to him because he’s all about a cig before the kid shows up. One foot is braced on the edge so he can rest a forearm on the knee while the other leg dangles off the ledge, and the cig is a good one, hitting the right places that he needs it to so his head isn’t as fucked as it should be about this. But dammit, he keeps going back to that night, to the string of coulda, shoulda, woulda falling in rapid succession when it comes to that kid. Jason is pretty tight with how his life is now, more than the first time around when he was just a snot-nosed little shit in green panties; he’s got people at his back, Dick and B, Roy and Kori, Tim and the Brat. Hell, he even some of the old school Titans have showed up along the way. So, yeah. Jason Todd is pretty tight now a days (he keeps one clip of the real thing along the small of his back at all times, rubber caps in the guns), and while it makes him this stupid side of content, he’s waiting for the next thing, the next big bad because there would always be one, wouldn’t there?

As is, he takes him time, letting himself look down on one of the bad parts of Gotham that’s become his territory. One of those yawning black holes in the city where criminals don’t try funny shit. It’s a good thing: don’t fucking with the Hood’s turf, and the Hood won’t break your fucking face. Fair is fair.

“You good with this?”

The voice actually startles him, the cigarette falling from his hand because he has the .45 Glock in hand to swing around and hit the shadow with the laser site.

Fuck.

“Baby Bird, sorry,” and holding that piece on the kid bring back a whole lot of ‘you’re dead,’ ‘you’ll never be me,’ ‘he let me fucking die and then put another kid in harm’s way.’

Red had a disc out, already moved to the shelter of an overhang because he was pretty fucking smart to remember why he’s got too many scars that aren’t from any bad guys on the Bat list.

Free hand in the air, Hood eases the gun back in his holster then raises them both up. “I didn’t hear you at all, Red. Not lying.”

It takes a few spans of a heartbeat, longer than it would with anyone else that knew him, before Red Robin straightens out of the shadows and fits the disc away. Hoods eyes pick out other shadowed movements, a discreet tap to a spot on the harness where some other trick or gadget is sure to have existed. Another move to the utility belt around his waist (not knock out pellets, what the hell is that?) and the glint off the retractable bo in the moonlight just remind him that regardless, this is the kid with the plan.
The guy finally steps out, “I’ll be louder next time.” And Red had a moment there where he thought it was all going to spiral back down the rabbit hole of the Replacement time period in his career, when he’d let Jason Todd use him as a personal therapy punching bag (complete with knives and bullets along with fists). He had a thrill of fear that the Pit was going to override months of hard work; that maybe he’d overestimated how amicable they’d become.

“Asshole. The point is not to be heard,” Hood just stands with his hands on his hips and a smirk.

Red cracks a half a smile and crosses his arms over his chest, “so, like I was saying before you decided on target practice, which speaking from personal experience here, you don’t really need, but anyway…You good with this?” the gloved, gauntleted hand waves between the two of them.

A brow over the domino goes up into his hair line. “Good with…?”

He’s sure Red is giving him a patient look under that cowl. “Hood, you and I don’t have the best track record. If the Bats are pushing you into this, just know it’s not—“

“Whoa,” one gloved hand stops this shit before it even starts, “kid. Red. Tim . If I didn’t want to be here, then you can bet your ass I wouldn’t be here. You know me well enough to know that.”

Red gives a fraction of movement that could be a nod.

Hood starts ticking off with his fingers, “and second, you asshat, the demon brat already said it. This isn’t just about B or N looking the other way for a minute too long. Nah, this is about the four of us just letting you get your teeth get kicked the fuck in without even giving you a hand up. No, we haven’t had the best play, you and me. Yeah, I put some marks on you, and fuck yeah, it bothers me. You already know that shit, don’t you? That’s why the wicked scar on your neck is just suddenly harder to see, right?”

Red’s mouth opens, soundless and closes again. He rubs the back of his neck, lenses averted. “It bothered you. You would fixate on it whenever I was putting you back together.”

And Hood just throws his hands up with a what the fuck did I do to deserve such assholes as family motion, “Christ, Tim, yeah, it bothers me. It should because I fucked up an innocent kid, Robin or not doesn’t matter. You were, what sixteen the first time I shot you, when I basically slit your throat?”

He sees the motion of Tim swallowing, the tension in his muscles younger. “Something like that.”

“Then you get it. I got my lot to atone for.”

And that, Red just stares, wondering if he’s dreaming, hallucinating because this…he never imagined he’d hear this from the Red Hood, from Jason Peter Todd.

“Besides,” the guy keeps going, arms crossed over his chest, jaw tight below the domino, “out of any of them, I’m probably the one that gets where you’re at right now, where you been for a while. It’s not a good place, sure as shit wasn’t for me and I know it’s not for you. ‘Cause your team? Yeah, you aren’t straight with them either, and I don’t have to have ringside seats to tell.”

“My team is good,” Red defends without thought.

“Not saying they aren’t,” Hood cuts across, “but they don’t have idea one about you. You have to be the leader and Mr. Badass, and I get that, but how much shit have you done under their noses, Baby Bird? How many risks? How many times have you hack those sensors so they don’t know if you’re dying or not?”
This…is very not where he expected tonight to start (and how did Jason know he’s hacked the sensors before?), and Red is definitely floundering a little in the unfamiliar waters. Because this, this is Jason, Hood, the guy he makes ‘don’t kill me, don’t die, don’t stop breathing, kick that guy in the teeth extra hard for me’ kind of jokes while he’s up to his elbows in gore and trying to keep the guy from bleeding out. They don’t do this in their partnership. This isn’t them.

“I’m not their responsibility, Hood.” I’m no one’s responsibility anymore. He feels numb when he says it, easing down.

“But they can be yours and that’s just how shit’s gotta be?” Hood just shakes his head a little, “like I don’t know you, like I didn’t study you for a year while I was with Talia and after I got the hell out.” Because in his head, Jason is right there in that moment again. A moment when he was too distracted with Dick and what was going on with him and Bruce to worry about the disappearance of an eighteen year old kid that kept coming into Gotham and picking Hood up when shit started getting bad.

“I have no idea what you want me to say,” because this was supposed to be patrol not ‘let’s have a moment where we share our feelings and sing Kum-ba-ya and shit’ (since he totally forgot his bongos at home). Because Red had his time patrolling with Hood before, and it never came down to what the fuck is happening right now.

“What I want you to say is, ‘hey Hood. I’m going to start making an effort at not being a self-sacrificing pain-in-the-ass.’ More than that, I want you to act like it. I’m not B and I’m not Dick. You and me? You and me have been on the up for a while now, which is good. Can’t figure out why you’ve been trying with what I’ve done to you in the past, but I’m not that fucked up guy anymore, and I like you, kid. I do, I don’t want to see you get screwed over anymore either. Me and Prince Brat agree on that.”

Red throws his hands up, “dammit. Just, fuck, okay. You know, I get where you were coming from, Jay. I do. I get it. The Pit makes people just this side of insane,” both hands make a gesture that separates the line, “so you got a little messed up in the head about the whole replacement bullshit. I. Get. That. Coming back from the dead would make anyone a little testy, right? Right. I mean, it’s not like you were necessarily wrong or anything and we’re good now, so this whatever, I don’t get.”

Hood wags a finger almost in Red’s face, “uh-uh. I call shenanigans on you, Baby Bird. We’re not good and I was wrong. Like I said, I got my own shit to atone for, and this is where we’re going to start. Because you know what? You’re not the only Detective in the family. The Brat and I know we’re just as responsible as B and N for you striking out, for you staying the hell gone. You think that little shit doesn’t brood because you don’t come back to the Cave without an air tight reason? That you won’t be straight with your own damn team? You think he doesn’t realize? That I don’t? You had three moves ready if I started shooting at you.”

“Five,” Red counters quietly, more disturbed than he was comfortable admitting (it doesn’t matter; Dami was right all along, Jason was right, so what the fuck is going on…).

Hood throws his hands up again, “always the guy with the plan. Always. But, look Red, that’s the point here. You’re conditioned and we did that, so it stands up that we break that conditioning if we’ve got any chance at getting trust from you. That’s what we’re going to do, and just like those other two assholes, me and the Brat have patience when it matters.”

A little helplessly, Red just lets out a long breath, just wanting to get on with patrol and move on with the rest of his week (because really, Ra’s gets antsy as fuck when his plots aren’t foiled in the nick of fucking time). He throws up his hands, “okay. Okay. What do you want from me, Jay?”
The smirk isn’t the usual half-evil baring of the teeth, but more…something that isn’t the normal guy. “What I want, Baby Bird, you’re far from ready to give. Not to me or B or N or even the kid. Here’s hoping we’ll eventually get there.”

With that, Jason picks up the helmet and slides it on, making Red beyond relieved when he starts moving to the ledge. Finally, they can do what they do best.

**

After patrol sees the two sitting in the perch, laughing like dumbasses (Tim totally has an excuse because Mike is a terrible concussion, just a party pooper) over noob thief with a tire iron that actually pissed himself without getting a shot in. Seriously, isn’t bladder control in the “How to be a Criminal in Three Easy Steps” Handbook?

Jason has his head in his hand, laughing so hard he snorted (I have cameras in here, asshole, I’m putting that shit on YouTube) while the pair of long necks sit empty by his elbow.

“No, dude. Not even the best one, okay?” And since he has to stay awake for a couple of hours anyway (thanks, Mike), he might as well tell the story about the time B slipped on ice and busted his ass right in front of Freeze and Poison Ivy, and those two were looking at each other and back to Batman like are we really seeing this? Did-did he just fall and shit because that’s fucking Batman, right? Are we missing something? What the ever-loving hell? And B didn’t even hesitate but slid right between them and threw gas pellets like a fucking boss. Best. Night. Ever.

“Stop, Jesus! Just stop!” Jason has tears in his eyes, one hand holding his side because he’s getting a stitch or because that lead pipe hit the wrong spot, but whatever since the guy is laughing like a fool at Tim’s kitchen table with dawn two hours away and they’re both alive after a pretty solid night.

And now that he’s kind of loopy, looking back on Jason’s little ‘talk’ from earlier, and even though Tim just passes all that shit off as lip service, he’s good sitting here just talking to the guy. It’s almost like the comradery he and Dick used to have before life went to shit. Almost, but not quite.

Chapter End Notes

Something happened during some of the last round of comments (thank-you, all of you) and the disarray this story took in my mind, the random later on chappies that I have no filler in between have finally started falling into a strange sort of progression. To you that comment and help me work things out, your opinions are so helpful, so welcome.
**Infection Protocol**

The television flips from one terrible news story to the next; images flash for less than a few seconds before the story, the program, the item for sale is discarded and the next thing reviewed with the same speedy scrutiny. From his spot on the floor in front, set up at the coffee table with textbooks and papers scattered over the surface, Kon gives the evil eye at Gar behind him.

“Your’re supposed to be reading,” BB waves a hand without looking at him.

“I can’t. Why don’t you settle on something?”

“Meh, nothing good.” Gar just flips the big screen off, “what are you supposed to be reading?”


One of Gar’s green brows arches, “you’re reading Shakespeare in English 101? Seriously?”

“It’s a General Studies course, everyone has to read it,” the meta grumbles, “I just…don’t get this.”

“It’s a play, Kon,” Tim comes in from the kitchen, bowl of soup in hand, “you should read it standing up, moving. Like, act it out.”

The two just look over at him blankly, and he sighs, puts his bowl down on a spot not covered by papers. Standing back a little, he starts with:

“The Prince of Cumberland! This is a step

On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap.
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;

Let not night see my black and deep desires;

The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,

Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.”

Kon’s brows raise as Tim moves, talking to the side in a monologue style, hands moving to his chin like he’s thinking, looking up at the ceiling when he talk about the stars. It’s…well, okay. Tim just grins and slides down to sit, soup in one hand.

“That was actually pretty cool, The stars part was a good line.”

Tim grins, gives a mock-bow, “that’s one of my favorites, so there you go.”

“I’m getting Cassie to help when gets here,” Kon stands, cracks his neck, and stretches after sitting for so long. “She’ll be an epic witch, right?”

Gar’s eyes get wide, “if you enjoy having kidneys, do not phrase it that way. Just some advice.”

Kon shakes his head and waves it off, going to make himself something to eat so the guy can turn his attention to Tim hunching over to spoon good old Campbell’s Chicken Noodle in his mouth.

“I have no idea how she put up with him. If I was like that, Rave would have eviscerated me, twice.”

Tim snickers a little, “I don’t know, BB, maybe she would leave you with your intestines, at least? Maybe?”

“Oh no, not when it would make a good jump rope for other hellions. That would be the first thing she’d go for.”

“At least she wouldn’t go for the brain first because, yeah, what would be the point?”

The guy’s features light up with shock, mock-hurt, and humor, “you dick. I’m a smart dude.”

Tim pauses long enough to give him a patient look then goes right back to his soup.

Beast Boy rolls his eyes in capitulation, “okay, so I don’t have tech knowledge, but I’ve got real world intelligence, Tim.”

Without looking up this time, “Reynolds wrap in the microwave, dude.”

“Miguel dared me!”

“No he didn’t, I watched the vid feed. ‘Mi amigo, you do this and you really are a dumb ass.’ Quote.”

Kon laughs on his way back in, day old pizza in hand, “you’re totally busted, BB!”

Exasperated, Gar shakes his head, “this is crap. I’m the oldest here. I should get more respect.”

“Hm, twenty-four and you’re so old ,” Raven pushes her hood back. She responds to the usual return
to the Tower by taking ‘normal’ means to get there, like the elevator instead of just appearing out of thin air (so Miguel stops having freak outs). She leans over the back of the couch, looking down at Gar who tilts his head back to meet her eyes.

“Aw, Rach, you’re only three years older than me,” and his eyes are so soft for her, arching his neck a little so she smiles that small, secret grin just for him.

Dutifully, Raven leans down to gently touch their lips together. “Three years?” Her brow arches delicately, “it seems more like a decade sometimes, Gar.”

He laughs and leans up just enough for a quick one.

“Hello, boys.” Raven greets as she rubs the tip of her nose against his.

Kon, watching with a goofy grin on his face, just waves his pizza hand (because Rave and BB were good together, just like him and Cassie used to be).

Tim gives a wave with his spoon, and something about it catches her attention. Raven’s eyes narrow. “Soup, Tim?”

Blue eyes flicker up, “sure. Why not? It’s really hard to burn soup from a can, Rave, and I worked the microwave.”

Gar hums a little under his breath, exchanging a glance with her; eyebrows drawn together, Raven crosses the room to lay a forearm none-too-gently against his forehead, completely ignoring him when he blinks at her and starts with the usual Tim nonsense of excuses, justification, and reasons.

“When was the last time you took antibiotics?” She cuts him off blandly.

He sighs in exasperation, “a few weeks ago…” maybe, probably.

“Slept?” Her thumb rests under his eye, pulling the lid down.

“I sleep!”

“Bullshit,” Gar coughs into one fist, then grins wide when Tim looks over to glare.

“Injuries?”

“Nothing extensive. It’s—“ just soup, take a pill, people.

She moves, putting her “unhappy” face inches from his, “finish that sentence with ‘fine’ and I will send you to the demonic dimension in your underwear. The one with lots of fire and carnivorous beasts.”

“Yeah, please don’t,” Tim replies automatically, “I really hate that one.”

“Then stop doing foolish things,” she returns just as blandly. “You are missing a vital organ that assists your body in fighting infections. Immunodeficiency, Tim.”

“I handle it.” Tim waves his spoon again. “If I didn’t then I wouldn’t already have antibiotics on hand or keep up-to-date with my vaccines. I do, so win on my part.”

Very methodically, Raven crosses her arms over her chest, staring him down. “System, we have a protocol breach; Raven, Sigma Lima Echo Echo Papa 65874115.”
Tim blinks as the computer system (his fucking system) lets out a series of beeps and a blue alarm starts going off in the Tower.

“What the hell?” He’s already on his feet with his soup.

“You aren’t the only computer person in the room,” she states mildly. “You have approximately seven minutes to get up in your perch, in bed, and resting or the system will automatically initiate a lockdown on you wherever in the Tower you may be. All internet and network feeds to any device in your possession will be cut; the system will immediately call not only an ambulance but also Nightwing, the Justice League, the rest of the Titans in emergency mode, possibly some of Ra’s Al Ghuls ninjas, I am uncertain about that part, I only programmed the first few, Ravager, and possibly even a doctor somewhere in the line.”

Tim’s eyes are HUGE. “Please tell me you’re not—“

“Six minutes,” her eyes are pleasantly calm.

“Even my phone!?“

“Even your phone.”

“And Dick of all people?”

“I am out of patience with you, Tim. Five minutes.”

The guy almost throws his bowl down, running for the stairs, disappearing out of sight.

Gar is snickering to himself while Kon just shakes his head at her, wagging a finger, “we were supposed to keep this on the low, Rave.”

She gives an unconcerned shrug, facing a monitor that shows Tim diving into his made bed in the perch, the alarms winding down to spinning blue lights without the shrieking. His face is utterly exasperated.

“Now he’s going to hack the system and—“

“Tim is excellent,” she cuts him off, “but I have someone better. The alarm will stay.” She looks back at Gar with a smile.

She got Vic, the best in the business. He chuckles darkly, standing to wrap an arm around her waist, pressing his mouth a spot just below her ear.

“You have such a dark side, babe,” he whispers against her neck, feeling the delicate shudder under his hands. That just makes him laugh more.

**Protocol: 48-Hour Fast**

The moment Bart Allen hits the front door of the main Tower, the automated voice informs him:

“Protocol Foxtrot Echo Echo Delta Romeo Oscar Bravo 84162.1B, Enacted.”

Ah. Good. Part of the teams, “Keeping Red Robin Alive” SOP seems to be working. In his civvies and back from an extensive run with Wally, he’s kinda glad to be back in San Fran since his bud was trying too hard to drill Bart for details about Red; Bart knew Wally and Dick were tight from their days in the same team, ‘fight bad guys and win the day,’ dynamic. He knew Wally had been through a lot when he was Kid Flash and the Speed Force had come to close to killing him; at the time, Wally
and Dick had been inseparable because Dick was just as afraid Wally was going to just vanish.

So when he and Wally had taken a pit stop in some rainforest, the heavy eyes of his mentor hit all the warnings in his head.

“Bart,” Wally sat down on some fallen log, “we gotta talk.”

Never good. “Okay, man. What’s the damage?” And his initial thought went dark immediately, like Wally was going to berate him for something he’d done, that he hadn’t saved enough people, that he wasn’t fast enough, that he wasn’t good enough, that he didn’t deserve the suit…before he knew it, he was making himself shake because no matter what, Wally was always going to be straight with him.

“You know me and Dick are good from back in the day,” Wally holds his gaze and Bart can take a deeper breath. “So, that’s why I wanted to talk to you... Dick and Batman (because he was never just going to call that guy by his first name, hell no) “have been trying to, you know, keep better tabs on how Tim is holding up. The guy is like a walking time bomb sometimes, jump from one crisis to the next, and they’re worried about him.”

Bart’s brain kicks on and he huffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “Look, Wal, I’m not going to apologize.”

“What? Apologize?”

“Red told us the Bats were like being creepy as hell and stalking him, dude. Seriously, I’m the one that told him to stop helping them. Move his stuff to the Tower and let the Bats have Gotham all to themselves! I told him to move on, and I’m not apologizing for it.”

A light enters Wally’s eye, “Oh. I get it now.”

“Red told us the Bats were like being creepy as hell and stalking him, dude. Seriously, I’m the one that told him to stop helping them. Move his stuff to the Tower and let the Bats have Gotham all to themselves! I told him to move on, and I’m not apologizing for it.”

A light enters Wally’s eye, “Oh. I get it now.”

“You know what? No, no, man. Okay, like I get it that Bats are busy as shit with their city and with the JLA and other stuff that happens, but no way. Red just got totally shafted, and he won’t even tell us shit about when—“ Bart forces himself to calm down, breathing deep in his chest. “I’m loyal to Red, Wally. Like, he’s my best friend, okay? No one else had my back for a long time but him, and all that shit that went down in Gotham with them just pisses me right the hell off. That guy is like a master assassin that doesn’t kill people. He’s so super smart he keeps us moving to the next plan, and-and that one time I thought I was dead, like no speed was going to save me when N.O.W.H.E.R.E was going to experiment on me and shit, and Red was right there to get me out.”

The memories are overwhelming, not being able to run, to escape, to save himself, and being strapped down for those scientists to start cutting him open…

When Red was still Robin, he’d showed up out of virtually nowhere, whooped the guard’s asses, freed Bart, and pretty much carried him out of that installation (smell of bleach and metal and blood). Back when they only met on weekends, Bart hadn’t expected anyone to ever come for him, for anyone to try saving him. It’s the moment Bart Allen stopped the attitude toward the human guy, saw him for what he was, and realized he would follow Tim Drake no matter what.

And arms holding him brings Bart out of that room, out of that fear when he knew he wouldn’t be able to save himself because Wally just wrapped him up and pulled him in tight, pressing Bart’s face into his neck and grounding the younger kid.

“I get it, B,” Wally said after a few long moments that they both pretended Bart wasn’t tearing up, “believe me, I get it. Your crew is tight, maybe more than we were back then, and you guys become more than friends when you depend on each other for your lives. I know how that is, so you’ve got
to understand why I’m helping Dick by just talking to you. So if Red is bad off, if Red is serious, the Bats just want to know about it. They want the opportunity to have his back, too. You get that, right?”

Bart sighs a little.

“Dick’s not asking for anyone to spy or run to the Bats tattling, but what your team has now? That’s what they used to have with him, so you know, think about giving them a chance. That’s all I’m asking, B.”

Finally, Bart stands back out of Wally’s embrace, trying not to be humiliated by how he pansied out for a minute. He wipes his face with the palm of his hand,

“Lemme talk to Kon, Cass, and Rave. I can’t promise anything, Wally, but…I’ll try, okay?” For you and for Red, fuck Dick.

“Thanks, B,” Wally grins down at him, an easy smile before his hand latches on to Bart’s bicep and he’s pulling the younger kid to sit down. “So, you never told me about the N.O.W.H.E.R.E sitch, think you’re up to talking about it?”

Up in the now, Bart hits the communal floor, drops three bags of groceries in the kitchen, and brings the system on-line. One of the monitors shows Red downstairs in parts of his uni, a welder’s mask over his face, and doing something probably really dangerous to the old Batplane he converted into the Titans’ mode of transportation for non-fliers. With a half-shrug, Bart doesn’t bother him.

Instead, he accesses the hidden drive and brings up the alpha spreadsheet, records the date, time, protocol (84162.1B means Red hasn’t eating in over forty-eight hours, dumbass); he adds more in the notes column. After a long minute of typing, he saves his progress, closes the spreadsheet, and stretches, arching his back. He’s got some killer stuff to make a veggie lasagna for when everyone else starts making their way to the Tower for the usual weekend gathering (and he will make sure Gar doesn’t get anywhere near the stove this time because, geeze, the guy just needs to not ever try cooking. Calling the fire department to a Tower full of superheroes had been just obviously humiliating).

He tosses his jacket on a couch and meanders back to the kitchen to start unloading the bag full of eats, humming to himself as he cleans the squash, tomatoes, eggplant, onions, and the rest of the stuff for a massive salad. Sure, they had their junk-food nights when ‘holy shit, we lived through that’ kinda demanded it, but healthy stuff never hurt, and Bart makes one hell of a veggie lasagna. Even BB eats it, and he doesn’t eat anything but cans of squeeze cheese and spam. Really, no lie. Spam. Ick.

Cassie shows up as Bart is getting the cooked noodles poured out into a strainer in the sink.

“Bart! Ooh, you are making the wonder vegetable concoction,” she leans over the ingredients waiting on the counter with anticipation in her eyes.

He laughs a little and shakes the strainer to get all the water off, “I haven’t made it in a few weeks. Didn’t want everyone to get sick of it, you know?”

Cassie just hums as he puts the colander with the rest of the stuff and absently sets the two jars of tomato sauce in front of her. She easily opens each one with the metallic little pop, watching as he lays the first layer of chopped vegetables, spices (because you can never have too much garlic, no matter what Miguel says), cheese, and spoons some sauce on top before the layer of noodle.
“I don’t believe it would be possible,” she informs him cheerfully with a pat on the back.

“I dunno, that barbeque Vic made last time he visited was, like, so totally better than this.”

“It was tasty, but your dishes are just as flavorful.”

Bart grins up at her, “aw! I’ll remember that next weekend when I’m shopping. You love my baked chicken.”

“Indeed I do. If you make it, I shall bring my full appetite,” she ruffles his hair and holds out the bowl of shredded cheese so he can get to the next layer faster. “For tomorrow night, I have brought excellent mana from the fountain of Athena. Everyone may dine like the gods.”

Bart immediately stops, staring at her with wide eyes.

Cassie barks out peals of laughter, “I’m joking, Bart. Joking! Diana and I stopped to get steaks on the way here.”

“Oh! Oh, well, good. I was kinda hoping, but you know—“

The kitchen window abruptly opens and Kon peeks his head in, “hey guys!” He’s got an honest-to-God picnic basket on one arm and that can only mean one thing…

“Ma Kent made bread,” Bart is already hyper-focused on the basket.

Kon just laughs, slapping B on the back easy, “you know she did.”

“Rock on, oh man, give me some and I’ll put in garlic bread. Dude, we are going to feast tonight!”

Kon eyes the counter and grins widely, “Fucking, really? Veggie casserole? That’s totally sweet.”

“Veggie lasagna, man,” Bart goes back to layering while Kon pulls a carefully wrapped loaf of bread out of the basket and looks for a bread knife to start sawing off chunks.

Cassie peels garlic cloves and gets the butter ready.

In an hour, the kitchen smells like almost time to eat with everything baking, and Bart easily taps a few keys on the wall control, opening up the vent in the lower workshop so the smell wafts down. Rave and BB are in the kitchen, BB sitting on the counter (where he’s been exiled; set one oven on fire and everyone’s all antsy about it, geeze) while Rave makes some epic thing with French vanilla pudding, Cool Whip, graham cracker crumbs, and whatever else. She’s humming while she moves, and Gar is perfectly happy to watch her with soft, happy eyes.

The elevator opens and Tim steps out from the lower floors, grinning when he sees everyone’s on the communal floor already and the whole place smells like heaven. His stomach gives a painful growl that hadn’t even bothered him until now as he moves through the floor to greet everyone (and check out who’s winning on the foosball table because his money is on Cassie every time, sorry Kon you know it’s true ).

“Everyone have a good week?” He calls, wiping his hands with a rag that is already wrecked.

The team turns with greeting until they see him covered head to foot in a variety of dark, darker, and black substances. His face is a mess of smudges and sweat from various itches, forearms covered to the elbows, clothes stained, and various cuts and scrapes along his hands and wrists.

“Dude,” B just shakes his head, “did you roll around in Ma Kent’s pig pen or what?”
And oh. Looking down at himself sheepishly, Tim waves it off, “I haven’t had time to do any upkeep to my vehicles downstairs. I mean, like, nothing. The Ducati was ridiculously in need of maintenance, the cars needed oil changes, brakes, and whatever else, the plane is somehow still flyable, and just,” he shrugs a little helplessly, “I like doing it myself.”

And because they are the best possible people ever, none of them even comment on the dark circles under his eyes or the recognizable strain in his face that screams he’d been in Gotham recently.

A self-sacrificing sigh from Cassie and she’s marching right up to him, hands on his shoulders spinning him around and pushing him right back to the elevator, “you will go shower because, ew, and get back down here in a hurry. Bart made his vegetable concoction that is utterly delectable and Raven has made dessert. Then we have decided we will imbibe on terrible horror movies tonight, so you must be quick.”

Tim is laughing all the way to the elevator, “all right. All right, twenty minutes, and I am so here for Veggie Lasagna and B-Movies.”

**Necessary Movie Night Protocol**

Protocol: Tango Echo Romeo Romeo Oscar Romeo 2276514, Enacted

The minute Cassie hears it, she’s flying up the side of the building. The sensors scan her, validate her before she even gets to the window and the one in the communal floor opens silently for her to float in. Her eyes search the dark room frantically as she unconsciously moves further in, going around one of the four couches by memory (since Raven stopped rearranging them to mess with Bart) and the sound of heavy breathing, panting draws her closer.

Laid out on one of the couches, Tim is making broken, painful noises in his sleep, hands fist ed in the blanket over him. Behind closed lids, his eyes are moving, seeing something horrific, something he would never unsee.

Quickly, Cassie moves to the vid wall and taps quickly, hands moving in familiar motions. Immediately, Star Trek: The Trouble with Tribbles starts playing on low volume. That done, she goes back to the couch where Tim is moving restlessly in his sleep, his chest still heaving sporadically, but he is simply too exhausted to wake up.

She slides down to sit on the floor right at the spot where his hip is under the blanket and reaches up to lay both arms on the edge of the couch, making sure to keep just a few scant inches away from the heat of his body, close enough for him to feel her there but far enough that he wouldn’t jerk and touch her to rouse himself. She pointedly looks halfway over her shoulder and takes long, slow breaths, in and out, in and out, in and out.

A few moments is all it takes for him to stop writhing, for his legs to still and his breathing to ease down. More slowly, however, his fists and forearms unclench. He breathes in time with her, falling deeper into sleep.

Twenty minutes later, the elevator opens without a sound and Bart, shoes already in hand, peeks his head out, eyes searching in the dark. He creeps in on his toes, eyes going to Cassie still on the floor, the episode winding down with another already queued up and arches a brow at her.

Cassie mouths, bathroom, and Bart nods twice, jerking his head to the side. He creeps over as she stands and takes the same spot, setting his shoes beside him and raising his arms to the edge of the couch, a few inches between his arm and Tim’s leg. He uses his free hand to check his phone and play Angry Birds.
When Cassie comes back, she brings him a cherry Zesti and a bowl of popcorn.

An hour later and they switch Sci-Fi and Firefly is thankfully on, Kon arrives via elevator and also takes in the scene. He sets down the two pies Ma made for the team on the counter before he creeps over and waves a hand at Bart who gives him a grateful smile and a hand motion to his very numb ass. He stands up slowly and moves for Kon to take his place, his arms up on the edge of the couch as he settles in.

Gar and Rachel are wrapped around one another, sharing a breath-stealing kiss when the elevator opens up later in the evening and pull away to the scene on the communal floor. Holding hands, they both creep quietly across the room to see Kon’s eyes at half-mast and Bart already asleep on one couch, drooling, with popcorn in his hair.

Gar grins and waves a hand at Kon while Rachel just sighs fondly; rubbing his eyes, Kon grins back and stands, his spine giving a series of cracks (alien physiology be damned, he gets stiff just like a human) as Gar sits down and leads Rachel to sit between his legs. Their hands intertwined, Gar raises their arms to the edge of the couch cushions.

Kon wanders back into the kitchen, quietly moving. He comes back with a slice of pie for Rachel and Gar and puts down the terrible tasting fruit punch Gar likes along with a vitamin water for Rachel. Cassie’s already had hers, so he eases down on the empty couch and watches the last of the episode before he closes his eyes.

The sound of House M.D. with Hugh Laurie is quiet in the background when he rouses. He knows night has fallen because, well, Bat. Tim blinks, feeling like he’s slept better than he has in weeks and looks around to see a head of messy green hair slumped close to his arm. Oh. He forgot it was Friday already. That case must have taken more time than he thought.

He stretches, arches his body in a clean line before he eases up, leaping over the back of the couch soundlessly. He huffs a laugh and moves to the couch where Bart is snoring softly; he eases the popcorn bowl out of the guys arms, moving fast and silently to pick the pieces out of his hair before he picks up the blanket off the back of the couch and eases it over the speeder (who just snorts and goes right back to sawing logs).

Then Cassie on the other couch, laying on her stomach with an arm over the side; he eases her shoes off and slips a blanket over her too. Kon is propped up against the arm of the third couch, neck at an awkward angle. A light touch at the back of his neck has him raise up slightly with a grunt, long enough for Tim to slip a pillow under his head before he’s out like a light. Another blanket over him.

Rave and Gar are always a challenge and Tim just looks down on them fondly before kneeling, his touch feather light under both their knees as he basically lifts just enough to roll them on the couch he’d been sleeping on (it was wider anyway). He backs up slowly as the two automatically arrange themselves closer into each other, lying on their sides with Gar’s arm sliding over Rave’s hip and her forehead nestling in the niche of his sternum before he eases around the back of the couch and flips the blanket he was wrapped in over them instead.

A hand motion and the vid wall cuts off, leaving him in complete darkness, just the far-away lights of San Fran twinkling out the big windows (it’s not Gotham, not home, but it’s...something). Tim doesn’t need light to meander to the elevator, letting his upper body stretch again on the way. He’d get a quick shower, warm up his muscles, go down to the training simulator and work out some of the kinks (the bad shoulder and hitch in his hip always needed some time before he felt almost 100%), then to work on the next thing. Before he hits the floor for the perch, his eyes soften at the sleeping members of his team, his friends, the people he would defend.
He smiles, a genuine smile before the door slides closed.

**

**Dealing with the Bats Protocol**

“Titan’s Tower,” he answers automatically, “we’re not in right now. To leave a message for Wonder Girl, press 1 and then #. To leave a message for Superboy, press 2 and then #—“

“Really, Gar?” Dick’s voice is warm, tone friendly.

Laughing in the receiver, the guy in question just props his feet up on the main control board of the monitoring center and looks out at San Fran through the huge windows.

“What can I say, D? I’m on monitoring duty for two more days and this shit is boring.” He makes another cursory sweep of the news channels, the system seeking out certain key words, flagging events for review.

“You always hated it, man. There’s nothing else to do but suffer.”

“Thanks, Dick. Really helpful there. I’m trying to remember if there was a good reason I was on a team with you in the first place, but nothing is really coming to mind.”

“It was my charisma and leadership abilities, don’t lie.”

“Pfft, more like I wanted to know the secret to fighting crime in green panties. Like, I have no idea how you still had balls once you hit the teen years. Seriously, man.”

Dick burst out laughing, “you suck, BB.”

“Talk to Rave about it. She likes when I do.”

“Oh my God. TMI.”

“Whatever, Dick. We walked in on you and Kori on the ceiling, dude. That was the most awkward team meeting in the history of the Titans.”

“Just when I forget why I left, you’ve got to throw it out there.”

“Really? Because Kori was right in the middle of an apparently spectacular orgasm when the elevator opened? Totally not our fault.”

“It was a mood killer!”

“Then you should have kept it out of the communal floor, asshole.”

“…that’s part of the appeal, Gar. Kori talked about it multiple times. Remember?”

Grinning, the younger man just sighs over the phone because he misses hanging out with Dick (like, as a person, not necessarily as a Bat), who he always looked up to as a super hero, as a leader, as a person. It had been too long since they hung out. Maybe someday. Not today because Dick always has a reason.

“So, what can the Titans do for the Bats since I’m totally sure this isn’t a social call?”

A few moments of silence of the other end and Gar just lets it roll, easing himself back in his chair.
He hopes this isn’t what he thinks it is but he already heard the big news from Bart. Good for them, trying with Red again.

“So, I already know you’re not going to tell me anything important,” Dick starts.

“Nope,” Gar hums in agreement.

“Even though I was your best friend first, not that I’m bringing that shit up or anything Gar.”

“Of course not, you wouldn’t do that, Dick.”

“And that I was there about the time you started hitting puberty, man, so I’m the one that had your back all those ‘uncomfortable’ times—“

“Don’t even,” Gar deadpans, head falling into his hand while his face heats (animals have crazy maturation, that’s just the way nature worked, okay?).

“I’m just saying,” Dick responds and the asshole is definitely smiling. “But yeah…He’s not okay. I know that now, Gar. I mean, I would have got it sooner if someone gave me a call—"

“Whoa, right there. Keeping you up-to-date on your own family isn’t our job. Don’t get me wrong. I love you like a brother, I do. Rave does, too. But that was the first thing we promised, Tim when he came back from…well, you know. When he came back with the weird costume, not that I’m judging or whatever, but me and Rave told him we wouldn’t run tattling to you behind his back. And we’ve stuck to it.”

“Gar…he was fucking tortured.” And there it is, the Dick Grayson that is horrified, one that took the habit from the big guy and gets righteously pissed when someone screws with the Bat-soldiers. “And only Jason knew anything about it.”

“I know,” Gar’s memory goes hazy with the sight of Tim’s back when the Red Robin costume came off. “I was there for the clean-up, Dick. Rave…Rave made the call for Kon to call Jason over you.” Gar shrugs but realizes Dick can’t see it (probably because he doesn’t want Tim accessing any video calls). “It was the right one at the time.”

“…that’s pretty fucked, you know.”

“Not really. She made the right choice, Dick. First off, all those not-calls we’ve gotten from you about him? Yeah, Rave’s was a little pissed. She’s better now. Second, dude, you would have flipped shit, been up here in a few hours, and Tim would have vanished to get away from you. He was too much of a flight risk at the time.”

Silence again and Gar can just see the guy sitting in half his Nightwing onsie, looking pretty destroyed. “Then what can you tell me?”

“Not shit. Not until Tim’s better. I heard you and the other scary Gotham dudes are trying to get back in with him, and hey man, I’m all for it, so’s the rest of the team…well, except Bart—“

“I’ve talked to Wally already.”

“Then you should be happy Tim didn’t take his advice and leave Gotham behind,” Gar shrugs, “When Tim’s okay with you guys again, I’ll bring it up to the team. We’ll reconfigure the protocols.”

“Protocols?”
“Good talking to you, Dick.”

“Gar.”

“Bird Wonder.”

Sigh, “all right man. At least…now that you know, if there’s some heavy shit going down. Fucking call me, okay?”

Gar hums, “can’t promise. It’ll go to a vote, but I’ll argue like hell for you, Dick.”

“I’ll take what I can get.”

“…I’ll,” and he sighs because, yeah, “Dick, I’ll try to talk to Tim for you.” He’s had his own moments in the extreme when Dick had him, had his fucking back, and it really sucked being in the middle of a family thing when his friends, his team mates old and new, were on opposing sides.

“Thanks man.”

Gar hangs up and his headache is back because now, he has too much to consider.

**

Red’s Protocol: Motivation

Cassie spits out a mouthful of blood in the dirt, craning her neck to watch as her “sister” grins, a ruthless snarl, as the victor. In that smirk, Cassie feels the shame that she lost, the overwhelming sense of weakness that she is simply not good enough, that she should leave the island in shame, to never wear the mark of Wonder Girl…

Diana and Donna calmly move away from the rest of the watching Amazons to approach the victor, their eyes narrow but forced by tradition to congratulate her on her win, the new Wonder Girl, while Cassie remains on the ground in dishonor.

“Cassie, Cassie, focus on my voice,” her gauntlet is glowing and she is hearing Red’s voice, her communicator is going off. Her eyes fill with tears, waver because she can no longer answer the call. In her state, she briefly considers thrusting her spear through her own heart to escape the utter humiliation (pitiful, foolish girl).

“Cassie, answer me.”

“T-Tim…I…” I’ve failed, failed Diana and Donna, I’ve failed everyone …

“Cassie, she’s cheating. There’s a chemical compound emanating from her pores. She’s taken some kind of performance-enchasing drug to try and beat you. That’s the effects you’re feeling, that’s the only way she could beat you. She had to cheat. Do you understand? Tell me you understand.”

And her mind switches on, “what? Tim?”

“She’s cheating, Cassie. She’s trying to take the Wonder Girl legacy from you, and she couldn’t do it on her own strength.”

Now, she’s shoving herself to her knees, shaking off the sense of failure, the sense of loss, of hopelessness, of weakness. Red said cheating because the god’s damned coward couldn’t beat her on her own and that really, just really pisses her off.

From the depth of her chest, a battle cry erupts, and Cassie Sandsmark sneers with blood painting her face. “You dishonorable bitch. You coward,” and now the gathered Amazons are drawing back in surprise. “She has taken a mortal drug in an attempt to win this match!”

The enemy’s eyes go wide; Diana and Donna drawing back as well, staring at the wench.

Cassie advances, kicking up her shield snatch it out of the air, “but you will not best me, not today, not tomorrow, never because I am an Amazon of worth! My word is my bond, and I will fight with honor!”

And Diana, the Princess, smiles widely, her own eyes glowing with the heat of battle. “The current Wonder Girl has made it back to her feet! The match will continue!”

Cassie yells as she charges. She will not fail.

**

Red Protocol: Mechanical intervention

The perch is part living quarters, part planning room for bringing together the strategy. His own workshop, however, is downstairs, a windowless room taking up an entire level, one with reinforced walls for the whole just in case this thing blows up a little on the first test. He starts his ideas with terribly crude drawings that usually get tweaked during the fabrication process (since he sure as shit isn’t trusting his ideas to S.T.A.R. Labs, honestly, what haven’t the fucked up in the last decade?) so he always has toys and new devices on hand for the next well, shit, time to save the world…again.

He’s working on a new incarnation of the force field cancelling discs because the ones he made previously kept shorting out; the computer overhead warns him that someone is in the elevator on the way. A necessary alarm so he can pause whatever he’s working on to make sure it doesn’t malfunction and take someone else out at the same time.

Raven steps out of the elevator, civvies and her usual calm aplomb; he smiles at her and totally doesn’t point out that she has a green feather in her hair. Nope. Not his business.

Besides, her eyes are seeking out every corner of the workshop, her feet almost silent as she moves between his inventions, suits, wing-sets, and miscellaneous other things without saying a word to him. Once she stops outside the glass container with a very specific, one-use wing set, he understands the why she’s down now; he’s opened the containment unit for a few minutes to work on the wiring (should have waited until everyone was gone for the week, shit).

“Uh, yeah,” scratching the back of his neck, Tim gets up to stand beside her, looking at the slightly glowy wings, extended out. “That’s here.” Sure, she knows he almost took out Trigon’s eyes with a completely plain wing to buy them some time, but he is already anticipating a not-happy Rave.

Raven finally turns to look at him (and that feather is really distracting, Gar), one finely manicured brow arched and looking decidedly miffed (called it).

“What is this, Tim?” She waves a hand, “you were able to channel a modicum of Trigon’s power, obviously. For what end?”

He holds up both hands, palm out, “not for any reason you may be thinking, okay? This,” he waves a hand, “is a contingency in case he or the brothers show back up again.” With a sigh, Tim looks up
at the wings instead of at her, “the last time you pulled energy from The Deadly Sins, you were sick for a week. If you’d have to do it again, the wings can act as a bridge, a connection point, so you wouldn’t have to put nearly as much effort into it. I can fire the wing into whoever and you’ve already got an opening.” Please understand, this is to protect you.

Raven’s mouth falls open a little as she stares up at him because the plan is utterly…brilliant.

“It could also work other ways,” he continues hastily, “that time you were just sapped of energy and couldn’t even get yourself standing, well, this isn’t good energy per say, but Trigon’s power has a circular effect for some reason. His power fed into you converts in your body and becomes yours, but…it’s only for emergencies, which is why the containment. I don’t want you to fight the temptation more than you already have to.”

“You did some type of maintenance on the containment. That is how I was able to feel the power,” she guesses shrewdly.

Tim looks down a little sheepish, “yeah, I did. Stupid, huh?”

With a fond look, Raven takes a leap and reaches out gently, slowly, and takes the edge of his sleeve between her fingertips. “Thank-you, Tim. Thank-you.” Because not only is this a show of trust, but also of his driving need to protect what he considers his. His team, his friends.

“Nah,” he waves it off with his other hand, smiling down at her, “I’ve got your back, Rave. That’s what friends are for, right?”

**

Red Protocol: Confrontation Planning, Bring Food

The plane is cloaked, not really helpful at the moment since Red is sitting on top with a turkey and cheese Subway Classic, legs crossed at the ankles (that sweet onion sauce is just so awesome). He takes a drink of sweet tea and rubs the bottom of the cup against his tights so he doesn’t get a ring on the top of the plane.

He checks his cell phone again, presses a button to set the traps to ‘Arm’ and puts the phone back down, humming as he gets bits of green pepper and cucumber.

Right on time, the sound of ‘holy shit that’s fast’ resounds in the distance. Red takes another bite.

The minute a foot travelling the speed of light hit the outer barrier, the trap springs and the speeder is thrown in a whirling tornado of get me off this thing, I’m going to hurl. Red watches absently, finishing off the last bite until the momentum is worn and the connection to the Speed Force severed by the trap.

The man on the ground, caged by a yellow force field groans in agony, trying very hard to keep all his crucial internal organs from spilling out of his mouth. When the guy finally lifts his head an iota and looks up, Red gives a wave from his seat on top an invisible plane because really Bats know how to make an entrance.

“Tim?! Tim, what the hell--”

“Hey Barry. How’s it going?”

The former Flash groans and lays his head back down as Red crumples up his sub paper and shoves it in the little bag. He hops down with a flourish of cape (because he twisted his knee a little too hard
last mission) and saunters over to the trapped speeder while sipping on his tea.

He gives Barry a few more minutes to re-orientate himself because these traps were really a bitch (necessary to build at the time, but whatever) and folds himself to sit cross-legged right in front of the guy.

“I am so telling your dad on you, kid.” He groans after a moment.

Red huff a very unfunny laugh, “my dad’s dead, Barry.”

The eyes finally look up at him as Barry has enough strength to push himself up to sit. “I meant Bats, Tim. Sorry—“

“Batman isn’t my dad,” Red sips his tea again. “So, funny meeting you here, huh?”

The older man just waves a hand, “okay, okay. I don’t need the shtick, Tim. What’s this about?”

Red just sips on his tea again, saying nothing because, really, put it together, Barry.

The former Flash throws his head back with a very painful sigh. He rubs his temple and accurately guesses, “Bart.”

“Yup.”

Immediately, Barry looked older, years older. “Tim…this, this is for the best. Bart needs someone like Wally to be an influence on him. I—I can’t…”

“Is this about him being from the future and your grandson?” Red asks in a bored tone, “because I already know all of that.”

Barry freezes, unnatural for a speeder and stares. “How did you…? Not even Bats know about…”

Red just taps the side of his temple, “know your team. That’s Bat rule number 17, maybe number 24, whatever. But, I’ve always known who Bart Allen really is and why he’s here. I know what he’s done and, honestly, can’t blame him for doing what he had to in order to survive in the future. We’ve all done things we aren’t proud of. At the end of the day, he’s still putting his life on the line to save the present.”

“Does he know?” Barry asked hoarsely.

“His memories are still gone from what I’ve observed. He doesn’t know he’s really your grandson.” Red shrugs a shoulder, looking at the shell-shocked former Flash. “He’s…hurt because he looks up to you regardless and you just dipped out on him. You dropped the mentoring thing without a word, so he’s been trying to tell Wally he doesn’t deserve to be Kid Flash. He’s been trying to redesign the Impulse costume without me knowing.” The tone is enough.

“It’s harder for him because he doesn’t get his speed from the Speed Force,” Barry answers hoarsely and dammit the guy’s eyes are watery. Shit. This makes bad-cop/bad-cop harder.

“Barry,” Red leans closer, “I know this is a shock for you because with what we do? There’s always that fear in the back of your mind, the ‘is this going to be the last one for me?’ I get it, you know. We all do. And now, here you’re faced with your legacy, so yeah, I’m sure it’s a mind fuck.” ( “Where do you see yourself in twenty years, Timothy? What does the adult you look like? And his immediate thought was a gravestone).
“I didn’t do right by that kid, Tim. Something happened that he had to come back here with no memory, with nothing. You don’t know how I found him, you don’t know how badly I could have already fucked that kid up. And all this time… all this time he’s my grandson. He’s my boy’s boy.” Barry scrubs his face, and Red gets it with an ah-ha moment. “Wally, Wally’s a good influence on him. Wally will do right by Bart, Tim.”

“Wally’s a great guy, Barry. He is. But, Wally isn’t you.” Red touches the spot on his domino to deactivate the security setting and let the lenses pop up to reveal his eyes. “Bart needs you, the guy that originally found him, the guy that gave him his start in our world as heroes. You’re the one he’s drawn to, whether it’s an instinct or what, but yeah. You have this chance right now to make sure he stays on the straight and narrow, to influence him to be even better than he’s already proven he is. Bart listens to me, well sometimes, and he likes being part of the team, but there’s always something missing. It’s you, Barry; you’re that something he needs.”

And the former Flash seems to be taking it all in, listening intently. After a long few minutes of nothing but Red slurping the rest of his tea, Barry finally looks up again.

“Batman would be proud of you,” the admission is quiet, sincere.

A harsh something is right on the back of his tongue, an acidic, bitter comment on Batman being proud of his real sons, but like he has for too long, Red chokes those things back to simmer in his chest instead because this was about helping Bart, not about him and the Bats.

Instead, he shrugs again, “what Batman doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” He stands up, cape swirling around him and dusts off his tights. “So, you think about what I’ve said. Take your time because this trap is going to be active for about seven more hours or so.”

Red troops back to the plane, hits a spot on his harness and the invisible door opens, revealing a cooler bag. He takes the cooler bag back and drops it through the force field because, yeah, no connection to the Speed Force, no problem.

Calculating eyes narrow at the cooler, “how did you…?”

“I set seven traps on your most travelled routes that wouldn’t intercept with any other speeders,” Red doesn’t even hesitate to inform him, “like two weeks ago. All I had to do was wait for you.”

Barry’s eyes are wide, “kid, you really scare the shit out of me.”

Red just grins a little maniacally below the domino, “if I had a nickel for every time I heard that.” He gives a wave and heads back to the plane, his point made.

**

Red Protocol: Maintain multiple contingencies

He’s screaming so loud, so long his throat is giving out, bleeding from the strain. His body rips itself apart, puts itself back together, reforms. Bones snap, skin rips, claws and wings and wicked teeth and scales and shells and paws and more, so much more trying to…trying to do something.

He throws back his head and screams again, his voice wrecked. It’s out of control, he’s out of control.

He’s locked himself in, locking everyone else out so they wouldn’t be hurt, so he couldn’t hurt any of them without meaning to. And the pounding on the door is Supes or something, flashes in his peripheral of Rave trying to get in, but Red thought this panic room out too well. She wasn’t getting
in even with her spooky powers because of anyone ever, he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if
he hurt her. He would kill himself first.

The door groans but doesn’t move under that massive alien strength because Red always has back-
up plans for his back-up plans.

His body ripples again, another wave of agony on the cellular level as he’s ripped apart again and
nothing, nothing, no amount of pain could make him open that door.

So that stupid jerk had to find another way, that Smarty McSmartpants. Overhead, clanging and Gar
has enough in him to look up as a sneaker kicks the vent in and Tim drops down from the ceiling.

“No. NO! Get out!” Copper on the back of his tongue. “Get the FUCK OUT!” The guy doesn’t
even have a suit on with body armor, just jeans and a t-shirt.

Tim leaps on him without answering and something cold pressed right into his shoulder, the guy’s
hands working super-fast, arm hiked up to bring down another, longer syringe full of something
green right into his chest. The force made the needle piece his breastbone to go straight into his
wildly beating heart, another agony on top the others. Gar’s eyes go incredibly wide, rolling in the
back of his head as the spasms start all over again, and he’s afraid, so afraid he’ll become one of the
beasts and rip Tim’s spine out to sink his teeth into meat and blood.

Tim holds on, doesn’t get bucked off, shoving the depressor so the concoction floods Gar’s heart
before he takes the needle back out.

“Red Robin access code, Alpha Sigma Sigma Hotel Oscar Lema Echo 55681.”

The main blast doors open and Gar’s hands fists, “no, Tim..can’t…”

The guy just sighs, irritated and probably with Gar’s stupidity, holding him up and against his chest
so Gar can take his time and shake. “Dude, I always have a contingency plan. Haven’t you figured
that out yet?” As the rest of the team surrounds him, hands on his arms, his forehead, Rachel’s eyes
wide (and maybe a little misty? Is he hallucinating?) when she takes him from Tim’s lap, cradles him
against her and kisses his forehead, he has a vague sense that the pain is fading away. He doesn’t feel
like the animal in him is taking over again, like his body is going to rage out of control. He feels like
he can just pass the hell out and sleep while everyone is just there to be with him.

“Dude, totally…owe you…a sixer. My treat,” Gar mumbles before he’s…out.

Chapter End Notes

So, we’ll be back to the Bats next chapter. You know what feeds the muse.
Chapter Notes

This…this was so hard because dialogue (ugh). I got on a crazy stint of TimKon and Tim/Dick fics, so I’m kind of sorry but not ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Red.”

“Hey Baby Bird, what’s shaking?”

“The usual, Hood. What do you need?”

“A better sense of humor, kid.”

Red barks out a laugh, shaking his head a little. “I agree, your idea of funny usually involves too many things that blow up.”

“Only with people I like, asshole. It’s a short list. You should feel honored.”

“So glad I’m part of the group, man. Just stoked about it.”

“See? All about perspective.”

And Red can hear the mirth in that jerk’s voice, pictures him grinning like a creep.

“No, really, man. I’m calling to check in on you. Haven’t seen you in Gotham for a few weeks. And…” he can hear the guy take a long breath on the other end, “it’s been a bad week, you know? Just…thought I’d see how things are on your end.” The rasp of a lighter and inhale over the speakers is telling because no way would Alfred deal with him smoking anywhere near the Manor (maybe, mostly, Alfred always had a soft spot for Jason).

Safe house, probably the one near Crime Alley since he keeps the beer stocked, Red thinks automatically. Not that he’s in the manner consistently anyway, at least from what Dami says.

“Nothing much to report. Pretty quiet.” Other than the ape-shit crazy H.I.V.E thing, but that’s was really more of a joke than a real attempt to take over the world. Come on, if you’re really going to try using some kind of half-assed particle accelerator to fuck with space/time, pay your electric bill or don’t piss off super heroes that can hack your shit well enough to screw with the grid (morons). The ensuing fight had been pretty epic with the light bombs he’d randomly set because, yeah, those just made the party even better. Bart had the time of his fucking life (mental note: big animals that are easily startled are not conducive to a fight in the dark, tell Gar to change into something else next time).

“Uh-hu. How many contusions didja get out of that fight?”

What now? Slowly, Red looks up at the ceiling, his eyes narrow behind the domino. He makes a few keystrokes and the perch comes up clean for camera other than his; he sets the system to do a manual sweep of the Tower for just in case (even though he has the system automatically do it every eight
Another inhale.

“Hood.” There’s a wealth of meaning there.

“Sensors,” the guy says like it’s obvious, “ones in your suit. Didn’t think you were the only one that could hack a mainframe were you? And, shit, man these are the good ones, like, your people are all kinds of concerned if they’re dropping the extra fifty bucks.”

“Seriously, Hood—“

“Gotta make sure you’re not dead somehow. After you pulled your profile from BI, I got no other way to know if I should send flowers or not. You feel me, Red?”

And, well, the guy might have a point (not that he’d ever admit it).

“After what happened this week, B is starting on some new protocols, make sure everyone’s on the up and up. That includes you, you know. Protocol for keeping better communications, get the ‘low on what the shit-heads’ (criminal element, Red reads) “are into, new poisons hitting the streets, the usual. He’s thinking about doing some bi-weeklies with everyone since it’s rough to read everyone’s report when you’re kicking ass every other night. Meetings would help that or so he thinks.”

There’s a lot there he’s going to get to soon enough. “Hood, what the hell happened?”

“Kid. C’mon. Gotham, right? What didn’t happen?”

A brow arches over his domino, but Hood can’t see it anyway. “How about something more concrete than that.”

“You’d know if you still logged into your non-existent profile and checked-in, asshole.”

“Your witty repartee is always fantastic. No joke.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be here all week. Tip your waitress. Whatever. So, Crane’s got some new stuff on the market. Big Wing… He got it pretty bad, trying to get the brat outta the way. It was touch and go for a while.”

“Shit,” Red’s leaning forward in his seat a little. Dick, that recently sent him yet another text message (along with a few emails) asking him to come back for the yearly tag-up, saved Dami and got a face full of instant fear. It’s not an unusual thing, really. It might be for Dick since his stint as Batman, he’d been trying to be a good role model for Dami, to be more careful about getting the shit kicked out of him (because security footage gave it away with the slight delays before Dick took a jump into a random fray or against the big bads. He was still trying to be more like the Bat).

“Yeah, new stuff is potent enough to affect heart rate and shit. B was trying to get a new antidote synthed, but it took time since the formula was totally different. He said something about a new composition.”

“He’s…okay?”

Another puff of the cigarette. “…Still feeling the after-shocks. You know.”

And, yeah. Yeah he did. They all had their gauntlet by fire, residual moments caught in that trippy, drugged-induced haze of their worst fucking nightmares (his dad screaming while he died; Kon’s hours).
soulless eyes while the hand still reaches; the ‘Haven crumbling below his feet; twisted, mangled corpses around him…). Hell, years later and he still has his moments. A lot of them.

“He’s not okay then.” Red goes on, and something changes, Hood becomes Jason, Jay, because there’s something different in his sigh.

“It was…close. Closer than anyone would have liked.”

“Crane’s working with biological weapons now, not just psychedelics.”

“Traces of something else organic.”

“…Fuck. Gotham’s going to have a dream team going.” Again. Man, those ones always sucked. Not just one crazy fucker running around with huge weapons, but a slew of them. Fan. Fucking. Tastic.

“Maybe. It’s not cool, that’s what I can tell you.” Then the soft wahh of the clip coming out of the .45 Glock, working back in like Jay’s hands need something to do. A brow arches over his domino, but Hood can’t see it anyway.

“Then…BB had a bad one, got pretty chewed up. B is in Hong Kong to check her out since Big Wing’s somewhat okay.”

What? What now!?” “Sonofa—what?,” Red spits out because Cass, “why the hell didn’t you call me? I would’ve been in Gotham—” or on my way to Hong Kong.

Now the tone is tired, not snarking back at him. “Just like B said, Baby Bird. We’re not trying to get a soldier. We’re trying to get a brother. Feel me?”

“That’s fucking irrelevant, Hood. Nightwing’s down, B’s out of town, and that’s a pretty good reason to call in someone else.”

“Me and Demon Wonder can handle it for the time being. Besides, if there was some way for me to know what you were up to or what cases you were on or if you were, you know, bleeding out like a motherfucker or whatever, then I could have seen for myself it was good to call your ass in, right?”

Red throws up his hands. “Really? Tell me a time that you’ve called and I haven’t shown up. You. Complete. Dick.”

There’s a chuff on the line, “remember what I said about breaking the old conditioning, Tim?” And there go the pseuds right out the window, “I meant that shit. Not fucking around with you.”

“You don’t need a damn profile in BI to pick up the phone, Jay.”

“No, I sure as shit don’t, Timmy, but I’m done making those old mistakes.”

And just fuck he’s already getting a headache. He can feel the lid of his left eyes twitching under the domino and briefly wonders if it’s time for his aneurism to hit just from dealing with these asshats.

“So, you’re not calling me unless it’s to check up? That right?”

“Yeah, me and the Bats got it straight, even the brat. Time to stop sending the wrong message so you might start coming into town without riding a case and shit. You come when you want and we’ll be here. You wanna jump in on what we’re into, that’s gotta be your call.”

And that’s just…fuck. Even Dami, dammit.
Red sucks in a breath because—

“Don’t do it.” Hood cuts him off mid-thought, talking through his exhale of smoke. “Don’t come here because you think it’s the job. You do you for the moment. Me, the brat, and BG are working it night by night.”

“There’s more.” Not a question.

“Maybe. What part of ‘I’m not making those mistakes’ didn’t sink in, Tim?”

But Red’s already maneuvering in the system to accesses the Batman Inc. mainframe (two months out of it doesn’t make him rusty), covering his ass and his IP with some pretty nifty re-directs and encryptions (O will know it’s him anyway, but he just likes giving her a run for her money because he still can).

“So, tell me about the H.I.V.E douche bags. What did they want this time?”

“You want me to tell you about my cases but won’t tell me about Gotham, huh?” It’s a little bitter, but hey, he’s not looking to be coddled. Red doesn’t need that shit; he’s got his own back now.

“I’d rather you tell me then break in your mainframe and read about it myself. I’m a guy that likes to listen, Baby Bird, you know?”

That makes an abrupt laugh jerk out of his chest because Jason. Really, just Jason. But, he did make promises, didn’t he?

So, Red multi-tasks, uses another admin log-in to get around the authentication processes, generating a token to see how easy it is since there were people out there a lot better than him (Vic is such a douche-bag and won’t disable the alarms because reasons and “Gar has a point about you, Tim, you just need to be cool with them trying to take care of you and shit” and no fucking thank-you, Vic, Red takes care of himself just fine and eventually he will crack Vic’s twenty second change encryption swap and then hack the guy’s eye so Honey Boo-Boo plays for the next five days straight, just watch out when that shit happens, man.).

If he can get in too easy, then he’s got to start coding more invasive security details and slide them in while O’s busy being omnipotent and shit. While he works it, he gives Jason the breakdown and the guy guffaws too because like space/time fuckage is so original. He’s as underwhelmed as Red had been, maybe more since he doesn’t have the healing ribs to go with it.

“Well, to be fair, Timmy,” Jason observes while Red’s working to get a back door open. He manages it in an embarrassingly long time (like, six minutes, maybe he’s losing his touch), coming to the main screen with new messages from the other crime fighters under the BI flag. “If you’d actually had some sleep and eats before the brawl, you might have gotten out of it better. Just saying.”

A brow arches over the domino and, yeah, he needs to work on the sensor net because this isn’t creepy at all. Red blows out a sigh through his nose as he quickly scans the message posted on the board from last week:

**Out of Towner Protocols: Update**

For any operatives in Gotham: log into the mainframe before and after patrol to verify status, enter necessary criminal activities, or report injuries. Help will follow. The emergency number is still applicable if log-in cannot be completed.

For out-of-town operatives: the new protocol requires frequent check-in and record of current
status. This protocol is to assure the health and safety of all personnel. A new page Weekly Check-In may be accessed to record all necessary data.

Red blinks once, twice, and then clicks on the new check-in page. Each out of towner has a link and his/her pic by it (that’s a terrible shot of Cass in the Black Bat mask, really, when did they take this?) and he picks out Red Robin with… he gapes at the odd domino and his hair everywhere because some asshole got a pic of him from the Unternet and put it on the damn…!

Babs, I am so crashing your shit for this he seethes to himself. Oh yeah, O and Steph were probably laughing their asses off because that suit was terrible and his hair was way too long and just reasons (the hair is still too long but, shit, he almost likes it now).

He click on it by rote anyway and get the error message profile deactivated. It’s like one foot is out of Gotham and the other one is just rising to meet it. The realization jars him, more than when he had digs in the Haven, more than when he moved his things out of the Manor, leaving behind sundries that could be easily replaced, more than when he came into the new perch here in San Fran and thought it’s not home but it could be.

“Tim?”

Red jerks abruptly because he’s never taken the time to think about all that, has he? “I’m here.”

“Don’t get pissy. I didn’t have to get into the vids of your Tower to know, man. We’ve met before, you realize?”

Oh. “Am I really that predictable?” Red stares at the error message for a long few seconds (some pain is a whole different level than the ribs) before hacking around with the password to get into Black Bat’s and scanning her recent activity reports. B had been in doing the same thing, traces of his coding and skirting there as well.

A beat of silence and then Jason is laughing over the line. “Really? Kid, c’mon.”

“Guess that answers that question.”

“Well, your team has a list of protocols for you, you realize? Specific ones because you are that predictable. But, hey, I mean, really, who named these things? I bet it was Gar, wasn’t it? Who names the door code ASSHOLE anyway?”

Red just pauses again, switching screens and putting an extra level of encryption on his personal medical file for just in case since Jay is all about digging and detecting apparently. “There’s a story behind it, ask Rave some time. And yeah, I’m aware of their list.” No one can see him roll his eyes behind the domino but that doesn’t mean he isn’t. “They don’t try to hide it or anything. It would piss me off if they did.”

“They try to take care of you since you can’t do it for yourself,” and that’s just matter of fact and irritating. “Well, the word I’m looking for is don’t.”

“I’ve lived this long, you know.”

“Semantics. Take a good long look at the ‘why,’ kid. Not just you, though; all the Bat soldiers are self-sacrificing asshats. It’s part of the requirements or something.”

“That and to be able to rock tights, man.”

“I had panties, asshole. I would have killed for tights.”
“Quit your bitching. No one fired your ass.”

“Meh, might’ve if I didn’t die first.”

A beat of silence while Red is back in BI, accessing the new checklist this time (a train goes by, it’s the safehouse by the East Side). “So, what I’m taking from this convo is that I’m not coming to Gotham even though you need me, and you want me to regale you with how much I’m eating a ton and sleeping eight hours a night. Dick and Cass are totally doing fine, too because why shouldn’t they be, right? That about cover it?”

“Who was talking about bitching? I could be calling you every night, Tim.”

“Yeah and asking me shit like,” Tim glares at the screen, “Number 4: have you sustained any serious injuries in the last forty-eight hours? Do you need assistance? Or, Number 8: have you taken anti-toxins in the 90 days? If so, which ones? Special Note: it is advised that you take new doses of anti-toxins every thirty days to attempt maintaining a consistent immunity.” Bullshit. Ask the guy without a spleen about immunities.

Jason laughs a little, “dude, that’s all O. Talk to her, not to me.”

“This is an every night thing? Seriously, Jay? Some of us have day jobs.”

“Well, some of us do reports and shit, call around to others so everyone knows that flowers aren’t necessary. Did I mention that already?”

“Sure did.”

“Then I’ll say it again. Answer the phone once a week to talk about something that has to do with you, with Tim Drake and how he’s not getting seriously fucked up without anyone knowing.”

And, oh yeah, there’s more under that since this is all too much emphasis in one phone call. Someone’s been talking to the Bats behind his back, or someone’s been hacking a little too deep. Red’s voice goes a little softer, full of steel. “Be straight with me, Jay.”

“Kid. This ain’t hard to figure out and after the long string of shitty nights we’ve been having, it’s not a bad idea.”

“I— this should be about the cases he’s working, about the data he’s collecting, about the new information he’s uncovered, none of this should be about whether or not he’s eating or sleeping or hurt or…

“All right, Detective, test the waters then.” Just as smooth as can be, Jason kicks right into his thoughts, “answer the damn questions and see if they’re bullshit. When was your last fight or patrol? You’ve been in San Fran for two weeks or so, right?”

“Gang fight, last night,” his brain is a little numb because he has no idea how this convo turned or why he’s humoring Jason at all.

“Okay, injuries?”

“Bruises, nothing major.”

“Yeah? Good for you, Baby Bird, nice work. Okay, when’s the last time you ate?”

Uh… “Yesterday before the Titans left.” What was yesterday…? Was that yesterday? Close enough.
“Yeah, okay,” whatever… *Chinese did sound pretty good, actually.*

“When’s the last time you slept?”

And the ghosts come out of his unconscious mind, hovering over his line of vision, his chest gets tight all over again. “Saturday morning, about five hours,” one of the Titan’s mandatory movie days because they’re all mother-hens and he can’t do shit about it but deal.

“It’s Tuesday, man. You get that, right?”

*It is…?* “Yeah, yeah. You want the truth or do you want me to lie? I slept eight full hours last night and had a three course dinner. Satisfied?”

“No, dick. Remember what I said? The whole ‘stop being a pain in my left nut’ talk?”

“I didn’t—“

“No, you didn’t. You didn’t need to. See why the check-in is a good thing for people like us? You’re just the case-in-point. One of us calls you every day because you forget shit like ‘oh, days actually end, huh? Who knew?’”

“Smart ass.”

“You already know it. We’ve met.”

“I’m sure as hell not doing this every day, Jason. Not even with you.”

“Here we are again, Tim, once a week. Be straight with me and I’ll be straight with you, that’s how this has gotta work. I’m not screwing around with a second chance. It’s part of my nature. Besides, you back out on the deal and I’m gonna have to come up to San Fran and see for myself. Me and Dick aren’t going to sweat embarrassing you in front of the kiddies. Like, at all.”

“Yeah, I seriously do not want that.” *Don’t come here.*

“Then don’t be a shit about this.”

Red’s frown is *epic.* Once a week. Once a week and he could keep moving forward. After a long moment of thinking, of calculating the possibilities of how much a phone call could hurt, of what kinds of concessions he would be needing to make to keep up his side of the deal anyway, Red finally takes a deep breath.

“Message received, Jay. The fam wants to know if I’ve got it together.”

“No, dumbass. We want to know you’re not hour 60 with no sleep and ready to pass out because you haven’t eaten for days. I will seriously have Big Wing make borscht and force feed you, don’t try me.”

“God, man, that’s fucked up,” Red can’t even control the horrified look on his face because *oh God that shit is nasty even when Dick doesn’t make it.* “I think that violates the Geneva Convention or something.”

“You dick,” Jason just says fondly, “that’s why you’re on the short list, you know? It’s not everyone that gets a personalized threat.”
Red just sighs and shakes his head a little, “I know, man. I mean, it just makes my life when you give me a bomb in a box. Just, warm tingles all over.”

“Yeah, that’s how we show we care, Baby Bird. All right, all right, big brother talk over. One of us is calling you once a week if you don’t call first. Deal with it.” And, as much as it’s a little too much like control, like make sure he isn’t fucking up something vital, he’s got little choice because Jay doesn’t screw around with I’ll come to you threats.

Jason sighs on the other end, sounding worn, “…and, shit, one last thing, Tim.”

“Hit me.”

“Dick…wants you to come the HQ, wants you there for the yearly.”

Red’s brows furrow over the domino, “uh-hu. I’ve already gotten the message. Like, four of them. Not going to happen yet.”

“You need time. I get it. But, he’s pretty on about it, so I don’t foresee him giving up the bone. Just FYI.”

“Thanks, Hood. I’ll tell him to fuck off myself. Red out.” He ends the call before something more starts Jay on another tangent of really uncomfortable, almost-kind-of-in-his-own-messed-up-way-of-showing-he-was-concerned spiel. Because, yeah, Jason Todd was one of those guys that if he didn’t give a damn, he didn’t call to attempt to make nice.

Twenty minutes later, an angry guy from the place down the street had to wait a little too long for regular dude, Alvin Draper, to hit the elevator to the ground floor. The muttering about the wait goes in one ear and out the other while Tim stares down at him with furrowed brows and a whole lot of what’s this about now?

He briefly wonders if he may have just triggered an attack by opening the door (but it’s cool, he’s got the remote in hand buried in his hoodie; one press and the lasers are going to start coming into play; the mini computer under his sleeve is already set with the ground traps, so eh, try it angry dude). Then the guy is shoving a bag, a big bag, of take-out right in Tim’s chest with the receipt stapled to it before vanishing on his beat-up scooter, completely ignoring “Alvin’s” protest that he hasn’t ordered anything and that this is a mistake (but really, it’s a huge Tower, how could anyone get it wrong?).

The smell of Chinese food hit him like a punch and his stomach rolled. He sighs to himself but takes the feast back upstairs and eats out of cartons while still looking around BI for the recent reports in Gotham. In terrible restaurant person scribble is “I don’t fuck around, asshole.” Cute. In a creepy, stalkery (thanks, Bart) kind of way. But, just dumplings. Mad amount of dumpling and he’s demolishing the carton of vegetable fried rice like you read about, not bothering to look away from the screen until his chopsticks are hitting the bottom of the carton.

He can see where the week has been shit because there’s the usual activity and then the breakouts from Arkham (seriously, they should just build a new place because getting out is like oh, let me just wiggle this bar that’s already been taken out twenty times before) in the last two weeks since he’s been gone. Crane is still on the loose, and Ivy, who has really made a hell of an effort to stay the fuck away from crime and the Bats in general, agreed to have a talk with Robin about the compounds found in the new Fear Toxin. Robin’s notes are sketchy (because, well, he’s a little shit), but Tim is pretty shocked to read how the kid actually believed she was honest when she claimed she didn’t give Crane any of her old formulas. She gave him the address of an abandoned warehouse she used to do testing, told him some of the crates with her previous mixtures might still be there, and if so, that’s possibly where the organic side could have come from.
The kid was going to investigate soon, put up his findings.

He and Dick were on for tonight.

Dick, who almost died. Again.

And he…he wasn’t supposed to go, to be in Gotham because of the good fight. He was supposed to do his own thing wasn’t he?

He eyes the Red Robin icon for a few sickening seconds and closes his eyes. It's dangerous to consider this (what part of you already lost this once hasn't sunk in?), but he's the strategist, isn't he? He's got to have a plan, he's got to have alternatives and prospective. There are ways to make this look like a good thing when he's really waiting for the real reason the Bats are keeping a closer eye on him comes to light ("I want my son back" but was I ever really? Dick is, Jason is, Damian is...). So if the Bats need to have a contingency, then so should he.

When he finally stands up, gathers the leftovers to go in the fridge (and probably not get touched), the Red Robin icon is active and Oracle is going to be pissed that she's not getting into her own mainframe for a few days.

Chapter End Notes

Begin Rant: So, picked up Robin War just for shits and giggles and guess what? Jay: Well you just skipped over Robin and went to Red Robin so you pretty much don’t count. (In my head) Tim: Hey asshole, 1989-2009, I was Robin longer than you, so eat it. End Rant. This is why I do not DC anymore. Reasons.
Chapter Summary

Sometimes, steps are needed to start healing the broken pieces.

Chapter Notes

The muse has not been kind; this just kind of splattered out after a bit so forgive any mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bart is acting like one of those little yappy dogs on steroids; Cassie, Kon, and Gar are just watching the guy go from one spot to another like he’s on the mother of all missions.

Once he’s done, the remnants from last night’s ice cream fight (totally blaming Rob for it) is gone, the nasty food left in the fridge from the last month is in the trash and already out the door, the dishes are all cleaned and put away, He’s in the communal room fluffing pillows, running the vacuum (because Gar, really? The hair, man, just the amount of hair), tossing his own shoes in the hall closet, picking up random items (how can you just leave a lasso of Truth lying around like this!?) and just really making sure everything is as pristine as it can get with a Tower full of teenagers and infinite possibilities.

“All right, man, you just need to chill out, okay?” Kon steps right into his path, letting KF bounce off his chest with an oomph and back a few feet. “This is really not as big a deal as you think it’s going to be.”

Bart stand, brushes himself off and just stares back with immediate exasperation and a finger poking the guy right in the chest. “Dude, how are you even serious with me right now? Do you even know the last time—”

“All right, people, they just landed,” from the stairwell, Red Robin is suited to the nines and he’s in Gotham mode. Silent steps, a slight sway of the hips that could be a roundhouse back to your face if you didn’t watch your shit, and the aura of don’t mess with that guy, he’s got plans if you do. The team takes a moment to inhale Red as he strides past them, adjusting his gauntlets and his face that serious one when they step out against the big bad calling them out for a fight. The air of something wrong makes everyone tense because this little visit was supposed to be just checking up, just seeing everyone and being cool. That assumption goes out the window since Red isn’t giving any of Tim, not even a hint, under all that armor.

Meaning:

A) There’s an assignment coming down that elevator

B) There’s some really bad news that just makes shit get real
C) Someone forgot to lock-down the first floor (again) and some damn stray is wandering around the vents.

D) One his Red’s “pet projects” made a move, and he’s out as soon as this meeting is over.

E) It’s oh shit time.

Bart gives a groan, “I haven’t even—“

“Irrelevant,” Red’s brow arches up over his domino, his tone clipped and busy, his mind is turning already, “they’re not coming to check out the décor, Kid.”

He pauses a few feet away from the elevator, hands clasped behind his back and waits with creepy stillness that is all Bat. The team falls in behind him automatically, just in their normal formation flanking his sides. The muscle in Kon’s jaw is jumping, ready; Cassie’s chin rises a notch, her eyes cold; Bart shifts from one foot to the other absentely, his fists working lose and tight; Gar’s eyes are dangerously wild, ready; Raven keeps her calm demeanor but the aura is tangible, a pressure against their backs; the hole in their rank where Miguel would be is closed, tightened because everyone needed time off, but the six of them are still ready for the next big to hit their door. It’s going to be something, the tight line of Red’s shoulders give it away.

When the doors slide open, Superman is trying (not going to happen, Kal) to make Batman laugh with a terrible slew of travelling salesman jokes (Fuck, why did it have to be E) The Batman is coming to the Tower himself?! If anything, the five dart uneasy glances to Red). The Flash is standing at the back with a hand clasped tightly over his mouth because getting sucker-punched with a reinforced gauntlet is painful as hell no matter how fast you are, Wonder Woman looks patiently irritated and ready to get out of the damn elevator because really the unresolved tension would make anyone lose patience, and The Green Lantern is keeping himself occupied by making random shit with his ring because, you know, these two.

The sight of the Batman, all dark and menacing with his cape wrapped tightly around him so his next move is just a hey, surprise beat-down! makes the team get a little more shit, shit, the Batman (because, yeah, metas fearing the non-meta guy in a bat suit? Watch him fight and then talk). Kon hears Bart’s pulse pick-up immediately even though Wally is right there. Red is cool as ice, his usual, and the rest seem happy to see the group in the elevator since it’s been a while. However, the Batman…Nothing stops the team from shuffling just a little closer to Red’s back when the Batman levels those whiteout lenses right at him; Kon’s body loosens up just enough that he can move fast if he needs to, and only Cassie’s hand in his back pocket keeps him from stepping up beside Red. He breathes out a long sigh that has Red’s head turn slightly in his direction then back.

Supes, when the doors slide open and Batman is only responding with his usual gloom and doom thing, grins at the assembled teens and waves as the members of the JLA file out of the elevator.

Smiles and easy motions; no one is dying today, and the elder heroes are moving in their formation to the protégés, drawing them out of uh-oh, FIGHT mode.

It takes longer than it used to, noted by Hal, Diana, Wally, and Kal, to make the, well kids but not kids anymore, stand down from behind Red Robin (of course they try to keep up with what’s going on with the Bat kids, especially this very different version of Tim Drake that Dick has been talking about, worrying about, concerned about). The Titans have had their share hard knocks in the last few years, becoming more of a team than their predecessors; the fact that none of them really relaxes until they see Red Robin ease from his normal stance to let his arms hang by his side is a telling tick. A worrying one.

The JLA make the transition easier for them with easy smiles and hugs, getting into excited chatter,
giving the younger ones an opportunity to catch-up on the latest—giving them silent permission to release the superhero in them and just be kids. Gar and Rave stand with KF to say hello to Wally and Hal, getting in on the usual gossip while Cassie greets Diana with a faint curtesy before they hug; Kon holds out a fist and Kal gives him an exaggerated eye roll before he allows the fist bump with a wide grin. It’s an underlying message with the JLA to ease the Titans away from Red’s back and into the communal area; he notices immediately, nodding to some of the heroes in welcome but doesn’t move because, yeah, why would they be here just to hang the fuck out? Red isn’t fooled but lets the JLA be good mentors since…not going to think about it.

The team finally necessarily occupied, the Batman cuts a direct path to face Red. Without a word, the leader of the Titans give a subtle nod in the direction of the back staircase and turns on his heel; the Batman takes that as permission to follow, silent and hidden in the folds of his cape. Their departure is noticed, Titans trading glances between one another, but are subtly distracted by the JLA when touch pads and wrist computers come out and the latest fight, cases, pics, touch football plans, next pot luck scheduled, and whatever else starts up between the superheroes.

Up in the Perch, the Batman stands by one of the windows, looking out at San Fran’s skyline, very unlike Gotham.

“Black Bat is on the mend,” he begins. “I stopped on my way back since I knew you would want an update.”

Red doesn’t sit, stands a few feet behind his old mentor facing the vid wall, pretending he’s looking at something else because this is entirely too awkward; the Batman has been in Titan’s Tower before (back when he was Robin) but not since he’d become Red (Dick in the cowl was here with the current Robin, but not this Batman. No, this Batman hadn’t intruded on his space once the mantle of Robin, the designation of partner was taken).

Of course, he could be a jerk and point out how these things, these phone things were just the neatest inventions ever, but well, Batman. He doesn’t do anything without a handful of motivations and even more contingency plans. It’ll come out eventually because if anything, the Bat was never that great at keeping things from the only Robin that could read into the next plan, the next step, the alternative perspective. Dick could only predict Batman’s moves to a point; Jason never read well enough; Dami still had difficulty separating the two; Red, though, Red and B were too similar and all those lessons came to a frightening fruition in the middle of a fight.

So, he’d bite. He’d do what the Bat wanted. “How bad was she?”

“…Not as bad as I expected. Cheshire was more interested in uniting the gangs in Hong Kong under one banner to do much damage.” More than I’m happy with, Red reads by the tone and tightness of the mouth, “I’ve asked her to keep down for at least a week, but—“

“It’s Cass,” Red finishes with a shrug. “She’s a Bat.”

Batman hums in the positive.

“And Cheshire?” Because that shit is so on.

“Roy took care of it. She’s back in max.”

Dammit. Next time. And there would be.

“And Dick?” Something in him clenches when he asks since it’s pretty fucking hard to shake up the Red Hood, but he keeps himself controlled, not-seeing the vid wall’s passing news streams. He needs
to do what B’s going to expect if he’s supposed to find out why his previous mentor is physically here with the JLA.

Gloved hands move and the cowl is going back, Bruce turning to face him. Red blinks behind his domino because what?

He takes in the reveal, however, and notes the guy is looking worn; it’s a bad week when two of your children almost die but still, this is Batman, right? Red tenses automatically when he pulls the minicomputer from his right gauntlet and wordlessly holds it out.

Red is purposely cautious when he takes it, watching the unhappy tightening around B’s eyes about it; regardless, he taps ‘Play’ and touches his domino to raise the whiteout lenses. A slight step back from B while a third of his attention is diverted to the vid, but Batman seems to understand, crossing his arms over the symbol and staying where he is.

The screen fills with a whole lot Batcave security footage in the med-bay area (more extensive than the last time he was there), Dick half out of the Nightwing uni on the table, arms restrained with the heaviest set, and the guy is fighting like fuck, twisting and turning with the effects of the Fear Gas. Mouth open with what’s probably a lot of talk since it doesn’t look like he’s screaming out, more like angry snarling, fighting whatever he’s seeing. Then Alfred is moving with speed, paddles in hand when Dick’s body just drops back to the gurney and spits a mouthful of blood before the machines go flat-line.

There’s no sound, but the movement from Dami still in Robin and Jason without helmet or domino tells him that’s exactly what happened because Jason, Jason looks terrified and Dami’s gloves are shoved in his own hair, body trembling like he’s yelling. Alfred dives in, paddles on Dick’s chest and the sharp jerk of his body up. Red’s back teeth are grinding as he watches the second shock hit and Dick’s eyes roll back, arms limp in the restraints. B is just right there, shoving the syringe right in Dick’s pectoral before Alfred can give him another shock, but the expression on his face without the cowl is chilling because if anything, Bruce keeps his shit together when one of them are injured, close to dying. It’s his default, to be stronger, like he could will his strength into one of his soldiers to keep the heart beating, keep the lungs working, keep them alive with his will alone. But if Tim hadn’t known better, if maybe he’d have been there in person, he would have said there was a healthy dose of fear right there. That has a whole bunch of implications as to how bad the new formula is and any plans on a more stable, stockable antidote.

The feed cuts and Red straightens, handing the device back for B to affix to his gauntlet. He almost asks the hard question, the where were you when…? He’s not completely heartless, however. After a second of silence, he moves toward his kitchen area, opens the fridge, and tosses a bottle of water over his shoulder. One for himself, he pulls out a chair at his table and waits, not looking up as he cracks the top and takes a cold drink.

“I was wondering why the JLA came with you; seems pretty obvious now.” There’s that mild tone, one with a whole lot of rebuke because the Batman is here, in his Tower.

B doesn’t put his cowl back up, just pulls up the chair across from him and sits down as well; the half-smirk is tired, still the Batman’s expression because he’ll have to do back down there with the cowl and be The Batman for a while longer. The knowledge, the you’re in my space, is there; B doesn’t seem to care because the guy doesn’t give a shit about boundaries when it’s one of his sons and he has a whole lot of goals to accomplish.

“Kal must have heard some of the details. He showed up in Hong Kong with the others in the jet,” shrug of those massive shoulders, “that happens in a group of metas.”
And yeah, Red gets is because they have the same issues with *mother-hens* in their prospective groups.

“The things we do for them, B. Really.” He drawls easily, watching every tick now that the whole face is revealed to him; but the small tells, the twitches he’s trained himself to look for are surprisingly absent. B is being open with him, honest. The deception lines aren’t showing.

“Preaching to the choir, Tim. Well, once they know you’ve got contingency plans to take them all out, they do become less suffocating. Just some advice.”

The two exchange an amused glance and go back to their water because the tension is still there regardless of in Gotham or in the Tower, in masks or out of them. It’s a weight pressing into the air.

“So?” Red doesn’t need to elaborate.

The half-smile, however, is telling because here’s the part where there’s always multiple motivations for everything he does. And the folder that comes out (hidden in the compartment at the back of his cape *don’t think I don’t know where you stash shit, B*) isn’t as heavy as, say, the file on the gang runners or the new “imports” into Gotham, but the thing still has some weight.

Red opens the flap and his eyes narrow immediately on the first color photo of Brother Blood and a map with satellite photos of the Church… With a small sigh, Red’s eyes go from the paperwork to the Bat and he’s going to have to look into the scanners again since B’s obviously been monitoring the Tower’s network.

Cool as can be, he just takes a drink of his water, “you used the League’s resources, Tim.”

*With thirty coded lines and dozens of re-directs, asshole.* Red’s brow hikes up over his domino.

“Your hacking style hasn’t changed. For someone that’s worked with you like I have,” the guy just shrugs.

“Cult of the Blood isn’t high on the JLA’s list or the Batman’s.” Red slides the paperwork back in the envelope.

“No, they aren’t. The Cult is high on your list.”

And…he can’t help the old ticks when his head tilts just a little in question because *what’s that?* The conversation from WE, the whole “I miss helping you on your cases, miss getting your help on mine” makes this strangely nostalgic (shit, he hasn’t had that R on his chest in a while, get it together, dude).

“I’ll check it out. Thanks.” Non-committal, professional because *dammit*, after the last round of near-fatalities, he’s been on the Cult like white on rice.

B hums a little, “I have more on some others from your database, the next time you’re in Gotham maybe we can compare notes.” Totally mild and unassuming, but without the whiteout lenses down, he can’t narrow his eyes unnoticed.

“Hm. Speaking of Gotham, B. Hood called,” Red deflects like he doesn’t know B is already aware of it, “to check up, see how the last round of bad guy beat-down went, but he didn’t tell me much about the apparently bad week you’ve been having. Was it you that told the Bats not to call me when shit started going down-hill? An extra hand around the city would have probably been helpful.”

The guy just looks at him with the detective vibe going on, but he throws up both hands. “Not my
call, Tim. I suggested getting you in on the communication part of the protocols because we have obviously been remiss in that area with you, but I didn’t say anything to any of the boys about keeping anything back since it would counterproductive to the end goal. Talk to Damian on that front.”

_I believe it, that little shit._ “Seriously? I’m going to stomp that brat. First, he calls me back and now he’s decided he’s not going to anymore? Get that kid some medication, B.”

An eyebrow quirks at him, “there’s a point to it that I can see.”

Red blinks at him.

“Tim, you’re my smartest Robin.” B gives him the look, like _it’s obvious so use your brain, kid._

But there, that “my Robin” just hangs there too, isn’t it?

“Yeah, maybe.” He sighs a little, “I don’t need benched. I’m not anyone’s—“

“Responsibility? Dick mentioned it,” and the not-happy-B scowl is absolutely _righteous._

Red shrugs, “Before I turned eighteen, I was already an emancipated minor, B.”

“I’m aware, Tim. It doesn’t mean—“

“It means that I do what’s necessary for the _mission._”

“It means that you always make the sacrifice play,” Bruce counters, “and it’s usually to your own detriment.”

Now Red’s giving him _the look._

“So you get it honest,” B shrugs, “that doesn’t make it any better. Alfred, Dick, and now Jason are on my case now more than they need to be, and I’m dealing with it too. But…it’s what should happen, I suppose.”

“Are you kidding me? The Bat is letting his Robins tell him to play the game?”

And there’s that small smirk, the one that happens when the cowl is on and someone does the whole _underestimate the guy in the bat suit_ thing. It’s odd because he has a similar expression.

“They care, Tim. It’s that simple,” B takes another drink of his water.

_Am I supposed to believe that’s why you’re here?_ Like he doesn’t know there’s already a bug under the table and the chair, probably one on the window sill or in the blinds. There would probably be trackers on his suit if B wasn’t already aware he kept his ones in San Fran _in San Fran_. His Gotham ones were a completely different design, different fighting capabilities, different security measures (none of which stops Rave from poofing in to reactive the sensors).

“That’s good, B—“ _I’m genuinely happy your family has your back. Someone needs to,_ and he means that.

“Your profile is back.”

A single, decisive nod.

“I’ll thank Jason later for convincing you.”
“He had a point. If the Bats aren’t going to call me in unless they know my general status and cases, it seemed the next logical step.” It also gives him an opportunity to stop the stalking shit, so he could be in Gotham without them actively seeking him out. Not logging in meant **leave me the fuck alone.**

“I appreciate it. Barbara, not so much.”

A small smile turns up the corner of his mouth, but he drinks his water like it’s interesting.

“She’ll deal.”

B hums with an arched eyebrow, “you’re dealing with that fallout, Tim.”

His return smirk gets a sharp edge because, well, they’re in the theater now and who’s the guy that wired the whole thing?

B hold up both hands off the table’s surface, his *I know nothing and will not be accountable.*

“So? Walk me through the process. I need to know what to expect.”

“I log in, do a check-in, and I’m open for Bat business. Pretty easy, no guess work involved.”

“Dick wants a place in your patrol schedule.”

*Nope.* “Not yet.”

Those eyes light with something, an epiphany of sorts, become calculating enough that Red automatically tenses, getting ready for pain because that’s the look of a finishing move, isn’t it?

But B is just piecing together the evidence he’s gathered, turning everything over from the talk in Tim’s apartment to losing Robin, being fired just like he fired Dick all those years ago. This withdrawal didn’t start until after Ra’s kicked him out of the window, not even when his last call out to the Bats had gone unanswered; no, there is some other massive event he’s missed out that turned Tim into the man he is now. Something else that has the teenager stepping back, stepping away, and to fight that compulsion, to get Tim *back,* B needs to know the what behind it. Coming to the Tower hasn’t given him anything yet (except watching those kids downstairs back Tim like guard dogs, and eventually he’ll have one of them come clean).

“I’ve never been good talking, Tim. You know that,” B starts in a low tone.

Red immediately gets to his feet, ready to just *jump out the fucking window or some shit because what?* His wrist is in that hand before he gets a step anywhere.

“Don’t. Tell me why not with Dick.”

And with all the bullshit he could feed Batman right now, Red, for once, does not lie, “I can’t trust him.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Red stares.

“Fair enough.” B’s eyes are too calculating, too intense, making Red wonder what he’s looking for now.

“Why are you asking this?” When the real question is *why now?*
“Because Dick doesn’t know where to go from here. He’s…lost, Tim. He’s been lost for a while, and this,” B’s free hand waves to encompass Red Robin, “is giving him some direction, something. He was always better with you, he was always more with you there for whatever reasons he might have had at the time. It’s not a new thing that he’s…different. It’s been a long downslope, but it correlates with the extended absences, the lack of your presence in the Cave, of you being gone. You’ve always meant a great deal to him, Tim. He’s had to be stronger, better to be a good role model for you, to be your big brother. Without that…”

Red has an insane desire to put the whiteout lenses back down because he’s got nothing for that. Nothing. And yeah. Years of looking up to Dick Grayson, of learning from him, fighting by him, believing in him with the whole big brother thing, being his Robin for a while. Yeah, there was a whole lot of history and whole lot of pain… You’re my brother, Dick. Of course, I knew you’d catch me.

“Shit changes,” and that’s Tim spitting out a hard truth, “and he’s got Dami to big brother for now.”

“Damian isn’t you.”

“I’m here to fight crime, B, not give your son direction.”

“But you’ll put yourself in danger for Jason and Damian, both who have actively tried killing you. Them, you’ll give forgiveness but not Dick.” And B’s voice is deceptively mild, “I don’t need your justifications, Tim. I just want you to think about it.”

The gloved hand releases him, B still looking up at him like the Bat, the Detective, and the concerned guardian all in one expression. “November the ninth, 1:45am,” B just rattles it off, “I was with the League off-world fighting an enemy race, Dick was still in New York tracking that serial killer, he’d gone black. Damian was in Hong Kong with Cassandra, and Jason was with the Outlaws. The Birds of Prey were down when the Clock Tower was compromised. Their net was down.”

Tim, not Red, steps back, staring down at Bruce, arms deceptively loose at his sides because it was enough that they’d let him almost get beaten to death by not answering his call of help; he hadn’t wanted to know more than that. He’d reduced his Gotham monitoring to sweeps twice a week after that, coming back to the Tower with a whole lot of pain and realization riding him.

But no one had been in the city anyway…

Bruce stands slowly, hand up, and takes those important steps closer, one of the gauntlets in his vision before the hand is on his shoulder, squeezing gently. A whole lot of something wells up in his chest, something that he’d locked away to be able to stand on his own. Tim just breathes in, forces away the good times when that hold meant pride and family and we’ve got you, kid.

“I had to know,” Bruce’s voice is soft, not the Batman, but just…the guy that couldn’t make a damn sandwich to save his life and thought the washer had to be broken because how the hell do you work this thing?! “I had to know, Tim.” That hand squeezes his shoulder again because Bruce didn’t deal with failure well, especially not when he failed one of his Robins…

Red smirks a little, “I guess we both do now, B.” He steps out of the hold easily, ignoring the brief moment of regret in his mentor’s (father’s) eyes, “good to have the details.” He steps away because he has to, he needs time to inhale this, to calculate if it’s truth or carefully placed alibis or if really…

The mask, the one without the whiteout lenses and pointy ears, is already settled over Bruce’s face before he even pulls the cowl on, activating the security on it again. “A good detective—“
“—needs all the evidence he can see and more that he can’t.” Red’s voice is a little softer too.

The slight twitch to the Batman’s mouth is his attempt at a smirk, and he turns on his heel to take the stairs back down to the communal floor, Red Robin walking beside him, spine still a little too stiff, still uncomfortable as hell, but there’s something coming together. The evidence is indeed piling up, isn’t it?

“By the way,” the Bat says out of the corner of his mouth when they come into absolute fucking chaos. “Nightwing wants you to come to the yearly. You missed it last year.”

Blinking behind his domino, Red’s got nothing because shit like this always happens when he’s gone for, like, five minutes. The mini (fuck, really? ) tornado caused by Wally and Bart’s let’s see who can negate gravity because why the hell not? is making his wings blow in every which direction; Diana and Cassie are holding onto their lasso that are firmly roped around one of the light fixtures and laughing like fools. Kon and Kal are standing back to back in the middle of the fuck-storm with stop watches and matching grins. Raven is above the floor mediating and trying like hell to keep from frying everyone in the vicinity; Gar is below her with Hal behind the shield and cheering for their prospective speedster, throwing down bets on who’s going to be just a one-millionth of a second faster.

Red face-palms immediately. When everyone notices the Bat and Red on the stairs, everything stops. Furniture hits the ground, dishes break, just utter fuckery and a whole lot of oops faces meet the two.

“Why do we keep them around again?” Red murmurs out of the corner of his mouth.

“Still trying to figure that one out,” the Bat sighs, crossing his arms over his chest and manages to looks appropriately disapproving.

**

“Red,” Robin’s voice is slightly strained. The meaty thumps in the background answer that question. “Are you calling to talk about our last conversation?”

“Nope,” Red draws out, popping the ‘p.’ “I’m logging into the mainframe to check-in. When I do, it will send a text to you and Hood, let you know I’m in town and can take on Bat business.”

“I see,” is grunted in his ear, “it will prove helpful to know you are not sleep deprived and bleeding like a stuck pig as well. I could then debate on whether or not you would prove useful.”

“You told the Bats not to call me in anymore, brat. You get what you get.”

The guffaw is followed by a slight scream as that little shit probably punts a guy in the nuts because wow, wouldn’t put it past him. “You still do not believe,” and there’s that creepy wisdom again, the person Dami should be in ten or fifteen more years, not now. “And only action will convince you if even then.”

The sound of breaking that isn’t glass, maybe teeth? Probably teeth, bones are louder than that on a one-way comm line.

“Don’t get into—“

“Red. Do. Not.” Now there’s an ease down, Robin tying up his criminals. “I will provide you adequate evidence of my sincerity. The others will as well. We require time and your cooperation.
You promised as much.”

Little fucker, he knew well enough that Red would stick to a promise. He should never have given the weakness away, but well, too little, too late now.

“I’ll stick by my word,” is growled out with a sneer Robin can’t see but can well image.

“Of course you will. It is in your nature.” Then the bang of the grapple and wind whistling, “when are you checking in?”

“Now,” in his Gotham perch, Red activates his status, “I’ve e-mailed you a case file. Have it read by tomorrow night. You and me.”

“A case?” Robin’s tone is more curious than questioning.

“You want to start on your list, this is where we begin. Meet me at the usual spot, bring the file.”

He knows Robin is grinning that evil smirk because the kid likes a challenge, always has. “I’ll be waiting, Red. Don’t disappoint.”

“Never do, Red out.”

Chapter End Notes

Real talk: Let's remember that Tim Drake is a 19 year old kid. Let's just take a moment with that. Sure, he put the ‘bad’ in badass! But, he's a human being, he's prone to the same failing and pain as anyone else, mask be damned; if anything, he's the guy with the most reasons to want to believe but not at the same time. So, slowly but certainly, the Bats are trying to give him evidence to draw his own conclusions (because yeah, Detective) without chasing him back out into the void. One of the things that originally drew me to Tim as Robin was the fact that he had crazy skills as an adult crime fighter with the quirks and faith of a kid; he could be more than one thing: oober powerful and steady one issue, but weak and needy the next. Out of all the Bats, Tim was the most real to me. So, what about you?

As always, thanks for reading ;)
Crash

Chapter Summary

Because everyone in the cape and cowl crew needs to crash.

Chapter Notes

Because I could not, just... I don't know. Maybe because RussetRedRain's comment about Dick on Chapter 11. The guy isn't flawless and well, maybe because Jason. Also, Arkaedia is my homegirl. Fact.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wall is the only solid thing right now, pressing on his shoulder blades and the corresponding lacerations between them. He's... everyone has a bad night occasionally, even him. It's one of those. Technically, he should have been hanging out with the couch, eat cereal, and getting the fucking boxes in his closet unpacked (finally). But naw. He's sitting here getting blood on the wall, still in the tights, the suit, and just...

Blockbuster.

Tarantula.

Jason.

Bludhaven.

The Titans.

Red Robin without Tim Drake.

And fucking Black Mask.

It's been coming for a while, the eventual instances that he has to ask himself the question as to whether or not the good they do outweighs the bad.

And he feels like breathing is a struggle, like his chest is too full of the bad, like he's too used up to be any good now. He just lets the wall hold him up, allows himself to just slump, be useless, be empty.

And something is there, a noise in the background, then a head of dark red hair, dark eyes that used to be green, still were once and a while. Right now, they're blue, not as blue as Tim's or Bruce's, a lighter but more intense depth.

Intelligently, Jason hadn't touched him (good idea because Robin training), was just kneeling at one side of his sprawled legs, mouth moving, eyes taking him in from head to foot.
"…Wing? Hey, I need you to come back, okay? It's just me. Left the brat home. He can take a
fucking pill. Hey, can you hear me now?"

Finally, the real world is filtering in, "what-?" 'Are you doing here?' We haven't been doing this
thing in months. You weren't comfortable. I was fine with it. I could just be family if that’s what you
needed, fuck, that’s never a question.

"Dick?" and there's a small smile there, "weren't answering your phone or comm, asshole. Isn't that a
big 'no,no' on your list?"

And he can’t say anything to that, just stare at his brother pretty much sitting across from him in his
bathroom while blood oozes slow and slimy, itching now that he’s aware of it.

"Hm," Jason just gives him another once over like he's looking into the guys thought processes.
When he speaks again, his voice is almost an octave lower. "If I touch you, you gonna feed me your
boot with a side of knuckles?"

Still, he's got nothing because maybe in the suddenly blown-out part of his brain (where he usually
squirrels away the big bads and the failures and the fucked situations), he still thinks he did some
major damage to one Jason Peter Todd.

He'd let the kid get acclimated to Robin, to figure out Bruce and himself before coming back to
Gotham on occasion. He'd tried to let the kid he was to figure out his place, figure out Bruce. He’d
been trying not shaking up the kid's sense of self in the ranks (since the old Robin showing you up is
never the way). The anger and betrayal at B for replacing him didn't belong to the kid, and he tried—
God, he'd tried so hard not to take it out on him because even then Dick realized how much it wasn't
his fault…

Initiating a casual, sexual relationship was just another fuck-up on his part. He'd come to care about
Jason (rage and all), he'd wanted to do something, anything to help him heal, to move on. He'd been
part selfish about it because it had been a while and…

The nice cut on his back gives a sharp edge, bringing him back out of his own head again. Fucking
Jason is pressing down hard enough to almost make him flinch.

"…me, Dickie. C'mon. Talk to me."

A second to clear out the fog, "I'm okay. Long…couple of shifts." And Jason could deduce he meant
more than the day job.

"Well, you're not going to win Miss Gotham any time soon, Big Wing. I don't care how fucking cute
you might think you are under the road rash."

A laugh, rusty and hoarse comes from the base of his chest, startling him.

Jason grins a little sadly and stands from his crouch. "What trouble did you get into tonight?"

"Black Mask is going to take a few steps back after this."

And that's enough said because now that the Red Hood was a foot out of the 'control the gangs and
drugs' racket, Black Mask had taken a step back in.

The first thing that could spew from Jason’s mouth might be are you fucking dense? Why didn’t you
shoot a text, asshat? Mother-fucking Batman just thinks he can roll out like that? You. Suck. Any
combination really of them really. But Dickie…Dick was the first R, so his fucking precedent set the
tone and all of them had their own versions of vigilante shock syndrome once and a while. Par for the course.

Instead of giving in to the urge of reminding Big Wing (again) what an asshole he is, the red-head just makes choices.

The sound of water trickles in, making Dick lift his weary head enough to look at gauntlets, gloves, and jacket coming off; then to the linen closet for fresh towels. Just looking at the haphazard mess would give Al palpitations. It's enough Jason is frowning hard; he used to pick up Dick's mess back when.

*Not the time, Dick.*

He vanishes out of the bathroom for a few long blinks while Dick gets some of his sense back to be able to wonder if this is a good idea, letting Jason take care of him like-

The guy has two pairs of sweats and t-shirts so the thinking pauses, mutes, something because the red-head is bending down, winding an arm around him to pull Dick to his feet without aggravating the wound on his back or the mad impressive road rash pretty much everywhere else (skill, just skill to get rash right in the crease of the damn) hip. And it's a crazy thing that Jason braces on his left side, remembering the bad knee, compensating for the initial give. Once the thing stretches, he can put his weight on it again.

And this is very *déjà vu*, even when in reverse: carrying one another's assess in through the window because *fucking ow* is going to be the mantra of the following morning, patching each other up (more Red Hood than Nightwing, natch). It’s the domesticizes they managed to stumble into somehow.

Jason leans in to test the water with a hand and looks just slightly down to start peeling the rest of the Nightwing suit down his hips and legs. It's nothing he hasn't seen (the reinforced jock and underwear) or done (scarred fingers moving over the indent of his hips, down the outside of his thighs and calves) before, but the hesitation is there in the way his hand just rests on Dick's bare thigh, gaze slightly off to the left.

"I can manage, Little Wing." He only limps once while moving to the shower, leaving the blood trail on the wall without a shit to give. Stiff with old pain, Dick peels the last layers off and steps into the shower, ignoring the initial sting on the raw skin. He hangs his head to let the water run over him, sighing hard, bracing his hands.

The door slides open; he doesn't need to turn to know Jay's bare ass behind him. Maybe he's left the Red Hood behind for the night.

The arm comes close because the body wash is in the shower caddy hanging over the pipe. They don’t need talk while Dick doesn't flinch at the minute pain of soap and Jason isn't still checking out his body, probably tracking out the new scars (he can't convince himself those calloused fingers aren't touching the newest ones knowingly). Dick just closes his eyes, gives himself over to the ministering.

Jay's hand on his shoulder turns him, pulls him slightly out of the spray, so the cloth can work the sides of his neck, down his collar bone, and ease over the his shoulder. Down his chest, careful on the bruising, and there’s no hesitate this time. He just kneels down to reach feet and legs and hips, gripping the left one tight, keeping Dick with him and out of his head.

It works better than meditation or terrible movies. When Jay looks up at him with a quirked brow and it's *the look* that started after their first time, and that ass knows what it does. The fight had been epic,
bloody, ending with Jay throwing the damn helmet and shoving his tongue down Dick's throat like a
dying man. They didn't make it off the roof, jerking each other off in the shadows, stumbling back to
a safe house to shower and do it all again like they're both horny teenagers or something. Three
(four? Fuzzy on that part) times, wrapped around each other, mapping scars and sensitive places,
mouths and tongues, teeth and hands, skin on skin. At the time, he'd taken it as a sign. Maybe Jason
would let him back in, maybe even let Dick help him however he could.

It had taken a month for Jay to still be there in the morning…but, that look is still part of him, a
testament to how far they had come in welcoming him back to the family.

The cloth left his feet and Jay is rising again, thumb on his chin to direct his broken gaze.

"It's one of those nights, Big Wing." Not a question, but Dick still doesn't need to confirm or deny.
He just needs to keep breathing.

Jason's the one that dries him, wrestles boxers up his legs and over his ass before drying and dressing
himself. Jason is the one that puts him on the sink and stitches his back, puts ointment and gauze
pads over the road rashes. And he doesn't need to talk or justify, to quote the rules or theorize how he
could have done it all differently. He does that in his head, a version of the younger Batman in his
own voice critically replaying how shit should go because when he was Robin, when he was
Robin… Jay's arm around his back slides him off the sink, pulls the sweats up his legs, shirt comes
over his head, one of the few blank ones (trust Jay to forgo the Bludhaven PD ones). He leads Dick
through the apartment to the kitchen, sitting him down at the island and pouring coffee from the fresh
pot he must have made before coming into that bathroom. He puts the mug in front of Dick with only
a pointed finger and already has his phone in one hand.

No hello, "I'm with him. He's good. Check ya later, Brat Wonder."

“Shit.” Because—

“Yeah,” Jay pulls a container from the fridge, opens cabinets for plates, and works the microwave
like a champ.

“Shit.”

“I believe we’ve established that.”

“You know, in case it wasn’t clear.”

“You’re the guy that went out against doctor’s orders, don’t blame the messenger, Big Wing.” And
he’s grinning with his back pressed against the counter, waiting for the (nice smelling) food to get
done.

Dick huffs a laugh back, savoring coffee, “I was ready. A week, Little Wing.”

“Yeah, actually dying really gives you more time off than that, but semantics, you know? Maybe we
should talk to B about setting up a standard, yeah?”

“You’re an ass,” but fuck if he isn’t laughing when the plate lands in front of him and the smell hits.

“Someone’s gotta balance your dumb assery, Dick. I’ve got an obligation here.”

“Everyone exaggerates,” the elder deadpans, “I am not some rabid hug-monster that coddles all the
littles and follows the Bat Rules like it’s my damn religion.”
In mid-chew Jason pauses, gives him a patient look.

And because he’s eating, Dick automatically picks up his fork, “hugs are great, man. If more people would just hug it out—”

“Hm. That’s why every crime fighter in, gee, well, ever, trusts Dick Grayson*? Huh, I thought it was your ass in that suit.”

And there’s what Jay wants to see, a little heat to Big Wing’s cheeks even though the guy totally knows already how fine he is and doesn’t usually need reminding (it’s a ‘Dickie feels like ass’ night, let him have something).

The two eat in comfortable silence, glad for chicken and rice in a bag because it’s actually pretty good, and dawn is still three hours away, so maybe a few hours to sleep in…

“What set you off?” He finally asks, taking both empty plates and searching for dish soap. “The Fear Gas? Baby Bird? Lady Spider that is still alive regardless of my numerous offers to—“

“Nope. Don’t kill anyone,” comes from his mouth by rote. “Not sure. I just…”

Plates are set up to dry, the water stops running, and Jason Todd is boosting himself on the table right by Dick’s hand, looking down with those blue eyes, taking him apart a little at a time.

“Yeah,” the younger man reaches a hand and is pulling Dick into his side, easy, not restraining because well, he’s been there before in his life, knows that sometimes (just sometimes when old demons ride you when you inevitably have to look back) easy is the way to go. And Dick moves willingly, pretty much letting his upper body drap over Jason’s and take a full breath in what seems like too long. One hand is in his hair, blunt nails scratching, carding through, and it feels like he might be able to move again, pull himself together and just fucking move…

He may have nodded off or meditated into sleepy as hell because the next thing he knows, he’s pulled to his feet, hand on his wrist, following the lines of Jay’s shoulder under the t-shirt, watching the covers be pulled back, and the guy is just holding them up for Dick to crawl in too. Which, of course he does, scoots down to let the younger man curve around him, wind an arm around his hips and warm. Warm. Been cold for too long if this warm makes him relax immediately.

And it’ll still be warm when the two inevitably shift in their sleep, and Dick’s plastered to Jason’s back with his nose right at the nape of his neck where the ends of his hair are just almost hitting. It’ll still be warm when the sun is blocked from the windows, and they’re laying facing one another, arms over the other, slowly coming awake with sleeps half-smiles. It’ll be warm when Jason is the one that closes the gap to press against Dick from mouth to knees, and warm even when the clothes come off for the familiar dance of skin on skin, of touch and taste and noises...

It's still warm when Jason stays through the day and puts the Red Hood back on in Dick's apartment.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all had a great holiday (for those that celebrate it) and I'm sorry for the time it took to get something, but yeah, the struggle has been REAL. I haven't been able to move forward because I would start the "next" chapter and get sidetracked with things I wanted first and yada, yada, yada. I couldn't even write my Avengers thing and just
well, *sad face.* However, asking for drabbles on Tumblr kind of helped! Haven't done a space salvagers AU, so that helped loosen up the muse.

I'm here: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/iphoenixrising

Oh, I forgot: The trusting Dick Grayson line comes from a panel shown here: http://theflyingwonder.tumblr.com/post/132255485896/how-do-you-think-the-dc-universe-would-have-been. I couldn’t find what issue or where this panel is from, but I really like that: “Next to Superman, Dick Grayson is the one guy alive that every other crimefighter trusts.” *Swoon*
Fear

Chapter Summary

Dick Grayson isn't the only one that gets pissy when someone messes with the Bats

Chapter Notes

This was...hard. For real. This story is making my angst have angst. Gah. Well, I also needed a little smart ass Tim in my life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

All things considered, demon brat can take a fucking pill.

Well, anyway, it’s almost a Robin-rite at this point: being ditched by the bigger vigilantes (at least once). It goes right up there with rooftop tag, best one-liner wins, name that crime, guess how many stitches that will need, which Titan did that fucked-up shit, and Russian Roulette for Replacements (still not funny, asshole).

Just so many good times.

However, in Gotham, you had to have priorities if the cape life is the one for you, and Priority One is getting his shot at the big bad... because Dick. Dick had to be shocked back to life, had died twice on the table, and is still “off patrol.” Well, one of them at least.

Before he called Dami, well, even before his new and improved encoding in the BI mainframe pinged him with a little heads-up that Crane had been spotted, Red fought with himself but had finally infiltrated O’s security feed, going in under new techniques and style because he really did not need this getting back to the Bats. He spent about twenty minutes checking out the guy’s living room until Dick Grayson made a disheveled appearance from the hallway.

And just because... because reasons, he’d waited until Dick went to the coffee pot with stumbles and yawns to disconnect the feed.

He was moving, so yeah. Then, just like fate would have it, Red gets good intel: Scarecrow spotted last night. Not engaged. Still showing signs of being ape-shit with his new addiction to fear.

Fucking. Sweet.

He changes up Red Robin in Gotham because this and being tight for it. Wearing the domino in his apartment while the layers go on, the belt is checked again, the other harness adjusted for a cape with a higher neck line...like his old cape. He cracks his neck and fits the gloves on before the gauntlets. Bo strapped to his thigh, backup fit at the harness section under his shoulder blades. He’s ready to rock and ignores the fucking Batcomm still in the drawer; he’s out the window as soon as full dark hits.
And the night air around the helmet's visor, snaking into his hair is a thing. Good thing. Inside the helmet, Red gives a little nostalgic grin. His phone is on silent, and the sensors in his suit are already on a loop feed of his regular heartbeat, O2 intake, all the readings of a healthy, uninjured Red. Tracking pinged on the South side in case any of the Titans check it out for shits and giggles, not to mention for Hood since that asshat can apparently hack them. If there’s anyone Red doesn’t want to see right now, it’s any of the other Bats. This one is all him.

Ditch the bike a few block down and fly.

He swings closer to the shadows, out of the city’s errant glow; making the extra effort usually goes the right way since Jason screams like a girl when anyone gets the drop on him (he does, don’t let him tell you different). The other 1/16th of his brain briefly reviews the last five hideouts and any connecting points that might give a hint where the Scarecrow may be laying low (well, Batman, so it’s only a matter of time, right?).

Luckily for him, the dots are in his old stomping ground (the large piece of the city that he could name every nook and cranny from muscle memory) instead of the sections he rarely used to patrol. He has several places already in mind, cross referencing Crane’s habits, his testing methodology, his usual victims (‘test subjects’), and an installation abandoned or densely populated enough for creation of the new toxin as well as any experiments the villain may be completing for a newer, more deadly batch.

Running through his mental rolodex is enough to keep him from focusing on the whats and whys behind this. A year ago, he might have considered called in for back-up, let O know this is the road he was going down for the night because, yeah, Crane, part of the Rogue Gallery for a reason. It’s taken a lot, but they don’t make him flinch anymore, second-guess. Those days are long gone, his brain kicking into ‘counter-measures’ whenever any of them steps up (should that make him a little sad or just relieved...?). Johnathan Crane is just another one he would have to out-think; he would have to keep in mind, a doctor with the potential to do something real, to fucking help people, and he turns his talents into a lifetime of mind-fuckery.

He thrives off traumatizing his victims, not outright killing them, but carving scars into their souls to make sure they’re never really nightmare-free again. He uses his intellect for a whole lot of bad, and at one time...at one time, Tim Drake could have possibly gone down that road since, you know, the whole Captain Boomerang thing, right?

He hits a section of the tenament building to give himself a brief, mental shake remember who you're going up against, dumb ass. Get the terrible shit out of your head before you do this.

"Right. Don't be an idiot. Bart will never let you live it down." He says to himself while scanning the run-down block, and his memory pops up a sign that used to be right there Philmore's Pharmaceuticals.

"No way it's that easy." Because Gotham, right?

Sure enough, he just settles low by the ledge for twenty, maybe thirty minutes (running through the list of DVered television shows Cassie left him before she took off for the week; he had five to get through before they got back because spoilers, Tim) before two white, unmarked box trucks pull up the block and slide into the alley.

"Please tell me this is my life right now," he gives it a good five minutes before he moves.

**
This one isn’t his favorite. John Crane, masked as the Scarecrow, gets annoyed with the birds; he was never good with children. Especially this special little brand; one of them usually leads the pain-in-his-ass right to whatever hideout he happened to carve out of the city.

This specific bird is the most annoying, the one with a reason to be cocky. None of them should have found him yet, not before the big reveal when half the country could just feed his addiction with simpering cries and terrified screams. Oh, they were all going to fall into it, to feel like they wanted to crawl out of their own skin just to get away from agony of terror (that’s your son? Your daughter? Your mother? Your brother? Do you want so see them split open like ripe fruit, rotting corpses reaching up from the grave to drag you down? Rivers of blood and all of you will drown in it…). He should have had the time needed to get the second trucks out of here before any of the Bat kin made an appearance.

And this fucking little bird. He hates this one, spent days talking with J about all the fucking birds, which ones they wanted to take apart, which ones they wanted to bleed (J is one up on him in that department; his neurosis over the one that came back, taking victory right out of J’s hands, get more intense every time he comes back…). J always wanted the first two strapped on his table for play time. And John, he wants this one. The one that flew away. A helpless thing screaming, re-living every loss, babbling all his secrets, cracking under the pressure, all that careful calm gone when the kid just gives the fuck in. It’s a secret desire, to be the one that destroys the smartest Robin, the detective.

Getting Nightwing with the bio-tech wasn’t nearly as satisfactory as it would be to get this kid on his table for a few hours, a few days to coax every nightmare, every whimper, every inch of pain out of him.

Two of his men (not the best or the brightest, mind you) go flying overhead, slamming against the walls of the factory, one falling down on the moving conveyor belt because the machinery is moving, the ten separate strands of toxic venom made in the multiple over-the-counter medications that would soon be distributed all over the country; hundreds of thousands will fall to fear. But before that can happen, he’s got this little problem to take care of, the one he hates above them all: the bird that is so much like the Bat. He looks like he’s dead, just like Bats, no expression, no emotion in the parts of his face that can be seen. He’s serious, no mess-ups, no moments of indecision. He’s the dangerous one.

With the wicked scythe in hand, the Scarecrow laughs, and he stands in the middle of the working factory like he’s the eye of the storm.

"You are very out of your usual element, Red Robin.” Because he knows the real name, the old one. Of course, it had been a while since he’s seen this one; from all the reports that reached him in Arkham, the kid is a force unto himself now. He fights without the Bat, just a team of metas outside Gotham, on the Bat’s out list. Poor kid. So apparent. So lost. This little bird keeps himself standing when the Bats left him to fly or fucking fall. It’s all so obvious just by watching how different he is than when he wore the R. And John, Scarecrow, Dr. Crane, knows how to make his weaknesses all about fear.

When he speaks, the dozen henchmen still surrounding the cape stop, pause long enough to watch the boss approach, the scythe gleaming in the overhead lights as he moves.

“Am I?” Amused, the kid straightens with that wicked fast bo looking so deceptively loose in one hand.
“You are.” Scarecrow waves a vague hand, scythe in the other, “where’s your little team of freaks, hm? Did they take a page from the Bat Book and leave you to your own…devices?”

And the white lenses hide the eyes, hide the calculating the kid certainly is doing. And the psychologists still in the villain comes to the fore while his men back up a little, make a space for the Scarecrow to face Red Robin without another body in the way. Of course Bats are what they are, but everyone has a weakness, everyone is afraid of something or other, physical, mental, spiritual, all humans from the very first ones to roam the Earth, owned terror, owned it down to their bones.

Red gives a disingenuous shrug, “I work better alone in Gotham. The Bats know it.”

“Really? Is that the truth?” Scarecrow gives an unfunny laugh, distorted through whatever he’s got in the mask.

“Yuuup, makes the whole stealth thing easier.”

One finger comes up to wave slowly back and forth in front of Red Robin, “who are you fooling, kid? By now, I know the Bat, and he doesn’t let any of his little birdies fly without back-up. Not here.” A small movement, barely a flick, and the trap is activated.

"Divide and conquer, Scarecrow. That’s the way we roll.”

And now, time to start the monologue because he would need a few important minutes for the toxin to set in; he would need to start cultivating the right feelings if this bird was going to feel the full affects.

Then, he has a moment of brilliance. “Birdy, Birdy, Birdy.” The voice behind the mask goes low, “It isn’t your fault, you know. That you aren’t special enough for them, that they left you. It’s not your fault, is it? It’s not your fault you can’t be what they need. It’s not your fault that you’re weaker than they are.” The Scarecrow paces around him, inside the ring of his men standing at Red Robin’s back, and the minute amount of toxins he’d triggered to start surging through the room from the floor vents would be hitting the kid about now.

“I understand that, Red Robin. I do. I was good enough to practice psychology but not be in the same league as my peers. I had to fight and claw to be heard, to be taken seriously. I had to do more, be more in order to earn my place. If anyone knows where you are now, I do.”

The minute sound of gloves tightening makes the man inside the costume grin to himself while his thug patrol shifts their weight, antsy to get the signal to attack.

“Do they even know who you are anymore, Red Robin? Or did they dump you completely when you stopped being the other one? Did you give up that cape on your own? Or did they take it from you? Because that kid...they replaced your with that murdering little bastard?”

The shoulders tense while the Scarecrow paces around again, to put him in front of the vigilante. And the lack of talk just gives the Scarecrow more reason to smile behind the mask because he’s hit on something deep within the Bat clan.

“Honestly, kid. What do you really owe them at this point?”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, Crane. I grew up. Robin’s a kid’s role.”

The white lenses are directly on him, the tip of the bo in Red Robin’s hand resting on the floor, and he’s given the vigilante long enough to be infected, for the effects to take place, and this, this, is going to be such a show. Better than Nightwing, maybe even better than Red Hood who has
volumes dedicated to his own brand of horrors, ones that were so sweet and brittle, cracking him open wide. But no, making the level one of them give, finally realize the full extent of his own fear, yes. Yes. It’s going to be so good.

“Is it, now? Why keep the Robin then? A little sentimental maybe?”

And he wants to see behind the mask, he wants the expression that’s surely a hurt one, and he wants to witness it, to see one of the Bats broken. He wants it so much he can almost taste the pain coming off the kid.

“It’s so other superheroes won’t have to memorize a new nom de guerre.” But oh, is that a waver in the dark tone? Yes, yes he thinks it is.

“I see. My mistake. Can’t blame me for thinking they kicked you out of the Bat club. The Red Hood likes to kill, and he’s still part of the family, so you can see where my curiosity on the ranks comes from.”

“I got nothing for you, Scarecrow. So how about you give up the ghost and take a trip back to Arkham?” The kid tenses a little, but there’s a slight twitch to his hand. "Make my night all kinds of easy since we both know how it's going to end."

“Instead, why don’t you tell me the reason you’re really here, Red Robin? This isn’t your city anymore, is it? This isn’t your home.”

And these mannerisms from the old Robin come through enough for the kid to tilt his head a little, thinking about the question.

“I’m here,” and the voice still deep, but a little hoarse at the same time, just what the Scarecrow wants to hear. “I’m here…”

“Hm. Not sure now are you?” And he gets a little closer when the guy seems to falter, to close in on himself just enough for someone that’s fought the Bats for years to look for. The shoulders trembling just slightly, hand working around the staff while the other clenches and loosens by his leg.

“But the question, Red Robin, is whether you were ever really sure?” And all the study, the knowledge, the know thy enemy, comes to the fore every time the Scarecrow meets one of the vigilantes. His monologue to Nightwing had been a work of art, convincing the masked man the entire Bat family was in their graves and he left to mourn, to weep over their new dirt beds while he was the one about to go into heart failure. And he’d been so strong, fight the effects of the toxin so hard, so valiantly, trying not to believe. If Robin hadn’t interfered, he would have a dead Bat on his belt…

He still could, after all.

“How long has it been?” His voice drops lower, "How long since they fought the good fight with you?" And those horrible teeth, the scythe glinting as he walks because he needs to pull the fears, the insecurities out.

"I—don’t remember,” and the slurring is perfect, utterly delectable. “I—don’t…They aren’t…”

“They aren’t going to catch you anymore. They don’t care about you enough to now.” And the face changes from that blank nothingness, the mouth drooping, the forehead smooth with disbelief, and if Scarecrow could see his eyes, he would know how desperate the kid is not to believe. However, neurological toxins combined with the organic compound from Ivy’s old control potions just made this batch that much more potent on the Bat, no matter how much antidotes he’s swallowed over the
years. To this, he’d be just as susceptible as the rest of the population, a broken little puppet.

“And you’re just going to fall. That’s obviously what you’ve been doing since the new little Robin took over the name, your name. You’ve been falling, haven’t you?"

Red Robin’s pulse speeds up, his chest moving in short pants, trying to get a full, deep breath, and that horrific grin, just gets wider as Scarecrow watches, waits for it to take over in him—the fear that even after all the history, he is on his own.

“I—I’ve fallen hard before,” Red Robin admits in a whisper.

The Scarecrow hums, scythe coming off his shoulder easily, fitting in between his hands like he’s always known how to hold one, like he could have been reaping from the moment he came into this world.

“That doesn’t worry you now, Red Robin. You’re so accustomed to falling by this point. But, I know what it is that you do fear, what keeps you up until dawn and you’re safe from the nightmares.” He’s moving in on the vigilante now, grips tightening on the handles of his sharpened blade. “Red. Robin.”

The kid’s hand comes up to his grab the uniform over his heart, mouth opening in a desperate exhale to get enough air, and of course he is, the toxin is filling him up to the brim, getting in his blood and viscera, making his very cells begins to tear themselves apart.

He looms, waiting for Red Robin to look up through the lenses of that mask.

“You’re afraid you’ve driven them away, aren’t you? What did you do to make them abandon you?”

Everything just pauses when Red Robin’s horror-filled features turn to look up at him, his tone almost broken “I—I…” His knees must give out but the kid is still looking up, watching the Scarecrow raise the scythe above his head with sadistic glee.

"Whatever it is, kid. Some day, they might regret leaving you behind.”

“They....caught me having sex in the Batmobile, Doc. I betrayed Batman.” That gives the Scarecrow a shocked moment to pause because what?

With a smirk, the gloved hand hits the right spot on his harness. Before the scythe comes down, the vents around them explode in fire and smoke and Red Robin is laughing, laughing like he’s just got a dose of J’s gas.

"Seriously. I'm out of the family. Shunned! But, hey, best twenty minutes ever, right?"

The scythe goes flying with a casual strike of the bo, a move so fast, the Scarecrow can’t even jerk back an inch. The Bird shows off the smirk before he dives back into the three thugs without weapons like he’s never had a moment’s doubt.

Fuck, I could have had him.

“GET HIM!”

Is just a little too late because, you know, Bats. The kid is moving like water through his men, a liquid roll to his fighting technique that is reminiscent of the Dark Knight himself; Scarecrow take the few important seconds to dive for his scythe and activate the full traps hidden under the moving
conveyor belts for when one of them came sniffing around.

But he keeps talking, his weapon fitting into his palms, sliding and shifting in his gloves. “So where’s the rest of the Bat family since they aren’t with you? Mourning? At the wake? Tell me, kid, did he fight until the end?”

With Red Robin taking on numerous opponents with the two holding his arms, the scythe tastes flesh, just a skim, when the vigilante jerks in the hold, throwing himself over their heads and the two that had his arms with him. The move is precise, controlled, even with blood spewing thick from his leg, such a little upstart Bat that Crane cackles almost happily. He jumps harder into the fray with his men while the sound of air escaping is the full onslaught of his latest four batches.

The vigilante dodges and strikes, a dance around the remaining thugs and the Scarecrow’s own insane brand of fighting. The scythe’s end buts him in the side while he’s catching a punch, kicking out, and delivering a stunning palm strike; he doesn’t lose his footing for a moments, a jump-spin over the moving conveyor belt brings him out of the blade’s path while knocking the next one into it. The hissing scream as the blade tears flesh echoes against whiling servos and the soft saaa of the bo.

The brat throws something from his assortment of toys, hitting the Scarecrow in the chest; the impact expands, making him stumble with the spray of something hitting his mask.

“You’re going to be so disappointed,” the bo strikes hard with the whip of his wrist, “when he shows up,” a grunt and another kick, “helping old ladies cross the street.”

The knife is good; this guy knows how to use it. A professional because the big bads always had to have at least one in their hodgepodge gathering of minions. Here’s the guy that works the hunting knives like he was made for it, like the hilt is glued to his hand. Well, knives against a bo (and the guy is good, but he's not Jason) and he's already on the win side of the equation. He doesn’t even need to get in range of the guy or turn from the one he's currently introducing to his shin. His free hand already has his own brand of anti-venom out of his belt, ducking down for a leg sweep, bo extended and a quick spray to the leg. It dries fast and gives a layer of protection because that blade probably has something on it. Knife pro is holding his broken nose. Pansy. Walk it off.

Back in the belt and up, pull the bo back in, turn, next on the list.

“You little fucker!”

Back flip over, out of the path.

“Really?” Back of his fist breaks a nose, “you don’t like being drugged? Geeze, Crane,” grunt and not from him, “that’s the pot and the kettle, right?”

His grin is the last thing the thug sees because he’s out and it’s just them. Him and the big bad.

“How are you feeling by the way?” Red asks conversationally while he squares off the that creepy mask, flashing briefly on the time before this (Batman and Robin behind him, still wary because he knew Bruce was alive out there, that he needed them) while the scythe makes shiny circles in the overhead lights.

The mask just chuffs, a half-laugh, “Birdy…oh, Birdy.”

“What? Thought you were the only one with a chemistry set as a kid?” And he’s moving, closing the gap for some face-to-face because he needs to get Scarecrow’s heart pounding, blood rushing, adrenaline pumping, and then… “The compound is already under your mask. You’ll start feeling it in under five minutes.”
He back bends like Dick, the blade coming almost close enough to get the tip of his nose. That one...little too close. His head isn’t far enough in the game while trying to calculate. He hops up on the moving conveyor belt, kicking a box of pills out of his way, knees bent for the defense.

“What do you think could really affect me, kid? There’s enough toxins in my body to kill anything you have.”

And that hideous mask is right there, pacing him, moving with the wicked blade. The sway, the movement doesn’t throw either of them, Crane or Red Robin; like the vigilante, the villain is thin and flexible, fast and furious, with his own assortment of toys.

“It’s a neuro-stimulant,” Red grins, jumping up and over the scythe’s swipe, the follow-up down strike “for your hypothalamus. So if you get a little excited, I won’t judge. Vigilante's Honor.”

“Smart, Birdy. Negate the fear with an extreme opposite.” He manages a blow to the side of the kid’s head, giving him enough time to double-hand the scythe again, throwing the end behind Red Robin’s leg, kicking out. The kid falls, bo in both hands to block. "It. Won't. Work."

“Really? It's also a nerve agent so I'm pretty sure this is a win, Doc.” The bo and the scythe meet, giving Scarecrow the chance to try forcing the kid to buckle. It gives him the chance to come closer, put the mask right in the kid’s face.

“I’ve always hate you most. Smart ass little punk. None of you fucking realize what I’m trying to do here.”

Red grunts with effort, at a disadvantage with the Scarecrow on top him. “Uh-hu, I’ve always hated you because you’re so small-minded. The Joker has better goals, you know.”

“What the fuck do you know you little shit?”

“Me? I know that you forgot the primary rule: watch your surroundings.” And Red Robin abruptly shoves harder as the compound does it’s job. The villain’s strength is abruptly gone as the nerve agent infiltrates; Red throws back, hard enough for the Scarecrow to get beaned in the back of the head by a support beam. And (as he watches Crane pass the hell out on the moving conveyor)…he’s thinking wow, kind of disappointing right here. Just a little, was that it? Kind of fight.

Red takes a few important seconds to lift Crane off the conveyor belt so he can start tying up the whole crew for the police to come fetch soon. The burning in his leg is a minor detail to gathering samples of the products to analyze while the call goes through to Jim Gordon’s desk. Once they’re lined up for transport, Red finds the main control panel and turns on all the ventilation fans so the police can come in without being subjected to a whole ton of bad.

He’s slightly limping by the time he’s jogging back to the main lab and snatching the old, rusted canisters just like Ivy told Robin. Gross. Some of this has to make it back for analysis (even though the Bats probably already have the breakdown since this isn’t anything new), so he carefully sets out two (one for him, one for B). He moves back to the big “wall ‘o criminal everything,” watching the multiple security feeds from all over the installation and accessing the system. He helps out the GCDP by printing copies of the first distribution route, the second copy going into his harness along with samples of all the current strains.

The picture isn’t pretty. Mass producing liquid fear into unassuming over-the-counter medications: the standard cold and flus at your local drug store, have some terror with your antacids, really. But, it’s good. He’ll monitor the cops chasing everything down while he does it himself on the down low.
The approaching sirens break him out of the Scarecrow’s systems because *almost out of time*. Red snatches up the canisters and takes off for the back entrance; quick glance and no one’s in the alley to see him shoving samples into his side bags. Good night, good haul, and the big bad is going back. He can go back, log in, and go into lock down. Fitting on his helmet, Red Robin has a plan and he's gone by the time red and blue is lighting up the old brick and mortar.

**

The bike jumps forward under his thighs, giving just the right amount of power to make the small hop off the street and into the secret passage half a block away from his perch; the thing is narrow, no room for a car by design (thirty-seven minutes approximately, hurry it up). He hadn’t had the room to build a fully functioning one to lead into the sub-basement of his apartment; there had been too many other things on his plate at the time, including re-joining the Titans and redesigning his costume and wings, still searching for Bruce, trying not to deal with a hostile corporate take-over with the wrong kind of *hostile*, setting up his own network of safe houses, communications, what he would need to fly solo.

This tunnel was more of an afterthought when he gave up the theatre in Crime Alley. At the time, the apartment had to suffice as his primary nest in Gotham, to house his equipment and what few personal items he still had out of storage.

Sparse lights give him an inkling he’s on the path before the automatic door at the end opens up, spilling the underground garage light into the tunnel. His leg burns more noticeably when he arches, pulls the bike up enough to take the sharp climb, giving enough gas to make it; he ducks down at the same time so he doesn’t skim the trapdoor. He slides the back tire sharply braking, sliding the bike right in the usual spot against the back wall and throws the kickstand down. Turns the bike off and sits back enough to let a series of cracks issue from his beat vertebrae. He stays on the bike for a few minutes, balancing the weight, pulling out his phone to turn the ringer back on…and *shit*.

A lot of missed calls. A lot of left messages. Two texts that he is really not going to read at the moment because none of that shit is from the team.

“Well. *Fuck,*” he says to himself because *really*. The Bats will just have to wait until he’s had a few hours to get all the shit from Crane’s place unpacked analyzed (well, and maybe after he’s had something to eat, maybe even a few hours sleep? Now that's funny).

Taking the side bag off the bike, he slings it over a shoulder, not even bothering to do anything more, just moves up into the garage with street access. He's got to get everything together before he sees them anyway because the rest of the night and probably into tomorrow is going to be a bitch- a step through the door and his lower abdomen tightens.

The punch is a good one, solid, professional, but Red went through a battle with the Wanderer without being touched, and he catches the punch in an ‘X’ hold by instinct, not even dropping the side bag.

“You. Fucking. *Dick.*” Is not from the real Dick Grayson who looks pretty angry in his own right and making no move to get his fist back.

Jason comes out behind him while Dick stares his down from the front. *Yeah. Security. I should have already been on that, shouldn’t I? Well, death dealers to stop and all.*

“I take it this isn’t a run-of-the-mill visit.” He comes back mildly to cover up the ‘fuck, fuck, Bats!’ that just suddenly fills out his brain pan.
“Arkham Unit went to pick up the Scarecrow,” and, yeah, Dick’s still in the GCPD uniform and finally takes his fist back. Straightening with hands on his hips. “Since no one else has seen the guy, must have been you.”

Red gives a sigh, “of course it was me.” He holds the side bag casually against the bad leg.

“I repeat, Baby Bird. You suck so much right now—“ and the guy is looking up at the ceiling like he’s asking for patience (Tim bites the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning).

“Thanks, really, Jason. You shouldn’t have.”

“And how many different strains—“ Dick starts.

“Ten. Compounded in over-the-counter medications.” He jiggles the bag slightly so the bottles rattle.

Jason jumps on the bandwagon, “And where the hell did—“

“Already have the distribution list of his first shipment. GCPD is probably on the way to interception now.”

“How did you—?”

He taps his nose, “underwater aerators from Aqua Lad. The toxin didn’t get in my system unless I ingested it or breathed orally.” (Or got cut by a wicked scythe. Thirty-one mintues)

“Where was the fucker—“

“He set up in the north side, old pharmaceutical factory. How would I not catch that?”

“Fine. So how many—“

“About twenty thugs. Just the average.”

“Stop answering the questions before we’re done, smartass.” Jason seethes a little, also doing the hands on hips thing.

“I have a lot to analyze,” Tim comes back with a shrug, “I’m trying to make this fast.”

Ah. There it is. Red bites the inside of his cheek (again) when Jason just does the whole, washing my hands of your fuckery thing by throwing his hands up in the air, “fine, then. We’ll do this upstairs then, so you can talk while you get that shit set-up.”

“Coffee would be just greaaaat,” he deadpans, already moving to take the stairs up to the perch.

“Do something to earn it, asshole.”

“Pfft. I already did tonight, thanks.”

“Dude, seriously—“

“Tell me you two are just fucking kidding, right?”

“Tim. If I was kidding, I’d ask something like—“

“I do not need any of your terrible traveling salesman jokes, Dick. Seriously, tell Clark he’s not funny and move on. Get better material. Watch Comedy Central. Something.”
“I’m not telling Superman shit. Why don’t you tell him—“


He hits the main floor, “lights, 40%” and right there is the fucking Batman. It really says something about the guy’s skill when Tim’s heart taken an immediate trip into his throat (even though he should be way passed being used to this kind of thing) because, well, *surprise.*

After he swallows his pulse a little more and has a moment not to think that, well, all four of them showed up and that… It’s been a minute since he came home to someone in this fucking city. Strange, but at least they made coffee, so score (*don’t think about it. It won’t last*).

“B, Rob, good to see you made it. I thought we were running Vigilante Anonymous at the Rec Center tonight. Hood apparently forgot the snacks.” B’s gaze actually goes to the guy with a whole lot of *what?* before he realizes it’s a joke.

“Red.” It’s the warning tone.

“B.” Side bags set next to his system while he moves, casually around his place, ignoring the glaring directed right at him. He’d been right to go with the cape, hadn’t he?

“…I’ll write the report after I change, okay?”

That just seems to piss him off more.

“Instead,” Robin just eases beside the Bat, arms crossed, “why not admit going alone was foolish and unnecessary. *Drake,* you agreed to give us the cooperation we need.”

Tim just blinks at him behind the domino and a deep sigh lifts his chest a little under the cape. “I have no idea why this is a big deal. Like, none. Double emphasis on *none.* I’ve take on a hell of a lot worse—“

Jason has no problem stepping right up into his face, finger pointing right at his chest. “Because, you ass-head, you’re not supposed to be taking on the big bads alone now, remember? You got *us.*”

With the angry Red Hood right at him, he just grins a little, “aw, are we having a moment here? We are, aren’t we? Seriously, I cannot sing Kum-Ba-Ya without my bongos, man it’s just wrong—“


After a second, he gives (*thirty minutes*). “Yeah, I probably should have.”

“No probably about it.”

“…I had it. I had the plan.”

“Don’t fucking care, Tim. You should have called.”

“Okay, I should have called,” he parrots back.

“Next time, you will, get me?”

And with that, he just shrugs. “Can’t promise, Jay. You know how that goes, man.”
“Then I’ll pull a fucking B on you, kid. Try.” With a whole lot of not-needed emphasis on you’d better do more than that.

Still, the corner of his mouth quirks, “I get it. Big Bads: call the Bats. Check.”

“Good,” Jay backs off and makes a shooing motion at Dick as if to say, ‘your turn.’

And just. Fuck. Now, he’s got all that attention, too. Great. He’s not in for tag-team berating tonight.

Dick’s eyes are the darker blue than normal (not fucking around), narrowed and assessing.

“Injuries?”

“Bruises mostly. I’m good.”

Dick’s brows raise, “define mostly. In detail.”

“Did I mention the conveyor belts were moving? And he totally knocked himself out more or less? I had nothing to do with it. Trust me. I. Didn’t. Work. That. Hard.”

And because Dick doesn’t veer from the keywords (like mostly), “Let’s see—“

“It’s good. Nothing an ice pack won’t take care of.”

“Timmy,” and Dick is taking Jason’s place up close and personal. Apparently the elder Robins want to have a creepy kind of moment tonight. “You want to get changed before writing up reports? That means you’re hiding something. Like I’ve never met you?”

“Uh...?” Actually breaks through his brain to mind filters.

“You’d already be writing up stuff and putting whatever you’ve got in there on for scanning,” Dick nods his head at the side bag, “you’re hiding something.”

He takes a second too long and Dick’s already moving to slap the cape away from his side because that fucking scythe and yeah, Dick used to be Batman, right?

“Shit, your leg.” Dick’s eyes are wide, “how are you not even…? Never mind, okay, just, for the record, I fucking hate how well you hide injuries.”

“Oh, like everyone else I could name?” Red comes back with a sneer, but he completely lets Dick take his arm and pull him to the kitchen table, sit him down. He takes the bottle of adhesive remover from his belt, applies it to the domino so he can pull it off, let the skin around his eyes breathe a little.

Jason accepts the First Aid kit from Dami (who also looks on the verge of throwing up his hands), “not about everyone else right now, kid.”

B, managing to hover like a fucking creeper, is looking down at him from that height.

“You, too?” And Tim manages to make it dry while Jason’s pulling out what he needs.

B does the thing where he could be looking angry or disappointed or worried or constipated while his knees unlock and he sinks down to gently test the sliced skin. “I think Dick and Jason have made the point clear.” Dami is trying to unobtrusively glance over the Bat’s shoulder without making it look like he is.

“Are we certain of this? Drake has a propensity to be," he gives a vague hand wave, "…an asshole.”
Jason looks up with a raised brow, “holy shit, demon. Did you just try to make a fucking joke? B, give the kid a silver star.”

“Just when I really want to believe you aren’t useless, Todd. You do something to remind me…”

“Wow, I’m just so hurt, Baby Bat. Just don’t gnaw my ankles off or something, 'kay? Eat your fucking vegetables.”

Dick gives an impressive, put-upon sigh, “Really, I can’t take you two anywhere.”

Both younger Bats glare at him for a moment.

Tim’s grinning a little at the banter, already unlocking the gauntlets and pulling off the gloves, discreetly taking note of the color of his fingertips. He doesn’t even flinch when the prodding includes alcohol wipes, when the prodding becomes the in and out of a needle and medical thread through the skin of his leg. Eventually B has him prop his heel up on top the table to stretch the gash out, he rips up the tights more, ruining them because he takes a few of the armored plates out and tosses them on the table too.

The banter is...somewhat comfortable, even when he accepts the cup of coffee from Dami and the plate of pizza from Dick and the Bats are crowded around his table for the Q and A about the evening. He totally notices when Dami prods B’s shoulder from behind, slides the plate closer to his right hand. Just the twist of his mouth shows when he pauses at wrapping up Tim’s leg to take a few bites before going back at it.

“So, you set the charges and it did what now?”

Tim shrugs and downs the rest of his coffee, “it’s my own compound. Crane didn’t even realize I was wrecking his fear toxin at the time.”

“So, you made some kind of chemical neutralizer?”

“Just for certain components,” he waves a hand at them, “it’s not an all-purpose kind of thing. Crane uses certain…uh, building blocks for his fear toxins, so take out one of those key components and the toxin loses a degree of effectiveness.” He shrugs a little, glancing over when B finishes the bandage to his leg, covering him from knee to mid-thigh. Yeah, these tights are fucked.

“Efficient,” Dami points out mildly.

“S’why I wasn’t worried going in alone. Like I said, I had a plan.” Plans. Gordon already knew about the traps in the control room.

“Still not okay with it,” Dick interjects, standing to throw away his paper plate and snag Tim’s empty mug from his hand.

“Yeah, I get it. I’ll do the 1-800-Dial-A-Bat next time.”

B hums around his mouthful of all veggies on his pie, “what did Crane tell you?”

“About…?”

“You said he tried manipulating you. What did he say?”

Tim stops, his face going eerily blank again, “Crane talks shit, you know that, B.”

“I do. Which is why I’m asking what shit he said to you, Tim.”
Carefully chewing his bite, he gives a half-shouldered shrug, “he asked if the rest of the Bats were at the wake.” Tim nods his head in Dick’s direction without looking up, “asked if he fought until the end.”

A growl rumbling from low is Dami’s immediate reaction because well, his Batman and all.

“You didn’t eviscerate him. Good job, Baby Bird.”

“I thought so. We had the usual witty banter, I’m his most hated Robin, he has big plans, we suck and don’t see the bigger picture, yada yada. The usual supervillain talk.” His gaze is drawn down to the refill Dick’s putting down by his plate.

“Fuck, Harvey is so much worse at that,” Jason groans a little. “I mean, dude. Get on with it already.”

“The Black Mask is also verbose in his pointless monologues,” Dami cut in, standing to throw his plate away (and slide another slice on to Grayson’s while the guy was looking over at Jay; Dick picks it up automatically).

“Freeze always liked to talk,” B throws in off handedly, pulling his gloves back on, fixing his gauntlets.

“Talker of all time: Mistah J,” Dick nudges Jason who nods in solemn agreement.

“Right, Big Wing? That motherfucker should get an award for pointless bullshit battles.”

“The ‘Your Monologue Blows’ Award,” Tim deadpans, earning a grin from both elder Bats (and B totally does not choke on his last bite of pizza a little. Nope.).

“I am so getting ideas now,” Dick admits with a genuine, boyish grin. “We could hand them out.”

“Oh God, a rating system, Big Wing. Your rant gets a three stars, better luck next crime.”

"That's...terrible." Maybe this is why he started staying in San Fran more, right? Between Dick and Jay, the bad jokes are just painful.

“Isn’t it enough we force them to return to jail,” Dami just sighs at them.

“C’mon, Demon Brat. We’re allowed to have fun sometimes.”

And the kid just gives Jason a patient look.

“Fine, fine! Get a sense of humor, Little D. Make it a goal.”

“Be less annoying, and then we may talk.”

“I’m so hurt. Crushed.”

“Hm. Be crushed somewhere else,” Tim stands with his plate, mostly in uniform. The second cup of coffee is already gone, and he’s ready to get out of Red Robin for the night (twelve minutes). On the way back to the bedroom, he snags the side bags up, closing the door behind him to start peeling off the vigilante piece-by-piece (the tights, however, go in the bin for the incinerator because, yeah, they’re done). He cleans up, ignoring the plethora of dark already blossoming under his skin and digs in the medicine cabinet for his antibiotics. With whatever could have been on that blade,
infiltrating his system already, he needs to be prepared and also gives himself a general Crane antidote because, yeah, he already knows.

But the Bats need to be gone and he can be fine since he feels somewhat better in sweats and a t-shirt, cracking his neck again to work out the stiffness before coming back out of his bedroom. The Bats are suiting up to leave (which is a relief…and kind of a disappointment at the same time. At least he could do this in peace.).

“Glad you didn’t die, Timmy,” Jason ruffles his hair while masks go on and Dick is putting away the pizza in the fridge.

“Aw, you’re just glad it wasn’t someone other than you.”

“See right through me as always. Good job tonight.” And Jay’s look is knowing because just Jason Todd gets the whole need for revenge thing, doesn’t he?

“…thanks, man.”

Jason flips him a peace sign before fitting his helmet on, and B breaks up the party, “school night,” and eyes turn to Dami fixing his domino, “and it looks like you could use some rest yourself, Tim. I’ll drop by and get some of the samples later. We can divide them up for analysis, see what we come up with.”

So absolutely casual that Tim falters for a second (since, you know, they all came just to see…if he was all right) but nods slightly.

“Good point, B. ’Sides, I wanna see this nifty little neuro-toxin you’ve got on hand kid.” Jay gives him a salute before he’s out the open window.

Dick throws a wave from the door, already fitting on his uniform hat, “I’m saying it again, Tim. Yearlies. It’s that time. Hope to see you there.”

Dami as Robin looks up at him from behind those lenses, “we have a case to figure out, Drake. Get enough rest that I won’t have to ply you with enormous amounts of caffeine.” And since his window is already open with Hood out and Officer Grayson closing the door behind him, B stands right there looking down at him from behind the cowl while Robin ducks out the window.

“I...am not comfortable with this,” odd that it’s Bruce coming from the Batman this time when he’s seen the inverse more; but, he can't fault his old mentor's instincts. “You should come back with us. Just in case.”

A small smile makes Tim Drake look more tired, older than he was an hour ago. “Not...not yet. I’m good here, Bruce.”

"Tim. It was Crane."

"Believe me, Bruce, I know. And I am good to go." Not technically a lie, but...the guy's arguing with him like when he was just a teenager, doing it because, yeah, Bruce wanted to do the right thing by Tim Drake.

“At some point, I hope I can convince you to come home. Even for a visit, see the changes that have happened.”

Home.
“Heh. Tell Alfred I said hi.” Tim turns enough to let the illusion of Bruce just vanishing hold true, and his apartment is empty when he turns back. And he has just enough time to make it back to his room before the tendrils biding their time in his system begin to rear up behind his eyes; he vomits spectacularly in the toilet rather than on the floor. Could be worse.

The spray on his leg only delayed the inevitable, and now that they were finally gone, he could give in and shake apart.

**

Early (or late) that morning, Bruce is sitting in front of the big computer, watching the footage from the moment Crane hit the factory’s power and the camera started recording. With Dick and Jason behind his chair, leaning against it with their attention on the screen as well, Bruce sighs deeply with the back and forth between Scarecrow and Red Robin. His scowls deepens at the line of questioning. At the very weaknesses Crane is prodding. For him, that’s two sons John went after. The next breakout was going to be his if the Scarecrow didn’t get a visit in Arkham before that.

Dick’s eyes soften when he sees the slight curve of Tim’s shoulders when he (plays? Maybe? How much of his reactions are real?) closes in on himself. The footage doesn’t show his face, just his back while Crane circles him, taunts him with the whole abandonment thing; as usual, it’s jarring when one of the big bads pick out dissention in the ranks. Worse, when it’s used against one of their own.

Jason twitches guiltily with “The Red Hood likes to kill, and he’s still part of the family.” (Got a point, doesn't he? Motherfucker. That. Mother. Fucker.) And Dick's fingers unconsciously find the back of his hand on the back of B's chair, not looking away from the guy in the center of that thug ring. Then, the Batmobile thing just makes him turn away and choke, trying not to laugh in front of B (Dick is almost crying, seriously). Jay needs to take an important second to marvel at the apparent size of Tim’s balls to say that shit to Crane. But when that dumb ass gets brained? He lets himself laugh.

Fucking. Priceless.

"All right. I'm heading up." Jay shakes his head a little. "You in for the day, Bruce?"

"Soon," the man in front of the computer glances at him, "something else to check, then I'm in."

"Dickie?"

"Ah, going back to my place. Laundry day." Dick stretches once, cracking a long line of his spine; behind Bruce's back, his eyes meet Jason's, brow quirked, and the two already have an understanding without words. Jason winks at him and turns back to take the stairs, arm thrown over his shoulder.

"Bruce, catch you later."

"Night, Dick. Get some rest."

The eldest son is already yawning, walking out to his motorcycle parked with the others, "yeah, yeah."

Once the two are gone and his Cave is quiet again, Bruce activates the cameras he set earlier in the evening, bringing up the live feed of Tim's living room and hallway on screen. He may feel just a small amount of guilt for it, but the Batman has demons with a helluva lot more power riding him than this. He just can't shake it. When Red Robin jumped down from the conveyor, the hitch in that leg.
He expects the black and white to show nothing, maybe a light on somewhere. Instead, his third son laying mostly on the couch in his living room, the floor on some sort of lock-down with some kind of reinforced blinds over the windows. And Tim, Tim is obviously screaming, body arching off the cushions while the cords in his neck stand out from the force of his shouting. Not even a blink and Bruce jolts as the images hit him, out of his chair, as close to the screen as the console can let him. Tim's body jerks while he rears back to try breathing, sweat matting his hair in the high def camera image.

And Bruce, the man that never really does, yells, "Fuck!" because he didn't act on the signs until too damn late again to avoid pushing his son further away. He spins on his heel, already jerking the cape and cowl off to see —

Alfred is right damn behind him with sweats, t-shirt, and running shoes; the butler's brow is arched, eyes darting up to the screen. And there's the biggest secret of the Bats: the only one that get the drop on the Batman is the butler.

Bruce doesn't even pause, just starts throwing his uniform pieces in his chair, throwing on the clothes Alfred holds out. "I need—"

"I have already packed a bag, Sir. The current anti-toxins we have as well as your digital equipment to analyze Master Timothy's blood."

With the shirt mostly on, hopping on one foot to shove his other in a shoe, Bruce manages to give his oldest friend a raised brow.

"Please, Sir. Allow me some credit."

In one of the daytime cars, Alfred hands two bags through the driver's side window. "I shall see Master Damian to school and that Master Jason sleeps a full six hours."

"Eight." Bruce corrects, firing the engine.

"Hm. I am exceptionally competent, Sir, but not a miracle worker."

"All I can tell you is try."

"Very good." The butler flicks invisible lint off his jacket, drawing the younger man's eye from my son is screaming by himself, dosed on fear.

"Should he become worse, call me, Bruce."

"I'll bring him back if it looks like the same strain— that one that almost killed Dick."

"Good. Go."

**

He has no idea how much time has passed, but there's sparse light coming in through the window. Fuck if he doesn't feel like shit.

Tim utters something that could be a groan if it was a little more together and if his throat didn't feel like raw hamburger. A brief and hazy slideshow of what the past however many hours was made of passes over his vision, makes him take a few long minutes to huddle back down and shake like the fever is on him. It had been a while since he's been forced under Crane's influence like this, and he really didn't need a re-visit to remember why he fucking hates it. With another groan, he pulls the
comforter back over himself and—

*Comforter?* He was on the couch, right? Yeah, he doesn't do the whole fear coma thing in his personal space (it's *a thing*), he'd had time to get the straps dug out between the cushions and from underneath, get his ankles and one wrist before the hallucinations hit. No matter what anyone else says, Batman is the only one that can get himself out of restraints while riding the fear toxin train.

Tim throws the blankets off, and he's in his bedroom in the perch, eyes moving wildly for any sign of someone...

The paper on his night stand flutters, stopping abruptly when his shaky hand snatches it out of the air.

*Already out of your system, but take the medication on the bathroom sink. No patrol for you. Anyway, call me when you're up.*

*B*

*Tim, we need to talk.*

His legs feel like rubber, gives him a bad case of the *fuck, fuck, stay up* when he stumbles into the bathroom and his antibiotics are just sitting on the fucking counter next to a smaller bottle of pills. And just...*fuck.* He'd left the cabinet open, his stash probably the first thing Bruce fucking saw.

"Shit."

Okay, no problem. He needs a shower and some Trip Advisor to get on the first plane back to San Fran (or shoot Kon a text if nothing's leaving in, oh say, the next hour). There's a whole lot of questions that might be coming, and he's for sure not in the headspace to give answers (*are these really antibiotics, Tim? You can tell me. Everyone was there for Roy when...Say, B. Do you remember that time when you were just kind of lost in time and I told you I'd done some stuff to find you...?*)

Nope. No thanks. That’s a conversation he isn’t having today (or possibly ever; there’s way too much *you did what now for the League of Assassins?*), and conviction is enough to get his legs more solid under him, gets him to turn on the shower and pointedly ignore the taped plastic wrap already around his leg that Bruce had probably done before he *left* so Tim could shower without needing to do it himself. He ignores the momentary insanity that had felt a lot like a hand moving through his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp when he was covered in blood and he'd actually managed to pull that *motherfucking boomerang* out…

“Fuck.” The water is warm when he shoves his face under the spray and comforts himself with trying to focus on the next step ahead, rather than the ones he’s already left behind.

Chapter End Notes

...the ending sprung from my brain pan just sporadically. It originally ended right after the little bonding thing, but then Arkaedia (who puts up with my nonsense, and I love her face for it) gave me:

'Oh, you’re writing a Scarecrow fight. Then...write a Scarecrow fight.' And my brain clicked. It just did.
Then:
'What if the BatFam found Tim's pills and assumed he's on drugs? The whole story will have to come out.'

Heh.

Brilliant.
The Wrong Reasons

Chapter Summary

Because sometimes we do the right thing for the wrong reasons...

Chapter Notes

This is...not what I had in mind. I started this chapter four or five different ways, but dammit Tim. Never does what I expect. Dammit. And, per word, this is 27 pages, so... yeah. Get a snack. I believe marshmallows were here somewhere...?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He what now...?”

Gar just sighs over the vid call, looking a little irritated himself (well, the guy is on watch this coming weekend and that makes him one hell of a pissy panda), “the message said he was going dark for only a few days and not to worry. He’s not out on a case, he swears.”

The face Bart is making right now… “Like, how can that guy be so fucking smart and such an incredible dumbass at the same time? Seriously. Mind-boggling, BB.”

“Dude. Hate to break it to you, but most of us are like that, you know? Comes with the territory. He’s just a different case because, well...he’s a normal guy in a suit. You have no idea what kind of problems we had with Dick, I mean, I can turn into a T-Rex, man, and you’re throwing smoke pellets. Let me worry about your ass.”

The banter did not have the intended effect. Instead, Bart is still scowling. “Fuck, Gar. Kon is going to go mental.”

“I know, I know.” And there’s that self-sacrificing sight. “He’ll have to chill, KF, okay? Red’s a big boy. Like, we follow him, so we’re going to have to trust he isn’t getting himself beat badly enough to die.”

“In Gotham, you never know,” Bart sneers out. “Why the fuck didn’t he just listen to me about this? Damn it.”

And because Dick, Gar sits back in the control room of the Tower, massaging his temples. “I’m going to say this once, okay? Then, I’m out of it, Bart. Like, completely. But, duded, he’s the one that’s gotta figure out the Bat sitch. I am staying the hell out of it and you should too.”

“Gar—“

“I’m not screwing around, Bart. It’s like your girlfriend telling you to never speak to your ex again, no matter what good friends you are. It’s wrong.”

“I—“ the speedster’s mouth snaps shut.
“I’ll tell Kon the same thing,” BB assures him. “We’ll meet this weekend, do our thing, watch out for Big Bads, eat a lot of junk food, and call it a day.”

“Got it,” Bart sighs a little, “see you in a few days.”

“Yup. Stop worrying. If he hasn’t turned up in three or four days, then we’ll start the S.E.A.R.C.H protocol and that asshole is going to be found.”

And that…well, that makes the speedster feel good enough to disconnect the line.

**

The shadows are necessity; it is the idea he teaches them all, what he trains them to appreciate, to use, to meld, to become. The shadows are the beginning lesson to a road of redemption, to becoming a tool in for what is needed, not necessarily what is right. After this first lesson, his assassins use the shadows like an extension of themselves, an arm, a leg, a hand. It is a weapon when no others are available; it a weapon when others are. However, he is extremely displeased to see the three that have come to deliver news to him using the shadows to cower, to simper like dogs; this is not what he would expect out of any that call themselves part of the League of Assassins.

“Tell me again,” he demands, staying in his deceptively casual position, leaning over the arm of his throne. The jade eyes narrow on the telling shifts of dark and darker.

“He has escaped surveillance, Demon’s Head.”

“Hm. And who is responsible for this?”

Two of the silhouettes shift, leaving the third to face the wrath of Ra’s Al Ghul; there is no question as to what his punishment would be.

“And how is it that the Detective slipped your surveillance?”

The assassin stays in a low bow while he speaks, “the Red Robin left his Gotham apartment the morning after his battle with Johnathan Crane, sire. He disabled all electronic devices, went through a network of buildings in the lower East side of the city, then into underground tunnels throughout Gotham. He…was leading the ninjas trailing him into a trap. He bested the four, tied them up, and from there, vanished.”

Ra’s hums a little, “as my interest in the Detective is well-known, this is quite a failure.”

The assassin doesn’t rise from the bow, “yes, sire.”

The soft sahhh is the only sound before his head is separated from his shoulders and Ra’s is already back in his seat, blade still in hand.

The other two simply wait for the next round of orders.

“The Detective is as foolish as he is brilliant,” Ra’s observes mildly, “find him. Now.”

**

The Red Hood is in his third safe house of the night, back in the bathroom, searching for—yup, there it is. The false front comes off with a bit of maneuvering, and Red’s apparent stash is three medical-grade something that looks like standard clear liquid, two medicine bottles of pills, and a three IV bags. He taps the comm in his ear,
“Found it,” he says aloud.

“Yeah, I think we’re getting the pattern,” Dick replies in his ear. “Moving to the place on 9th and Main.”

Pulling out the bottles, Hood eyes the larger pills that he’s relatively familiar with even though, well dead guys don’t usually get the sniffles but that one time his Mom took him to Urgent Care and they had to cut the pill in half for him to be able to take…

He shakes himself out of those memories, “I think it’s been a while since Baby Bird has had a Bat-physical, right?”

“He’s apparently managing the situation,” B cuts into the convo and by his tone, no one really has to venture a guess that the guy isn’t saying how well, we have yet to determine but oh yeah, it’s there. Hood is pretty fucking fluent in Bat-a-nese at this stage in the game.

“We’re only looking for the medication he takes in case the fear toxin affected him enough for his immunities to be failing. We know Crane used a different compound on the scythe than the ones that are most familiar.”

Hood almost comes out with something crazy, like he should have told me about it, but realizes how that sounds because, well, Tim. Instead, he reads off the specifics on the IV bags and takes a single pill from each bottle for testing; the glass vials, however, have no labels, and he dumps them unceremoniously in his pockets.

“You got the info you need?” Hood asks instead.

“From the dosage and amounts he leaves, yes. I can run a query to estimate how he’s been adversely affected.”

“I thought it was out of his system,” and there’s a thread of something in Dick’s tone.

“I did as well, until I brought some of the samples back to the Cave for analysis. His equipment is top notch, but my systems are geared to look for any anomalies. This formula could have long term affects for someone without a healthy immune system. I need to be sure what else may be in Tim’s system and how low his immunities normally run.”

“Lower than the average person without an important internal organ,” Dick snarks.

“Probably,” B returns mildly while Hood closes up the safe house, puts the false front back. “The average person without a spleen isn’t a teenage crime fighter, so we work worst-case scenario and assume he keeps up the minimum requirements at best. Hopefully, however, he is on a strict regimen to keep the risk factor low.”

“Well,” Hood closes the door, leaps over the fire escape to the alley, “none of it helps us sniff him out, B. He hasn’t been back to his perch in two days, and we know he’s still in Gotham, so where does that leave us?”

The line stays silent for a beat too long.

“I’m getting Oracle in on this,” Dick’s starting to sound a little testy.

“Not a good idea—“ B starts.

“The let him come to us method isn’t working, B.”
“He’s a grown man, N. Trying to force him would be too much like saying he’s still a child.”

“Not force, B. Geeze. How about we actually talk to him, get the real answers—“

“Aw, Mommy and Daddy are fighting,” Hood revs the bike, “that makes the little kid in me want to hide under the covers.”

“I’m on my way out.” B closes the line because when the guy has a mission, he has a fucking mission.

Dick sighs in his ear.

“I get it, Big Wing.” Hood assures with a shrug the other man can’t see but can imagine, “kid wasn’t, uh…he wasn’t okay when he took off from the penthouse that morning, so yeah, I get it.” Because, really, the Red Hood still isn’t accustomed to feeling this way about anyone (that’s a lie, asshat), concerned.

“I’ll feel better when I know he isn’t killing himself.”

“Then be prepared to never look at him again. Like, ever, N. Seriously put a bag on his head from here on out.” At the huff over the line, Hood smirks inside the helmet. “How far out are you?”

“Getting closer to the next place. After that, I’m going out. I think punching the shit out of someone would help my zen right now, Little Wing.”

At that, the Hood has to cackle a laugh himself no matter how crazy it sounded with the voice modulators, “you know, I think we are so right on the same page tonight.”

“Meet me on the West side and we can ride into the night, be all romantic and stuff.”

He doesn’t have to image the terrible eyebrow wiggle. Really, it’s not as cute in real life that Dick thinks it is. But, Hood is already takes a sharp right, jumping the bike over a bus stop bench for shits and giggles. He pointedly isn’t thinking about the samples in his side bags.

**

The front door creaks when opened, settled dust flying with the abrupt motion. He’s already deactivated the security system, disabled the Bat alarm that will sound if anyone enters, and closes the door behind him.

Dust covers on the remaining furniture, clocks on the wall with tasteful blankets covering the faces, time fails but dust bunnies are forever. A service comes once a month to keep up the grounds and the things still here. It’s all a cycle, a perpetual stillness giving way to brisk, abrupt movement just to settle again.

His shoes are too loud on the stairs (weren’t they always?) no matter how silent he learned to be, and the climb is shorter, easier now that he’s gotten some height, some length to his legs.

Bypass the second floor where his old bedroom remains closed, unused, and stagnant. Up to the third floor, down the hall to the closet on the end. Inside, he pulls down the string from the ceiling, and takes the steps up to the attic. Back when he was small, short and weak, before he wore the R, he would come here when the house was often empty and he was alone for the seemingly endless days and nights, and just sit in the rafters until he fell asleep. He could sit without stretching, curl up and wonder if or when or…
Tim Drake lays his bag down, unzips his hoodie to lay on top of it. He takes a few minutes to pick his way through old artifacts, boxes of his childhood handicrafts, made and carefully stored away, luggage from old trips, and more knick knacks that would never have a place downstairs to stand right at his old spot, the boards smoother than the rest from the long hours he’d spent up here, reading, writing, wanting something more than being a kid who was left to his own devices. In a way, his parents got him ready to be a Bat; they normally left him to fly or to fall, too.

And even though it’s probably dumb, he bends and twists, pulling up the hurt leg to scrunch down and just be in that spot again. It’s almost like he could go back to those times when his parents were, at least, alive if not globe-hopping to find the next big thing that could make them famous in the archeology circles. They would be alive. And Tim Drake, who had been trying so hard to focus on moving forward for so long, to just keep standing, keep putting one foot in front of the other, to meet the next crisis with calm foresight, he takes his time to sink back into the waves of loss and pain and alone that started way before he the cape went to Dami.

His notion of normal changed when he started in with the Bats, and while Bruce let him fly on his own (maybe more than he should have), there was always a communication system in place. The Red Bird had enough sensors to know his every move, all his injuries; his Robin suits had trackers and sensors in triplicate. Hell, he even found a few in his staves regularly because B knew, even if he was out of the car or in civvies, he’d always have one of the bos with him. It was B’s way of showing he cared, that he didn’t want another Robin to die on the job. Later, when he started being Tim and not that annoying kid that found out the big secret, B did more to keep track of him, took more time to ask about homework and Ives and what was going on in the teenage world. No, he’d never be Dick, never be Jason, and it was fucking fine, he didn’t need coddled (B did it anyway—especially after injuries or bad nights…B was the second person in his memory to hug him; Dick…Dick was the first. His father didn’t hug him until after he came out of the coma) The Bats gave him more attention and comfort than his parents had most his life.

He didn’t need it now. He didn’t need it the other night or the morning after either:

*Getting in the shower was a bad idea.*

“Hey,” is called through the door less than a minute after he starts thinking about all the nice flights Trip Advisor would have waiting for him, and he very nearly jumps out of his *fucking skin* because no one else is supposed to be here. What in the utter fuck…?

“Jay?” His voice is a little more than wrecked from all the screaming, “what the hell are you—?”

“Bruce ran back to the Cave for some equipment, Baby Bird. The antacids are like, some crazy ass shit or something… You’ve got a good lab here, but it ain’t the Cave, you feel me? He’ll be back in an hour or so.”

And shit. Just shit. He’s got to move.

“Hey, Tim. You…you doing okay? B said…it wasn’t good.”

Fuck. Dick probably knew too, right? Because they were supposedly trying to get him back, to earn his trust. Then, a whole different part of his brain kicks on with the ’holy shit, what did I say while I was out of my mind and he was here…?’ What does ’wasn’t good’ mean in Bruce-speak?

“I’m good. Thanks.” And he can hear the *fucker* in his own tone, wincing slightly because, well, Jason.
“Aw, Timmy. Is that really the truth?” Apparently the guy is getting a Captain Obvious cape and shit for Christmas, seriously, he was going to remember that.

“…how about you tell me why you’re here.”

And that was apparently some invitation because the door opens and closes. “How about you tell me why you had to go through that bout of fear toxin on your own, kid? You know, because we almost lost a guy to it recently, so really, Timmers. Really? You knew that shit. There was a good reason for you to let us in on the deets.”

“Gee, Dick—“

“Let ‘im the fuck alone, asshole. You’re talking to me here.”

He shuts the shower off and a towel is dropped over the top, landing on his head. Gingerly, he dries off behind the curtain, favoring the bad leg, glancing up as a t-shirt, sweats, and boxers are laid over the bar and just, this guy, right?

“…again, I’m a big vigilante now..”

“So’s you’ve said.” He doesn’t need to see the snarl to know it’s there.

“Not just saying, man. I am. The Big Bads—“

“Dick and B and me take ‘em on alone alla time, right? That’s what you’re going to say?”

“None of you need a fucking babysitter. Neither do I.”

“No, we don’t and neither do you—shit, will you come out of there? I’m arguing with a fucking lightning bolt right now.”

“It’s the Flash insignia, you dick, and these shower curtains rock.”

“Yeah, yeah. Wally loves fan boys, whatever. You dressed or what?”

Very quietly, staring at the silhouette of Jason leaning against the sink, Tim final manages, “I didn’t want anyone here.” ‘Who knows what I might have said.’

“I fucking get that, you aforementioned asshole. You just let us eat pizza and bullshit while your body was ready to start the meltdown.”

“It’s not my first fear toxin train, Jason.”

“It wasn’t Dick’s first either, Tim.”

“There was no need—“

“That’s what family does. Get it?”

And there’s something in his chest that just abruptly hurts; a pain that isn’t from an injury…He’s taking a second to try pulling himself up, to be Red Robin when he feels very Tim Drake right now with Jay in his place and fucking Bruce had been here—

The shower curtain is shoved back, Jay’s expression dark with vestiges of the other guy that used to hate him, the one that gave him a handful of scars along with his scorn. They’ve come a long way
from then, Jason bleeding him at the Tower because he needed it, and the Robin he’d been back then had **recognized** the primal need in Jason Todd to break things wide open.

In the here and now, that same guy is looking at him like there are other people, other things out there he wants to break, and Tim flinches internally because he was so used to that look zeroing right in on him.

“Jay—“ he doesn’t recognize his own voice because it’s so small…

“Gimmie your arm, watch that leg,” and he can’t really put up much of a fight since the guy is gripping his forearms and pretty much pulling him to step out. The assumption is right, his leg gives a little throb that is really secondary to the fact that the Bats stayed with him through crazy fear toxin babble. Speaking of which—

“Please tell me Dick wasn’t here,” Tim deadpans, pulling back.

Jay just shrugs, “B asked me to come sit with you...in case shit went bad again. He analyzed your blood with the equipment you’ve got here, but there was still something bothering him. He doesn’t want you alone until he figures out what it is.”

Jason isn’t releasing his arm, just pulling him out of the bathroom and down the hall.

“Can’t say I blame the Bat because, you know, we almost had one **die** and stuff.”

“I know that—“

“Really, kid? Because you could have, too. You could have gone into cardiac arrest and **none of us** would have known until we came upon your corpse.” There’s the anger, the one that maybe part of the pit’s influence. Jason pulls out a chair at his table, shoves him to sit down.

“I had the antidote for that strain,” Tim just counters, “it was part of the plan.”

At the counter be the fridge, Jason is breaking eggs into a bowl with **feeling**. “‘Part of the plan,‘“ he repeats in a barely-there tone. “You and your fucking plans, Tim. For Christ’s sake, what the fuck would you have done if Crane had a compound you didn’t plan for? What then? Just **die**?”

“I would have—“

“You know what we’ve been doing with B.” Jason glances at him over a shoulder as he adds in veggies and ham to the egg mixture. “What we’ve been trying to do.”

“...I’ve heard.”

“He always had Robin as a partner, someone to keep him in line out there, to keep him in **check**. But, Robin ain’t enough sometimes, and B gets severely f*cked up. We’re trying to break him of that habit, Tim. The bunch of us, the ones that call ourselves Bats or Birds, are in this together. You’re in that group, might not ‘a thought of yourself that way in a while, but you are, always have been.”

And just f*ck...was he really still a...?“Jason—“

“So it isn’t just with you, it’s B too. We respect you, Tim.” He pours the eggs in a pan and turns, putting his back to the counter, “yeah, you’ve grown up and become a cape in your own right with your own team, I get it. They get it.”

Tim sighs, “I have no idea what the hell you want here. I’ve got nothing.”
“I know,” and just, fucking Jason as the guy to be doing this. He must have picked the shortest straw or something, right? But, at least he has some pity and makes a fresh cup of coffee, setting it in front of Tim before he’s back at the stove.

“I…don’t always get it either. Dick gets all fucked up over it sometimes when he does the same shit over and over, but—there’s gonna come a time when no one’s coming back, not me or the kid. It’ll be Dick or B or you. That’s the point, trying to avoid it.”

Tim drinks his coffee, keeps his mouth shut.

“Just…do me a solid. Like, I’m going to ask again, and I fucking hate repeating myself but I’m a do it for you. When there’s bad shit going down, call, text, send a fucking carrier pigeon or something. Not asking for help or anything, but to let one of us know you’re taking on bad shit for just in case.”

“…I can try.” And that’s all he can do. Well, that and stare down at the omelet Jason made, setting down his own coffee across the table before he’s back at the stove to get his own off before it burns.

They eat in amicable silence, Jason saying no more on the subject, and the time ticking down until B would come back with results.

Very carefully, he doesn’t mention the inevitable heart-to-heart.

He leaves it off while Jason plies him with more coffee and washes the plates. Tim only had to wait twenty minutes for the sedatives he put in Jason’s coffee to take effect, managing to lay the guy out on his couch and covered (he needed it anyway, back from the dead guys don’t need sleep his ass), before he’s shoving things in a backpack and making his out the window.

And night falls around him, casting the same shadows on the floor that he remembers from his childhood, overlaying the dust with darkness. He doesn’t move, doesn’t need to go anywhere; his space is right here where it’s always been.

**

The noise on the other end is a self-sacrificing sigh because, well Kal. “I’m in shock, B. Honest.”

“I don’t need the sarcasm right at the moment,” the tone is mild while his fist drives into the spans between ribs.

“Of anyone I have ever met, you have the most sidekicks. You know that, right?”

“I’m aware.”

“Diana only has two—“

“My kids grow up faster.”

“Humans, am I right? Hey, have I told you the one about—“

“Again, Kal, not the time,” he grunts out when the lead pipe is blocked by his gauntlet, but he feels the vibration down to his teeth; Kevlar only stops so much. “I just need to know if you might have heard him in the last few days. He’s in the city laying low.”

“Not Tim, no, but I can be in Gotham in—“
“I’ll let you know if it comes to that.” The satisfying kick takes another down fast. “I’m giving him one more night to do what he needs to do. After the yearlies tomorrow, it’s going to be everyone on deck for the search effort.”

And Kal huffs a rolling belly laugh in his ear, “You only had to call me for Dick once, you know.”

“Twice.” And Kal winces for the criminal on the other end of that fist.

“Once. Twice was for Jason.”

“Twice for N,” meaty thumps and groans that aren’t the Batman’s, “his first real Titans mission, and again when he and Starfire disappeared for two weeks.”

“Oh… I forgot about that one.” The same feeling of discomfort washes over him because those two in their heyday. Just, wow. He thought he’d never use super-hearing again. “Well, more like I tried scrubbing it out of my brain with metaphoric bleach.”

B just hums and keeps moving.

“But, um, while we’re on the subject of Robin the third…”

“Tell me.” Fisting a handful of hair, B drives his knee up into a face, breaking the nose with a beautiful move.

“…The Titans called me about him, almost a year ago. They…asked me not to tell you.” And the ring of unconsciousness around him is going to wait a few minutes because what the hell. He’d never tell the alien but Clark Kent is someone that’s seen him through dark times, that he’s seen through dark times. Between those moments in the extreme, they became close, closer than he’s let anyone other than family.

“Back when they figured out he was abducted. The Titans asked for your help.” Because really, he didn’t need insurmountable evidence to come to the obvious conclusion (which means the Titans know more of the story; he’d be having a talk with Superboy and Kid Flash soon enough. Once Red trusted the Bats—trusted him—enough to give some of the details, he would approach the Titans to get their take).

The guilt is right there in Kal’s tone, “yeah. Yeah, they did. I—Bruce, I’m sorry but I didn’t take them serious at the time. I thought Tim might be on a case or something, I swear I never would have —“

“It’s understandable when we’re talking about Tim. He’s…more similar to me than I care for now a days. At one time, I thought it would keep him alive. Now, it’s equal parts impressive and frustrating.” Zip ties and a message to Gordon, then he’s back up on a roof, taking off at a run.

“I know, B. The last time we were in the Tower? Wow, I was a little intimidated and, well, it’s me.” And yes, Kal, the whole class knows a battalion of blood-starved warrior aliens with a hard-on for destruction only gets your Kryptonian blood pumping. “I mean, that kid is scary sometimes. You know he’s been the primary force against the League of Assassins, right?”

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“Who do you think updates the spreadsheets?” B replies with a sharp smirk since the last time they trusted Wally to do it…had been an epic failure. Weeks of work. Just weeks. “Thanks for reminding me, though. Ra’s and I are going to have a talk about leaving my son the hell alone.” And, yes, another bullet point on the list. He definitely owed Ra’s a visit when things started calming down. From Black Bat’s short but sweet interpretation of events on his last visit, Tim had come very close
to being… Well, if the assault had gone according to Ra’s initial plan, he would be infested with Bats already, and the fucking Batman would be livid. No more games, no more pits, no more putting up with him; no killing, but the Batman was going to take fucking action (the explosives have always been waiting in your pit caverns, Ra. And yes, every hideout is mapped down to the furniture in each room. Honestly, Ra’s, who do you think you’re messing with? Tim might have become the Detective to you, but B, B is the original.).

“Yeah, yeah. World’s Greatest Detective.”

“You were telling me about the Titans, Kal. Don’t deflect.”

“Heh, that’s the pot and the kettle, don’t you think, Bruce?”

“If this was about Connor, I would tell you what I would be able to.”

“Not everything?”

“Not and keep his confidence.”

“Point.” Another sigh, “Tim had been missing for almost a week by the time they called me at the Watchtower. The team’s resources hadn’t come up with anything. To be fair, I was still…well—“

“Uneasy about your clone. I remember.”

“Yes, just…you were right from the start and taking him serious was all you but anyway—well. I had every intention of setting the satellites to look for him when I got back, but then the mudslide in India, the earthquakes in Haiti, and—“

“There was also a tsunami relief effort in Japan at the time if memory serves.”

“I think so? Anyway, I didn’t set the tracking for Tim. I forgot, Bruce.” And, yes, they’ve been friends and colleagues long enough for B to recognize the self-reproach, the guilt.

A long sigh from the Batman because yes he wants to be pissed, but with Superman’s usual dizzying task list, he can understand on some level. “Anything else?”

“…he was found in Gotham, he’d made it back to your city somehow. There was a ship involved and I’m sure you already know he was tortured. Kon…Kon was not forthcoming with information when I finally caught up with him. Actually, he was very upset, rightfully so, I mean, but he wouldn’t talk to me about it.”

“He’s loyal, Kal. It’s a good thing for Tim and the Titans, not for the Bats.” And there, Hood and Nightwing riding tandem through the streets and…

Under the cowl, he arches an eyebrow, but really couldn’t muster up the shock because well, maybe he’d seen the signs, just pending judgement for after he had all the facts (those two parking in an alleyway to kiss…some things a father doesn’t need to see). However, Jason had been more calm and together, spending some much needed time at the Manor; Dick had been less scattered and empty, more like himself than just going through the motions by rote. Apparently, they were better for each other than he anticipated. Good. They both needed something to ground them.

“That’s all Kon let slip, but his face, Bruce. It must have been…bad. I thought now, with your efforts, you may want to know since the team doesn’t—“

“I’ve heard. They aren’t supposed to contact us.” It doesn’t take a detective to tell the Batman is
pretty ticked off over that little piece of information.

“It probably doesn’t make you feel better, but I’ve heard the same thing in regards to Bart Allen. Barry got a little visit and Wally has been trying to step up with the kid.”

And, no, B doesn’t like the implications of that. “Apparently, we need to have a talk with the Titans. The JLA agreed to give them autonomy as long as they were at least communicating with their mentors. Barry, well, we can see what’s going on with him, reassigning Bart to Wally wouldn’t be a problem.”

“…none of them are underage anymore, Bruce. They’re kids but not kids.”

“No, but we still have more resources and experience. Not to mention, yes they are still kids, and yes, we do need to be aware of what they’re doing. Just like the JLA, they need a safety net. We do. Other groups do. It’s a joint effort to protect our world…” he sighs a little, “I should have pushed more after their mission with the Insurgents.”

“We all should have.” There. Now Kal’s on the same page. Diana and Hal most definitely.

“Agreed.”

“So, we meet in the next few weeks and decide how to not step on toes and still get the cooperation we’re asking for.”

“Sound plan.”

“Coming from the Batman, I’m flattered.” But, there’s something in Kal’s tone that triggers the Batman and he pauses in his rooftop run, puffing out a steamy breath in the cold night. He waits for it.

“It’s not…” Kal starts, and B can hear the alien sitting heavily, “now I’m the one having a hard time getting Kon’s attention. Shoe on the other foot.”

“Kids these days,” and even though he deadpans it, Kal still laughs. “It takes time. Don’t give up on him.”

“Never.”

“All right, I’ll take this into consideration. If you find out anything else, call me.”

“Absolutely.” And the alien hesitates for just a moment, “Bruce—“

“Kal, I understand.”

“Thanks. I’ll talk to you soon about the meeting, and…call me. Promise, if you have any kind of feeling he might be missing, I’m there.”

The small smile under the cowl shows to the night, “I will, Kal. Thanks.”

**

Robin breathes uneasily through his nose, an annoyed sound. His arms are crossed over the red tunic, eyes narrow behind the lenses of his mask, and this is certainly taking too long. He should have called Grayson since the man has a knack for making the strongest crack under pressure—not to mention, the role of Robin has traditionally been underestimated by the general criminal populace that knew nothing about the city. Ones that had never seen him or any of his predecessors in action;
those are the criminals that still believe the Dark Knight is just some myth made up by the police. Honestly.

The man hanging upside down from the fire escape is annoyingly one of them.

“You little motherfuck—“

The blow shuts him up with the offset of teeth. “Answer. The. Question.”

The criminal spits blood on the dark pavement, “I ain’t heard nothing about that guy,” is slurred and broken.

“I am not sure I believe you.” His gauntlet comes back for another blow.

“I swear it, you little brat! That fucker is nothing to sneeze at. Every time he comes to town, my business goes to shit. I pull back whenever I get wind he’s out with the rest of you freaks.”

Instead, Robin has a fistful of hair, yanking the head at an odd angle, making the dealer scream in pain.

“It is not wise to bait the one holding your skull in hand.” Robin deadpans.

“It’s the fucking truth,” Blood makes a path down the grungy forehead and onto Robin’s gloves.

“Should I find out you’re lying—“

“I know, I know, brat. You’ll eviscerate me. I got it. Red Hood already told me he’d do worse.”

“Good. Then it’s satisfying that you know we are serious.”

The grit of teeth, the dark eyes of evil make Robin feel a well of guilt rise up out of nowhere; years ago, he’d seen that same darkness in the mirror every morning, never recognizing it for what it was until after he took up the cape.

“He’s the worse than the Bat, you know,” and finally, Eddie the Shark sneers something worth hearing. “He’s a fucking crazy asshole.”

And just as suddenly, Robin is baring his teeth in a frightening smile, making Eddie take a long second to think about his career choices in life.

“He is, is he? Hm. Perhaps you just haven’t had the pleasure of meeting the rest of us yet.”

And the last thing he sees it the green fist coming at him again.

**

It’s not the Clock Tower; never would be, but the space has been home for over a year, and Oracle does her usual stretches and exercises, working herself out, before getting back in the chair and back to work. The massive bank of computers is calling.

Someone must love her because fresh coffee scents the air behind her, and O grins a little as Cass sets a mug down in the designated spot to be just out of the way without being out of reach.

“Glad you could make it,” O gives her girl a full smile, genuinely happy to see her after the ordeal.
Cass grins back, looking none the worse for wear since Bruce pretty much made her rest up enough to heal before he came back to the states (of course, he’d tasked everyone else to keep a close eye on Dick in the interim, but really, B? Really? It’s Dick Grayson. He’ll back flick the hell out the window while whistling Dixie and tie up all his guards in between. Everyone knows it. He was Batman. Try babysitting Batman on steroids. Same concept).

“I…didn’t want to miss it.” And that soft voice, the girl more together after her own ordeals makes something deep within the Oracle ease.

She hums in reply, taking up the fresh coffee, “it’s important to B, always was.”

“His chance…at a reunion.”

“I always thought so.”

Cass nods gently and pulls a rolling stool up to sit, allow O the time she needed to assure herself Black Bat has mended and bares no permanent damage, which she completely does while sipping her coffee with deceptive ease.

“He said tomorrow night. I’ve got people from the BI mainframe to come babysit Gotham while we all convene.”

“Good. It will be…nice to see everyone—“ realizing what she said, Cass immediately looks away.

O just shrugs a little, “Dick invited him, but I doubt he’s going to show. Right now, he’s…dark. No communications.”

Cass’s eyes sharpen at this little tidbit, “Tim is in Gotham?”

Just a nod in response, and the two have a meaningful conversation without saying a word since Black Bat could really do the talking that might be needed.

To the silent question, O just sighs, “he’s gotten better, so no. I’ve been looking as hard as the rest of the Bats, but I haven’t caught him in any feeds or hacking in any mainframes. No activity from his safe houses, phones, computers, nothing.”

Worrying her lip a little, Cass wonders if this might be the start of something moving; as long as the other didn’t monumentally screw up, perhaps, perhaps…

“I know,” O chimes in like she can read Cass’s mind, “if the boys could play nice like we do, well. Things may not have gone down that road.”

“If only,” Cass jokes and O takes a second to laugh a little because, well, the computers could wait a few more minutes.

**

Finally, he stands.

His body is a mass of popping joints, giving him a clue as to how long he must have been sitting (how many days…?) and the span of time between meditation cycles and memories and thinking and calculating and deciding. Running from a talk was pointless and once he realized why he was so worried about it…well, he was being incredibly stupid. Telling the Bats the stories behind that missing time, what would really happen when they got it all? They’d kick him out of the Gotham club? Make him turn in his fucking cape? Kick him out of ‘the family?’ He’d bolted out of some
long-ago fear of being cast out, abandoned, of his name and his vigilante card being taken from him, and—and, well fuck, wasn’t that shit just pointless? Hadn’t he already figured it out the last time they’d all just showed up at his door with coffee? Dammit, Tim, get your shit together and stop with this pointless abandonmentcrap.

Since, well, all that had already happened once and he survived it. He came back, he moved on. He could do that shit again. It wouldn’t break him.

So, running. Dumb idea. They wanted to know the why behind it, fuck it. He’d tell the story.

Shaking his head at his own ridiculous hang-ups (but it’s still there in the recesses of his brain: what if they gave up the effort, didn’t care about a second chance after all…?), Tim goes for his hoodie and back pack, glad the stiffness in his leg has already faded to barely-there twinges. He goes back down the stairs and shuts up the attic by habit. He doesn’t bother with anything in the house, any other rooms with personal items still in drawers, still on table tops, or in cabinets. The light is already filtered low when he passes windows, planning on some food and then hitting up a safe house for a shower, change of clothes. Then, moving again. He wants to get in right after full dark, wants the element of surprise since the rest will already be there.

Just as he open the front door, Tim pauses a second, hand still on the knob. He doesn’t turn back to the house full of ghosts. He just—

“I’ve been gone…a long time, but I’ll be back again.”

Then he’s out, closing and locking the door behind him. In a few seconds, the security system is on and the Bat-tracker reinitialized.

He walks the Ducati out from the hiding place with a small, frightening smile. He’d survived it all once, fought to come back. So, maybe the Bats needed to be reminded of how well he could do that.

**

The shower door slides open behind him, and Jason laughs, not a rusty, awkward sound of a forgotten tone, but like he really can’t help himself.

“Don’t be mean, Little Wing,” Dick’s hands are cold (the fucker) when they slide around his heated skin, making Jason shiver a little.

“Me? Who’s the one trying to freeze my nuts off, Dickie?” He turns to look at the stacked naked man over his shoulder, eyes soft with something not even close to the Red Hood. And that…the feeling in his chest is still unnerving sometimes when he used to feel such utter loathing for the other man.

“You’re a tough guy, honest. I know you can take it,” and Dick just lays his forehead down a little to rest at the nape of Jason’s neck, his breath stirring the water there.

“Hm,” but Jay’s hands come up anyway, one wrapping around the back of Dick’s neck, fingers rubbing the tension away while the other finds purchase on one of those carved hips. He pulls Dick with him, a step forward so the hot water is hitting them both. Dick sighs against his neck, content.

“I can feel your forehead wrinkling, babe,” and that easy tone, that term of endearment, something only meant for Dick, gives so much more than Jason will ever really realize.

Tightening his arms, the older man just sighs again.
“We’ll make plans after tonight,” Jason continues in that tone, “B can be part of it or not. It can be just us and demon brat or whatever.”

Dick hums against him, the sound vibrating his chest against the curve of Jason’s spine. The younger man just huffs a laugh again and pulls out of the octopus hold, moving to soap up the scrungy purple thing Dick favors to start washing the tight chords of neck and shoulders while the hot water beat between them.

“…I’m just—“

“Overworked, over-stressed, and blaming yourself for everything all over again,” Jason finishes with a raised brow, soaping up Dick’s stomach, using his forearm to brush the wet hair out of his eyes. “Like we haven’t met, Big Wing.”

“I guess…we all have one or two of B’s hang-ups, right?”

“Naw. You’re all you. Always been your thing, taking shit to heart. It’s what makes you different from most of us, you know.”

Dick’s brows arch up in question.

“The life,” Jason emphasizes, “it doesn’t faze the human part of you, Dickie. You just…you just keep being you no matter what gets thrown your way.” He doesn’t need to say it, but that’s one of the parts I like, I need, about you hangs there in the steam and soap and sound of skin on skin.

The smile Jason gets back is blinding, a real Dick Grayson special, and fuck if he doesn’t get all caught up in it, dropping the loofa thing when Dick leans down and presses their together.

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And after the darkness falls and other shadows fill in the spots around Gotham, Cass, Steph, Dami, Dick, Jason, B, and O converge rather than prepare to take to the streets. Sweats and t-shirts, the Robins are cajoling, tussling, Steph unabashedly jumping on Jason’s massive back and riding him like a bronco while he pretends to be miffed but is really grinning at Cass and O over the antics. Dami, pain in the ass that he is, standing beside Cass with an arched brow, mouth half open to ask if this is an American thing he hasn’t been immersed in yet or if this is a Bat thing. Babs discreetly takes pics because some things should just be kept for prosperity. Absolutely, as long as Bruce never finds out.

Throw Dick Grayson in the mix and it’s utter chaos (because he’s not here as the Batman, is he? He can just be here as the big brother, goofing off with hand stands, noogies, fist bumps, and general tussling of Dami’s calm and collected. He does because that’s what they all expect, isn’t it? What they need him to be…) of movement and terrible jokes; of jumping around and Cave tag and ‘who can do a hand-stand the longest’ and ‘who got the worse ass-beating of the week’ and ‘pick on Little D because he still can’t say asparagus without everyone laughing.’ This is one of the few instances that the persona, the masks can go away and allow the Bats to just be.

And the purr of a Ducati shakes them all out of their daytime usual.

And.

Oh shit.

The whole carousing bunch of Bat kids stop, turn, and stare. They sharpen, prepare in case of an invasion of their home turf. The incoming is not expected.
But there’s just one interloper coming through the darkness. The guy striding toward them is still wearing the motorcycle helmet, still has the leather jacket on, unzipped with a white hoodie underneath. He’s carrying a beat-up gym bag baring the ‘S’ shield decal on the side and numerous patches with band names, other superheroes, and even an old bumper sticker half torn off about the types of nerds.

The bag isn’t new, and an audible breath can be heard through the Bat ranks. The helmet swings in the direction of their group briefly, assessing, before he strides right to the other side of the mats away from them and drops the bag outside of bounds. He turns his back to them, dropping the jacket and unzipping the hoodie to reveal sleeveless black under armor outlining the line of the shoulders and torso, the lean and sinewy grace that is all nineteen-year old Tim Drake. The prodigal son.

Dick and Jason exchange a glance over everyone’s head because wow, he actually came and where the fuck has he been hiding out? Of course he knew we’ve been looking for him and don’t forget what has the toxin done to him? Is he really okay to do this? What about that leg?

Shoes toed off, his Red Robin tights are under the jeans, he folds them to go back in the bag while he kneels, pulls out one of the retractable bos (the non-tracked ones, B) and flicks that shit out full length. His bo, his work that fits his hands like an extension. The helmet comes off of shaggy, wet hair, and his ear buds go in because Tool is going to help him get in the right headspace for this shit (sure could use a vacation from this bull…shit…three…ring….circus…sideshow). His MP3 player is tucked in the front of his tights while he stands to stretch, keeps the bo over his shoulders while he leans out to work his thighs and calves. He’s already wrapped both hands and feet to the ankles before he even got on the bike. He isn’t here to waste time.

His longer than normal hair is caught up both hands to wind a band around the tail at the back of his head, changing it up for the Bats. He doesn’t look around, just stays on his side of the mat, not even considering going near the computer or work benches.

To the mats. Strip down. Warm up. Check weapon. Get ready to give/take a beating. Rote.

And Tim doesn't give in to curiosity or nostalgia, he refuses to let the pain in his chest make him leave; instead, he doesn't stop stretching, from working the bo in some rudimentary exercises, trading hands, around the wrists, around the back to the rhythm while he keeps his back to the gathering. He’s here for an amalgamation of reasons since each Bat probably has his/her own for wanting him in on this. They obviously want to see him fight, to see what he is now, what he’s made of, to see if he really is some kind of addict, if he can still hack the vigilante life. They think he can’t, that he’s given in to something else, that the antibiotics (that B has certainly tested by now) mean he isn’t fit. They think he’s working himself to death over the mission, and he’s here to prove them all wrong. He’s going to make sure that little heart-to-heart doesn’t happen because the majority of questions are going to be answered and all the different hypothesis on the Tim Drake Problem is going to be concrete when he’s done here tonight. Doesn’t matter if he has to face each one of them head on.

Dick expected (if the guy even showed, which was incredible doubtful since the last round of keep shit from the Bats just enforced how much Red Robin didn’t trust them yet) Tim would be…reluctant to come back to the Cave without emergency signals. Wary. But still Tim. Dick expected he’d play around with the big computer, mess with the crap in his locker, play around with the weapons room, maybe make a few gadgets at one of the workstations. Something that would tell them all that Tim Drake was still the guy. The guy.

There were other scenarios he’d imagined. Not civvies and a bike (where’s that shitty Civic at?) without a word, without a twitch, without recognition. Not only did it piss Dick Grayson and Jason
Todd right the hell off, but it made them both reevaluate the meaning of home.

Dami actually manages to get out of Dick’s hold and away from the noogies (since breaking Grayson’s fingers would certainly make Father livid), staring with something that might have been a smirk of satisfaction; beside him, Jason still has a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his mouth with an arched brow and his arms crossed over his chest since Steph hopped off when he lit up. He eyes the movements with a narrow gaze, assessing. Of them all, Jason is the brawler and the guy that normally has only half interest in what he’s up against, but he’s still a Bat, so know thy opponent. Now that he’s not ass deep in criminal dipshits, he can observe unhindered.

Steph…Steph looks slightly devastated, just staring at the lines of his back and shoulders like she hopes he’s going to turn around any second and say something to her in the old way Robin used to before all the shit started to fall apart; it becomes abundantly clear that text messages weren’t enough to bridge the gap. The tension in his shoulders, his silence, all of it is worlds away from the boy she knew, the one she very nearly destroyed under Batman’s order. Sure, he could work side-by-side with her (and had) since he took on the Red Robin and leader of The Titans, but that is apparently where the connection stops. Steph’s heart aches with it, aches with old decision.

Luckily, Cass. In her usual wordless understanding, Cass’s hand finds Steph’s wrist, giving a brief squeeze of understanding before she too spreads herself out and begins to warm-up before Bruce makes it down to the Cave to start the night. Her eyes move over Tim’s bo play, his tightly controlled stationary kata, she has a faint hope she’d have a try (not like she’s really that only Bat that wants a go) because pushing him bring out the fast and furious always made him more relaxed after, made him give her a smile again. Perhaps, this could be the beginning she and O talked about; a meaningful glance at the red-head in question with eyes for the lost son gives her faint hope.

Dick, however, sees the opportunity and after a few moments, decides to takes dibs. He snags his sticks and steps up on that mat first, cracking his neck before he starts his own progression. The yearlies were voluntary usually, first on the mat goes. With a breath, he brings his left leg up, holds it, then does a few back flips to work the muscles out. Do a few long-reach punches, work the sticks like he’s in a fight, like it’s one of the big bads that kick ass rather than plot and plan. He stretches, reaches, warms himself up, already looking forward to some epic bruises because maybe, just maybe this is where they could start over (where he could begin making some sort of progress) because he’d come to terms with this a long time ago; sometimes, in this family, you just need to take a good ass-beating to make things right. And here he is, revved up to take one without making is seem like he’s trying too hard to let that shit happen. The last yearly the younger Bat had come to…it had been just Tim, B, and Dick; just the three of them meeting. That’s…that’s how long.

Dami, with a glance at Tim’s back, eyes Dick for long moments since the potential for this to go…badly is obvious (and should be to Grayson), but it would be unwise to call out his Batman with Tim’s tenuous presence. Going first with Grayson could prove to be disastrous or sensible—and he contemplates the possibilities while holding Cass’s ankle above his shoulder with one bored hand (she always taps him on the forehead for it, and he, as routine would have it, rolls his eyes with false irritation before giving in). The flick to his ear draws him out of his musings while she leans forward to stretch her back for it. A small shake of her head is enough. Dami’s back teeth grind, and she can certainly hear it.

Jason huffs a little, working his shoulders and neck (kind of wishing he’d kept the holsters on just, well, because). Fucked if he should have stepped up first and might need to go a little one-on-one with Dick just to work Baby Bird into it a little, make it easier on the kid. Well, besides the fact he’s still a little pissed about being drugged because that asshole just violated the Bat rule, but Jason Todd—the Red Hood—is a man that knows all about running from your demons. He’s no stranger to the get-the-hell-away-from-it mentality, so he can see that what for in the background. What gets him,
what drives him a little closer to that swirling pit of anger is the way Tim is working it right now, like this is just another thing he has to do. Like Baby Bird is just humoring them, doing his civic duty so he could get back to real life or some shit. And, as much as that pisses him right the fuck off, he still gets it. Doesn’t make it better, doesn’t make him want to punch the asshole less, but he works himself out on the possibility he might have the chance to knock some sense into the kid’s head. Mr. Big Shot Vigilante all grown up.

Bruce finally makes his way down the big steps alone since Alfred was never really a fan of the yearlies and there’s enough upstairs for him to do since feeding everyone is like feeding an army anyway (Damian’s an endless pit of hunger these days because teenagers). He reaction at Tim’s presence is carefully masked (and once upon a time, he would have no issue, no hesitation calling Tim out for the duck and deception; now, however, he would bide his time); he keeps himself weaving around his children, arms crossed and speaking softly while they stretch and prep and get ready for something to happen, and those blue eyes go to Tim’s back at intervals. He took a second to join Dick on the mats where the acrobat is working out his arms and legs. Escrima sticks are sitting neatly beside him, his energy at 110% because there was a lot of new on the plate and he’s got the time to start puzzling out the moves, the contingencies (take his gained muscle mass, height, and reach into the equation, Dick; speed is going to be more strike at the end moves, and the bo…man, that’s going to hurt isn’t it?).

Bruce just steps a little closer to Dick, "I should go first." And there’s a wealth behind the simple statement that Dick picks up on immediately.

Still, his face twists in a dark scowl, "don't even. Don't take this from me."

And Bruce smiles that small smirk, both hands up in surrender as he backs off.

And then Tim is finally turning around with an audible breath, pulling his ear buds out, eyes dark and empty, expression closed. He stares Dick down for a long second, calculating, and takes his step onto the mats, no bullshitting, no playing around, no posturing, Tim's tight. He’s going to bite the bullet and take the first round, arm propped up on his bo, stance deceivingly calm. Dick almost starts in on some good-old play, just to set himself at ease because that look on the younger man’s bare face makes him want to pull the guy against his chest and just hold the fuck on. The old Tim would allow it, take comfort from it, return the embrace; while this one might deal with a hand on the arm, anything more might spur him to try feeding Dick his teeth.

Everyone stands from their stretches, closes in, whispers and chatter while Bruce pointedly looks at both combatants, waits for the return nods. He gives Tim the eye for a few beats longer than Dick (because he knows Tim avoided the talk for good reasons, not good enough for Bruce, but there is too much under the surface that explains all of it), and the ‘silent Bat-language’ commences in the furrow of Bruce’s forehead, the arch of Tim’s eyebrow. Whatever passes between them with the facial changes makes the others roll their eyes and throw up their hands because really. Long moments of facial ticks and Bruce seems to finally believe Tim’s ready (even if he is certainly unhappy about it), and uncrosses his arms.

"Usual rules," he gives another glance at the two and, yeah, he probably already knew how this is going to go. "We're doing a tag-up here. Showing off anything new and planning how to fight with one another; this isn’t the usual playtime."

Thanks for the reminder, sourly Dick’s up on both feet working his neck and shoulders one last time, the knee is good for this.

Bruce gives them both a final look; the second he steps off the mats, and it's on.
Dick doesn't even breathe, just scoops up his weapons, fakes high when he really goes in low for the first strike since, you know, most people get their shit knocked out that way. No one expects the first one to be low.

Tim doesn't bat an eyes with the block and spin, a good shot that would take most down without a hitch. Dick back flips out of the way because he's not most people.

Neither is Tim and strikes mid-flip, making the first blow like a champ and knocking the acrobat's balance all to hell. Dick still lands it, ready for what should be the brash onslaught coupled with utter finesse in planned responses to keep his opponent off-balance (a mixture of him, B, Snake, Shiva, and multiple others), but Dick is only marginally prepared for the stealth sinewy attack of a master assassin that doesn’t kill (to his credit, he was usually the Batman the last time he and Tim fought the good fight side-by-side, his own ass-kicking to do). Tim’s eyes are narrowed, his moves like water flowing, pausing, striking hard, determined to use every advantage he has against Dick Grayson.

From the audience, Dami's mouth parts in surprise as he watches. Longer reach, longer kick, more calculating, more moves, more styles, more shifts in offense and defense. Tim averts, bo vertical against his body, tight spin and duck with the leg while Dick is puzzling him out. Bo under the arm, to go for the midsection while the other hand dives in for the new nerve strike, taking the older man’s raised right arm out fast and seamless.

"Shit!" Someone yells as Dick jumps back, eyes a little wide with surprise, but Tim's expression is blank, gaze only for Dick’s face, body a coiled mass ready spring. He telegraphs next to nothing, making him impossible to read.

Dick kicks back, waits, watches, the Batman in him but it's been too long, and the nuances are different, the tell-tale sign are gone (like his eyes flickering when he bring out the King Snake or the turn of his ankle when Shiva’s roundhouse is on the way; the flex of his forearm when Rhmul Lama’s palm strike is just suddenly in your face). There’s more lingering styles hidden beneath the shift of muscle and bone, and Dick’s own gaze narrows down to just what’s doing on the mats, just the fight, just the calculations.

The noise dies down, eyes of the audience horrified and worried because it's supposed to be just sparring, seeing the new moves so they can fight together better, with more precision. Tim joining them is supposed to be a move in the right direction, isn’t it? This isn’t supposed to be brutal or personal.

But Tim spars with metas now and fights on his own when he’s in the city; there’s a smorgasbord of new in his repertoire, and it shows.

The younger man seems fine with Dick waiting him out, scarily still and watching, bo under his arm while Dick shakes off the strike, hitting the right spots on his own arm to start getting feeling back.

"Nice shot, Baby Bird." He's grinning and using his own brand of fighting. "Ra's people taught you some new stuff, huh? Ninja moves by the Assassin delivery service? Did you get into their 401-K? That, seriously, must have been a terrible plan because, you know, how many of them live long enough to cash in?" He dives in before the sentence is done, striking out hard, blocked, legs kicking at the knees, stick for the elbows, driving Tim back a few steps.

And Tim calculates it flawlessly, even letting Dick get a hit to his side to misdirect him enough to lands a harder blow to the acrobat's knee. His strength is his legs and those have to be compromised. Take the leaping ability away, hinder the kicks, take some of the power out of the play. As expected, his side radiates pain, but Dick's down on one knees, eyes big with 'well that wasn’t what I was expecting’ (because new moves). Tim drops the bo, leaps behind him, arms fast, winding
around the acrobat in a hold. His legs are around Dick, taking them both to the ground, thighs locking around Dick's chest and other arm so he can bar the free one in a complicated twist of his own arm. Bruce recognizes the hold (Talia, dammit) and clenches his fist to keep from stepping back on that mat since Dick can turn just enough to level him an angry eyebrow.

The peanut gallery is silent, watching with wide eyes as Tim pins Dick. Tim pinned Dick Grayson, Batman, Nightwing, the first Robin.

Tim arches his body in a clean, curved line and the lock is firm, solid. Dick's arms straining in his hold to no avail; the muscles in his biceps and shoulders are screaming with over-extension. The length of thigh at his throat presses slightly, a warning. Tim's eyes are empty, no remarks, getting the job done.

“This…isn’t—the kind of—*wheeze* hug I was…hoping for, Timmy.”

Nothing.

Well, at least Jason huffs a laugh under his breath.

Dick's still mostly fighting to get free (kind of), but the thumb on the right place makes his elbow to shoulder seize with abrupt pain and shit needs to get real for a minute because ow. The former Batman arches himself, swivels his hips and jerks hard, hoping to dislodge the hold when he brings his weight and Tim's vertical. He puts his back into it, on his feet with Tim maintaining the hold on his upper body but still refusing to take advantage of that thigh near Dick's windpipe (and maybe, just maybe...there's hope) but keeping both arms stretched out; the negative for Tim is gravity, so instead, he goes for a new tactic in a blink, legs moving around Dick's neck, hips swiveling to throw the older Bat with his legs and weight (so, we're not sticking with new moves?).

And, well, acrobat, so he catches himself before he's off the mats, spinning back around to face Tim (who is already on his feet, bo back in his hands). A decisive move and Tim brings the staff across his knee; it breaks apart by design, his wrapped palms fitting around both sticks, switching it up again. Dick grins a little because really; picking up his sticks, he looks a little rueful. “T. I thought you and Jay had a talk about just being yourself, okay?” And yeah, burn.

The Red Robin suit thing back when Jason was still an asshole, and… “Pick something original you little shit.” Right before the mother of all fights.

Nothing, no change. No reaction. There’s a grunt from the Bats because he just blew past that line.

Dick starts out on the defensive because Tim’s apparently got something he wants to show off if he’s picking a different weapon. He’s a little miffed he’s not getting any reaction since one of his best tactics is (and always has been) his mouth, and yeah, there’s that Robin holdover that just became part of him; the witty repartee that distracts, that makes the mind work on more than just the next fight. He keeps every opponent off balance with acrobatics, diversions, and banter, it's his thing. Whenever he's against another Bat, they all know his tricks before the fight even starts, but his word vomit is always the change-up in his bag of tricks.

Tim dives in again, this time using Dick's own signature moves against him because technically, they are new for Tim. The double hand blow, the reverse arco, the hip twist, the sweep, the follow-up punch. Tim starts with right offense, left defense and switches it up without a twitch. He moves from sinawali techniques to kung fun like a flow of water, not even a pause. He goes for Heaven Six, trying for bone, snapping his wrist for impact.

Not holding back then.
Dick blocks, dodges, meets the blows, making it obvious he’s not going for weaknesses yet; he’s got
time to let Tim work out the details of whatever plan he’s got (of course, the triple contingencies
might be a problem).

Changes up his power hits, getting through a weaker defense to almost clock the other guy. Tim
takes the blow to his forearm, goes live hand to block with it instead, changing up again and just
\textit{fuck}. He’s a tank now.

Sweat rolls, splatters on the mats. Time moves even if the two aren’t aware. Both men take hits, both
men come back with \textit{game on}. The weapons are discarded after a while, and the brutality of hand-to-
hand makes them both have to compensate. Tim is speed, planning a barrage of moves ahead of
Dick’s pace. Dick is liquid grace and reach, the Batman in him compensating, changing it up with
each hit he takes, forcing himself not to soften with each blow that connects.

Finally, they’re in close, Tim catching Dick’s fist without flinching; Dick blocking Tim’s sharp flat
palm to the abdomen. And again, when Dick expects things to turn in his favor when it comes to
pure strength, he’s wrong when Tim’s fist clenches harder around his hand. They’re closer now than
they’ve been in almost two years, staring the other down.

“Talk to me,” Dick finally says in a low tone, his mouth salty from the busted lip, “\textit{fuck}, Tim. \textit{Fuck.}
You’ve never stopped being \textit{important} to me.”

The twist in Tim’s expression is the draw of his brows, the lift of his lip to bare teeth. His biceps
strain to push harder, make Dick bend further away, almost, \textit{almost} make him take the all-important
step back.

“I don’t—“ but the older Bat just pauses, straining, “\textit{care what} you say. You’re my little brother, and
that’s \textit{fucking it.”}

Something dangerous sparks in Tim’s eyes, something dark and twisted. He just finally lets go, hops
up to let Dick’s momentum make him stumble an important instant. It’s all the time he needs.

And Damian sees it coming too late because \textit{Drake should not know this, no matter how much
Grandfather respected him} rather than not believing what his eyes are seeing outside the League of
Assassins. But Tim's body slinks down into a crouch, knee bent, hands poised for it while Dick
spins, getting his footing back in a heartbeat.

And Tim, Tim just \textit{moves}.

His hands are liquid and lightening, graceful, through the defenses in strategic planning, poise, and
the memory burned in his brain from the one time Ra’s forced him to watch.

"\textit{Drake, no!}” Damian moves too late because Cass has him in a lock, her eyes horrified but if she
didn’t \textit{stop} the interference, if anything shook Tim’s aim, Dick was a dead man.

Likewise, Bruce sees it like a horror movie because he's faced this attack before and his whole body
goes cold with the memory, with the recognition, with \textit{one of my kids knows how to do this}. Just as
Cass realizes, he’s automatically snatching Damian’s other arm so they won’t be burying Dick
Grayson.

The five spots on Dick's upper body are triggered in a blink of Tim’s fingers and palms, the sweep
and duck of his body.

\textit{The Demon's Trap}. 
The older man is frozen, eyes wildly wide as his lungs stop, no air, the muscles can't work, can't move, can't breathe. His chest is on fire. He can't even fall to his knees because his joints are locked in place. His mind working, his eyes on Tim’s face before it’s out of sight and he has the Batman in the back of his mind, berating him for underestimating an opponent.

But Tim, moving with animal grace, pacing around Dick with a predator's eyes stops to look up into those wide blue eyes, catches the hint of fear. It shakes him because this is Dick, this is the guy that took a lonely kid out of that fucking shell of a home and helped him earn something worth holding on to. This is the guy that hurt to even fucking look at the most because Tim believed in him with unquestionable faith. So, yeah, all his meditating, questioning his own motives since this whole ‘let’s give the Bats a second chance’ shit started comes back down to the basics: Dick Grayson used to believe in him, too. The moment Dick took the only thing he had left to live for, when Dick thought he’d lost his fucking mind, too many connections between them had been broken. The trust Dick had for him, the trust he had for Dick, all just shattered. In that meditative state in his childhood home, B’s words haunted him you’ll forgive everyone, except for Dick. Of course he could. No one else…

Tim’s hand rolls back, palm arched in a flat strike, aimed right at Dick’s sternum. The trick is force without breaking the bone, and he puts muscle into the initial blow, jerking back hard to keep from shattering the chest under him.

And Dick chokes, knees giving out as he fucking breathes. Babs actually chokes on a breath with him, her eyes incredibly wide, hands already reaching out before her brain can catch-up.

"Grayson! GRAYSON!"

Cass can finally breathe herself and release the struggling Robin, and Damian as well as Bruce run for the downed fighter while his opponent backs off entirely, almost to the edge of the mats, uncaring at the blood dripping down from his face and knuckles through the wraps. Bruce kneels beside Dick, hands on his chest, watching as the oldest gets his air, limbs shaky from the rush of adrenaline that hits him the second the strike was released. Damian, in a change from his normal I am an island thing, has both arms under Dick’s to hold them up, to keep the older man sitting up to keep his airway unhindered. Cass discreetly puts herself between the trio and Tim, eyes over her shoulder and a disapproving tilt to her mouth since some things are just too far past the line (but at least he half-assed it and didn’t follow through with the whole death part. Kudos). O has eyes for the painful twist to Tim’s face just a second before it falls to that blank expression and what the fuck is going on behind those eyes?

Damian turns just his head, blazing anger almost crackling from him, "how could you?! How could you even consider—?!

It's Dick that answers, his voice still wrecked, his body thrumming, "because I asked him here to fight, Little D. That’s what he came here for." And, shit, he expected to get a little bit of ‘kick ass Red Robin’ not literally have the whole master assassin thing thrown at him. Well, whatever. "Tell me that made you feel better," Dick grins a little, but the pain is there—new found respect is there. Some kind of realization.

And Tim with that blank faces just tilts his head in question from over Cass’s shoulder, "Why would it?"

And Dick just stares, Jason on the ground beside him gives the look. You know, the one that ended up with a wicked scar across his throat and a broken arm; big brother’s going to murder you kind of thing.

"I did what you asked." The younger man picks up his staff to collapse it, stays on the outskirts.
“Now the Bats know I can still hold my own, right? I’m not a drug addict, and I’m not failing at the vigilante game. I’m functioning pretty fucking good actually. There’s your proof.” And Tim’s looking up just enough to catch Bruce’s eyes, sticks out his forearm, “you can test me for whatever you think I’m on. No problem.”

What he doesn’t expect is a whole lot of drawn, confused eyebrows.

“You wanted to talk.” That’s all he needs to say because a whole lot of gazes swing to Bruce and yeah, steps back are taken (even Jason helps Dick scoot back a little while B’s staring at Tim).

The Batman actually rolls his fucking eyes (because his kids. All. Of. Them) and moves off the mats to cross the space to the computer. When he comes back, walking right past Cass, the red file folder in hand is thrust at Tim. Warily, he drops his bo and takes the file, quickly skimming the contents because, well…Shit. He gets the picture with B’s test results and cramped notes in the margins, circled results of his lower-than-average immunities.

(Note 1: Compound 7145.6C, adverse effects on immune system, attacking white blood cells; possibility for long-term complications. Note 2: Tim’s results post-splenetic, check for indicators of adverse affects; current norms needed for comparison)

Tim goes still, eyes on nothing just over the file folder, expression hard. “You already know. Tam told you.”

“Tam told me actually,” and Dick starts to his feet, Jason giving him a hand.

Tim’s eyes shift and now he’s a little guilty about it because he could have given Dick another cardiac arrest.

B is up in his space this time, talking low, “drugs? Never crossed my mind. The fact you can’t hack the life didn’t either.”

With the blood still on his face, Tim’s expression falls a little, turning away from Bruce’s intense gaze like he’s still that teenager trying to lie to Batman and just not pulling it off yet. “I read this… wrong.”

“Well, on a high note,” because Jason, “we’ve discovered Tim’s got balls the size of the demon brat to almost take out a Batman.” His thumb hitches at Dick who arches a brow at him.

Steph just falls down and dies, hands over her mouth not doing shit to stifle the near-hysterical laughter. She’s got a hand on O’s wheelchair, watching the red head lose her calm and collected. Eyes incredibly wide, Cass laughs completely unintentionally but still has the composure to look apologetically at Dick while she does. Damian is just so done and have care for his blood pressure, Drake.

“Almost? Little Wing, please.”

“What? C’mon, Dickie, that was pretty fucking—“

“There’s a way to un-trigger it, you know. I’ve hung out with Ra’s too.”


And Steph had just calmed a little, but she lays back down without even trying. O just reaching down to pat her head.
“Besides,” straining not to start laughing, Dick just pushes on, “That wasn’t even the full move, right Timmy?”

He can’t look Dick in the face but stares at nothing over Bruce’s shoulder, “of course not. I’m not that much of an asshole. There’s a catch.”

“Ah-ha. But, you admit you are overly gifted in the balls department, right?”

Bruce is very pointedly biting his lower lip.

“Who in this line of work isn’t?”

And that’s game, set, match.

“This,” Damian’s hand just waves vaguely, “is not how I pictured this event to proceed. At. All.”

“Brat, this makes my year. Not even going to lie. If I would have had popcorn. Holy. Shit. Yes.” But while the others are laughing, Jason’s eyes snap to Dick’s face, assessing, narrowing. The tips of his fingers just barely touching the curve of the older Bat’s hip once. He gets a side wink and a half-smile even with the blood from the busted lip (and oh does that make some sense, Babs discreetly gets a picture of those two and the look that passes between them).

“All right, all right,” and Bruce is apparently the one that needs to stop the nonsense. “We’re all very well aware of rampant miscommunications in this family, so—thirty minutes. Everyone break, then we’re coming back for round two.” Looking down at his obviously guilty or ashamed third son, Bruce takes the file in one hand and a wrist in the other; Tim doesn’t even fight the hold so maybe, just maybe things are sinking in and his worst case scenario would start changing.

“You too,” he says to Dick while Cass pretty much lifts Steph off the floor and into Babs’ lap.

He and Jason just follow B leading Tim to the med-bay for a little clean-up; the third Robin stands still while his face is tended by Bruce. The first Robin sits on the gurney while the second cleans up his lip (and covertly checks his pulse, his lungs because Christ Dick, stop making me think you’re going to fucking die).

Just like with the leg a few days ago, Tim doesn’t fight the harsh solvents and care. He’s…well, he’s a douche bag for ruining their night, and—shit, the Batman had been concerned for him, knew his immune system is down and why. With the broad hand holding his chin still, he averts his eyes and refuses to let the tightness in his chest take over.

But… he sighs a little and once B steps back to toss the cotton balls away, Tim lifts the bottom of his under armor up over his abdomen, just enough to show the impressive, jagged scar that stands out among the rest. The three Bats with him zero their gazes on it.

“When—it happened when I was looking for you.”

Bruce moves slightly to catch the averted gaze, and because it’s Tim, he walk through it all easy in steps to keep the man with him, “where were you?”

“Iraq. The League of Assassins, the three of them sent to…help me, I guess…were waiting. They followed me from Berlin. I stole an artifact from a museum, one that looked like a batarang.”

Jason’s brows go up at the same time as Dick’s because Tim did what now?

B remains unruffled, “Did they take you to Ra’s?”
“No. Didn’t need to, not then. Ra’s believed me when I told him you were alive. He left me those three to track down the proof there.” Tim swallows, eyes going distant. “I used the same pseudonym twice, my mistake. If I hadn’t, Z and Owen wouldn’t have had the excuse to stay with me. They might still be alive.”

Bruce inhales it all, but keeps himself in a linear progression, “What did you find?”

“The mark you left, the second one in the cave, out in the middle of the desert. The Council of Spiders’ member, the Widower, caught up to us there.”

Okay, breathe. The League and The Council after Tim. The Batman needs a second to process or else Bat Dad is going to start up with the lecture or the millennia. “Let me check your leg.”

Dick scoots over, pats the seat beside him without even hesitating and makes the younger man feel even more like ass, but he lowers the tights to the top of his thighs, bicycle shorts underneath, before he gingerly sits beside Dick and pulls them down the rest of the way. While Bruce cuts the bandage away, noting spots of fresh blood from the fight, Dick gently takes up a still-bound hand in his own (ignoring the automatic tense of Tim’s arm) and starts unwinding the tape.

“He…he was—he had the element of surprise. Owen and Z…I was too late. Pru. Pru survived. They had to take out her larynx.”

“The League found you in the desert?” Dick makes it smooth, eyes on the hand he’s working with while Jason stands silently, listenting.

“No.” Tim swallows, eyes still glossed over with the memories, “after the Widower ran me through, I came to enough to used my cape and her scarf. I managed to get us in the Jeep, drive it back to the Wayne holdings somehow. That’s—that part is fuzzy, but Tam had tracked me there, came into the room while we were both bleeding out on the bed. The League came in right behind her.”

B smears antibacterial healing goop on the stitches, glad none of them have popped. His mouth is a grim line because even though it was assassins from the League, the underlying tone gives him insight into what those people meant at the time. Someone else that believed in Tim during the turbulence of losing Robin, of moving alone, of the stigma he may be mentally unstable. No one gave him much detail on the time he’d been gone, only security footage and vague reports gave him the picture.

“I came to in the underground, right by one of the Pits. His main one in the Cradle. Thought Ra’s had…heh, thrown me in. I mean, I’d lost so much blood, there was no way I could have survived.”

Now, all eyes are on him, motion stops.

“Christ, Baby Bird—“ Jason’s hand on his arm and his face is fucked. “No! Jason, no. The surgery was tough, but I lived.” And finally, something fills Tim’s eyes and he look up at Jason with a half-smile. “I’m still getting you the ‘Number #1 Zombie’ shirt for Christmas, asshole.”

A hard (relieved) grin crosses Jason’s face while B winds new bandages around the leg.

He sighs, “after that…I pretty much took over the League for a while. The White Ghost and Expediter fought about giving me access, but it happened in the end. Ra’s didn’t give me a choice because Tam; they would have killed her without thinking twice if I refused or if they thought I was faking them out. So I played along until I had enough access to sabotage the systems, take down the League worldwide and then the Council found the Cradle, so I had to take them down at the same
time. Took some work, but...” he just shrugs.

Now, the three of them stop with that creepy Bat stillness. Three sets of eyes are huge, even B and nothing short of random alien invasions, multiverse explosions, and being lost in fucking time even phase him.

“Timmers, fuck,” Jason blinks like he’s had some kind of brain injury and needs to reboot.

“I didn’t have any other choice,” he defends harshly, the hand in Dick’s grip tightening into a fist. “I got Tam into it, and I wasn’t going to let anyone else—” fuck, his voice is—shit stop yelling. “The Wanderer was going to try killing me next or maybe Sac or Tangle because they were pissed, but, the Council was going to make me watch Tam die, and that shit wasn’t going to happen.” I did what I had to do, I did what I had to do to survive on my own.

Bruce’s broad hand is on his face again, and who knows what his expression is giving away because flying alone was always harder, but his first take-down as Red Robin was the fucking League of Assassins and their mortal enemy. He didn’t half-ass, that was for sure. Everyone needed a goal, right? But Tim’s looking up into Bruce’s face and just... just like when they first met up again in Gotham, he’s suddenly pressed up against that strength and warmth, his head tucked under B’s chin and arms around him like he fucking belongs somewhere again. Like he's still got Wayne attached to his name.

“Tam didn’t die,” and his voice is a little pathetic, slightly muffled against Bruce. Utterly, but damn if he can make himself do anything other than lay his forehead against that shoulder and lean. “It’s okay. No one else died, Bruce. It’s really okay. I didn’t let anyone else fucking die.” Because it is, right? It was years ago now, and he’d done more since then because his plans weren’t always flawless, his body not always fast enough or strong enough.

And Dick is prying open the fist in his hand, making the slightly trembling muscles unlock so he can slide his fingers in, press his palm against Tim’s and hold on since he knows without asking, without Tim outright saying anything, that were is so much more along this same vein in the time Red Robin had been flying without a net.

“He was going to kill everyone you cared about Alfred, Selena, Vicky, Gordon, Babs...well, not Babs, she had that shit handled.” He tries to cover up his tone, but no one is laughing, no one is snarking back. Shit, not a good sign. "I called in the Titans, Dick, and Dami while I went up against him. Heh. I was cocky, waited until the last second when the paperwork was signed to tell him he'd lost. I won. Well, the whole window thing, but you know, whatever. That's...how the emancipation, the CEO and shit happened. It had to or Ra's would be running Wayne Enterprises."

The sudden tightness in Bruce's shoulders is surprise because, well, Tim never really told any of the Bats the 'whys' or 'hows' behind all that either. He just started showing up in a business suit, taking care of things that needed to be handled. Bruce's arms pull him in tighter, one hand coming to the back of his neck. Dick's other handle cradles his, pulls until Tim's fingers are against the older Bat's chest.

“You were a mess when I got you back here,” and Dick, Dick that he could have killed less than ten minutes ago sounds raw. The two hands around his tighten painfully.

“No one else could die,” is the only answer Tim’s got for him.

Jason’s face is dark, angry, and he closes those green eyes pointedly taking a deep breath. One hand reaches out over Dick, palms the back of Tim’s head, scratches lightly against his scalp.
“I’m taking the kids up to get some grub. We’ll start after that.” and the guy turns on his heel to walk away, ignoring how hoarse the words are. He grabs demon brat by one hand, the kid that had been watching the exchange with narrowed eyes; Jason gives a minute shake of his head and Damian huffs a little, helping corral Steph, O, and Cass upstairs. Jason doesn’t bother answering any of O’s questions about the three in the med-bay. Instead, he lifts her effortlessly out of her chair and carries her up the steps behind the others.

“What the hell is--?”

“Leave it, Babs. Get the deets later when I’m not ready to go kill some motherfuckers.”

She meets his eyes with an arched brow, “well, glad to see you’ve got Bird Wonder to keep you on the not-so-straight-and-narrow. I have some epic footage though.”

And Jason…the Red Fucking Hood does not blush. Oh hell no…but, well, his cheeks are a little hot.

“Maybe someday we can compare notes,” she teases gently, patting his shoulder.

And even with the noise disappearing up the big staircase, Bruce has a hard time forcing his arms to unlock when Tim starts to pull back, to pull away.

“It’s all old school, B. I’ve dealt with it since. Fought crime, lead the Titans, did the whole international thing. I’m good at this stage. I manage my condition.” And there it is, deflection away from the pain, away from the I was not as okay alone back then as I want everyone to keep believing. Dick sighs a little, refuses to let go.

"The second you saved us from Harvey, I knew you were cut out for the life, Tim," the older man replies in an easy tone. "Nothing has been able to shake that conviction.” The hand lingers on his shoulder (Bruce’s fingers find the wicked scar over the at the nape of his neck).

"Noted."

"I hope so," Dick counters.

A sigh lifts his chest, but Bruce cuts in, "this is the second time you've come at me with a worst-case scenario when I swear, I'm only concerned. I can't ground you, take you off patrol anymore, and I sure as hell don't think you're on drugs."

"Knee-jerk reaction," the younger deadpans. "I'll...get better at reading this stuff."

Bruce’s eyes are hard, his mouth open to say something that probably isn’t good, but Dick kind of beats him to the punch.

“Timmy, we’ve know you for years now.” The older Bat pulls the arm so he has the younger’s attention. “Since you started training for Robin, Bruce and Alfred and I have been trying to deprogram you from all this ‘I am an island, I need no one’ mentality, to teach you that being a vigilante means you have to have a network because bad shit just happens. It’s a part of the job. That said, we all have our safety nets. B has the League, Jay has the Outlaws, I have the old Titans, and just...yeah. You used to have us; when it came down to it, you called me and rightfully so.” Dick’s brows draw in, his expression troubled, “I know the last few years have been bad, I really do, kiddo, but I want,” Dick lets go with one hand to make an erase motion, “no, I need you to try and remember the old days. Sure, you can follow protocols for check-ins and whatever, but we used to work on the premise that none of us are going to stand up against the world and win.”

“I have the Titans to back me. I haven’t been alone all this time.”
Dick just shakes his head a little, “you think I haven’t talked to Gar, Tim? He won’t tell me much because he’s in your corner now, but yeah, you’re the leader there. You take the burden of responsibility.”

“Someone has to?” But Tim just rubs his temple with his other hand, “I…okay, okay. I get where you’re coming from,” and he has a strange moment when one night, after Kon and Bart and Steph and Dad had all passed away, when he thought about digging out the old .45 in the closet and just…he’d called Dick instead, desperate to hear someone alive. Dick, he’d been able to lean on Dick at one time.

“No saying what we want to hear to appease the Bats,” Bruce pushes a little harder. “Tim, no more of this.”

The youngest huffs a little, “I’m not your Robin anymore, you know. You can’t just—“

“Incorrect,” B cuts in, “no matter how old you are or what your new pseudonym is now, you’re always going to be one of my Robins. That’s what happens when you agree to take on the mask.”

Dick chuffs a laugh, “Bats for life, Tim-my!” and finally, finally, Dick Grayson reaches out and snatches the younger man with his octopus hold, getting his damn hug. And Tim…still a little raw and in disbelief, doesn’t fight it.

**

After a good cup of tea and Alfred’s mini-sandwiches (“Tim’s…having a rough time, Al. We’re giving him, B, and Dickie some privacy.” “Master Timothy is here, Master Jason?” and the old guy just got that look, like he was going to start making all the kid’s fave foods immediately because, well, the guy hadn’t really seen Tim in years, had he?), the rest of the Bats make their way back down the massive steps into the dim. Jason is carrying O, but…he’s completely not blushing still, get it?

But Dickie and B are standing by Tim, who is already straddling his bike; the kid is re-dressed, helmet in hand, and Jason automatically tenses at first glance. But, well, it doesn’t look like anyone’s yelling, so maybe the epic beat-downs will stay on the mat tonight. Maybe.

“Give us a few,” he tells Cass and Steph while setting O back in her chair. He snags the demon by the collar and strides right over to the mini pow-wow. Demon is half-running to keep up with his strides (which is saying something because there’s no snarking, no small hands punching him in the nuts or anything; kid must be concerned too).

“…send me your previous reading so I can compare,” B is saying in that easy tone. “I want to make sure that fear toxin isn’t going to make your natural immunities break down.”

“I have the last six months saved. I’ll forward it.” Tim is fiddling with his helmet rather than look at the two. “The antibiotics are the standard. The bags for emergencies, the vials pretty much the same.”

“Yeahhhh,” Jason draws out to get some attention, “septic shock is pretty much shit, Baby Bird. Glad you got a plan for that.”

“I don’t remember,” Tim just shrugs, “I was unconscious through it the first time.”

Jason just blinks at him.

“Been a long time since then. Seriously. I monitor a hell of a lot more now.”
“Good to know,” B just shakes his head a little. “All right. We won’t hold you, but—“

“I have to go back to the Tower, Bruce. The team is…they don’t like it very much when I go dark for periods of time. I’ll be back in Gotham in a week or so, longer if something comes up.”

Dick is smiling faintly, “and…?”

Tim just huffs a laugh, “yeah, yeah. Fine. Next time…you and me.”

“Fucking righteous, Timmers. We’re going to train surf the hell out of Gotham, ‘kay?”

Bemused, the younger Bat just nods and fits on his helmet. A small wave while the Bats back off; he revs the Ducati and takes off into the night.

“He’s leaving?” Steph sounds a little lost from behind the group, arms around herself.

Dick, looking genuinely pleased, even with the bruises starting to turn that terrible shade of purple, gives her a one-armed hug. “Yeah, for tonight he is.”

“But he’ll be back,” B finishes, relaxed and lose. “It’s fine. We’ll be here.” One hand goes out, ruffles Damian’s hair and lands on the kid’s shoulder. “All right, people. We’ve got some rounds to finish up. Let’s get moving.”

**

Several days later, the shadows take shape, become something more and Ra’s simply smiles.

“Detective.”

“Wrong one,” the Batman growls from the other side of the room, and Ra’s turns just a breath too late.

Volts of electricity jolt through him, his body seizing in sudden, unbearable agony. The few times the Demon’s Head has screamed in his extensive lifetime could be counted on one hand; three of those times occurred because of the Batman. When the pain finally abates, Ra’s falls to the ground, his body steaming, twitching.

“You’re not as progressive as you may think sometimes,” the Batman comes out of the dark and unabashedly shoves the cowl away from his face. “There’s always going to be some tech you don’t get.”

“I will—“

B moves incredibly fast, yanking the Demon’s Head up by his throat and delivering a stunning round of iron fist punches, determined to make that shit painful.

Ra’s spits blood and a few teeth, huffing in rage until the reinforced steel toes catch him right in the face.

Batman, Bruce, takes out the remote from his utility belt, clicking the multiple screens on and each screen is filled with one of the numerous Lazarus Pits.

Ra’s eyes go from the screen and back to the man he originally deemed the Detective.

“Killing is not my way,” in the dark voice of the Batman, blue eyes colder than ice, “it never will be. I’ll never lower myself to that. Doesn’t mean I have any qualms about taking immortality away from
“No!” Ra’s yells, a hand uselessly reaching out. The Demon’s Head is on his feet in an instant, eyes for the destruction the Batman has wrought. “You!”

“Two left, Ra’s.” The bare-faced Batman states, “only two and I know where they are.”

That…makes the Demon Head’s heart stutter.

“I’ve been too lax. Too worried about other criminals to really make an effort with the League of Assassins. The JLA and I have our hands full most of the time.” And footsteps crunch, boots in the newest Cradle as they line up, one by one: Superman, Wonder Woman, The Green Lantern, and The Flash. They stand at Batman’s back, game faces on.

“I’ve had a few words with Red Robin about the Council of Spiders, and that time he was kicked out of a window.” The growl in the Batman’s voice grows dangerous, enough that had the Demon’s Head not lived so long, he would have cowered. “I’m very, very not happy about how you’ve been treating my fucking son, Ra’s.” Without fear, B puts himself a breath away from Ra’s, forcing the villain to stare him right in the eye. “You come for me. You fight me. We’ll dance. My sons, Ra’s? My sons are off limits.”

And Ra’s Al Ghul sneers, blood on his teeth. “You’re sons are more interesting than you are now a days, Detective.”

“I raised them right,” Batman deadpans back. “And so we understand each other. Come for Tim or Damian or Dick or Jason, come for anyone that’s mine and I will start putting some real effort into this little game, Ra’s. I will bring the fucking best of the Bat. Get it?”

With a terribly frightening half-smile, Ra’s regards the gravity of the situation. “Unless Timothy or any of yours come to me, it seems as though we dance with one another, Detective.” And there’s a sick anticipation there, one similar to the Joker when the game just got interesting.

But the smile that cuts the Batman’s face, the light in his eyes that only comes out in the extreme, is enough to make the look die off out of Ra’s. Behind him, Wonder Woman audibly cracks her knuckles with a grin, Superman cracks his neck, the Flash smirks and throws a peace sign, and the Lantern’s ring gives an abrupt spark.

“Believe me when I say I can’t wait.” And for the first time in a while, the Batman is sure he’s doing the right things for the right reasons.

Chapter End Notes

So…Double entendre here, there’s more than one person doing the “right thing” for the wrong reasons, right? Oh, and one of my Headcannons is that Tim and Bruce can hold conversations with facial expressions alone—he was Bruce’s Robin so yes, just yes. Don’t judge me. Oh, and Arceadia wanted the League to have spreadsheets full of the man/alien hours saved because Tim whoops the League of Assassin’s ass as a hobby, so B has to do the updates because Wally, honestly Wally.
Oh, and I need a break to work on my other fic because WOW. Just, Wow, this took a
lot and it hurt. Lol. Not as much sass and sarcasm, lot of feels and some angst. Hopefully the leave off from last chapter was addressed. And oh, this one hurt me, so please let me know your thoughts.

Also, for next chapter: Tim and Dick patrolling together for the first time or Tim and Dami going all detective? Or.... terrible mishaps and more feels?

I'm also on Tumblr at https://www.tumblr.com/blog/iphoenixrising. It's my muse blog, so feel free to leave comments and headcannons and all kinds of stuff.

I totally got sidetracked and am doing this crazy little thing about Multiverse Dick, Jason, and Dami coming to this universe and the Insurgents took over their world because their Tim died, yada, yada, so I might post it too. Never know.

Okay, no more rambling, but thanks again for reading.
Drabble: Vests

Chapter Summary

If you forget your vest, the other cops make fun of you.

Chapter Notes

Crap. Seriously, I'm working on my other fic after this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six months after the return of Red Robin:

Forgetting to put on your vest is like forgetting your side arm; the other cops make fun of you and poke the shit out of you so you don’t forget again. Well, when the suit you normally wear is body armor in itself; the under layer of Kevlar (shitty Kevlar at that, the kind that chafes like hell) just slips the mind.

He’s an idiot. Not just because he forgot the vest, but because he can’t be a bad ass vigilante here. He’s been through generations: Robin, Nightwing, Batman. He’s stepped into them all, pulled away from fear of the unknown and given himself over the night. This incarnation, being a cop, is so far out of his normal reach that he still slips up sometimes, still has to focus on doing things that regular people have to do. He has to pretend he’s scared, has to pretend he’s tired, has to pretend he’s never seen crushed skulls, ripe viscera ripped from a body cavity like rancid fruit, empty eyes open in a never-blinking stare.

He has to put on a completely different skin for this, not just a mask. The Haven had been so much easier than GPD; no one knew him there, no one cared about the deets because they were too worried about appeasing their own greed and tending to other masters. Sure, there were good, honest people in the ‘Haven, but not enough to balance the scales.

In Gotham, he’s got more than the usual criminal element. The ape-shit crazy variety because, yeah, the GPD has protocols when a 516 (Fear Gas explosion), a 1029 (Joker hostage situation), an 879 (Freeze on site), or a 442 (Carnivorous plant growth) popped up around the city. He’s prepared to handle these things as someone that moves without restraint (other than not killing), so he’s got to force himself to move like a regular citizen.

In the middle of the shootout, it’s easier said than done. If Hood were here, he’d be laughing his ass off at Dick Grayson holding a gun (even though he’s a better shot, a trick shot when necessary, than even Hood) because he knows the eldest son isn’t going to shoot anyone, just like B, there are always other ways. At the same time, he can’t use wingdings while on the job. Closing his eyes behind the crate, Dick places the seven without fail and cups the hilt in his left hand while the right tightens.

A spfft, the sound of smoke pellets hitting the concrete and shit, who’s here?! His eyes go to the rafters, the niches, the shadows by habit and picks out the flash of a cape, a long one before the
vigilante dives out of his line of sight. Well, he’s pretty sure he knows who that is even if there are way too many new capes in town, and that one…it’d been a while.

“Jesus, Grayson!” McHenry is yelling from beside him, shaking him out of his head and the sudden it feels like I haven’t see him in a long, long time, “they’ve got us pinned, we gotta—“

Dick swivels, up and in motion before his mind overrides instinct. The .45 in his hand jerks in the right rhythm, with the right beat, the right location (ricochets off a steel girder to make plenty of noise, another close to a boot that’s still moving because Red Robin hasn’t gotten there yet). The distraction should be good. He picks out the individual grunts, the sharp whack and thocks of meaty hits, the hollow thunk that means someone is having nap time. He grins a little.

Automatically, he holds a hand out to McHenry to stay put and pulls the auto at arm’s length, crouch-walking over to the dissipating fog.

“Grayson!” is hissed from his spot behind the crate. “Are you nuts?! Geeze! That’s one of the BATS!”

No shit. Lived in Gotham a little more than half my life.

“He might need help,” and Dick is peering through the rolling smoke to come face-to-face with another automatic, one that doesn’t have nearly the same moral obligation to not just shoot people in the face.

“GPD, get on the ground!”

“Get fucked, pig.”

He feels the rush coming at him just as his finger starts to squeeze the trigger, and then his side is aching, breath driven out of him by the blur of red and black that slams into him (so that’s how that felt, damn, it kind of sucks), taking them both to the ground (because he has to be a regular person) and still, the gun goes off. Another blur is a spinning insignia to the back of the thug’s head without even a hitch in the throw. Must not have been hit, good. That’s a good night.

The white lenses looking down at him narrow with his eyes, “why the fuck aren’t you wearing a goddamned vest?” Red Robin hisses before he’s on his feet and just gone.

McHenry darts out of his hiding place, eyes wide, the older shield panting “oh—oh man. I’ve only seen them from far away, but, wow. That one wasn’t the Bat but he’s one of ‘em. Glad he did us a solid though,” the hand is held out and Dick makes an effort to look winded and let the other man pull him standing.

“Wow, he was. Yeah, man, that was really good of him to save me.” Dick blinks and rubs the back of his neck in that golly, gee kind of way.

McHenry is already scoping out the tied-up perps. “Yeah, you were lucky, but seriously kid, I know the ‘Haven only had that one guy, but we’ve got a team of ‘em that get our backs, so try to stay out of their way if—“ the older cop’s eyes suddenly get wide, “holy shit, Grayson!”

Eyes drawn down, Dick’s mouth parts a little at the red stain that spread over his pristine shirt. But, there’s no pain.

McHenry is right on him, hand pressing as though he’s fully aware how fast a bleeder can hit, but also realizes there is no wound under the shirt.
“Not me,” Dick mumbles and looks up again at the rafters.

“Damn, that Bat took one for you. That’s well, not really a surprise since they’re pretty all right in my book,” McHenry is pulling up his shoulder radio, “except that Hood guy. He’s a few nuts short of a can if you know what I mean. This is Unit 14, we’ve got some Bat activity at 17th and Grand down by the Lower East. Send a transport for seven.”

And Dick moves woodenly, giving hand signals that he’s going to check the perimeter, gun still out while his mind is on how bad Red Robin might be on the roof. Once he’s through the door, he’s moving like Batman, silent and hidden to scale the side of the building without being seen.

Nothing. *Fuck.*

Cell phone time.

“Yello?”

He might regret this, but well…“Hood.”

“Big Wing! You’re thinking of me while pigging out on jelly-filled aren’t you? Don’t lie, I already know.”

*No time for this.* “I’m going to need an assist.”

“Oh? Wait, did you ditch your day job for the night job?”

“No, I’m still the uni. I need you to find Red, check him out ASAP.”

Silence for a few short seconds. “I don’t like the sound of this. The Joker was out earlier tonight, Big Wing. B didn’t get a chance at him.”

So *shit*, of course Red Robin would just walk right in the middle of that. “He’s had a *bad night*, Hood. Do this for me.”

“Ah, shit.”

“Yeah, my shift is done in a few hours, let me know when you find him.”

“Okay, okay, I’m going now.”

*Jason*, don’t kill him, okay?”

“… you know what?” and there’s a disgusted noise on the other end, “*Fine.* Just, fuck. Fine. Believe what you want.”

“Thanks, Little Wing.” And there, that tone is a little warmer with the old nickname, makes the Red Hood get all huffy because he’s digging it. Like Dick didn’t know.

“Whatever. Blah, blah. I’ll text you when I know he’s not dead.”

**

*Present Day*

The Pylar Industries building has the best roof. It’s perfect for scoping, high enough to be out of view of other windows, has enough outcroppings to latch on in case snow and icy make flying
treacherous. There’s plenty of hidden spaces to duck under in case the police helicopters are about, or if the terrible Chinese takeout necessitates more than one hand. It used to be their meeting place, back when they were brothers.

Red is standing deeper in the shadows like the Bat, the whites of his lenses taking away the depth of his humanity and Nightwing gives him a half of a smile because, well, the guy’s here, isn’t he?

“So,” the voice is just like the one from that time, why the fuck aren’t you wearing a goddamned vest? “Where do we start?”

And this is all about trust, earning it back, earning his place back in Tim’s life again. He keeps the goal in the forefront of his mind. “We’ve got the upper East run, nothing hard on the books tonight. General fly-by. Sound good?”

The casual statement, the ease at which he’s moving closer to the shadow to put them a few feet apart, all of it is nostalgia turning between them. It’s different now, too different for being comfortable yet, but hell, at least he got a hug last time, so things are already looking up.

A shift in the shadows is a nod, and Red Robin turns his back on Nightwing to take the edge of the roof, grapple ready.

**

While Dick was gearing up for this, getting into his suit down in the Cave, Bruce watched on in the Bat suit sans cape and cowl.

“Just remember—” and the older man hesitated, “remind him you’re there when you two find a fight.”

Without his domino yet, Dick looked up from getting his boots on, brows drawn together. Bruce just gave him a one-shoulder shrug, “he’ll forget,” is a good answer. “He’s used to fighting with a team but not in Gotham…he’s probably lost the instinct. Just like you did when you became Nightwing and took up in the Haven.”

“But he’s been out with Robin and Hood—”

“Robin and Hood don’t work like you do, Dick.”

Well, point. Those two functioned like a force of nature, separate and silent and deadly in the right circumstances.

Dick considered this and gave a sharp nod, “good observation. I’ll keep it in mind, B.”

When he walked over, Bruce did that thing, the hand on the shoulder that was a grounding touch. It brought the mind out of whatever shit storm and back to the present. “It’s okay, Dick, just do what you can do.”

And there it is, the same stubborn look Alfred swears is a Father/Son thing. “He’s not going to fall away again, Bruce. I’m not going to let that happen.”

His pseudo-father just gives him a half smile, a quiet chuckle, “I know, Dick, we’ve got a mission, don’t we?”

**
And of course they find a fight because Gotham, and it’s a real bitch to be in the middle of this, blood pumping, riding the adrenaline high, muscles working and straining, and the Red Robin isn’t standing at his back but is over to the right with the same get it done and move on mentality he’d had in the last interactions. It’s so wrong that Nightwing hadn’t focused on it in the last few times they’d been in the same brawl; how closed off, how tight Tim held himself now. Brutal efficiency is the name of his game. Of course, he’d only seen him in the bigger fights when there were a whole lot of too many and a handful of not enoughs. Now that this is just kind of like bullshitting around the water cooler kind of business, he can bust ass while watching the changes out of his peripheral because damn.

Batman is always poetry in motion, a never-ending ass-kicking that flows from one move to the next with the more dangerous, savvy criminals, and pure street brawler with guys like these. He can change, adapt, learn fighting styles like most people change socks—without conscious thought.

Red, however, has been in Nightwing’s sight from day one. He’s seen the kid start with a sprained wrist throwing the first punch to making his knuckles bleed on the bag to taking on Nightwing’s signature spinning back kick (patent pending) to integrating King Snake’s brutal martial arts to adding the graceful change-up of Lynx. He’s seen the kid through stages. The last two years have apparently been a lot since this guy is in a class of his own. Where Red Robin still had vestiges of his previous alter ego in the way he kicked, in the way he flew, in the way he spoke, the Red he is now moves like Death. If it wasn’t Tim Drake under that cowl, Nightwing would be worried enough to try and take him down.

Once he gets back into the guy’s life, like really back in, they are going to spar for days because he wants to see the eyes under that cowl with every new move he pulls out; he wants to pit himself against this fighter and push them both to their limits. Just like he’s always felt with Bruce, he wants to pit himself against this strength. Not some half-assed fight like last time, not with an angry Tim Drake still raw from his ordeals, he wants the real thing.

The next one is literally cannon fodder and Bruce’s words come back to him even as he’s pulling a wingding and letting it fly at the stocky dude on Red’s right. The hit is flawless, sending him flying back, and Red’s white lenses snap over the Nightwing, who gives a cheeky grin and wave while the high kick takes his guy right out.

Red just gets back into his mind set, but Nightwing snatches the next guy’s wrist when the punch goes too far and calls out, “Red! Down!” A roll of his hip the right way and the thug is airborne, arms pin wheeling as gravity kicks in and the younger vigilante automatically drops so flying thug can take out standing thug.

Nightwing knows he’s getting somewhere when Red flicks a flying disc-thing and the guy sneaking up over his shoulder (dude, knew he was there) suddenly has a mouthful of that insignia before the guy goes back to his own collection of punching bags. Really, Bruce might be a pain sometimes, but he did give good advice on everything but relationships (don’t get him started, just really).

As the fight is winding down, Nightwing has made progress in moving to Red’s back so they’re in the center of the circle, and flying fists, working calves and thighs, the burn of a good fight, the ache of it. Nightwing almost grins with nostalgia as the fingers of his left hand tap Red’s side under the cape and Red gets it in an instant (because maybe the instinct is still there). The guy running at him yells before he jumps, Nightwing steps back tight against Red and bends forward in a bow; Red bends backward to lay them both flat and the thug goes flying into another.

It’s a fave move, one that never disappoints. Nightwing is laughing as they both come back up into the next wave (the last wave, sadly) jump with knives and lead pipes because gee those work great
against the Bats, right? Go back to the ‘80s you wanna be thugs.

And holy shit, one of Red’s arms winds in his and the guy is turning, taking Nightwing with him; the old move kicks in with less than a breath, both legs extended to take the last three out before Red lets him go to do an effortless backflip outside their little circle of fun.

And N…N is laughing while Red starts tagging the thugs, zip stripping them together; if he wasn’t wearing a domino, everyone would see how shiny his eyes are and the genuine contentment settling in him. This, this, all that time with Dami as Robin, the time as Batman, the time afterwards when he took Nightwing back and moonlighted as B when the real guy was out on BI set-up…he’d apparently forgotten so much, too much as how seamless he and Red used to work as a team. It sucked a little in the long run of things because he’d had the chance to forget, but in the here and now, he’s grinning like an idiot while he helps tie their thugs up for the GCPD.

Red moves next to him, getting the last one on his right.

“Ah, the smell of blood in the morning,” N grins.

“Just like going home,” Red deadpans, but the guy is giving him this half-smile under the cowl.

With an agreeing nod, the shoot grapple lines and take flight.

Chapter End Notes

So, Drabbles and whatnot. Boo. I’m working on my Avengers thing, I promise. Lol.
Ah, the first part is supposed to be six months after Tim came back from finding B lost in time, so make sure there’s no confusion. Travelfan, are we good with this? Oh, and thank you all for reading ;)
Threat Level

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been a minute, that Destroyed thing seriously had me in its thrall since I've never multiversed before. It was fun times with this Tim and what-ifs. And, the beginning was going to be dark as hell and confused Timmy and shit, but nope, I wanted funny and snarky. Arkaedia was totally with me on this because, well, what would I do without my idea buddy? Lol, Fail.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And maybe… he should go out and scope a comic book store or something because really.

Kid, BB, Rave, Wonder Girl, Bunker, and Superboy are the ones looking at him with a whole lot of where the hell have you been and what the fuck have you been doing? Of course, the screaming sirens and whirling lights (usually reserved for shit, shit, get ready to fight!) in the background aren’t doing much to convince anyone his week in Gotham went swimmingly. And, yeah, he should have realized the minute he hit the roof access entrance, the Tower systems would auto hit the sensors and other whatnots in the suit he had been wearing during the whole watch-the-Scarecrow-knock-his-own-ass-out incident (and he should have thought to get one of the San Fran ones out of storage before he even got in the damn plane anyway, oops).

Thus, haywire.

Also not helping: in the center of this adorable little semi-circle of glaring, spandex-clad supes, is a full hologram of a human form (wow, they even programmed it to have wings…sweet) with red spots pretty much lighting up to tell everyone his business. Shit. He’s usually more on top his game than this when coming back after a long few days in the city; either the latest excursion has affected him more than he wants to admit or he’s just off his game (it happens to everyone, don’t judge).

“So,” he yells over the belting system and flashing lights, “how was everyone’s week?”

“Beast Boy,” BB yells over the whole lot of noise, “Protocol Golf, Oscar, Tango, Hotel, Alpha, Mike 176.5.”

And the whirling, screaming indicator of imminent death calms, winding down to let the full lights kick back on and normal Tower processes back on-line.

The hologram, however, stays right where it’s at. Red just grins, a sharp one with a bite.

“What’s the .5?” He asks mildly.
BB, of course, is the one that answers him right back, “Return after a minor black-out period. Thus, the scans are going to be more…sensitive.”

And, well, it would really piss him the hell off if they didn’t put all this right out on the main drive for him read for himself; they even have Ninja spreadsheets. Spreadsheets with descriptions of which particular ninjas are hanging around, including the ones he conned out of their weapons (no, really, one sheet dedicated to how many swords, knives, chucks, scis, staves, etc. he’s collected over the last year; and it’s chronologically alphabetized). Normally his thing but he appreciated them being totally thorough.

“So,” Superboy, face all kind of wow, I’m pretty pissed right now. Don’t trust me with electronic devices or small animals. “I had a stellar week, Red. Just fucking awesome. Because, you know, I really like getting texts telling me you dropped off the grid. Like, I’m trying to write an essay on some poem because Emily Dickinson apparently “dreaded that first Robin”* thing that I suddenly kind of get and oh, the Tower system thinks you just, you know, died and stuff.”

Well, now he feels kind of like an asshole (not that this has happened more than once before).

“And then, like, some of us are worried as hell, running our asses off from across the world because —“ and Kid is just giving mad hand gestures all over the place (Wonder Girl automatically dodges and never flinches during her Amazon death glare. Skill.) “—we happen to care whether or not you’re dead and shit man to get ‘oh hey, Titans. Just going off the grid for a hot minute so chill out and I’ll just let you know what’s going on when I can.’ Well, news flash, Red, that’s shitty to tell your team. Not to mention to tell your friends, man.” And the blotchy red is fading out of Kid’s face when he winds down, actually sounding a little…hurt. And yeah, now he really feels like an asshole. Like, major. More so because he…hasn’t told them anything about the Bats. Double shit.

Raven, in her usual style, looks highly unimpressed and opts to keep it all at a minimum: “Group. Text.”

“Ah. Noted.” He mutters, averting his eyes even though he’s got the cowl on instead of the domino and, yeah, whiteout lenses.

Wonder Girl sighs a little, still glaring. “We talked about this. More than once. You agreed after we lost track of you last time. For our peace of mind, you would stay in contact if you were on the outside doing whatever non-Titan thing just like the rest of us do. It’s not just for you, you know. We do this as well so the team—“

“I know,” and here, he just deactivates the cowl and shoves it back. The side of his face is probably as purple and black as it feels about now. “It’s been a crazy year for all of us and the protocols are there for a reason, I know. I apologize for worrying all of you, believe me that was not my intention when I went there. It…it got a little fucked up and I—” he stops because his breath catches and how is he supposed to finish that sentence?

And it happens again, just like in the Cave. He’s supposed to be Red right now, but he feels very Tim Drake instead; maybe it was the bad couple of days. Maybe it was the round of semi-comfortable snarking back and forth between the other Bats. Maybe riding the fear toxin train was more detrimental to him than he originally anticipated (or because he knew now that Bruce came back, Bruce stayed with him and Jay came right on his damn heels without even bitching). Maybe it was the fact that he could have very well killed Dick if things had gone that far (“You never stopped being important to me.” Fuck, man, just fuck). Maybe after all this time, he finally got to tell the story of how it all went down in Iraq, never had to before since it hadn’t been relevant; suddenly, it is now. For some crazy whatever reason, that shit meant something to them. Maybe, even though he’d never admit it because, well, he’s not a pansy or anything, but that being held like he mattered by two of
the most important people of his adolescence...was just too much to compute.

Maybe he needed a vacation.

Latter is the more probable conclusion.

BB’s eyes narrow in an *ah-ha* moment and he cuts through the shifting suddenly worried looks of the team without a hitch, “all right. All right, man. Bad sitch in the big city, got it.” The guy sighs a little, runs a hand through his shaggy green hair and doesn’t give Red enough time to disappear to his perch until he’s given them the deets.

“First, Kid, get to your Chicken Parm because the guy hasn’t eaten, and really man, I’m ready for some grubbin’ too. That shit is just tight as hell, and you know we’re all in on it. Rave, Blue, let’s go over some of these injuries and see what we’re working with. Wonder Girl, we might need the RRK from upstairs. Miguel, help out Kid so we can get the other stuff out of the way before the Tower just blows up or something.”

“If that’s a concern, maybe we should revisit these protocols,” Tim replies seriously with an arched brow.

“Dude. Just stop scaring the ever-loving *crap* out of us and there would be no need.” BB returns patiently.

And, it’s not usually Gar giving the directions unless the squishy guy is out for the count or overseas taking down some random networks of arms dealers or the many other international activities that peak his interest, but BB is the guy to step the hell up when it matters (ask Dick or, well, Vic because *that one fucking time* the auto-virus almost killed him—dumbass). He’s also the guy without any space issues whatsoever, and even less of them after an extended period of time with Dick “the Hug Monster” Grayson. Thus he has no qualms taking Red’s arm and pretty much steering the guy to the communal kitchen. Two chairs are pulled out at the island since, well, the scans told him all he needs to know about where the injuries are, which is why they aren’t heading to the medical floor. Nothing serious as Red’s usual *oh, that’s blood and probably internal something, isn’t it? Whatev, had worse.*

Cassie takes off in a heartbeat, flying upstairs to save time. Rave and Blue are just as in the sitch and helping to maneuver off the cape/cowl combo along with the harness and outer layers of body armor to the sleek body suit underneath (yeah, they all learned when the guy was a whole different designation of Robin: *don’t fuck with the utility belt*. Seriously, appendages are useful. Red just grins on the DL and gets it off himself). There’s a telling moment when the human guy doesn’t fight any of it, letting himself be moved and manhandled so they can assure themselves he’s fine as Rave tilts his chin up to get a good look at the bruising and healing cuts on his face, and Blue is hunting for the zipper to check out the bright red light over the guy’s leg and Gar gets a look at the busted knuckles once the gauntlets are set aside.

“It’s, ah, mostly okay.” He waves Kon away from the leg, “The Batman checked out the leg before I left.”

*Pause.* Everyone turns to give him the eye, the *did I just hear you right?* look. And yup, he gets the shock and awe.

Kid, however, throws it out there. “Like *The* Batman? Gloom and Doom? Not one of the associated stalkers of the night?”

Red nods with half a grin because *surprise.*
From the counter where food prep is happening, the speedsters upper lip curls in obvious distaste, but one hand waves in a *c’mon, out with it* motion since he has some *when the hell did this start being a thing?*

“Okay, okay. So it was a good slash bad stay in Gotham.” Red finally admits, “and no, the bad wasn’t *that bad*, so really—“ and he’s going to have to come out with the whole sordid thing, isn’t he? Welp, get it over with.

“Bad enough that you’re sending medical updates to *Batman*? Bad enough that he’s being really attentive and checking you out?” Cassie, setting the beaten up, dented-to-shit RRK down beside Red’s elbow, asks with an edge to her tone. And, her brow is up in her hairline. That’s never good. Nope. Someone went into his medical file and saw the last six months of specified files on his immunities sent to a generic, *unknown* email address. Well, even his encryption gets cracked once and a while, right?

“Well, fear toxin is a tricky thing, really,” he hedges, “and Dick almost—“

“Yes, you’re giving personal info to the Bats,” Kon interrupts, speaking slowly, taking in the new *protocol*. “So, they helped you out? Like, for *real*? I mean, don’t get me wrong, damn right they *should* because you bust ass for that city too, but—”

“Ah. In a manner of speaking?”

“Answer the question, man,” BB has his arms folded, face more grim than that time he turned into a velociraptor and almost ate M’gaan because, well, mind-controlling aliens are dicks. True story.

Miguel (back from his brief trip to check on his awaken significant other; Red already knows and made sure to contact Wayne holdings in Puebla, the largest city near El Chilar, and commend them for the excellent work looking after the man) holds up both hands, “*Uno momento* Red. *Cabrón*. We love you like family, like a brother. We ask these things because we need to know, you know?” And it’s not the usual happy-go-lucky-puppy look; if Miguel isn’t playing around then shit is getting real.

Red breathes in and gives the CEO of Wayne Enterprises smile, “Got it, I do. So, I went to Gotham to go after the Scarecrow, you know, *bad guy*, and he’s experimenting with new types of toxins, so obviously I needed to be there for that. So, I totally got dibs because *first*, right? I’m the other detective. After the fight and subsequent ‘go back to jail, do not collect shit,’ the Bats showed up at my perch to make sure I was still walking. Which, totally was in case you were wondering—“

“But?” Raven interjects.

“Did I mention he pretty much knocked himself out? And that the conveyor belts were moving?”

“No unless it’s important.”

Yeah, deflection doesn’t work with Rave.

“It is. I didn’t work that hard, but,” he hefts his knee up a little from the other chair, “he got me. Part of his sh*tick, you know epic scythe of terrible B horror flicks everywhere. Unfortunately, his blade had some toxin on it, so *fear train express*. Not like I haven’t done *that* before, but the Batman being *The Batman* came back once he realized there was toxin still in my blood. They had a bad run in with it, so yeah. I still don’t know what he might have heard or what I could have been saying.” *Screaming*. That charismatic, trust-me-I-will-make-you-millions smile never falters. “It was awkward, but he was pretty cool about staying until it wore off, and figuring out I have lower than
normal immunities. Thus, he got a span of previous results to make a correlation.”

Cassie’s hand is on his wrist, holding on, but Red…Tim…finds the bland shade of the kitchen cabinets more interesting (hm, they used to be yellow, maybe before BB burned it down the second time). He subtly pushes the RRK away with a finger and the matter rests (you know, plenty of antibiotics already in his blood).

“I really don’t know.” He assures her with that smile. “Some of the toxins are more memorable than others. Could have been the Mind Field or the ship or hell, anything. When I ripped my tights the first time I met Superman, crying like a bitch when they ended the Ultimate Avengers, Microsoft came out with Windows 7, I don’t know, and I didn’t think to ask him while I was trying, and succeeding I might add, to beat the shit out of Nightwing a few nights later.”

Now, he’s got some eyebrows and BB, Dick’s champion on the team, huffs a little. “So, to recap, you totally got dosed in liquid fuck my life and went to, what? Give Nightwing a little ass kicking—not that I’m saying he doesn’t deserve it once and while because we’ve all met the guy, right? But, were you still high on that shit or something? Wanted to work out some aggression?”

“No, no, it had nothing to do with Dick being, well, you know,” Tim waves a gloved hand, “B found my stash of antibiotics. He wanted to…talk.”

Kon automatically flinches at that because, yeah, he got that shit from back in the day when he reported to the Bat because, at the time, Supes was all freaked out about having a clone made by his mortal enemy (it’s cool, he understands it now).

“Right?” Tim just arches a brow and Kon just nods sympathetically. “Well, ah, at the time, it made sense that they might think I’m not fit for the job anymore. Or that I might be on some kind of drugs, antidepressants, who knows what. The life is hard, people fuck up. So, I assumed talking meant something very different than it turned out to be.” He raises a hand to wipe away the last part, “meaning, I went to show them that I’m good doing what I do. I’m not failing at life because I don’t have a minorly important internal organ, okay? I manage it and when I don’t there’s a group of these loveable assholes that have some nifty computing skills to make me.” He chuffs a little laugh at their amused faces, but the truth kind of spills out of him, “I’m not going to give up the cape like I did the first time. I’m going to fucking fight for it this time.” Because there it is—the real reason Red could justifey kicking the hell out of Dick Grayson; wisely, BB doesn’t point this out…yet.

However, the Titans, they can all read between the lines of this rigmarole since a whole lot of shit matters now is what they take from this. More interaction in this one trip back to Gotham than in the last six months?

“What aren’t you telling us?” Raven asks almost gently, wanting that important something in between the steps in this progression.

His chest lifts a little in a sigh, and for a long moment, Tim Drake closes his eyes, remembers how tight he’s been with these guys for the long stint of good/bad. He’s had them and for whatever reason, they keep having his back, too.

“A…few months ago, Damian called me back. Needed me for something, wouldn’t tell me what until I got there. The Bats came to my perch for a visit.”

Blinking at the new deets, Kon pulls out the chair across from him, and the others do the same while Miguel gets stuff together for the red sauce and Bart starts with the chicken, moving quietly to listen. Cassie lifts his calf to prop up on her knee, Raven sitting straight-backed across from him and all kinds of go on.
“They had a request,” he admits quietly, a half-smirk on his face like the irony is still too much for him, “for a...a second chance, I guess you would say.” He shrugs a shoulder, half-smirking since, well, crazier shit had happened.

There’s a collective blink, and exchange of glances while he just waits.

“Then that explains why the Justice League came here,” Raven’s expression becomes assessing. “Interesting.”

“And...the medical reports, Batman is worried about you. Wow.” Cassie has her chin propped up on a hand, eyes a little softer because, well, it would be nice to have someone more, ah, menacing? No, successful to watch Red’s back. There’s only so much the six of them could do, which is terribly embarrassing to admit: super powered heroes can’t keep one human guy from getting his butt kicked on a pretty reoccurring basis. The JLA probably laughs about it in their monthly tag-ups, she’d have to remember to ask Di (and then promptly remind her: Batman).

“Actually,” Kon casually interjects before Tim gets a word out, “Batman came to guilt trip the fuck out of him to essentially make Red go back to Gotham in the first place, right?”

And Tim’s eyes narrow, “uh-hu, I thought we had a talk about this. I don’t turn the dampeners on if you promise to stop listening in.”

The guy gives him an unimpressed look, “Dude. The guy we’re talking about? He’s got a reason for everything, and if I remember correctly, which I’m pretty damn sure I do, he basically said Grayson needs a sidekick or something. Oh, poor guy is just a mess since you’re not, you know, playing little fucking brother anymore, which, you probably totally would be if a whole lot of bad hadn’t happened. Not that I have the deets on how crazy vigilante families should go—I don’t—but that doesn’t sound like come back to the fam ‘cause Tim Drake rocks to me.”

“And I told him in no uncertain terms I’m here to do the same thing I’ve always done—out-think the baddies, kick some ass, and rock the tights. Dick isn’t my responsibility and I’m not theirs. He got it.” Tim slices a hand through the argument because, well, whatever. “On a higher note, he also came to bring me files on Brother Blood and the Cult of What the Hell is Wrong with These People, so—”

“Oh? Going from Bat stalking in Gotham to just general stalking is supposed to induce the warm cuddlies?” KF asks from the stove while Miguel’s furrowed expression while he’s pretty much putting in the pot whatever KF hands him.

“What if the guy’s trying to reach out? Find some common ground?” BB helps, playing devil’s advocate.

The expression on Kid’s face pretty much says it all because, well fuck the Bats. “How about they try—“

Tim clears his throat loudly, “I’m still gathering evidence. What better way to make sure the oldest gets it together than to find the reason for the breakdown and fix it; rudimentary problem solving there, okay? Two Bats, one proverbial batarang. Just because I have a—a function within the Bat schema doesn’t mean I’m putting anything more than what’s necessary into this. To this point, it seems...a logical conclusion they are trying to, I don’t know, be friends or something. Sing Kum-ba-ya by the Bat Fire, toast marshmallows over bad guys, argue who had the worst costume because, well, pixie boots so Dick automatically wins, and I don’t know, whatever else. I’m not putting faith into this change in Bat behavior yet. Bonding shit or no.”

“Aw,” BB grins, “you guys could totally have a campout on the Lower East Side with Blask Mask
thugs! Cuuuute.”

“Maybe have family portraits done with Two-Face in the background?” Kon tries.

“Nah, the Joker is more family than that guy.” KF interjects.

“Aww, you could ask Scarecrow to bring a pitchfork!” Miguel’s throws back his head to laugh loudly.

But the ends all— “Ra’s,” from Cassie and the gathering exchange nods, cements all that while Red snickers to himself.

Raven hikes a brow, “Family Game Night…with flamethrowers and exploding things.”

And Tim takes a moment to bury his face in one hand and laugh harder because he could totally see that shit happening with Jason, really we should do this and fuck, right in Robinson Park. And, oh God, get Dami on it because he’s shortest and could duck under stuff and— he gets a breath in, but it’s an iffy thing.

Kon just carries it on, “no, no, it’s like a Scavenger Hunt in Arkham, okay? Like, man I’ve got Harley’s mallet and I need Ivy’s right vine, but how that hell do I even tell which one…just shit dude?”

“Lucky you, I still need a selfie with sleeping Guard Number 3 that lets Riddler get out every time.” BB sighs with fake irritation.

Cassie picks it up while he just keeps fucking laughing (because there actually is a guard…), “I need three fillings from either a Black Mask thug or one of the Penguin’s bow ties…wow, decisions.”

“You all suck,” he coughs once and just shakes his head.

“We haven’t even gotten started yet, man,” BB grins widely. “Like, let’s have a Bat bonding night on getting runs in their tights, use clear fingernail polish, okay, because that shit—“

“Okay, okay,” Tim waves a hand, his face still red because these guys. “I’m dying. Enough already.”

And the table full with the other two leaning their backs against the counter are looking at him with grins and fond looks because well, their bird didn’t laugh often, and surely not like this. It’s a good sign, possibly a change in the darkness that seemed to settle over him in the last year. Maybe this new thing, the Bats showing they were going to fight for him, is a good thing. Kid, however, watches closely, tracking the subtle shift of comfortable in Tim’s stance.

Cassie pats his hand when he calms down, “well, then tell us how it’s going. I mean, are they like, cool? I thought the Hood and Robin seriously hated you. Honestly, trying to kill someone kind of sends a get out and don’t come back message, right?”

Now leaning his chin in his palm, he gives a little nod, “You know what they say about the Bats, Cassie: nothing says I care like a kick to the nuts. It’s the Bat way. Serious though, uh Dami and Jason asked me to patrol with them, so I did. Nothing spectacular, the usual ‘hey, Bad Guys! Let’s fight.’ Then Jason asked me to check in once and a while since sending flowers just assuming I’m dead is really a waste of good flowers. But, the guy was a little roughed up. It wasn’t a good week in Gotham, fear toxin, almost dying Bats, usual array of terrible crime, and thus, I went to check it out.”

BB exchanges a glance with Rave, her brow arching almost to her hair line.

“Batman came here because, again, bad week. Black Bat and N both had close calls. N got that
deadly combination of fear toxin, worse than Scarecrow has come up with until now. Nothing that could cause arrhythmia like that. The biological component worked in tandem with the neural stimulants to—"

And the rest of the team without super-snooping powers have the ah-ha moment of the week.

“So that’s really why you went, man,” Miguel eyes him from over his shoulder, stirring the red sauce again so it won’t burn (he learned from BB’s last attempt, that hombre concino nunca).

And yeah, he doesn’t have to admit it out right. The knowledge has always been there. Why else would be still be the on-call IT guy? The intel source? The soldier that just powered the fuck through when a call hit the Tower from that crazy untraceable number right from the Cave. Even if this shit with them hadn’t gone down, he’d still be doing the job, and all that included answering the call should one of those fuckers get hit with a holy shit, bad (not to even mention the thing with Dick Grayson…the thing that’s been a thing since the first time he saw Robin do that damn quadruple on a cold Gotham night and realized he knew exactly who was behind the mask—puberty sure as shit didn’t help make all that any better; however, the guy thinking crazy might be part of Tim’s impressive resume did dampen things a bit, too bad proximity just strikes him right in those old feels).

“Yeah,” he admits quietly, “that’s why I went.”

Rave is the one who asks, “Dick is all right?”

“Good. Well, better. Before I left, I patrolled with him instead of waiting until next time I’m in the city. Seemed like the thing to do since, you know, almost killing the guy a second time in less than two weeks is in really bad taste and stuff—“

“Totally deflecting,” BB points out, now kind of intrigued.

“Yup,” Tim admits without a flinch, “it was a shitty terror ride, what can I say?”

With his back turned and breaded chicken already in the oven, Bart starts on noodles, slowing down on purpose so he doesn’t have to face Tim when this comes out: “Wally…kind of mentioned it. Briefly. He and Nightwing are tight, you know.” And yup, he’s the guy cooking and completely ignoring Kon’s glare (please don’t accidentally use heat vision, I’m hella fast but that shit is going to leave a mark) “Said the Bats wanted the opportunity to have your back sometimes, like they used to, man. And I didn’t tell him anything, but, uh… I’m sure he had a talk with Grayson since I wasn’t really waving Bat pom-poms or anything.”

Tim’s got nothing for that, just staring at Bart’s moving back.

BB shrugs a shoulder, drawing Tim’s eyes from his seat. “He called here, too. Wanted me to consider giving them a comm or something if you got all kinds of bad in the ways you normally get all kinds of bad. A heads-up for them.”

And Tim just waits, arches a brow.

BB holds out a hand because this talk happened a while ago, and, no, Tim, sometimes shit doesn’t change. “I told him the same thing we told you when you came back with the new duds, T. Not going to run to Bats and tattle on you. Besides, we actually voted.”

“Voted?”

Miguel gives a little hum, “on whether or not to humor them.”
“Bart totally wanted to fuck with them a little,” Kon grins, “like, ‘yeah, Red’s down in the Rain Forest somewhere and creepy immortal guy isn’t foiled yet this week, better go check that shit out. We can’t get to the Tower for another few days. By the way, did you know he has, like, a crush?’”

Tim’s eyes get wide, and a laugh boils up from his chest again. “No, seriously? That…that would have been priceless.”

“We had a list,” Raven informs him. “Some of them with a few of your old safe houses.”

Now his eyes get HUGE. “I would add to it, just, so many ideas, I can’t even tell you.”

And the team laughs with him, just a whole library of ideas on how to punk the Bats if the need ever rises while the six metas take their time in ingest this new development, and the ones that knew to wonder how much of this investment is all about keeping a valuable asset.

The Bats realize what they’ve pushed away and trying to make amends? Nice, but are any of them going to buy it?

The answer is in the tightness of Kon’s shoulders, the gentle hand of Cassie’s on Tim’s ankle, the smirk on Miguel’s face, the quiet assessment in Raven’s eyes, and the new protocols forming in BB’s thoughts. Kid is the one still at the stove, looking at Tim’s face again, watching his bestie laugh his ass off like he hasn’t laughed in…shit, how long? A half smile forms on KF’s face while noodles cook, the sauce simmers, and the chicken cooks.

**

Before Kid steps out after dinner, he gives Kon a pointed look. The meta arches an eyebrow but wisely doesn’t comment as his other BFF walks into the elevator and thumbs his celly, dials, and waits while he comes down to the first floor of the Tower. He walks around in his civvies, taking in the whole bunch of empty as this time of night, looking around the main lobby without really seeing anything.

“Hey Little F!” Wally answers with the usual. “Your face—?”

Even with the weight riding him, he sighs a little because geeze Wally, you’re like a kid. No wonder he and Grayson got along. “You love it. I know.” His smile is grim though. It isn’t a social call.

“Heh. That shit is always going to be funny. So what’s happening, man? You okay? Or is this that kind of call where we’re going to talk about girls and what they like and how nice they smell and stuff ’cause I can totally give you the low down on how to—”

“Wal, I, uh, I need…I need a phone number.”

“Oh?” The funny guy is gone with the tone of voice.

“Yeah, man. I need…” and Kid sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose with two fingers, “I need Dick Grayson’s number, okay?”

Significant pause.

“It’s okay if—“

“Nope, he said it was cool to give it to any of the Titans, you know for just in case or like the Bat theory of extreme Murphy’s Law. In every scenario ever. Sorry about that, I was just, ah, a little surprised, okay?”
“I—was kind of a dick about it. Heh, pun intended.”

“Dude, seriously. But, it’s cool. Ready?”

“Mmhm.” Bart memorizes the rattled off sequence, not bothering to put it in his personal phone or anything.

Then there’s feedback from Wally’s end, “B. If you need to talk to me first, or have me run some interference, that’s totally fine man. I get where you’re at right now. Uh, Barry kind of did the same thing for me with tall, dark, and gloomy once, you know? Dick…wasn’t always in a good place when we were in your proverbial tower.” And in the light tone is the whole you don’t want to rat your bro out for something; no worries, I’ll do it for you.

Drawing in a breath, the younger speedster considers the offer for, like, two point two seconds. Sure, he could just give Wally a message, but that would be a shitty way out. Naw, he’s gonna to man up and do this himself since he wants to make sure the point is clear. “I appreciate it, man, really, but I got this. Me and him? We need to have an understanding, and that shit needs face-to-face time.”

Now there’s a pause because, dammit, Wally would pretty much be in the middle, but it would be fine. Kid wouldn’t blame him for backing his bro over a sidekick because Kid has every intention of having his bestie’s back too.

“All right, Bart. You need me, I’m there—”

“—in a flash? Dude, get a catch phrase. One that preferably has less suck in it.”

“I am hurt. Oh, my heart. For my own mini-bro to say that with such conviction and shit, I just. Ow, do you hear that, Kid? Ow ow owwww.”

And now, damn it, he’s laughing. “You are the best slash most immature friend I’ve ever had, and seriously, you know the people I hang out with.”

“Actually, I think that hurts worse, man. Just destroying me over here.”

“Uh-hu. Keeping being kick-ass. I’ll talk to you later.”

“You know it. Hey, after the Titans jet, we should go get some ‘zza and play video games. The new BioShock is out and I want that shit.”

“I will wreck you, man. No lie.”


“I’ll remind you of this conversation when you’re crying all over Artemis. She will give no shits about your hurt pride.”

“Meh, she never does. S’okay.”

“All right man, later.”

Kid hangs up and…stares at the keypad until his phone’s screen goes dark and he has to touch the thing again to get it to light up. He feels a move of air current and glances over his shoulder where Kon is slightly levitating out of the elevator, looking around for him. The guy lands and gives Kid the look.

“I do not like this, KF.”
“I don’t either, but I kind of owe the guy an apology, Blue, but more importantly, I’m going to make fucking sure this shit is legit.”

Both hands out in the I’m not for or against motion, Superboy just lowers his voice, “and that’s fine. You want to feel like less of a jerk, okay then. But we do not owe those guys anything, man, you feel me? Don’t get it wrong, I like Batman, really. Dude was there for me in the beginning, and I will never forget that. He calls out for help, and I’m totally there, but this is different.”

“I’m aware of that, Blue. But those motherfuckers need to know what’s going on if they suddenly want their Baby Bird back.”

“Whoa, they don’t need to know anything about—“

Kid lets out an exasperated noise, “look, I’m not saying we lay out the last year or anything, but… like Wally said, we give ‘em a chance if Red’s going to and that if is still pending. Right? We just have a word in the meantime.”

And then Kon gets it. “Oh no. No, no, no, you’re super fast and—“

“Kon, man, are you messing with me right now?”

“You don’t get it, KF. His hugs are like fucking kryptonite, even Supes can’t get away, and that the first thing he’s going to want to—“

“I really can’t believe you’re even saying this right now. I mean, I’m so disappointed, Kon-El. Righteously so. He’s a human guy, no super powers, buncha Bat toys, and talent.”

“Uh-hu, you’ve never had to really hang out in the Cave for an extended amount of time. I have super hearing man, emphasis on the ‘super’ and I never heard him coming. He just ninja strafed out of the shadows—“

“Put your big boy pants on.” Is KF’s unimpressed response.

Last resort. “You could take Rave? He won’t hug her unless she lets him because, you know, evil. BB could turn into a real octopus or some shit—“

“What would your adoring fan base think of this?”

“That I’m a smart guy.” Still, that face. Shit. Kon lets out a long breath, “all right. All. Right. Fine. I will…go with you.”

KF is already dialing the phone, shaking his head at his BFF because so disappointed, man. So terribly, terribly disappointed in your lack of balls. But he’s having his own moment of indecision while the line rings, his foot tapping in super staccato.

“Yello, Bats are Us, Buy two get one freeeeee.” SLAM. CRRRACK. RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE.

What? “…Can I talk to Ni—“ POW, WHAM, THUD, “uh, I think I may have the wrong number.”

“Possibly. Are you looking for an incredibly dashing vigilante? ‘Cause that’s what you’ve got.”

SMACK, CLANG, PWAT, KER-BLOW.

“I don’t know about dashing part, but the Flash gave me this number.”
All the noises stop, “…Who is this?” Now the voice is low, humor gone.

“Kid Flash, look is this—“

“Hey man!” **CHICK, BOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOM.** “I totally didn’t recognize the number, m’bad. Huh, aw shit. Titans thing or—?” **THWACK, CLANG, CLICK.**

“No. No emergency. Titans are chilling right now. I was hoping to talk to Nightwing?” And Kon’s brows are up to his hair line since he can hear a whole lot of *what the hell is going on* coming out of the other end. No wonder Batman is perpetually pissed off since this is probably what he deals with on the regular.

“All right, all right, hold on—“ then there’s scuffling and wind and a grunt. More fists hitting faces, and in the background, “it’s for you. One of the Titan kiddos.”

“I’m sure it’s for me, it’s my phone. Gimmie—“ and another epic **CRACK.**

“This is ‘Wing.”

“Ah, you sound busy, I can call back.”

“No need, we’re done here. Kid? This is Kid Flash isn’t it?”

“Uhm, yeah, I asked Wally for your number. I hope that’s okay.” now he and Kon are doing that thing with hand motions and exaggerated mouthing of Kon’s ‘*dude, terrible idea*’ and KF’s ‘*what am I supposed to say here?*’ ‘Tell him you wanna talk!’ ‘Now, I’m not sure I want to!’

“Kid? You all right? Still there?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re good, Nightwing” he waves Kon’s eye roll away, “just wanted to have a word with you, face-to-face, man. Sounds like you’re busy, so another—“

“Patrol’s done for the night and, of course, you can totally have my number, NBD. Where and when can you meet me? Do you need me to come to you?” All smooth and easy because, yeah *Dick Grayson,* right?

“Long as Batman is good with metas in Gotham for a tight minute, I can get there. Look, I can do this another time, no need to—“

“Kid,” interrupts his backtracking, “it’s perfectly fine. You need to talk, I’m here. Okay?”

And the tension eases out of his shoulders a little because the guy sounds really sincere. “Sure, that’s rocking. About an hour?”

“Sounds good. Hey, I’ve got Red Hood with me, you cool with that?”

Kid’s eyes shoot to Kon who’s brows furrow a second before he finally nods.

“Yeah, he’s all right. I’m bringing Superboy with me, too, so, ah, there’s that. Where—?”

And Nightwing rattles off an address in a nicer part of the city, an apartment building…so the dude is cool with them coming to his place and chilling. Well, maybe the roof but whatevs.

“That’s…really good of you, man. Short notice and stuff. I’ll see you in about an hour.”

“Hey, no problem, ‘kay? We’re all in the hero biz together. We’ll see you then.”
KF hangs up with a sigh, and Kon…doesn’t look any happier about life. Kid doesn’t even hesitated, just points a finger right at the guy.

“Bro, said I was going, not backing out.”

“All right, then, we’re packing up the leftovers and going to Gotham. I’ll tell the team we gotta do a thing and we’ll be back, no time.”

The two make their way back to the elevators, and Kon is unconsciously floating about five inches above the floor by the time the doors close.

“What do we say,” the taller meta starts, “if they start asking questions?”

Unconcerned, Kid shrugs a shoulder, “we tell ‘em they missed it, too bad, so sad.”

Kon hums a little, “so…you think this is for, like, really real?”

“For them? I think they think they mean it, but shit, man, how did that pan out for Tim the first time?”

“…I hate the whole ‘hope for the best, prepare for the worst’ thing.”

“You and me both. But, it’s just part of being a supe. We do what we do.”

And the almost-not teenagers exchange a glance of comradery as the doors slide open and the vestiges of dinner are almost over. Red is helping Cassie and Raven wash and dry dishes since KF and Miguel cooked; nothing has yet been broken. Score.

“All right, I’m taking leftovers to Wally and Artemis,” KF grabs the ziplock containers and hunts around for a bag to hold them that could also survive super speed.

“Dude, I’ll carry it for you,” Kon just shakes his head and flops an insulated one down on the island.

“That’s what bros are for,” KF grins back at him, “besides, Wally burns soup, man. Soup.”

“So does Red.”

From the sink, said terrible cook just scoffs, “they make things in cardboard boxes that go into the microwave. That’s usually my jam unless I get fresh stuff. Besides, I’m not eating souls or anything,” and his shoulder bumps into Raven’s while she dries plates and hands them to Cassie.

That little smirk is there at the corner of her lips, “only of the damned, and they taste suspiciously like chicken.”

“Little bit of BBQ sauce and you’re sold, right?”

“Absolutely. Sweet and Sour is also acceptable.” And yeah, she’s smiling, he’s going to get the vid feed and capture it for future reference.

BB, from his place sitting his ass on the counter, just shakes his head at them. “You guys are taking Wally leftovers? Nice.”

“Yeah,” KF replies casually, “not hanging out long though, comm us if shit goes down, ‘kay?”

“You know it,” Red replies, the pot’s sauce turning soapy water the color of dirty blood. “We’ll do a movie after you get back.”
A round of groans while BB looks hurt. “It’s a classic you Neanderthals!”

“You always say that.” Cassie points out, “and we’ve watched it so many times already.”

While the fight about what to watch is winding up, Kon scoops up the bag over one shoulder and Kid Flash in the other, taking the window on their way out.

**

Flying at super speed while making sure the food didn’t fall or the bag break, Superboy and Kid Flash make it to Gotham in record time where the darkness is thicker, fuller than in San Fran. The city itself seems to breathe. Unlike Metropolis with gleaming chrome and glass or Star City with the gentle architecture, Gotham is all old school, even after the quakes levelled most the city. Rather, the rebuild effort went into trying to preserve the feel of old Gotham in the new structures—maintaining the Romanesque style with pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses. The guardians of the city, gargoyles spread out on buildings all over, may be newer, less chipped and weather-worn, but their carved eyes still watched.

Superboy used to be in Gotham every other week to report to the Batman, usually meeting him on one of the Bat’s fave chill spots near the city’s bad areas. A few times he got to do the whole Cave thing when the Batman insisted he needed to learn to control his enormous strength without being afraid of hurting someone, and had thrown himself right in the thick of things, able to work the meta up enough so he wasn’t so worried about, you know, shaking someone’s hand into dust or something.

Back then, Tim had still been Robin, easy going.

How things have changed.

“You all right, man?” Kid says next to his ear while he tries to stay in the shadows and out of obvious view, but, hey, flying kids kind of catches attention.

“It’s weird,” he admits aloud, “how everything came to this, you know?”

The draw of KF’s brows tell him that he’s got nothing.

“Five years ago, hell, in our Young Justice days…I never would have seen us all here. All the shit that’s gone down, and we’re still Titans, still fighting the good fight and stuff.”

“Dude. Never doubted you. Those commands dick bag programmed into you? I knew you’d be able to fight it, sucks about Red’s arm, but he doesn’t hold grudges against brainwashing, right?”

And Superboy is laughing at that a little because shit, he’d felt like ass after he’d in essence, attacked his best friend; well, after dealing with mind blowing alien fuck heads that could do something more detrimental, that seemed like a cake walk.

“I didn’t think I’d be in a group this long either,” Kid finally admits quietly, “I don’t always…do the right thing.”

“None of us do, Bart. We have crazy powers, we try saving people, and stopping bad guys from destroying shit, but…we aren’t perfect. None of us. We fuck up, we make it better if we can, and we move on to the next thing. At least, most of us have other lives to kind of sink into, you know?”
“Pfft. I do not want to do the college thing after watching how much you struggle with it.”

The arm around KF moves with his shrug, “I like it. Even the stuff I don’t find interesting. It’s still something normal. I don’t know, I think I need that, right?”

“Normal? Never heard of it.”

The two share a laugh at that as the aforementioned apartment comes into view and, well, game faces on because Bart Allen and Conner Kent have very different expectation as to how this is going to go.

**

Nightwing invites them inside one of the Bat’s safe houses, climbing in through the window easily as the Red Hood closes the window behind them all.

KF lays out the leftovers and stands beside Kon while the Bats warm the place up with lights and heat, wiping down the kitchen table and gesturing to the other two chairs. Both metas prefer to stand, causing the creepy Bat silence that Red’s known for when he’s assessing. Well, that’s totally cool, let them assess all they want.

Hood and Nightwing pull off their helmets and dominos to be the guys under all that armor, digging into the chicken parm with raised brows and a whole lot of not bad. And they get to dig in a good half way while the two meta discreetly check out the slightly run-down apartment on the top floor, taking in the usual accompaniments (because, well, X-Ray vision motherfuckers) without being obvious they are totally checking out the digs. He spots the mini-cams in just under a few seconds, gives an exaggerated eyebrow wiggle at Oracle or Batman or whoever might be on the other end.

“So, Kid,” and the guy is Dick Grayson right now instead of N, blue eyes clear and frank as he finishes up the last of his portion, “let me start out with it, okay? Because if I would have known what was going on? I would have stepped in a lot sooner. Seriously, man, I’m sorry I didn’t catch it. I’m just…yeah, I’m sorry.” And it’s as sincere as they expected from the guy every superhero can trust.

Kid has already moved his goggles up on his forehead and his brows furrow because what now? How could the Bats not have known about one of their own? He opens his mouth but Kon beats him to the punch.

“That—is a fucking horrible excuse, man.”

Red Hood’s expression goes black for a minute, his jaw tightening.

“Get mad,” Kon offers, “that’s fine. Doesn’t change any of the facts. That guy is seriously fucked up because of you and we’re the ones that have had to deal with the fallout, not the Bats.” Kon leans forward a little so they know he’s not here to fuck around, “do you even know how much effort it takes six meta to keep one guy from dying? On a regular?”

Dick blinks at him, swallowing his bite. “I know he’s in a bad place, Blue. Well, I know now. That’s the thing about us, all of us in the supe community, okay? All of us have our own deal, our own cities, our own lives, our own idents in most cases, and shit gets under the radar. Back in the day, it was a struggle to even try keeping up with my team when they were in the Tower not the mention when they weren’t.”

Kid’s eyes roll over to Kon’s, “we get it. That Bats are busy. Fucking right, there’s a lot going on for all of us, but if we can try to keep his ass from the edge, then I sure as hell expected a lot more from
his own family. I mean—"

“Family?” Red Hood and Dick exchange a glance this time, “look, Kid, Barry is cool and all, but he ain’t—“

“Barry? This isn’t about Barry,” is it? Kid just blinks at him. “We’re here about Red, dude. Not Barry.”

“Oh. Oh.” Dick just blinks an important minute, and both their expressions tighten more because Tim. “ah, damn. I heard Barry’s been in a bad headspace, had been for a while. Me and B went to have a talk with the guy, see what’s going on. He’s…I get where he’s at okay, but he left you hanging and that shit needed to be addressed, you know? I thought that was why you called.”

And the irony, Kid closes his eyes and counts to ten, is so totally lost on these ass hats.

“Okay, Red then… I understand your reason to be pissed, but you have to understand that we also have a reason to be pissed.”

The two teenagers straighten because come again?

“I realize none of you want to rat out your bro. Been there, done that. You think me and Wally haven’t had this out back in the day? Sometimes you’ve got to go behind your best friend’s back and get him the help he needs even if he doesn’t realize he needs it. We’re that kind of people, all of us. Even all of you in some respects. It’s like an unspoken rule somewhere, but the second Tim started getting bad, one of you should have called me or B just to give a heads up. We’re his mentors, we’re the guys that brought him into this life, and we’re the ones that have every right to be there for him. Sure, shit got bad for him and us when he had to give up the R. Shit, it was bad for me when I had to give it up, too. I needed time, and that’s…initially what it was supposed to be for Tim. Give him time to heal, to figure out his new life, who he needed to be for him then he can come back with his own ident. So, we let him go, too far and too long as it turns out. But yeah, here we are now trying to get him back.”

“Yeah, he finally told us what you’re up to,” Kid fills in, “trying to have a Batfamily Christmas and all.”

Now they have the Red Hood’s full attention. “More than that,” he interjects, “we’re trying to get our brother back, man. Not just an intel guy or another soldier. That ain’t the point here. We’re trying to work him back into the family if you get what I’m saying.”

A muscle is Kid’s jaw works, “sure. I get it. Sucks when a valuable resource stops being convenient. Or, you know, doesn’t have the same cape anymore, so that guy can hit the curb.”

Dick takes right up with that, “look, changing the name—“

“The Bats stopped giving shit pretty much after that happened, no matter what kind of space you wanted to give him.” Kon interjects quietly, firmly and the fucking memory of how he found Tim, staring at the guy and what he was about to do before the whole come back to The Titans, we need you, man, “I mean, how do you think that looked to him, dude? Not being Robin meant he wasn’t family anymore. I mean, I could tell you what happened after that, but if I did, you guys and the Batman would never be able to look him in the eye again.”

Dick and Jason assess the weight behind Kon’s tone and meaning. Finally, Dick hold up a hand, “All right. You’ve got a lot of say, so feel free. Drop it on us. Everything you’ve got because yeah this is serious.”
Now, the attention is super creepy because *Bats*. Jason’s eyes are the scary kind of intent when he’s the guy citing down the barrel because something is going to get blown to smithereens. Dick is inhaling everything (you know, *Batman*), thoughts turning behind his eyes and calculations already forming. And nope, the two Titans aren’t going to let the good guy side of him cover up the fact that he’s the first Robin, N, Batman, a Titan, an Outlaw, and the guy that breaks bad when he needs to.

Kon looks at Kid and shuts up. The speedster wanted this shit to happen, fine. *Tell ‘em how it is, dude.*

“We’ll start with the standard,” Kid goes on smoothly, “none of us believe this shit for a second, to be honest. Bats might just feel *terrible* for the poor former-Robin right now, but we’re pretty sure it’ll happen again and probably again. As shitty as it is for him, we’re the ones that’ll deal with the fallout.” Kid makes a one-handed motion.

The furrow of Jason’s brows just makes his scowl that much more dark, “stop beating around the bush. Lay it out for us.”

“Fine. After the first two month of Red leading rather than *Robin,*” eye dart over to Dick Grayson so the point is made, “he was worse than before. More reckless, not giving a shit whether he made it out or not as long as the rest of us did. Making sure there was always a second in command for just in case, like he thought we wouldn’t notice or something. I would say he was suicidal, doing whatever he could to almost die in the line of duty, but I don’t think Tim really saw it that way. Just…I don’t know. Anyway, we started seeing the pattern *for what it was* is the point here. He’d come back way too fucked up for a normal guy, just not even give a shit if he was close to sepsis or not, stitch himself up, and keep moving on to the next crisis.” Kid sighs a little because, at the time, Tim hadn’t been able to *see* what he was doing to himself and in extension, the rest of them. They’d all had enough death; his was always just *this* much closer every fucking time.

“We started making rules for him at first, applying it to everyone in general so he’d wouldn’t fight it. Sensors for the unis, check-ins during the off times, medical clearance before a fight—if he was fucked in any way, he had to stay on the sidelines and direct. He hated that, but at least it worked for a while.”

Kid swallows, eyes a little distant because the Insurgents and Red’s abduction right on the heels.

“It changed in the last year,” Kon picks it up, helping his BFF, “the team took some hard hits. Red took some hard hits, and he started going back down that rabbit hole. Three septic shock episodes in less than two months, had to put him on IVs a couple times to keep him from getting ketosis. So, the team came up with the Protocols and later, the RRK.”

Kid nods a little, “protocols after we got him back, put all that shit on the shared drive so he could see it himself. Wednesday Protocols take up the most space since, you know, assassins and ninjas are like part of his weekly status report. That guy really needs to get another hobby than *oh Detective, my Ninjas need training and I’m doing something terribly illegal, come get me.* He’s just too creepy. Seriously.”

Kon’s face twists up in a grimace, “that’s why we keep an eye. He vanishes, that’s the first place we’re going.”

“Preach,” KF holds out a fist for a bump.

Dick’s face takes on a very scary smile, not one either of them had seen before. “Oh, I don’t think Ra’s is going to be a problem for Red much longer.” He and Jason exchange a satisfied smirk. “I think the JLA and the Bats have a handle on it.”
Now both teens are staring.

“Like I told him a few days ago,” Dick Grayson is oddly reassuring, “I never stopped caring about him, neither did B. Now we’ve got the Red Hood and Robin with us, so group effort.”

Jason gives a nod, pulling out his pack of cigarettes, “protocols. Tell us about ‘em. I got some off your drives because the demon brat is one hell of a nosy shit, but I got a feeling that’s only the tip of the iceberg.”

“And, what is the RRK? Seems important.”

“Miguel threw in the deal about the RRK, that it would be this symbolic thing so Red would know we always had a plan, too. Contingency and shit. We keep it stocked and it goes to every whatever the Titans are called in on.”

“And it’s the what now?”

“The Red Robin emergency kit. High dose antibiotics, saline drip, adrenaline, and portable de-fib.”

Now both vigilantes look a little disturbed. Good.

“It’s necessary.”

“We need a new case,” Kon observes mildly.

“I’ll put it on the agenda for the next team meeting.”

“Cassie could get one that’s, you know, reinforced.”

“Sure, I’d carry a blessed item on my back, no big deal. Maybe it would glow.”

“Then you could totally—“

Sigh, “I am not dropping KF to be Hermes, let it go, man.”

“Aw, dude. You could wear little wings on your ankles.”

“Not helping the image. At. All. Anyway—the Protocols. Those…started coming out after the disappearance. He spiraled down, and it was bad. All those old habits came back, working himself into a coma, throwing himself in front of any weapon without a fuck to give if he lived or died. He was a ticking time bomb and we didn’t know how to help him other than get serious. And the majority of those are encrypted by Vic, so you’re not getting into those files.”

“Maybe we should adopt them,” Jason jokes, lighting his cig with a smirk.

The two metas look unimpressed. Instead, Kid takes out his cell phone, idly taps a few things on screen and slides it across the table. Both Bats inhale the data, logs from the Tower’s record storage.

“Wow…” Jason winces, “ten hours a week? No way, he’d be dead and I’m a guy that would know.”

“About two hundred calories a day on average,” Dick supplements, “how can he keep moving like that?”

“You think those aren’t our questions too?” Kon shrugs, “he’s only moving because the protocols. It’s kind of hard when he mostly suicidal on a good day, but if you guys are serious about this and I
fucking mean serious, then you need to get it because what’s going to happen if you guys drop him again? We might not able to pull him back again. We’re still struggling with it.”

Kid closes his eyes briefly, “Fuck, you should have seen the guy after the disappearing act.”

Kon shoves an elbow into his ribs, and owdammit, dude, not indestructible here.

“We agreed no hardcore deets,” Kid growls out of the side of his mouth.

“Don’t need to bring that up,” Kon argues back.

“You want to face him down with a gun again if this falls apart, Blue? That shit wasn’t enough the first time?” Kid hisses and the effect is there, Kon flinches hard with the memory.

“Whoa,” Dick pulls their attention back to the task at hand, the guy’s eyes are huge and Jason Todd looks a little sick because, yeah, he fought his way out of a grave to live.

But…but the two didn’t even hear him, caught up in a whole lot of something else. KF’s expression is something very young, very scared, “what if me and BB didn’t get taken? How else were you gonna talk him down off that ledge, Kon? What about next time?” His chest hitches in a breath. “We don’t even know what’s in that file on the server, only that it unlocks the second he really does die, man. Fuck, Kon, what—?” are we going to do?

The chair scraping back doesn’t dislodge them from the helplessness in that moment, not until Dick Grayson has both hands on KF’s shoulders, grounding him like Barry used to do when he couldn’t outrun his thoughts or his fears. And both teens stare up at the taller men, too jaded to hope.

“Bart,” and those blue eyes, that expression of we won’t let that happen makes some tight knot that’s existed too long in his chest loosen just a little, just enough that, like Red, he can have a tentative amount of belief. “Bart, this isn’t just a thing we’ve decided on the fly or because there’s a Tim-sized hole in the Bat ranks. That’s not the point. B…is trying not to push him to hard because he might bolt, seriously, but it’s not going to stop us this time, okay? We’re not giving up on him, we’re not letting him just wander off into lone vigilante land again. We’re going to chase him the hell down, all of us. Maybe…maybe if he’d been dead set against it a few months ago, we would have given him some more time and tried again, but that didn’t happen, so yeah. Plan Bring Timmy Back to the Bats is a go.”

Jason looks to Kon, trying to see past the starch in his spine, imagining him trying to talk Baby Bird out of shooting himself because…yeah, that’s the picture he can’t get out of his head, one that’s going to haunt him for a long time.

“It took a lot of balls from both you to come here tonight,” he follows up Big Wing’s little power speech since, yeah, the guy has the knack for inciting faith. “And believe it, message received. Baby Bird gets dumped by the Bats again, we’re probably going to be burying him, and take my fucking word as gospel—that. Ain’t. Gonna. Happen.”

Dick grins over at him and turns back to the weary teens, now very much aware how much burden they’ve had to shoulder. Not just in regard to Tim and his state of health and mind, but of being superheroes battling for their world. Without too much more thought, Dick pulls both boys into his arms, not octopus hold he reserves for his old team or the Bats, but a hold that relays strength and support.

Jason Todd just looks on, no smart ass comments about how KF is letting his forehead rest of Dickie’s shoulder or the Super kid finally loses some of the tenseness in his shoulders and back.
Naw, he knows, now that Big Wing’s got a bunch of littles that are beat to shit by the life, well, that guy is going to have a new mission, and well, ain’t that just what he needs.

**

Once the two Titans are out the window and back on their way to the Tower, Jason dials his phone, puts it on speaker while Dick grabs two bottles of water from the mostly empty fridge.

B answers the Cave phone like he was waiting (probably was).

“You get all that?” Jason asks needlessly.

“Yes. I’ve already called together a meeting with the JLA two nights from now and spoken to Cyborg about monitoring the Titan’s call more closely. He’s going to set alarms based on their distress codes that will alert everyone automatically.” The echo isn’t the phone because, well, Bat Cave. That shit is terrible on speaker phone.

“I think Baby Bird is worse than I thought, but dammit, B, did you look at those kids?”

“Superboy was aware of the cameras, he kept their backs to them, but I don’t need the visual to be more than normally concerned. The rest of the League needs to be clued in to what’s been going on as Kal-El and I have been discussing. Barry is already aware of the last two threats on Kid Flash’s life as well as his last few scrapes that look suspiciously similar to Red’s worst habits. Hm, I’m sure that is going to be quite a conversation after the Titans part for the weekend.”

“You go, B. Get that little motherfucker something to lean on. Shit, he’s almost as bad as Baby Bird.”

“Precisely, Raven, Beast Boy, Wonder Girl, and Bunker are more aware of the danger, respectful of it. The other three are a cause for concern. Kal is also aware.”

“I bet you made ‘em a PowerPoint, right?”

Dickie chuffs a laugh at that, settling next to him and cracking the first bottle. Jason’s hand unerringly finds the smooth texture of the uniform over that thigh; if B wasn’t on the line right at that moment, he’d bring that guy a little closer to lay one on him since, well, they could both use the closeness just before they start with the we’re cracking some fucking skulls, hacking that wrist computer, and setting some shit up so we know Red’s usual better than he does.

“No need to, they’ve reviewed the footage and spreadsheets.”

And well, now Jason’s laughing too since B and his damn spreadsheets.

“All right, all right. We’re out for the night. Dick’s gotta work tomorrow so I’ll see you early afternoon. Then, we break some of Baby Bird’s shit and keep that track of that kid on the low.”

“Understood. I take it you memorized the reports Kid Flash showed you?”

“You know it. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Absolutely. Batman out.”

And a little sigh because those guys gave them some heavy shit to think about.

“First thing’s first, if he’s got a gun, I want to know where.”
Dick just hums in agreement, his gaze also far away.

“Hey,” and those green eyes twinkle a little when the elder of the two looks over immediately. “We’re going to handle this. Not just Dick Grayson or Nightwing, but all the Bats and the supe mentors. We’re gonna share the burden of duty. You feel me?”

Laying his head back a little, Dick just nods looking that much more worn, and just, his heart. “C’mere,” a broad palm on Dick’s neck, pulling the guy into him so for once (or maybe twice), he can be the one this hero leans on.

**

His personal phone buzzes about halfway through Grandma’s Boy (since no one will admit it, but really, hilarious movie if not for the drug use), and Red excuses himself to take the call, not that any of the sleeping Titans heard him leave.

“Red Robin,” he answers since, well, the guy already knows the ident and all.

“Hey Red,” Superman replies fondly, the noise of air whooshing in the background (that guy totally owes him for hooking up the Blue Tooth).

“Supes. How’s kicks?” Up in the Perch, he stretches his neck, waves a hand to boot up his systems since his team had needed chill time more than he needed to be deep in data. Besides, his phone would have pinged him if heavy shit was going down.

“Good. The usual. Life at the Planet never stops. Lois is the same, mover and shaker. JLA is on task for once, so nice really. How is everything Tim Drake now that Batman isn’t talking my ear off? Well, as much as he talks anyway.”

Now a brow is arching, “Batman calling you is not a phenomenon, Supes. I keep trying to tell you all that. Deep down past the bad ass exterior, he has a creamy caramel center of gooey, sweet goodness—“

And the alien is laughing out loud, a full belly sound, “funny. All the Robins are hilarious.”

“Someone has to balance out darkness with terrible puns and jokes, man. That’s the whole point of Robin, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Mmhm, so you going to ask me about Emily Dickenson so you can help Kon again or what?”

“Hey, I was an English Major before I got into journalism you know. I love poetry to this day, and I do want to thank-you for the advice. He’s let me help him with the last three assignments. It was great just to get to hang out with him.”

Bingo. Now he’s grinning like an asshole because, well, Kon already started acting calmer with CK’s influence and attention. Clark, Barry, and Di next. He’d have to call in the bigger guns for Rave and BB (even though those two are, as usual, on point).

“I’m helping out a bro struggling with literature. What better resource than a guy who originally majored in literature? No brainer there, but I’m glad the two of you are on a more even keel. He’s still having some…issues with his strength. I’d like to eventually see him confident enough to stop worry about hurting anyone.”
“I can understand where he’s coming from, Red. I was terrified for years after I started manifesting power.”

“Be that as it may, his control is incredible. Leaps and bounds tighter than it was even a year ago. He has the capability, just not the confidence. I think if he takes more from your example, he’ll ease up on himself. It’ll be good for him.” Yup, he really did enjoy when plans started coming together, especially when all he needed to do was talk.

“I’ll run it past him, maybe start training with me every other week…” and now the guy seems a little hesitant and, yeah, Red already know about that from back when the guy was still all kinds of freaked out about having a clone. “Do you think it’s been long enough that he might—?”

“Be receptive? If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have suggested you try again, you know.”

“I understand. Really, Tim, I appreciate everything you’ve done for him.”

“He’s my bestie, Supes. I might break Bat law for the guy if there were no other options, no joke. Besides, you’re good for him. A good mentor. Batman helped as much as he could, but you can really get where he’s coming from. I think Kon needs that.”

“Me too,” the other guy admits, “well, I think I need it as much as he does. He’s really a great kid. I’m kind of honored he’d keep the name, you know?”

“I do. I understand the whole legacy thing. Bat, remember? Like, the third Robin, sure I’m the first one that had pants and all, but still.”

“I get it, I get it. Well, at least you got him to stop the Mohawk thing because…wow, that was terrible.”

“Don’t dis his style, man. He was rebelling, it’s whatever. And as much as I like catching up, why did the Batman call you?” Deceptively mild, but yeah, detective, remember?

“Oh…he was somewhat…concerned when you disappeared in Gotham. I offered to come down, help them search for you in case the fear toxin was affecting you, but he assured me they were going to start seriously looking after the yearly meeting.”

*Oh. News to him.* “Very nice of you to offer, but we…figured it out.”

“Glad to hear it. He’s not a guy that talks about things very easily, but when he does, I tend to listen. The others do too.”

And there’s something behind that phrase, a subtly. Superman oddly isn’t forthcoming for once *ever.* Undertones are not his usual style, and Red’s brows furrow. “Something you want to tell me, Kal?”

A heartbeat of quiet and the tone coming through the phone is low, “we…the JLA haven’t been on our game, Tim.”

“Tight lot of universe and a limited number of you, man. Don’t—“

“We have fall backs. All of us, the team. We have others we can call on when things are Doomsday kind of bad; it’s good practice.”

“I get that. And?”

“We’re supposed to be the support for The Titans. That’s what we all agreed on when Dick first
wanted to start a team. Nothing has changed that, not when Jason led them for a while, or when Young Justice branched off, or when the new Titans formed. The fact that we would have your backs was always the understanding.”

Tim slowly blinks, staring out the window at the San Fran skyline because *what?* “Mmhm.” He manages.

“We haven’t been doing that for the last year and a half or so. You guys are incredible, really. Not just as individuals, but as a team, your strengths function like a well-oiled machine, covering each other’s weaknesses, knowing and using one another’s strengths in a fight. You coordinate them like a pro, and they trust you to lead them in a fight. So, I think we all just assumed the Titans would call for us if you needed us.”

“We have when necessary.”

“Tim. If we would have responded when you called out during the Insurgent Crisis, none of you would have been trapped in that Mind Field. You would have had more powers and players to work with. We failed you guys on that one.”

And, well, he’s really got nothing for that. “We handled it.” Is all he can say but really Cassie and just, how fucked up was BB after experiencing Trigon almost tearing Raven apart? All of them were shaken, badly.

“Admirably, but that doesn’t mean the fallout isn’t still terrible, Tim.”

He sighs in the phone, closes his eyes a minute. If only there had been more time, some other way.

“Don’t beat yourself up. If we’d been there, well, it would have had a different ending. That’s the point.”

“Logical leap, here, Kal. The JLA wants more *input* on what we do?” Nope, he does not like where this is going, not at all. Babysitters are very not necessary, thank-you very much.

“Not so much. Tim, don’t take this the wrong way.”

Too late.

“We intend to be better back-up is what I’m saying. Everyone already has an idea of what we’ve been missing out on. The hard fights, like *invading aliens* should be worth JLA help, not intervention. As team leader, I want to run things by you before we gather, get your opinion on what kind of emergency bells should be warning signals that we might want to join the Titans.”

*Dammit Bruce. What. The. Hell.*

“He’s been talking to you a lot apparently.”

Now Superman sighs, the wind dying down as the guy probably hovers over Metropolis somewhere. “How many times have you almost died this year alone, Tim? Before you answer and play it down, at least be honest with yourself. You may be fine with how things are going, but maybe you should really talk to your team and how worried they are for you.”

And that makes him jerk back a little, just this is not the conversation he thought he’d be having tonight.

Staring out at San Fran, his thoughts originally taking him to suit up and going out, stopping some
run-of-the-mills, calculate on the future implication of the JLA and whoever the hell else they might draft into the new *watch the Titans* procedure.

A few years ago, when he was a real Bat, he would have been relieved to have more fighters in the ring. He would have been flattered they wanted to work side-by-side, but with everything happening in the last few months, this could very well be a noose tightening. Trying to placate the Bats, give them a chance, might have been a bad call after all.

“Consider what I’m asking.” The alien soothes, “We’re going to meet up in a few days, and I’d like you to be there, listen to what we have to say, give us some guidelines. Tim, tell us what we can do to help.”

“I will definitely think about it,” he draws out, “let me know when I’m supposed to show up. I’ll be there.”

“I hope when you do come, you’ll see what we’re trying to do here. This isn’t about controlling your team’s activity, you know.”

*I’m sure you think you believe that.* “I get it,” he lies easily since, well, Kal wouldn’t detect his pulse speeding up or any of the usual indicators even if he is listening in. “I’ll talk to the others tomorrow. Hit me up with the invite, and I’ll pay a visit to the Watchtower.”

“I appreciate it, Tim. Thank-you again for helping me with Kon.”

“I meant it. You’re good for him.” *Just like Barry was good for Bart. Wally tries, but Barry was the first connection, the first mentor.* “Don’t let him down this time, Kal. I trust you to have his back if nothing else.”

“I’m going to try, Tim. Believe it.”

“Hm. Good. Talk to you in a few days then.”

“Absolutely, have a good night.”

Tapping the ‘End Call,’ he has another item on his to-do list, weighing the validity on whether or not he could realistically believe the JLA just wanted to be friends and whatever. Nothing Superman said was necessary a lie. Yes, the team had a few terrible run-ins; yes, they kicked alien ass with less than desirable aftereffects. Nick Galtry showed up with some crazy compound he managed to get into BB, turning his powers against him. Yes, H.I.V.E would have dissected Bart if they hadn’t made it in time. Yes, Brother Blood did his damnest to make Raven into some kind of sacrifice to bring Trigon in this world. Yes, N.O.W.H.E.R.E is most certainly up to something…

Gently, Tim’s forehead presses against the glass while he considers the next move.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, so... A lot. Snarking, Wally is crazy as hell, Good-Guy Dick Grayson, the usual Red Hood, helicopter B and Supe, Bro KF and Kon are just exhausted and worried and a little jaded. Just, yeah. Belatedly, I realized I mentioned stuff in the other thing that I didn't in this thing, like what's in the RRK? And stuff from that Mind Field scene, so fighting on whether or not to address it here because, woo, Kon. Sorry you to walk in
on that, man. Geeze. And...so much talking. Sorry, kind of. But Timmy's got plans, so
good, yes? Also, I don't know much about the JLA, Robin fan, right? So, I will try to
keep them in some kind of character mostly. Going to do my best.
And, the sound effects are totally a reference to the very old school Batman show with
Adam West and Burt Ward because Ker-Pow. Enough said.
The Titans are out for the week (and, oh, the JLA had a little meeting scheduled tomorrow night for let’s coddle the Titans, fuck, just fuck), and Red has been pretty much glued to the Perch since the usual ball is rolling; the last two weeks of monitoring, tracking, investigating, hacking, and the normal gathering pieces of the larger puzzle has made him pretty well obsessed with the new faceless bad guys who happened to be gathering up old Luthor tech like it’s going out of style. Only Scarecrow managed to get him out of the Tower for any reasonable amount of time, and just…well, that was pretty much personal.

Since everyone took off after the oh hey, so Batman and Co. might be the reason I’ve been going back to Gotham lately team talk (and the usual review of spreadsheets pertaining to his eating and sleeping habits, you know, like he’s not aware or anything), he’s fully back in this game since there’s still too much bothering him about potential wide-spread destruction and such. Actually, his first clue of something very wrong hit a month ago, shortly after he came back from his second patrol with Hood (one thankfully without horrendous injuries, only the usual busted ribs and bruises) on the road give the Bats a second chance. His system had flagged a new item on the black market’s equivalent of Craig’s List (even the awkward relationship section, like ‘oh hey, looking for love? You can buy it here, pick from Russian, Ukrainian, Iranian, African, and more.’ Ugh, those assholes went down fast, stop trafficking people you pieces of shit. Yeah, Red Robin wrecked that little operation): chemical WTF. Luthor’s previous attempt at thwarting that darned Superman by making, you know, a copy with the same powers and whatnot. The chemical for sale had been a building block in Kon’s creation, and some random asshat brought out a Black Amex for that little jewel.

Tracing the shipment to the buyer had been arduous for how many re-routes the thing went through, and he lost the final destination along the way (fucking H.I.V.E); however, the user account linked back to some communications talking about other shipments, and gave Red another avenue to track them. He got lucky enough to get a delivery place and time for another package being delivered to Washington, D.C. three days before B stopped by the Tower to let him know more about the heavy
shit going down in Gotham.

Luckily, he had time to intercept the first shipment before his road trip home (wait, what? Gotham isn’t—). He’d hit D.C. in a few hours, tracked the package that was supposed to be picked up, not that the thing was really that easy to get. Sure, he could have broken in at night as Red Robin and taken what he wanted, but that would be so un-Bat-like that he went with undercover instead. Well, the dude at the Fed Ex place seemed to think the box was just way too big to be cookies from Aunt Ethel, but what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him (and just fully reiterates the face that he is no longer the right size and build to pull off heels, thigh-highs, and a dress; damn it, he used to be so pretty).

With the Bats back on an even keel, Gotham in the usual state of perpetual fifty-fifty chance (massive crazy assholes going to kill us all or a nice day to go to the park, who knows?), and the Titans going back to their potential lives for another few days, Red can get back to other evil around the world. Now he’s on the hurry up and wait list while his systems analyze the compound he pulled out of that box and so he can get a better estimation of how far up the Oh shit meter this thing might go. The full device, however, was really an example of creative genius, and not that far below Luthor tech that Red started getting a little nervous the moment he got the two containers of chemicals out and started picking the thing apart, stripping it down to the wires.

The complex detonation device of course operated on a network connection to other devices with a radio frequency redundancy (nice, bad guys are just so smart nowadays). The most telling is the preset sequence: the two chemicals would be combined for twenty-five minutes before the detonation, either to give time for an appropriate reaction or to assure the mixture complete before blowing whoever the target is to smithereens. Either way, he would have to know what the compounds are, why both have to be combined, and trace the other devices.

In the meantime, he’s hacking the motherboard to get a date/time range of the detonations while simultaneously using his other facilities to have some “bonding time” via telecomm.

“This is irritating,” Robin’s voice over the speakers doesn’t lose any quality when he’s annoyed.

From behind his system in San Fran, Red grins a little as several of his other screen run tracers on large maps, trying to pin point the other locations in the continental US where the detonation devices and compounds have been shipped; without specifics, he theorizes the most populated cities just by rote (New York, LA, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Antonio, and San Diego). He finally has enough for the pieces to start coming together, and the normal repertoire of multiple contingencies run in the designated space in his brain as layers of plan come together in conjunction with new, uncovered pieces. The plan needs to be flawless since none of those scenarios he can associate with Luthor tech are good.

“It can be,” Tim replies out loud, knowing Robin can hear him. “It’s not an easy thing.”

“—tt—where do you suggest beginning then? This is your area of expertise.”

“Heartily,” Red chuckles a little. “Do what you’re doing right now. You have the evidence, start putting it into place. Make the puzzle solid.”

“Not helpful, Red. I have been over the case files, I have every sheet of paper memorized, and still I am clueless as to what I am to be looking for. You are supposed to be the one teaching me this.”

Tim hums a little and sips on his coffee, riding sleep dep for this one since he needs the burn to see more than the obvious conclusion; his brain needs the strain to start thinking outside the box while the screens flash with percentages and pending results. Worse, this motherboard is a bitch. “Rule 1.”
“To look beyond the obvious. Do not take the easy answer unless it is the only answer.”

“Rule 2.”

“To perceive subtlety. Do not pass off the smallest detail; that detail could be the crucial one.”

“Rule 3.”

“Use what you know.”

Red hums a little because *yup, just like where B started with him a lifetime ago*. Now with the Aristotelian Q&A: “Where did it take place?”

“The Upper East side, near the glass factory.”

“And what do you know about the area?”

“Originally, it was the center of the industrial boom in Gotham, housing several crucial textile mills. In subsequent years, it has fallen by the wayside, become obsolete with new industry moving to other areas of the city…before the earthquake, it was mostly abandoned, a breeding ground for drugs, crime, homelessness, and lower-income families.”

“What evidence from the case file gives you any clue as to where it took place?”

“…compounds in the boot prints possibly? I am guessing here, Red.”

“You’re starting to get it. What kind of things in an environment could be specific? Take the Upper East into account.” He tries another line of code to break the encryption, biting back an irritated sigh.

“There are several things I am able to discern, the old building materials combined with newer ones as that part of the city maintained the most building intact after the quake.”

“Keep going.”

“Old material from the previous textile production.”

“Hm, do tell.”

A slight pause, “the fibers under the victim’s fingernails…!”

Red hums, pleased while the tracers get closer. “Combined with?”

“The trace elements in the boot print.” Now Robin is talking while running, the air around him in a rush, “one factory on the Cornell block specialized in uniform production while the other on Mason side was for some other type—“

“Children’s clothing.” Red supplies.

“Yes. That it is,” the sound of the grapple, “the fibers were not of standard cotton blend of the current industry, something more synthetic—“

“Durability.”

“Yes, I am on my way to Cornell now.”

“What about your perps? Who did the deed, Robin? Cause if you’re going to go out looking for
“This is not the work of Zsasz, Red.”

“Hm, seems to be his *modus operandi*.” Red puts a hand over his mouth to cover the smile, but Robin can probably still hear it in his tone. “And all the evidence leads to him. The victim was competition to Black Mask, and Zsasz still chooses to work for him that we know of, so—“

“—tt— it is flawed, plausible but flawed, Red. The victim’s throat was slit and posed as Zsasz intends but the bruising, the other injuries, the alley where the body was found, none of that adds up to him. He does not extensively fight when he kills for money, only when he does for sport. Nor does he hide a corpse, rather he wants his victims found regardless of the reason. This is not Zsasz.”

“Nice deduction.” On another monitor, Red taps out a command and the security feed is Gotham, running off some of O’s old cameras. Still, he catches the shadow as it swings. The next screen already has a bead on one gnarly looking guy in upstairs of the textile mill, the four others throwing down dice and drinking cheap liquor. The one Robin would want has already lost his ass and his share of the booze gone; the ratty looking coat is already siding over his shoulders while the cameras watch, probably going for a run. “Then who are you looking for?”

“I have narrowed it down to one of the three other suspects. I had thought it might have been another thug on Mask’s orders; however, that conclusion is incorrect. Mask has a tendency to kill other dealers as a last resort, rather he would sway them to his side, to have another soldier in his ranks. The victim was well-known in several areas of Gotham; he would have been an asset to the industry.”

“Interesting. Then who is your suspect?” Damn it, this thing is for real; he tries another back way into the data he needs because this shit must be something else….

“A man they call Johnny the Razor. He has recently come out of Black Gate after a ten year sentence.”

“Don’t recognize the name.” Well, he didn’t before he did his own sleuthing.

“Of course not. He was born Michael Sean Patrick to a moderately wealthy family; he changed his name at twenty-three after his mother and father went bankrupt and committed suicide. He joined the underworld shortly after as Johnny the Razor. The victim, unfortunately, is the son of Maria and James Rothchild, the power couple of—“

“Mylan Inc. Powerful people. I’d heard one of their kids went to the wayside.”

“Yes, that is our victim. They are also responsible for driving the Patrick’s thriving business to bankruptcy.”

“Revenge play then?”

“I believe so, yes. The depth and amount of wounds on the victim suggest to me a great of *emotion* went into the final blows.”

Red watched the suspect saunter out of the main doors just as Robin hits the rooftop across the street. He taps his comm twice, muting his main feed with Robin just long enough to say, “get ready in case we have a runner,” because odds are really for it, natch, career criminals usually don’t learn that well. He switches back to Robin’s main feed.

“I am going in. Stand by,” Robin breathes and Red hums again.
And Johnny the Razor ducks into the alley off Grand, hoping to lose the Bat’s little shit around a corner and down in one of underpasses, hoping he’s got enough lead to get away. The Bats are nuts, crazy, and he’s very sure he’s screwed if even one of them has their eye on him.

The sound of guns cocking stops him cold.

The Red Hood steps into the sparse light, both .45s at arm’s length and whole lot of bad ass stamped on his chest. “Wrong way, motherfucker.”

“S—shit!” Johnny slides, almost falls, shoves himself up with his heart pounding and adrenaline pumping because holy shit that guy is crazy as hell and kills, he’s back out of the mouth of the alley, running immediately out into the street, barely managing to miss being roadkill. The incessant honking, yelling, and middle finger out the window doesn’t even slow him down.

The Red Hood slinks back into the shadows, fitting his side arms back. He gives a little shake of his head, looking up into the skyline for—ah, Robin swings by a few breaths later with eyes on the prize.

“He’s in pursuit.” Hood reports.

“Good. Thanks.”

“All in a night’s work, Baby Bird. I’m going back to my part of town. See you next time.”

“Affirmative.”

And Red switches security cameras with ease because, well, Gotham. He switches frequencies while Robin’s still on mute, “Get ready.”

**

There’s the fence. If he can get over the fucking fence, he can lose the little shit in the old strip yards because there ain’t no fucking way anyone can follow—

“Gahhh!”

The girl in purple stares down at him from where she’s perched on top the fence he was about to swing; she has a sneer and a bat across her chest, too.

“I suggest you run somewhere else,” she suggest darkly, “so I don’t have to punch your balls into your throat.”

Yup, he can take a hint. Not even thinking about fighting because the brat would roll up in this shit and two against one. Damn, one of those freaky bastards is enough.

Johnny gives her a sneer back and keeps running.

Batgirl dips down, huddles in the shadow of the overpass, looking up at the skyline. When Robin’s body arches through the air in a clean line before he re-shoots his grapple, she grins a little sadly, watching him disappear into the night.

“Wow, he’s like on a serious mission with this guy,” Batgirl finally observes when Robin is out of range.
“Yup. Thanks for the assist.”

“Any time ex-boyfriend wonder,” and her tone is too warm to be coming from a masked vigilante. “Next time you’re in, I owe you coffee and pizza. Think maybe you could do that?”

In his perch, Tim hears the uncertainty, and as much bad as there was between them (seriously, *Batman did not tell you to hire people to kill me. Just nope*), still, there was a whole lot of good.

“I could do coffee and pizza, next time,” he finally admits, switching security feeds to watch the Razor run like a rat in a maze—Red’s maze. From the camera on top of the Wallstone Apartments, he can see the entire block and grins to himself.

“Deal. Even with your crazy combinations.”

“I like to think of it as eclectic,” he replies off handedly and *still*, fuck. He’s watching the perp run while trying another combination.

“Ham, sausage, pineapple, tomatoes, and olives are gross, Red.”

And her voice soothes a small part of him that missed her friendship rather than their old flames of attraction. Maybe…maybe he needed that again. Maybe it was time to just forgive shit and move on.

He smiles a little and hits another set of key strokes. “Best of all worlds, BG. Next time, we’ll get two so your boring as hell Meat Lovers can also be on the menu.”

“I’m stoked. See you then.”

“Red out.” He taps the comm in his ear again, watching Robin’s progress.

“Grayson here.” And that voice makes his chest ease just enough to be irritating because, dammit, they aren’t supposed to be there yet. Not after everything. One hug, one kind of okay patrol, one look in those big damn blue eyes that are just always sincere as *hell* isn’t supposed to—

*The job, asshole.*

“Coming your way.” He says low in the comm, “Get in place.”

“Thanks for the tip, kid. Glad you’re helping out in the fight against crime.”

*Only Dick,* he must enjoy the hell out of the double entendres, really. Against his will, Red chuffs a laugh, shaking his head, taps the comm to end transmission, unmutes the main line, “Robin, we’ve got GCPD close. You can drive him right to them.”

Huffing on the other end because the kid is obviously getting his workout tonight. “Acknowledged.”

By Red’s calculations, he only needs to change one more feed and sit back for the fireworks. But again, *dammit,* what is mystery criminal hiding with this thing?

**

Robin’s boots make contact just as the Razor almost hits the old Five and Dime where he would have been *fucking* home free. Instead he gets a face full of curb and has enough left in him to pull the pearl handled straight razor from the back of his jeans, rolling over to, at least try getting the little shit one good time.

His slash is blocked by green gloves as the kid’s leg comes up and the knee nails him right under the
“Hm. You do a terrible impression of Victor Zsasz, Mr. Patrick.” The masked little freak sneers down at him. “No one would believe that was his handy work.”

“I’m gonna fucking gut you, you little shit.”

The kid just smirks at him, and the fight is on.

The Razor has spent years in prison, fighting daily to keep his place in the ranks, keep other prisoners from fucking with him. He’s fast, strong, bigger than the kid, slashing out, ducking, changing up to try being unpredictable. He gets one good slice in on the kid’s forearms, following up with punches and kicks of his own, but the kid is a cape for a reason, and gives back as good as he gets.

After a hopping head butt to his nose, the Razor takes a step back, holding the broken appendage.

“James Rothschild.” The kid says while sliding between his legs and kicking out, “no one will believe Zsasz committed that murder.”

He slashes out again, still holding his bleeding nose, misses, jumps back. “No one’ll believe I did it either. I got witnesses you little bastard. Air tight. No one will ever know it was me.”

“—tt— except the police have already figured out the murder weapon was not a knife but a straight razor as well as Zsasz was being arrested at the time of the killing. It won’t be long before they come for you.”

“I’ll be outta Gotham before then,” Razor ducks, comes up with the blade flashing in the street light while the other fist goes for the gut.

Kid raises his knee to block the fist, other hand snapping down on his wrist, almost breaking it, and Johnny yelps, drawing back. “He had it coming, you little shit. He had it coming.”

The kid, straight back with those freaky white eyes, “I’m aware his family was the catalyst for your tragedy.”

“No one would have ever made them pay, asshole. Ever. They’d have got away with it. Do you fucking get that?!”

And only Robin, who is always aware of his surroundings, hears the sirens getting closer, but this, this must be addressed.

“This action,” Robin holds out a hand, the voice too deep for a kid his size, “what has it done for them? For you?”

The guys mouth works, no sound coming out while he cradles his aching wrist.

“This vengeance has killed the child of your enemies, a child that had no place in the cause of your tragedy. What was his part? What did he do?”

“—Nothin’. He was the only one I could get to, and yeah, it was worth it.” Because, to him, it was. Watching that little bastard bleed out, knowing mommy and daddy are going to mourn, just, yeah. They got theirs in the end, didn’t they?

“Worth it? To cause the same pain and loss you have experienced? You have become the same as
And that…that stutters him a second more than he woulda liked because the little fucker didn’t know anything, he didn’t get it, just like the cops, and the courts, and all the social workers. None of them could understand, and he opens his mouth to tell Robin just that when he takes a roundhouse kick to the face instead.

And wouldn’t you just know it?

“Freeze! On the ground, now!”

The kid, little asshole, leaps into the air, taking himself out of the line of fire to land on top the cruiser at a crouch. He comes inches from the cop holding the .38 still at the Razor like he’s waiting for a reason. The other pig is coming at him with cuffs at the ready.

“What you will need,” Robin drops the file and the recorder removed from his belt. Confessions are excellent leverage.

The dark haired officer keeps his stance, blue eyes sliding over to Robin, and there’s a great deal of affection there. The younger huffs quietly, “do not blow your cover, Grayson,” he mock whispers.

“Good work, Little D. Get that arm taken care of.” And Officer Grayson closes in as McHenry pulls Johnny the Razor up by the elbows to lead the criminal to his nice escort (and geeze, the kid worked this one over they’d have to get him to the ER maybe).

When the two officers turn back, Robin is gone, and the evidence already inside the cruiser on the driver’s seat.

**

“Feel like you’re getting the idea?” Red’s voice in his air isn’t lost while he flies.

“…somewhat. I must admit, Red, you are surprisingly not an abysmal instructor. Perhaps miracles do occur.”

The laugh in his ear makes him smirk a little since this, this is part of what he can do to keep the older man returning or at least staying in contact. A year ago, less than that, he would have meant everything with hatred and disdain as he would never be the Robin Timothy Drake had been; he simply could not be. His efforts to learn, to acclimate crucial characteristics of each former Robin into his repertoire had been the original goal—in order to become the best Robin, he would need to possess the best qualities of each in addition to his own. Grayson’s ethics, Todd’s bold bravery, Drake’s intuitive skill, all of it would make him a better Robin than any of them, would guarantee father would never regret keeping him, not if he could be the best all of the Batman’s former partners.

In the here and now, after all the good and bad he’s been through with the Bats, as an older and wiser Robin, he understands much more than he did then. With the family coming together, he can use his own brand of humor and expect the other former Robins not to take offense, not to get angry with him, to accept him as he is. Rather, the four of them have come to a level of comfort with each other’s quirks—and though these attributes may be persistently annoying…he no longer complains with real feeling. Rather, these four are becoming important to him (not that he’ll ever admit it…even though Grayson is likely already aware).

Landing with no noise, Robin looks up into the shadowed face of the cowled Bat, he resists the urge to smirk, but barely.
“I have rendezvoused with the Batman, Red.”

And he hears the kid touch down even though, well, Bats, and like the good older pseudo-sibling/rival/former Robin/what-the-fuck-ever, he’s okay to let Robin chill and disconnect now that B’s on the roof of the old Legend theater with him...when the analysis finally completes the run and gives him what he needs to know about the chemicals, literally two seconds before he finally cracks the back door code on the motherboard.

Quiet talk comes over the speakers (“Well?” “—tt—of course I was able to turn him over to police, Batman.”) while Red immediately takes in the results of both the detonation device and the chemical combination with a trademark smirk since it really is a rewarding experience when he gets the drop on some new baddies--especially right before they get the opportunity to do the whole ‘debut as bad asses’ thing and just have to make a show of it and whatnot...

The full weight of what he’s looking at, the necessary building blocks, the literal less than an hour they have, spell impending holy shit once his brain puts together the combinations and possibilities. His attempts to put together the chemicals he’d previously known were a part of this mess with random other building blocks in his attempt at feeling out what exactly these ass hats are playing with, but well, his estimation had been off, undercutting the true design, an ingenious one, really, but with a millions of people are going to die horrifically kind of vibe.

“Oh. Shit.” His eyes take it all in, the building blocks that are more than just a meta killer. One that would break down any DNA within radius, one that would make hundreds of thousands die slowly as their very DNA degrades....

*Holy Death Bomb, Batman.*

“Red?” But he doesn’t have time for anything else than this.

“You turning in with B?” And he automatically hits the big emergency button, deeming shit, shit, a lot of explosions to kill a lot of people important enough to call his team in from their regularly scheduled lives since it’s hero time, people. They need to bypass the normal protocol of gathering at the Tower. Nope, he needed them all in the field.

“Yes, the car is close.” Robin is suspicious but Red has no time.

“Good,” he’s already up out of his seat, throwing on his harness and utility belt, grabbing a domino, giving the command to warm up the plane for plan get to that shit.

“What is it?”

“Got something to take care of, see you next time, Robin,” and a soft noise has Red looking up, inhaling everything.

Four out of the five have been tracked, his predictions ringing true. Four out of five traces pops up addresses in New York, Chicago, Houston, and Phoenix as he surmised and that covers a majority of the US. The fifth trace is still working, error message popping up, but with the sleep dep Red is riding, he can see the spots on the map explode in a mass of gore. The spurt of blood splatters on the virtual maps expand to a thirty mile blast radius, another twenty or thirty with fallout. Every meta dead, large majority of standard humans dead with the initial explosion or dying slowly with whatever effects the chemical cocktail is going to have on their DNA, stripping them down the cellular level, not to mention the temporary survivors effectively on the same road with aftereffects (cancer, organ damage, who the fuck knows what else).
And Red sees the hole in where the blood hasn’t reached, where people might be safe, have some kind of chance at survival…L.A. It has to be in L.A.

“Fuck.” His brain hitches into overtime, which Titan to send where, how many they may need to fight through to get to the detonators, the disarm them, to get them clear before the big finale, how he was going to make sure the main connecting point to the network isn’t going to launch the others in an unavoidable chain reaction.

“—swer me, Drake?!”

“Red. Batman here, report.”

“Gotta go. Red out.” He disconnects and takes off out of the perch, already planning on how he’s going to find the final charge.

He’s already got camera giving him visuals on flashes of metal, glass, and canisters hiding in unassuming spots out of the main way (one in New York’s Grand Army Plaza tied right above the electric box on a street light, next in Chicago’s Lincoln Park Zoo entrance, woven into the branch sculpture, third one in the Clock Tower at Houston’s Market Square Park, and fourth inside the USS Arizona Memorial at Phoenix’s Bolin Memorial Park) before the plane is even ready to go. Secondary trace on similar bar codes on the four packages to figure out where in LA (though he’s betting Grand or Echo Park since, well, pattern. No problem, the second it turns on, he’ll trace the frequency anyway). With the data he gets from the security feeds, he can begin plotting how to tell the Titans to disarm them.

“Raven here,” her voice breathes through the cockpit as he throwing the switch for the ceiling to open up and let him in the sky.

“Dude, I totally have a test today, so you are my hero. For real. My professor thinks my grandma is having a stroke but karma can get me later.”

“Red, Wally wants to know what the emergency is—“

“BB on deck.”

“On my way from Paradise Island—“

“All right, people,” the plane shivers under him, rises. “We have a lot to do and little time.” His tone shakes everyone out of their humor because it’s Red Robin time. “I’ve traced five incendiary devices dispersed in major cities. One is the main device, once it detonates, the other four will trigger sequence. However, each one will need to be disarmed in case a redundancy exists to trigger an explosion regardless.”

Short and sweet, he sums up the findings while the security feeds keeps an eye on the devices, just flashes of metal, glass, and canisters; he can see the separate chemicals that would combine when the detonators go off. It’s enough for his systems to spot the antenna for frequency detonation, more of a possibility that the bombs are rigged together—once one blows, all of them blow.

“It’s a Meta Killer?” Bart breathes.

“Yes, more like an everyone, anything killer. So, we’ve got chemical warfare. I’m on my way to the epicenter, according to the readings, one should be the primary conduit. This isn’t to say the others aren’t set-up with a redundancy in case one doesn’t go off. I need all of you to find the secondary
bombs and disarm them, get them away from populated areas however you can without risk. We can’t let them go off.”

The second screen on his right lights up green, Echo Park it is. He hits the thrusters while hacking into any near-by feeds, looking for a hulking suspicious carrying a package, somewhere, anywhere.

“Red,” and Kon’s voice is a little shaky because bomb, a bomb that kills metas and humans alike.

“Stay calm, the devices are rudimentary. Not difficult.” Again, guy that lies to Batman. A tap of his wrist computer and coordinates are sent to the Titan comms. “In the meantime, you have your locations and what I know of the bomb’s working—get to the site, clear out as many civilians as you can, see if any of the responsible parties are in the area. This could be a massive trap, so we’re not making assumption, and sticking with the plan. Keep me updated. Do not, and I repeat do not try disarming the devices without giving me a heads-up. Everyone clear?”

He gets a chorus of answers and then the comm goes quiet while he works and the team speeds to their respective places.

“Red,” and it’s Cassie, “You’ve got to wait, okay? Wait for someone to have your back, too—”

“Can’t. It’s already set, going off in twenty five minutes after the central device is activated if the decoded motherboard is right.” He breathes in a little as the plane breaks Mach 1 and his systems calculate. “He’s still in love with you, you know.” And why the hell that tumbled out of his mouth is a mystery, but, fuck it. “You two make sense. Always did.”

And there, Cassie is speechless, choking a little. But there, the frequency hits, and the main bomb comes online. From the trace, it has to be in the underground tunnels, somewhere close to 5th and Main, the epicenter of basement speakeasies during Prohibition. Perfect place to set up a death knell.

**

On watch duty, Superman is lounging back in his seat with a copy of Norton’s Anthology of America Poetry (the same textbook a certain young superhero had to have for a certain class he claims to hate but does relatively well in) and reacquainting himself with Walt Whitman’s Song of Myself that may come next on Kon’s syllabus.

“I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.”

And he’s smiling a little to himself with the memory of first reading the poet and wondering how the human experience could be so in tune with nature without the enhanced senses, without the extended knowing—

When the control panel in front of his sounds and shakes him out of the text.
If it was the normal JLA alarms, the whole place would light up, but the mid-sized holo-screen projects in front of Supes with the reason behind it; the Titans emergency wave went off less than twenty minutes ago, not the secondary, most-used wave of ‘get together to fight some evil’ he’s accustomed to seeing Kon answer when some disaster calls them in, but this one is the highest level alert and attached with a message flashing across his screen instead of a Titan’s communicator: *Bypass the Tower, emergency protocol, Bravo Oscar Mike Bravo Sierra 005, instructions on the private channel.*

Brows furrowed, Superman drops the book, opens up a line with his best friend.

“Batman here.”

“I need you to hack into the Titans private channel,” and he feels terrible even saying it but, well, sometimes help had to push a little. Batman himself (and more recently Red Robin) taught him that. “I think they may have a situation.”

“Do you think this is wise?” The immediate response.

“I could try calling Red Robin, but he may not be…happy with me. The emergency signal always hits the Watchtower, but they don’t use it very much…”

“He could be very not happy when I hack his channel either, Kal.”

“I’ll take the fall for it.”

“ Wouldn’t ask you to.”

The Kryptonian’s blue eyes narrow, “what aren’t you telling me?”

“Red was on comms with Robin earlier. He seemed flustered before he disconnected.”

Ah, of course. *Bats.* “You’ve already hacked his wave.”

“In the process.”

Superman hums a little.

“I wouldn’t normally do this,” B says conversationally (and from his voice, he means it), “but very little shakes Red Robin these days. Naturally, I’m concerned.” Then Superman can hear someone else talking on another channel, one he can pick up coming out of the Batmobile’s speakers.

“N has already retrieved the *special* utility belts from the vaults, Father, he is on his way” and, ah, Robin.

“Good. Tell him to meet me on the roof of Wayne Tower. We’re going.”

“And I—“

“Have school tomorrow. No saving the world on a school night. We’ve talked about this.”

“This is not fair, Father. I can agree we must keep up a certain *pretense*, however—“

“Not up for discussion, Robin. You need normalcy and structure. Nightwing had to go to school, Red Hood had to go to school, and whenever I had anything to say about it, Red Robin went to school.”
“—and should the situation be dire?”

“I’m calling you in.”

“Very well. This is unsatisfactory, but I will acquiesce this time since the Justice League will be accompanying you.”

“Thank-you for your vote of confidence.”

Listening to this banter, Superman has a hand over his mouth while sending out a call to the JLA, hoping most of them were somewhat on world.

“Superman, I’ve hacked the wave. We’re muted.”

The first thing they hear is Kid Flash’s wavery tone: “It’s a Meta Killer?”

Then Red’s smooth, and somewhat concerned answer: “Yes, more like an everyone, anything killer. So, we’ve got chemical warfare. I’m on my way to the epicenter, according to the readings, one should be the primary conduit. This isn’t to say the others aren’t set-up with a redundancy in case one doesn’t go off. I need all of you to find the secondary bombs and disarm them, get them away from populated areas however you can without risk. We can’t let them go off.”

Superman sounds as worried as Kid Flash, “Red…”

Superman’s eyes go wide with the implications.

Batman and Robin are silent while they cut the feed.

Superman hits a few keystrokes on the control panel and crosses his arms tightly over his chest.

“Red Robin.” The cockpit of the plane is flawless at keeping the outside noise down, but Superman can still pick out the details.

“Red. Superman here. The Watchtower picked up an emergency wave from Titan’s Tower—”

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*Shit. What part of ‘we’re on a time crunch’ is difficult to understand since, you know, major alarm going off from the Tower, right? All this time, Red figured the JLA kept busy during their down time, polishing the statues in the Hall of Justice, making banana bread since Manhunter is nuts about the stuff, starting that whole knitting circle thing so Cyborg can finally stop dropping stitches, anything other than actually monitoring the emergency wave (since, well, last time he used it was during the Insurgent Crisis, and the JLA showed up at the ass end of everything). So, stellar. Looks like the little talk they were going to have with him and the team has pretty much already been decided. Whatever. He’d deal with the fallout when a fuck-ton of people aren’t going to die.*

Red Robin sighs, “Thought you weren’t going to start going all Big Brother until after the meeting, Supes.” He’s staring at the countdown, biting the inside of his cheek while working furiously on a frequency blocker and the plane soars.

“The Watchtower has always tuned in to the emergency frequency, Red. You’re the one that initially set it up if memory serves.”

“Not with the notion it would actually be used.” And yeah, the guy’s voice is tight—he already knew the situation or at least some of it.
“Who’s deflecting now?”

He chuff a little at that, attaching several circuits when the wobble in Bart and Kon’s voices pass through his thoughts and a whole lot of this could be handy, I could use this brand of superhero in the plan. The odds are looking up regardless of opening the Titans to the JLA’s influence (control). Red weighs the options and outcomes in a breath of time he really doesn’t have (he already has the contingency in case one of the team can’t get to the detonation devices, in case he can’t get to the main one, but, always better to have more hands on deck, right? Even he can’t plan on Kon’s speed and accuracy to throw shit into space if the final countdown gives them no time for disarming the devices) and makes the definitive call based more on the lives that hang in the balance, the apprehension in his people, the nature of the immediate danger, and the statistical improvement of success with the JLA riding alongside the Titans.

“Well, Supes, you obviously already know what’s going on, but I’ll humor you since I apparently have plenty of time.” And yup, the little intake of breath over the line just emphasizes the alien got the message. “Explosive devices are set at multiple sites around the US. Parties responsible unknown. The Titans are scattering to each location. If the JLA wants to play back-up, I’m sure I could find a place for them; however, we have contingencies ready.” He keeps his voice neutral as an eye goes to the screen of Echo Park, watching the three or four civilians in trench coats keeping in proximity of the underground manhole cover. Really? Trench coats in LA? Why not wear a neon sign instead?

“I’m patching you into the JLA comms to get point, Red.”

He hums a little since gee, everyone already waiting? You guys must be awfully prepared.

“Lantern here.”

“Wonder Woman checking in.”

“Aquaman present.”

“Cyborg and the big MM.”

“Batman on-line.”

“Flash, but we’ve got to hurry this up, okay? Gotta catch up to KF. Something’s up, he just took off, and it doesn’t look promising.” And Wally sounds garbled inside the Speed Force, probably going as close to top speed as possible.

"League, the Titans have some heavy danger. Red Robin's on with us now."

*Fuck*ing wires, Red finally gets the damn thing connected. “Listen up people,” Red puts the back on the disruptor and runs a fast test while LA looms closer as does the countdown. “I’ll say it once: we’re dealing with weapons of mass destruction. The number of civilian casualties are unknown, immediate damage estimated at around a fifty to seventy miles radius. The combination of chemicals in each device seem to be a play on Luthor tech, as in breaking down the building block of DNA, all DNA, meta and human alike. The proceeding fallout will have later consequences for any survivors. Currently, the Titans are en route to each site to disarm the devices in less than—“ he glances up —“twenty three minutes and counting. All of them could use JLA at their backs for this.”

“You have us,” Wonder Woman asserts immediately.

“What’s the plan, Red? Tell us what we’re doing and where we’re going.” Lantern sounds like he’s already moving too. Nice. Good to have superheroes on speed dial sometimes.
He needs less than a second to place everyone, “Lantern and Flash are on Alpha with KF; Wonder Woman and Cyborg need to get moving on Beta with Wonder Girl and Raven, Aquaman and Manhunter take Delta with Beast Boy and Bunker, Superman and the Batman get Gamma with Superboy. We have a limited window here, people. The blasts are coordinated with the primary; it goes off, they all do regardless.”

“Who’s on the primary?” And the noise is Superman already taking off from the Watchtower. Lucky guy gets out of watch duty early, heh, everyone else would have to suck it because massive people killing explosions, right?

“Me. I’m closest and have already diffused one charge. I need all of you on crowd control and support in the biggest areas with the most possible casualties. LA is going to be the easiest to take down; the pairs are going to be crucial in case the secondary devices switch to manual detonation. All of you need to be on point in case that happens. Questions?”

“Red, you need someone with you,” and the Batman’s tone is…a little off. As Red makes a final check of his belt, gives the countdown a courtesy glance, he grins a little to himself since, well, the Batman doesn’t do concerned (why the hell does it feel nice that he hears it, in front of the JLA, no less?).

“No time, Batman. We’re on a tight schedule here. I’ve got LA. I need everyone else to get the devices that might explode with the push of a button. You, Flash, Cyborg, and Aquaman are my bomb techs if things go south. Lantern, Wonder Woman, Manhunter, and Supes can get the devices in space if things really go south.”

“…Red,” and there’s the tone, the one when B almost calls him by his name.

“The main device is countdown only, no manual override.”

“Stay on comms, Red, keep us updated,” since, well, B knows. He already knows how Red calculates all the possibilities.

“Of course, everyone else too. Stay in radio contact, provide updates.”

“Coordinating with Titans now,” Cyborg whistles over the line and Diana’s laugh echoes.


**

The Dark Knight mutes his comm, N’s already muted on the JLA frequency. Side-by-side, the former and first generation of the Dynamic Duo are already on the ledge of Wayne Tower, both with arms crossed over their chests and the wind blowing B’s cape while ruffling N’s hair.

“So,” N just looks out over the city, “wide-spread bombs capable of killing millions?”

“Yup.”

“Crazy unknown organization behind all this?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Walking into what could possibly be our last hurrah?”

“Most likely.”
“Heh,” N grins below his domino as he and B exchange a knowing glance even through the whiteout lenses. “Bring it on.”

The moment they’re waiting for hits as the blue and red blur scoops both up without a hitch, both braced against Superman’s shoulders so their necks aren’t broken as his incredible speed. The comms, however, are to make sure they can hear him over the sound of wow, I blinked and we passed Texas, like—all of it.

“Red Robin is going to kill me in my sleep, I hope you know that,” Superman says without preamble. “I am honestly scared of that guy, Bruce.”

“A little fear won’t hurt you,” B placates as best he can, already receiving data to his wrist computer from Red’s transmission to the Watchtower.

“And he’ll want to make sure you’re awake if he does decide to,” N grins because, well, Bats.

Supes just sighs, “what happened to the kid that worshipped me as his hero?”

N grins against the intense wind, but B is the one that answers while he inhales the data.

“He still has shield pajamas, Kal. Several pairs.” And oh yeah, they all know he mean the S shield because, well, fanboy, no former in it.

N’s expression would probably be a mixture of betrayal and hurt if the elements weren’t pulling his features in tight, “B, I’m hurt you’d give Superman that kind of ego boost. I totally do not have jammies like that anymore.”

“Alfred still occasionally does your laundry, Dick.”

“That’s Jason, B.”

"Keep telling yourself that."

Maintaining them in the air at fantastic speeds without killing the humans, Kal-El just chuff, the sound almost lost in the wind if he wasn't wearing the comm unit. "Okay, tension broken. Dick, I'm still flattered, you know, and I still think you are probably the better hero. Never wavered in that, but what's the real plan, B?"

"You and I are taking the New York device. Kon is going to get N to Red's location in LA." The Bat is, of course, able to use his own gauntlet device with the force of Bat will alone.

"What? He's by himself with a death bomb?" N would be grinding his teeth together if he could. "Dammit. I am having a talk with him about these plans and how a contingency where he calls the Bats for back-up sometimes would be just fucking epic—"

"Sound plan after millions of people don't die," B interjects. "We'll make sure to bring snacks so he's more open to suggestions." B opens the comm link, "status?" They can see the city, closing in on Superboy's apparent fight.

Kid Flash bursts out with, "Uh, Red? I think we have an added complication!"

When they see the teenager, the picture gets clear as Superboy is held at each limb by what must be the “parties responsible” for the devices. It seems there may be more than just diffusing a bomb. N taps Supe’s hand and is suddenly flying, throwing out a line and swinging down into the fray immediately, boots taking two of the figures holding Superboy in one attack. N breathes hard
because this is going to be a doozy, isn't it? If these guys can hold down a meta, then it’s going to be such fun, and Timmy is alone, and just shit. What needs to happen is the usual kick ass take names, only with a whole lot more make it good since time is counting down faster.

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He sets the auto pilot to land elsewhere and hits the emergency release in perfect time. The air pressure is immense, and he loses whatever is said over comms as his ears pop and the wind screams against his exposed skin, raking through the uniform’s armor. He flattens his body on the descent, get as much speed as possible, only flaring the wings at the last possible second. Everything becomes background noise, a separate part of his brain processing the information. His arms are shaky on descent, but it's good because he can see the park, hears everyone start checking in, almost on point.

So far, so good.

The second he's on the ground, the trench coats swarm, trying to keep him from getting underground. He doesn't need more than a few seconds to realize it's go time. He's not dealing with your run-of-the-mill crazy faction like the Church, but rather there is something familiar and definitely off about these guys. Just watching the first one move, lightly skimming the ground with incredible speed tells him what he needs to know; Red has less than a second to think that even with the Titans and the JLA...it might not be enough if this is what they're up against (has to be).

Breathe asshole as the first blow is dodged on principle while his mind works at the plan, the air whooshing by his face, the heat from that fist skimming over his cheek. Red watches, moves, remembers Kon's weaknesses with speed and force, remembers Shiva's lessons on using momentum, closes his eyes like Snake to track the aura by feel rather than sight as the bo comes into play. He can't move as fast, hit as hard, but he can trip them up, he can take them down easily if they think he's just a random human guy.

"Uh, Red? I think we have an added complication!" KF doesn't sound good, Manhunter reports them too. Meta on each site, metas that are either willing to die for the cause or are ape-shit crazy. Perfect.

Moving, Red has the mission in the forefront of his temporal lobe with the next layer of plan working, those blood splatters on the map in his peripheral at all times. "We apparently have guards on the hot button, people, make sure they don't near the devices if you can help it."

A scream of pain, a knees to the face with a chop to the right spot, and Meta Death Dealer Number 1 is down (what the hell is that on his neck?).

The second is on him before the first even falls, his speed incredible, and this is starting to look familiar and creepy at the same time, like Luthor's attempt at re-creating the JLA...

He catches the arm on the first attempt to take him out at a run, rolling with it, the connected leg nailing him in the side (fuck, ribs) while the super baddies’ force throws him for miles. Things start clicking since these guys obviously suck at having super powers.

Clones, bio-engineered, multiverse, or Door Number 4...?

The next one is a different fight, a new opponent when the burn of electricity snaps near his leg, barely catching the side of his knee as he moves to avoid it, but nothing can stop him. He has to reach the device and time is counting down faster.
Wonder Girl hates being strangled (or when one of their many foes attempts it). She takes a page right out of Diana's book and brings her knee up with brute strength and anger. The male with both hands wrapped around her throat chokes in the abrupt agony, making her temporarily satisfied, grip slackening enough for her to head butt him right in the nose, blood flying. A final punch puts him down and she can move on to the next.

Her backhand could normally break a man's neck and just seems to make the next powered being stepping up more pissed off than before. She grins, feral and bloody since she’s already well aware they have more of a reason to win.

The comm in her ear echoes with Kid's, "Uh, Red? I think we've got an added complication!"

Wonder Woman is in her own fight, trading blows between two oncoming enemies, moving like the monarch she is, with swift and powerful vengeance. Her gauntlets glint dully in the lamp light since blood covers sparse spaces from the other two that underestimated the Amazon to their own detriment.

Cyborg, however, is blasting his way through a meta that seems to appear and vanish as he tries valiantly to get through the opposition to get to the device. A thrill of fear licks up her spine because they had to get him to it; they had to get him close enough to disarm the device. Wonder Girl growls maliciously, grabs her opponent by the next and side, rears him up above her head and cries out when she slams him down into the pavement hard enough to crack the substance around him. The meta spits out blood, gasping in a breath.

Raven is herding innocent people out of the way, protecting when the fight gets too close. It's chaos around them and the time is counting down faster.

Kid's arm is wrenched almost out of the socket; he throws his head back to scream, feet still moving, changing abrupt direction to swing around and nail this motherfucking dickface with both feet and a hell of a lot of force. He wants to crack the guy's skull on pavement after throwing himself in front of a lady with a small child to keep him from going for the innocent bystanders. That's the only reason he was able to get a hold of Kid's arm like this, using crazy strength to try making him stop.

"Run!" He yells at them, using both arms under the other meta's to pull hard at both shoulders, trying to dislocate them just like Red showed him that one time when he kept saying speed isn't your only weapon, KF, you've got more options in a fight than that. Lantern behind him is taking on two at a time while Wally is running circles around another meta that's also a damn speedster! It's just, a whole lot of what the hell are we up against?!

The arms under his give with a sick jerk and a sound he's going to be hearing in his dreams for a while. Shaky, Kid drops him, looking around the whole lot of bad, "Uh, Red? I think we have an added complication!"

The speedster has tripped up Wally, sending the Flash skittering at high speeds while the meta deflects and gets Kid right in the gut, sending them both reeling with the sheer magnitude. Fuck, he thinks as the pain explodes and screaming becomes dim with cottony quality, time is counting down faster.
The fountain at Bolin's Memorial Park explodes because, well, *Aquaman*, right? BB and Bunker play off one another, rebounding to keep the evil dudes on their toes since this is totally not how he was expecting to spend a Monday night when Cartoon Network is seriously having an epic anime run and Raven (for once) was all about watching it with him as long as he went to Wegeman's for that special kind of hummus she *loves* and just- shit. Night ruined.

Dude. This. Blows.

Whatevs. Superheroing isn't easy.

BB takes a whole second to spit a mouthful of blood and glare menacingly at the obvi meta guy that really needs to take a shower and chillax for a few since he's in a real hurry to get his ass kicked. Like, nobody should even take a shot at *this face*; it's his moneymaker, and he gets righteously pissed when someone just has to get a few lucky ones in while he's changing between terrifying carnivores.

He vaguely catches a few colorful phrases from Bunk as they guy gets tossed a little and a spray of water gets deflect at him. MM is just looking this side of pissed, which is totally hard to tell sometimes, you know? Because green and no pupils and stuff (*green bros 4 lyf, dude*). Just, c'mon, let it out. Tell me how you really feel when you've got to break some face. No judgment here. We're all about the support, 'kay?

And his teeth sink into the meat and bone of a shoulder, powerful jaw snapping with the threat of ripping the nasty dude apart if he even *thought* about trying to aim freaky eye beams at his Titan bro *one more fucking time, dude I will seriously hurt you, get the wave.*

MM is yelling at the King, "go! We will hold them back!" just as he gets a good pot shot to the back.

Well, time to get serious apparently.

Tossing his neck, BB throws the guy in his jaw, throws his head back, and lets the roar *fly*. Need a little TLC over here, huge green monster with wicked teeth, so going to be a good fight, come get it!

And it's game on when the two surrounding his highness just start coming at him. Tail thumping, he hears KF's shaky voice over the comm, "Uh, Red? I think we have an added complication!"

If he could use his terrifying vocal chords to chat a little, he would probably say something to the effect of *'naw, bro, these guy are just posers'* but he's a little busy trying to dodge and fight back against, you know, like super-fast, super nasty powerful guys and give Aquaman an opening to get to the bomb because, seriously, they need to get with it. Time is counting down faster.

**

"Supe and Blue, Wonder Woman, Raven, and Wonder Girl, Lantern and KF, Manhunter, Bunker, and BB are on the meta hostiles, hold them off so Batman, Cyborg, Aquaman, and Flash can get the bombs deactivated." He back bends, effortless, catching the arm mid-motion, snapping the joint in a blink.

His instructions hit all the Titans and JLA; the groups moving to comply.

His bo moving at a rapid pace, he keeps talking, keeping the target in sight, "I'm against a speedster that has a hitch in every 176th step, a supe with a weakness in the right shoulder and left hip, one with heat vision that fluctuates in the left eye, a chameleon that flickers after one minutes, twelve seconds, and a shapeshifter that can't maintain form integrity, last one with electro-magnetic control that can be turned against him."
Said electric-wielding maniac wraps the whip doesn't even get it when Red lets the whip wrap around his bicep where the suit is more reinforced, doesn't get what's going on as he's airborne, swinging around him to bring the whip over the guy's neck to choke him with his own power.

The screaming and sizzling is bad (he's smelled worse, like that one time Firefly totally toasted the Miss Gotham pageant and just, wigs and huge dresses going up; fuck that ranked) but the blackened, smoking disc on his neck makes Red pause for an important ah-ha moment.

"They're being controlled," he moves to the last one, palming the mirror from his belt. "Look for a circular disc on the neck." The last one falls when his own heat vision takes him out of the game and Red is moving to the bomb at a limping run.

"Come again?!" The sound of Cyborg's plasma gun firing echoes with the other sounds of fighting.

"Use a low grade shock, a lead pipe, a super-fast run by, a good smack, something to take out the mind control devices, and they're down." He kneels by the manhole cover, ignores the pain in his knees and side, and shoves the thing over so he can dive in. He tracks the frequency, forcing his body forward, forcing himself to run full speed because he can't let this happen, he can't let the damn thing go off...

“Batman at Gamma, beginning unarm sequence now.”

Thank fuck.

Less than ten meters down and he sees it, back in the old tunnel, slightly hidden by a rail. Red drops to his knees by the device, taking the chord out of his wrist computer to plug into the detonator, moving fast. The two chemicals are still sloshing from the movement but have yet to combine. Seven minutes.

"Clock is ticking, people. Red on point with the main device." First, disable the network connections, use the frequency jammer in case the big bad try to detonate early. One hand takes the top canister of chemicals off the device, sets it aside while the other is on the manual override.

“Aquaman on Delta. Red, talk me through this.”

“Easy, your highness, pop the front case,” Red’s heart stutters, beats hard when the countdown panel goes dark with a final morose beep.

“Done.”

“Three wires in a main bank connected by a round disc.”

“Red, blue, and yellow?”

“On point. Pull the disc completely off the unit.”

“Cyborg taking out Beta now! The device is dark, man.”

“Good day, Cyborg. Aquaman, once you pull the disc out, pull the board it’s connected to down without disengaging the wires.”

“Done.”

“Look for two copper posts.”

“Ah, yes! Found them.”
“Separate them without ripping them off the device.”

He can hear Cassie yelling, her Amazon, *I’m going to fuck your shit up* battle cry.

“All right, next?”

“Do you see where the red wire is connected to the posts? Unwind it without jostling the other two.”

“Ah, the clock has gone dark?”

“You did it, epic, now both of you remove the two vats of chemicals, make sure they don’t mix, like at all.”

“Done, Red Robin. We have averted the crisis here.”

“Awesome, I own you a fruit basket when this is all over.” He’s pulling the flesh colored patches out of his utility belt, scanning them to get an idea how the hell they work and trying to find anything that could tell him who manufactured them. “How are we moving on Alpha? KF, status?

“Flash here, Kid is out of the game for a minute, Lantern has his back, but we’re having issues.”

*Shit,* “Supes, we need an assist. Status on hostiles at Gamma?”

“Batman has it in hand, on my way.”

“All right, Red,” and Wally doesn’t sound like shit is fine, “font panel, disc, copper posts, red wire?”

“You’ve got it.”

“Okay, holy—nope…shit! yup…ah, crap—!”

“Flash?!”

“Electric dude is a total buzz kill! I’ve got the chemicals out though, what could happen if—?”

“The device still has explosives in it as the catalyst, Flash.” *Fuck, three minutes,* “Supes, put on the speed, man.”

Red is forcing the knee to move, to hold him even with the fucking burn mark left. He shakes a little while the comm line is still full of fighting, yelling, the mash of pain, grinding his teeth because his team is elsewhere and he can’t do shit—

“Okay, okay, okay, okay,” Flash talking fast to himself, “red wire gone! It’s dark, right? Not going to just blow the hell up anyway, right?”

*Holy shit, man, you’re timing, really.* “The unit is dark, we’re good. Everyone, epic job, get the metas contained.”

“Gamma secure. Superboy is moving to back you up, Red.” Batman sounds completely calm.

“Superman hitting Alpha now,” and the sound of a meaty thock just makes him feel better about the JLA in on this, really.

“We’re kicking ass and taking names here at Delta,” BB’s voice is smooth, a little hoarse on the edge since his throat could only take so much growling.
“Beta is secure,” Cassie sounds distasteful, “these meta are very familiar, Red.”

“Agreed, someone’s been playing around with the meta genes again,” he picks up both canisters, ready to head to the surface and wait on Kon since, shit, the sleep dep is riding him like—and Red goes perfectly still because the ground lurches, rolls abruptly. He feels the shockwave under his feet less than a few seconds before the ground starts crumbling around him. Underground explosives, an apparent contingency plan, destroy Echo Park with a vengeance. And…there’s nowhere to run, no way to get above ground fast enough.

“Fuck,” he says vaguely, “I always wanted to die in Gotham,” as fire and debris explode around him.

**

The massive explosion rocks the comm line, making every hero in their respective locations stop.


Static hits the line.

Chapter End Notes

B and N’s part, picture Pacha and Kuzko from “The Emperor’s New Groove” doing that back and forth thing: “Sharp rocks at the bottom?” “Most likely.” “Bring it on.” That’s where it came from. So, please, let that guide you there. Oh and I will mention this again: action and action sleuthing, not my forte and yes it makes me a sad panda, but I’m still going to try, darn it.
The Meta Killer Part 2 of 3

Chapter Summary

It's so nice when the superhero community joins together for a common goal.

Chapter Notes

So…my outline and concept for the User’s Guide got rejected (bummer, I worked really hard on that shit) and no one said anything about Red’s little cross-dressing thing, and I really thought that might go over. Lol, he used to be so pretty. The whole chapter is a little…wonky? Kind of? There’s a lot of players. So. Many. Players. So. Much. Stuff. Happening (Arkaedia).

Hope it all flows okay, but seriously I almost needed an abacus to keep track. Oh, and again, Arkaedia (MUSE, what the hell would I do without you?!), Anon, Titans R Us, and all of you that comment and give observations, thanks for the help on this crazy ride ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Superboy and N are the first on scene, taking in the destruction with wide eyes because, really, who the hell could survive this? The answer is a desperate plea in N’s mind before Superboy’s: Red.

Echo Park looks like a war zone from the fight between Red and the mystery metas as well as the following explosion that were thankfully not of the DNA-destruction, kill everyone everywhere, holy shit this is bad kind. N can see the traces and evidence of the underground bombs from where he and Superboy are floating above the mess. And his chest aches with pain because Red (Tim) shouldn’t have been on his own with this, no matter how well he planned everything for any kind of contingency—none of the Titans should be on their own against something like DNA death bombs. And just, fuck, he failed his brother again, didn’t he?

While Superboy sinks unconsciously, eyes wide and watery while he’s probably thinking along the same lines, N’s lenses project the image to the Batman still at the bomb site to coordinate prison pick-up, and the other three waiting in the Cave for an update.

Robin, with his usual failure to cope with any reaction not pissed off, has been tapping his foot since Red’s voice (“Fuck, I wanted to die in Gotham.” Jesus, Baby Bird, break my fucking heart why don’t cha?) came over the comm line followed by explosions and radio transmission just cuts out. Jason takes a few important moments to practice that well-known Bat stillness (because he and the brat are the ones that know about death, about why it can’t have Baby Bird, not yet, that guy is too much of a fighter, too much starch in his spine), eyes for the scene in LA from N’s view while he takes in everything he can.

The whole damn area is caved in from the underground bombs, broken down with concrete and debris. His heart sinks even as he tells himself this is Red for fuck’s sake. He’d find a damn niche somewhere, anywhere. That kid could figure it out, he had to (even though Kid's words take him
back to that convo and someone’s penchant for getting messed up just enough not to die—well, everyone’s luck runs out eventually, doesn’t it?

Now that the initial oh shit, he’s going to die has worn off, the Red Hood starts up with the usual rigmarole in the detective tab B inserted in his brain back when he was just a little punk (not that much has changed on that front).

He opens the local comm line to start with the first resource, "O. Cave here."

The distorted voice comes back. "Hood. Nice to hear you. Boss already called with his usual no time for pleasantries, find me some footage kind of thing."

"Searching for feeds in LA?"

"As we speak. Looking for everything I can from the last hour or so."

"Good. Keep us updated. How’s the line-up for Gotham?"

"Won't need the Bats. I've got the Birds on standby since you're going to be busy with some in-house clean-up."

"You know it, babe. Thanks for looking out."

"Of course. N already told me about the whole Plan thing with Red. I'm on board, Hood. All the way." And of course she knew, it’s O for fuck’s sake, but her honed belief is obvious in the fact she mentions that shit—like all of you are stupid as hell for thinking the worst.

"Good to know," and now that the wheels are in motion, he starts at the computer, hacking his way back in the Tower's control system. He needs the deets from the sensors in Red's suit, hoping they could trace him or look at the last readings, find out where or why or how. Unlike O, he needs something other than dead.

Dami is next to him, watching the streaming feed as well as Hood's progress.

N, meanwhile, switches from grieving brother to Bat mode.

"Blue, X-ray vision there, that's the last place I've got a signal for him." And N forces himself to breathe, to think, to reason, to try and put himself in Tim’s place, to calculate like him so they could find what niche his younger brother found to hide in before the blast (because that had to have happened. Had. To. Be. N wouldn’t consider anything else, not with Tim).

He jumps out of Superboy's hold, landing on a piece of messed up concrete and keeps his balance effortlessly. His lenses pick up some kind of residue and the debris, not broken up by the damage, something, someone here after the explosion. He carefully jumps, pulling out an evidence bag and swabs from his suit while Superboy gets with the vision.

"N." Batman’s voice is hard over the line, "pickup complete here. On my way in the jet."

And, well, the JLA has the best toys don’t they (of course, the Bats just let them think that, right?).

"Acknowledged, Batman. Blue is searching the wreckage, I've found some leftover substance, post blast-"

"Shit!" Superboy yells just as he dives down through layers of what used to be park, making N turn fast, tucking the sample in his uni.
The Bat leaps, automatically balances his footing like breathing, without effort, and tracks the lines of whatever it is making a line from around the park to down the hole where Superboy vanished and back up, out toward the sea… (he’s alive, he has to be alive).

N gets a terrible ‘oh shit’ feeling, and the gut twisting bad shit went down here gets worse when Superboy flies back up to the surface…holding onto Red’s harness and utility belt. No bruised and battered body, just the main components of his suit. The feeling in N intensifies at the sight of the battered harness (that most definitely went through the explosion but remains mostly intact).

Those blue eyes are wide with fear, "no body, no canisters, just pieces of what could have been the original device," the meta answers hoarsely before N even asks. "Even if he was crushed or blown-up or something, I’d be able to see him in the debris, but—" and the kid’s forearms are starting to shake minutely because dammit this is how Red must have felt when he and KF….

N doesn’t even hesitate, just takes hold of Superboy ’s wrists, "keep calm, Blue. We're keeping a cool head here, okay? No body isn’t necessarily a bad thing, right?"

"That fucking asshole," the meta just whispers back with his spine ramrod straight. “There were at least three other devices below ground, and I mean he had to have known, right?"

The look in those eyes (and N can just see it, the kid facing down a suicidal Tim, talking him down, and he’d have the same desperation N’s looking at right now).

“He had thirty minutes notice to place five devices,” N placates, “and if those others were on a different network? A different signal? There’s no way to know.” And, dammit, he really wants to believe it.

Both heroes start when the Red Robin icon in the harness gives an abrupt, jarring buzz, flashing yellow on and off for three beats, pause, three more beats.

Superboy blinks his watery eyes, recognizing the pattern, and taps the comm in his ear fast, "Team. I need someone not in the middle of clean-up. We've got Red's gear, need to get it open."

"On my way," KF sounds like he's been in a meat grinder, voice rough and slightly slurried.

"Kid," N warns since the guy sounds like shit and just, oh yeah, had been down and out of the fight for a minute. “I can probably get—“ the thing open without killing myself, okay?

"On. My. Way." Now his message is distorted because of speed.

N opens his mouth again, but Superboy’s look cuts him off. “You don’t want to try it. This thing can drop me and I don’t want to think of what it might do to you if you hit the wrong catch. Two of us can open it, so I need someone else. What have you found?"

N’s chest lifts in a sigh, “something my lenses detected,” and his finger sweeps around the perimeter. “Some kind of residue we can analyze with the big computer once I get the sample back; so, we’re gathering evidence to prove Red is alive. Now, we need to keep looking for more data.” A hand on the distraught meta’s shoulder, a very Batman move, and those eyes are already darker with fear and grief that N has to make a distinct pause, “we’re gathering evidence, Blue. Okay?"

In the Cave, Hood finds the sensors reading extreme speed before cutting off; he also notes Red is riding some serious motherfucking sleep dep that apparently didn’t trigger any of the Titan’s protocols (and dammit, you little asshole, if you aren’t dead I might just give you a fucking hand with that shit). He comes to the same conclusion as N with the evidence looking more promising than a dead Red Robin.
Dami’s eyes narrow on the readings, “Drake said something about one of the metas, a hitch in every so many steps.”

And well, maybe the detective lessons are panning out for the kid. Good to know, have to give Red a shit ton of kudos after they find him and then promptly chew his ass out enough to count into next year.

“Looks pretty right on, brat. This kind of speed isn’t ‘cause of a bomb going off.” Since, he’s the guy that would know and all. Hood points at the previous readings, “matches up with the meta he beat up right there.” And Hood taps a few keys strokes, “B? We’ve hacked the sensors in Red’s suit. First, dunno how the hell he had enough of his shit together to plan anything other than sheep behind his eyelids because almost 90 hours is seriously bad. Like, hallucination and crazy-as-shit bad, so win for Red not blowing the rest of us up just on principle. On a positive note, it also looks like he might’ve had some help getting out of the wreckage. Took some damage probably, and the sensors are fried, but last readings are moving away from LA. South East. Not much to go on before the damn things shorted out.” Or were fried on purpose.

The second Hood comes out with that, N closes his eyes behind his mask and sighs. Superboy looks up a little in hope. KF doesn’t even pause in mid-stride, just pushes himself harder. Superman, moving at fantastic speed, pulls a more determined face (he’s not letting these kids down again oh hell no). Wonder Girl pauses in mid lift, one side of her mouth twitching up and no, Raven don’t quirk that eye brow.

In the JLA’s jet, the Batman is coordinating with the rest of the League rounding up the faux-metas, screen showing multiple shots in all locations and that find of Hood’s gives the Bat a reason to let his shoulders and chest relax an inth. The secondary jet is being flown by Wonder Woman (well, her own jet that has the incredible ability to go invisible should the situation call for it) to round up their prisoners.

“Good find, Hood.” The Batman’s wrist computer bleeps, “O has also found some footage right after the explosion, sending to the Cave computer now.” He brings the footage on the screen to his right because he has to see…

And his eyes behind the cowl watch that previous few seconds, slow down frame by frame of a barely perceptible blur streaking out of the hole made in the park just as the fire erupts from below and the feed goes static. The force probably helped propel the blur out of the main site before the full thing started crashing down, but he can’t tell if the blur has Red Robin or not (your son could still be buried alive down there; worst case scenario, dead). He’d need the Cave computer to do a positive match.

“Running analysis,” Hood just fills in his thoughts over the comm, making the Batman give a grim half smile.

KF, however, feels like his heart might beat out of his chest and running full speed from Houston to LA, which normally wouldn’t be a big deal, but every speeder has a limit, right? Didn’t Wally teach him that back when he pretty much vanished and Bart got the KF gear?

Yeah, he’s back now, but that shit was way too permanent for a while (some shit you can’t out run).

Doesn’t matter, asshole, his good knee, the injured one ironically, gives a twinge when he leaps over a moving car like it’s standing still, lungs expanding in the attempt to get a full breath. Get to Blue, get to the site, dig through the destruction to find Tim—alive or dead he’s not staying buried: priorities, man.
On his private line, a harsh voice almost makes him stutter, trip up. “Bart, take it easy.”

*Fucking what now?*

“Barry, no time for talk,” he bites out since, at one time, he’d called the guy *mentor, Big F, friend*…

“I get it. Bad situation. But you’ve got to slow down, Bart. **Now.**”

Dodge that tree because, damn that would have *hurt*.

“Last time I checked, you needed some *time*, dude. Not that I don’t appreciate you *hacking my shit* or anything, but now is not the time for a chat,” he bites out angrily, fists clenching by his side, eyes moving constantly at anything in his way.

“Kid, I’m not screwing with you,” and the force of another speedster brushes against his side like a butterfly wing, the blur slowing down enough that he can have a near heart attack at thinking it was one of those fake fucking metas back up on his feet to come after him.

Those eyes, though, through the pair of goggles and dark suit, are all Barry Allen, former Flash, current speedster and Dad, the guy that needs to get out of his *fucking business* and go back to whatevs he was doing before.

**Dude.** Not. The. *Fucking. Time.*” And he puts on another burst of speed, weaving away from the older man’s path because he seriously does not need this right now, not with Red possibly, maybe dead, and his harness that might have answers and just… *I needed you months ago, Barry. I needed you so much.*

*I don’t need you now. The team has my back, and I need to run.*

But Barry Allen has other ideas.

The veer right into Kid’s path has the planned effect: Kid leaps to try avoiding his previous mentor, Barry just follows him into the jump, snagging the younger speeder by the waist, slinging him over a shoulder and taking off again, his momentum as smooth and flawless as ever.

“What *the hell* are you doing?! Put me down!”

“Nope. Fucked your knee, Kid. And, you’re violating Rule #1, remember?*” Speed is one thing, suicide is another. If your body is saying *no*, you listen to it, Impulse, don’t force it or you’re done.

And he can only see the back of Barry’s head, thrown over that strong shoulder, Barry’s arm tight around his waist to keep him from falling at such crazy speeds, and damn, the guy is just as fast as KF remembers…

They hit the halfway mark while his comm is going crazy with updates, Wonder Woman and the rest of the two teams on the way to Houston for the last pick-up. The small mechanical devices on the fake metas look like Red was right, mind control, and there’s some fucked up scars on the people that pretty much say *human experiment, bro.*

“KF? How bad you hurt, man?”

Against the strain, he taps his own comm, “I’m good, Blue. Ah, bringing company, but we’re on the way.” And yeah, only the Titans and Jay Garrick knew about the prosthetic, right? Since, you know, Deathstroke is a douche.
“Watch out for the gnarly debris, seriously, don’t get tripped up here.”

“Pfft, as if. Have we even met?”

“This from the guy that face planted in front of Carol the first time you saw her.”

“Don’t remind me,” Kid bites out while Barry hits his stride. “I totally thought we agreed, I wouldn’t mention that thing you had with the previous Batgirl and you wouldn’t—“

“Want to run that by me again?” Batman bites out of freaking nowhere (creepy Bats, seriously, you need a little bell or something).

At the site, Kon laughs a little, but the sound is off enough that N pokes his head back up from the hole in the ground to check on him (c’mon B, you knew about the kid and Cass—World’s Greatest Detective—stop trolling the littles), eyes for the kid that looks close to falling in on himself. He has more samples of the residue for analysis and another glance down at the obvious message written in a splash of blood on concrete makes him simultaneously pissed and proud of Red Robin—only that guy (and B) would think enough a few seconds before he was going to die (don’t lose hope, it’s Tim) to write a message in his own blood.

A numeric code, six numbers. Possibilities, protocols, translations into alpha characters, translation into different languages flash through N’s mind before he climbed back up out of that hole to check on Superboy (fuck, is he using the Robin code still…?). He has pieces of the device, pictures and footage of the craters where the secondary ones were planted. He can triangulate Red’s location by all the leavings.

“Everyone is on the way,” N placates again, boosting himself up while the other meta lands again. “Hood tells me the sensors in his suit read movement away from here before they went offline.”

But still, both men have the niggling doubt, the possibility that something horrible happened, something no one would come back from if Red was buried further than they thought, if he had been thrown too far in the blast, if—

“Incoming.” Superman floats down, eyes for Superboy holding himself together by a thread with the harness and utility belt clutched to his chest. The elder man eyes both N and Superboy, “I’ve scanned the rest of the area for any civilians or in case Red Robin was—“ He visibly hesitates in front of his audience.

“Blasted to bits,” Hood supplies over the comm.

Superman quirks a half-smirk, “crude but accurate, Red Hood. Thanks.”

“Hey, I tell a mean dead Robin joke. Better than your travelling salesman ones any day, Supes. Seriously. Oh, and tell Blue to stop crying like a bitch. He’s pissing me off, thinking Red doesn’t have balls of steel to survive something like a few bombs. Geeze. He should know better, feel me?”

N bites his lip immediately at the upmost shock on his old hero’s face (because, oh my God, Jason, who tells Superman about balls of steel? B is probably feeling the migraine right about now…). The effect seems to have done something though since Superboy is likewise hiding his grin behind his free hand.

“Hood, thanks. We get it,” N tries for his deeper, adult voice to keep from laughing. “Have you run the analysis on the footage?”

“Working on it, ‘Wing. You get another sample?”
“Yup. Also a code. Red must have left it before he got, ah—“

“Snatched.”

“Possibly. The evidence is beginning to look that way.”

“Agreed,” B and Superboy say at the same time in a creepy kind of stereo.

“Come again?” From KF over comms, “seriously? Shit.”

Bunker swears hard and fast, “we gonna get that guy a leash, yeah? Something.”

Raven’s noise is enough to guess her current mood: pissed and irritated. Yeah, the majority are glad they are not in the vicinity.

“I know,” the meta placates his team members, “as soon as the prisoners are secure, we’re hitting everything we’ve got this time,” an eye dart to Supes (since, well, he hadn’t believe them the first time, had he? No big deal, apparently they have the Bats on their side this time along with experience, so not letting Red fall through the crack this time).

And like the guy is reading his mind or something, turns right to Superboy with sincerity pouring out of his whole body, “anything you need, anything I can do—“

“We’ll let you know,” Kon cuts in, closing his eyes and breathing.

“I’m already accessing the Tower’s systems,” BB comes over the comm, “Rave and I will start running traces too. Looks like—“

Superboy’s phone goes off.

From over Barry’s shoulder, so does KF’s.

Rave and BB pull out their work mobiles to check the message.

Taking off his top mask, Bunker pulls his out of his inner pocket.

Wonder Girl, helping secure these metas, also hears her cell sound with a notification.

In the Cave, Robin’s work cell goes off.

The message is the same, an auto-generated from the Tower’s main system. *File unlocked: Protocol Romeo Echo Alpha Delta Mike Echo located on 10.72.41.34.* The server name. A file server unlocked, and the Titans stutter because *Red’s Ghost Drive is unlocked.*

BB is the one that chokes on an audible breath as Wonder Girl’s knees just give out from under her and she ends up on the floor of the jet with wide eyes, staring at the message.

“Fuck,” Kon whispers, his voice faint while staring at the screen. “Fuck.”

Supes just steps up to him, gripping him by the arms that actually helps keep him standing.

Robin (with absolutely no idea what this may be pertaining to) clicks on the link to the server and a password is requested. His eyes narrow behind his mask as the Red Robin insignia flashes a moment before the password request.

Red Hood is still working several angles, N’s mask cam on screen to get Superboy’s face while he
stares at his cell phone with a terrible realization and Superman is bending over his head, talking in a low tone. Robin’s brows furrow, but he steps up, presses a button on the control panel to open up the comm line.

“Titans, I have received a message from the system at Titan’s Tower. This is directions to a server in need of a password. What is it that I have received?”

Without a domino, Hood looks down at the kid, and a whole lot of implications settle. “Holy shit, is that—?”

“Red’s hidden drive,” KF’s voice is distorted but still, they can hear the edge to his tone. “It’s supposed to unlock if he dies.”

BB hurries with a firm, “we don’t know how it’s tripped, don’t start panicking yet, people. If Blue has his gear, then it might be a timer for those sensors.” But he’s looking at Rave, both kneeling in the cockpit, over Wonder Girl’s head with grim worst case scenario eyes.

“Never happened before, has it?” KF interjects with a bite. “Robin, the drive is password protected?” Since, you know, he’s not in a good position to get his damn phone out.

“Yes,” from the Cave, Robin shoots a glare at the obviously not surprised Hood who is still trying to get a good look at the footage frames. He thinks a moment and taps in the six digit code from the destroyed site.

Error message.

Robin’s eyes narrow behind his mask. He hunches over for the next attempt.

Barry finally makes a leap over debris that used to be the Park, the older speedster giving KF a jolt when he lands and hops on somewhat sturdy pieces of left over concrete, fountains, and benches until he spots N, Superman, and Superboy.

“Motherf— dude, I asked how bad you were hurt, like maybe running was a bad idea or something,” the angry meta glares at KF’s ass since, well, can’t see the guy’s face. At least he can glare at something, right? (Oh, hi Barry, and just what the hell is your deal all of a sudden? The guy doesn’t even flinch at Blue’s pointed glare, but he would if the real heat was there, wouldn’t he?)

KF just smacks Barry at the back of the head, hissing, “all right, put me down.”

Unimpressed with the blow, Barry’s arching a brow over the goggles (and, yes, dammit, KF can tell, okay?). “Not gonna happen,” and he just turns around instead so the two teammates can look at one another.

Blue cocks his own brows up, eyes going to Barry’s back and then his BFF. Kid throws up both hands in an I have no idea what the hell is going on right now, man, help me kind of way.

Superboy just holds up his hands in that on your own motion. Barry chuffs a laugh but makes no move to put

“First things first,” N interjects himself right into that sitch. “Robin, what do we have on the drive? Blue and Kid are going to get this harness open and see what Red’s left us.”

“Still attempting access.” The voice is clipped, impatient. The whole stabbing thing might start soon.

“Do it on the plane,” B’s voice comes over the comms, “ETA five minutes. We’ll see to Kid’s
injuries onboard."

“Good timing,” Superman observes, turning a little so Barry can give him a bro fist. “I’ll coordinate clean-up here since the site is damaged. I can hear the authorities on their way.”

“Sound plan, Supes. Good to see you again.”

“It is. Surprised you’re stepping in, but the more the merrier.”

The former Flash grins, “ain’t it the way?”

“Well, this is just a great time for a pow-wow, everyone,” Hood draws from the Cave, “since we’ve all got fun bits to share. Seriously, I need popcorn. Demon Wonder? Popcorn, yeah?”

“Fuck,” Robin interjects with feeling, gritting his teeth at yet another error message.

“Language,” B snarls back, and Hood’s laughter decreases the whole vibe.

Sucking on his tongue, Robin considers Red’s style, the drive probably double or triple encoded to—

*Double encoding*. And there, for the first two months of wearing the tunic, before Father returned from time, Grayson did his damndest to program the default Bat language into him. What Grayson had laughingly called the *Robin code*, one Batman developed when he decided to take on a partner. All the Robins knew the code, even Brown and her tenure was the shortest.

Using the six digits, he enters the characters translated into the Robin code.

“Ah…it seems Red has left us the proverbial keys to the kingdom.” *Access granted.*

The roar of the overhead jet announces the arrival of the Batman, drowning out Robin’s epiphany as the files started listing, all named in a numeric code. The youngest Bat pauses at the very first file name, 5790 (Dami). He double clicks to open it:

Robin,

*Your permissions on this server give you access to all cases and updated data, be it Titan or Bat. More so, you will find profiles for Gotham bads and any forces the Titans have taken on since I’ve assumed leadership. As Nightwing once told me, Robin has to calculate and compensate for the strengths and weakness of his team, which is why you have received the initial message to find this part of my locked server. But it’s more than that. We have to be the backbone of the team and, at times, the conscience—all of which I know you can do. Even though we might not have always agreed or understood one another, we’ve come far enough that I trust you to step up and keep The Titans fighting for the right reasons. You’ve had to deal with your own inner demons to keep moving on the path B stared us all on. You’ve had your struggles with your past and the ingrained teachings, but you’ve conquered all that to come out of it as Robin.*

*I know you can teach them balance and control over their powers; how to balance their other lives with this one. I trust you to keep them moving forward, just like Robin should. For whatever reason I cannot lead, I know you won’t let that reason keep them down.*

*Even if you aren’t that Robin by the time you read this, you are still a leader that can give the Titans the direction and support they need. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. I’m so proud of how far you’ve come. And I trust you, D, I trust you to take care of my friends. Don’t stop moving forward.*
Robin blinks, reads it again, and a gauntleted hand comes up to cover his domino, the pad of thumb and middle finger rubbing his forehead above his eyebrows. His chest hitches slightly under the tunic. And this, the recognition he had wanted from the beginning, is again demonstrated. Red trusted (trusts, present tense) him to step into the role of leader and take care of those most precious.

Off comms, Hood looks down at the kid, says, “Little D?” with a whole lot of something ain’t right.

Robin breathes since he will have time later to fully inhale this implication, this message, as he has a job to do and goes back to his phone with a wave of one hand at the older Bat, searching for most currently dates files while Hood watches him out of the corner of his eye, still working at the big computer and listening to the others bumbling the hell around to get a half-way decent surface for the jet to touchdown close enough to get all those fuckers into it.

Courtesy glances at the first three files from earlier in the evening (while Red was walking him through the case in Gotham—of course he was multitasking) are the tracing logs from the black market listing, the packages, the parties involved. Red made sure his steps are able to be back-tracked in case something happened to him—telling and disturbing in one thought, another contingency of the just in case variety.

While N’s mask cam shows the heroes boarding the JLA jet, Hood gives Robin another obvious/not obvious side eye.

Without a hitch, the younger Bat nudges him to the side, opening a new window to begin entering data he pulls from Red’s servers. With an exaggerated eye roll, the two work in tandem on their separate pieces of the puzzle, also watching with as N feeds his samples into the JLA system and checks on Barry plopping KF’s ass down in a seat and pulling the leg up to get a look see.

Blue fumbles around for a second to find the First Aid kit before sitting next to him and holding Red’s harness in his lap so KF can get the blood on his uni checked out first (since he’s so fast, seeing blood is never a good thing, just means they’ve got something worse than the usual bad to deal with and, yeah, he tangled with one of those speedsters). While the Batman sets the autopilot for the JLA headquarters, Barry works at removing the obvious shrapnel out of Kid’s good knee with some “how did this happen?” and “what caught you?” then some “this is gonna hurt.”

“Status?” BB takes up Red’s usual.

“KF has a fucked knee,” Blue says right off the bat, ignoring the twitching, angry glare.

Wonder Girl is back on her game after a deep breath and pipes up, “we have the engineered metas secured; they are, however, still unconscious. I am taking blood samples to run and testing the mind controlling technology. We may glean something of substance.”

“On board with that,” Kid grits out while N takes the tweezers from Barry and lifts Kid’s calf up on his knee. “We find out where the tech came from, we might find Red.”

“Possible,” Bunker’s smooth tone eases over the line, “but I’m still going to run some analysis on this little cocktail of doom, yeah?”

“Watch yourself, but do it,” BB interjects. “Rave’s with me, we’re waiting for our little dudes to wake up so maybe a little Q&A on our end.”

“If they were under mind control, they may have nothing,” the Batman advises darkly, watching N, “Robin?”
“Red has left data concerning the chemical composition and shipment of the devices,” Robin’s voice echoes even through the comms. “We are beginning to re-trace his steps now.”

“And, you know,” Hood’s tone is deceptively easy-going, “since we’ve all got the same idea brewing here, maybe we should help the Titan kiddos out with protocols for that little asshole. ‘Cause, I’m sure he probably knew there would be more dickbags at his lo-cal than the other sites, feel me?” He watches Red move around the metas again, waiting for the next bit of footage to get done decoding.

Kid flinches as the N digs the last piece of metal out of his knee and the fixing-shit portion of the program starts. “Ah, all that’s not necessary. Fast metabolism, right?”

All of the other heroes on board look at him with a glare (he can even feel N’s and the Bat’s through their white out lenses. Scary. Shit. Right. There.) while N just slathers some kind of healing goop on the wounds and starts with the wrapping.

“All right you two, next piece of the puzzle,” B motions to the harness and the two Titans exchange a glance because that sounded familiar.

Kid takes off his glove; he and Blue press their palms right on the insignia and wait for it.

**

Crazy is just really an incredible thing: adaptable, inherent, or learned. In his time as a vigilante, he's learned a great deal about the various shades of insanity: ape-shit, let's fuck everything up because why not, fun times will be had by all; pseudo-maniacal insanity, let's fuck everything up because the houseplant told me to; intellectual crazy which is let's fuck everything up because everyone is suffering in this life and they need to die or with everyone suffering, I should rule them all to stop this cruel fate; and, of course, megalomaniacal crazy with I'm obviously the smartest (not) person in the room, I should be the ass hat in charge.

Whatever. The point is, apparently, he's hit the jackpot. Like, the motherlode (panel on the wall by the door, fingerprint and retinal scans) of crazy. The bad part, however, like most versions of crazy, is there’s usually someone else that has to suffer, has to pay the price for someone else’s piece of brain damaged ridiculous. Worse, however, is there’s always followers (usually a total drag, at least the Joker’s goon have killer stage make-up).

Red wiggles his fingers inside the metal cuffs in an attempt to get feeling back, far beyond the tingly stage since his weight is completely held by his manacled arms (new guards every five hours, three shifts during that time). Only in his under suit and domino (surprising but nice that bad guys don't have the burning curiosity to know who he is right off the bat, maybe a big reveal later on when the eventual evil guy monologue starts up— Red takes a moment of comfort in N and Hood’s rating system better luck next crime), he's already pondered what happened to the guys that tripped his security defenses on the outer armor. He didn't smell anything burning or saw blood on anyone but himself when he came to but the implication is still there; the electroshock is still one of the more bad ass reasons he keeps the armor as is (Alfred is just way too nice with the voltage. Red, well, not so much since he hangs out with metas). Still, the thought someone must have gotten a nasty surprise makes him feel warm all over (three cameras, his armor has to be in one of the storage lockers; no one removed his gloves or gauntlets, suckers).

Three guard groups have gone past the massive window in the sterile room he's been hanging around in, transporting other prisoners in medical gowns (lab, some kind of hidden lab, human experimentation, that’s why the metas were under mind control). No external windows from his line of sight into a long hallway, which is good because no one can see him try to ease the pressure on his
abdomen because *fuck* something down there hurts and, you know, massive explosions, falling concrete, debris, metal shrapnel, all of that just spells *fuckowshitdamn*. And this from the guy that lost his spleen, so probably something important got damaged (again). Plenty of time to worry about the sluggishly bleeding injuries later when he’s not being detained by creepy shadow cult experimenting on people. At least he’s behind a wall of laser bars, so you know, in case he gets down from the wall mounted manacles, he’s just going to chill out in the prison cell, drink a Zesti, do a cross word (in pen, you dicks), maybe take up macramé. Who knew?

However, the most jarring…is when two guards walked past carrying children in hospital gowns (and oh *fuck*, longer than a few moments when he's back on that ship, being tortured, burned, beaten while trying to figure out how to save all those kids onboard, being shipped for sale like cattle the first time the White Triad wanted Tim Drake, not Red Robin…).

A little blonde girl and a dark haired boy, approximately seven and ten both looked utterly terrified of the military-like guards with guns apparently ushering them around for what probably surmounts to a barrage of terrifying tests and horribly experiments (*fuck, what are they doing to those kids?*). Upon that first sighting, Red immediately changed plans in his head from the layers of blackout, hack their systems for deets on the numbers, bring down with some kick ass, and call the Titans for a pick-up. Instead, shit is now *real*. He's got to hack for back-up, get the location, get other authorities here to see how many kids are being held, experimented on, abused. This isn't going to be like last time (even now his brain keeps stuttering back to all those small hands clenching fist fulls of his cape, gripping his harness, taking his hands and forearms, trying to believe he'd really taken those evil men down and they were all *finally safe*). Nope. He's getting them out ASAP, he’s getting them out with him.

He just needs the numbness in his fingers to wear off enough…

**

The doors to his holding cell slides open, finally giving him a face to whatever bat-shit crazy organization he’s stumbled on this time.

"Ah, the Red Robin. Welcome to Praesidium."

*Army building much? I’d love to stay for a little visit, asshole.* And because, well, he is who he is: "I'm terribly disappointed you don't have an accent," he draws. "Didn't they teach you how to be an effective leader of bad guys? Pretty sure that means you need at least one wicked scar and some kind of evil bad guy accent to pull off the image. Maybe a hairless cat."

The guy in the lab coat just grins at him (tall, 6’1’ or so, lean, no obvious distinguishing marks), "the reports about you claimed you have a most intuitive mind, a master strategist. I’ve read nothing about a sense of morbid humor however. I'll note that."

"I also enjoy long walks on the beach, canasta, and fighting rogue bad guys. You know, just to round off my week. Seriously, you should check out my Wednesdays, so much crime fighting penciled in."

The evil guy smirks wider, "well, it is nice that you actually met some of our *expectations* and requirements, Red Robin. Honestly, I had begun to think the accounts of your *competences* were much exaggerated since the recommendation of your distinct skill set in dealing with our product put your name in the program roster. However, you took down my metas and deactivated the devices with very little difficulty, so I suppose it's a positive thing you were available."

Shit. Trap. Red just grins, sharp and feral.
"Of course, you fell right into the black market technology postings as I predicted. Perhaps you aren’t as talented as I’ve been informed."

Not a question. Well, we’ll see how your predictions pan out in forty-eight hours or so—like it really take me that long to get out of here, but, just in case I find something interesting. “Maybe I just like getting a feel for people that do terrible things. You know, keeps me on the up and up in the fighting random bad guys career goal. I totally have a five year plan.” He grins because, well, here’s the challenge in the planning phase. What is crazy bad guy #1 going to do next? Tune in and find out.

The head of the organization smiles a little. “So you let us catch you? Then I would have expected you to be more adequately armed with more trackers, and your own metas on site with you. Taking on the detonation device alone was either the move of a good leader or an indication of your narcissistic tendencies.”

“And that is a very not smart thing to have in a holding cell, Red watches idly as the wall screen comes alive under the baddie’s prodding, typing a furious pace. Several photos flash over the screen, files, data, and just what he would realistically need to hack their shit (wonder which they would hate more, Honey Boo Boo, terrible MTV reality shows, or the Real House Wives, maybe they need to catch up with Ru Paul’s Drag Race). Hm, the system is Windows OS, just, really? Haven’t bad guys ever heard of Linux? Red just sighs a little sadly.

“Good, we have a product ready for testing.” And those eyes, a blue that remind him of Dick’s (only, not crazy, right?) and B’s and the portrait of Jason that hangs on the Manor’s wall, turn to him with renewed interest.

“Uh-hu, a product. So I’m already going to tell you I like squeeze cheese Brand X the most. Totally biased.”

“Amusing,” and that white, WASP smile, as another set of directions is coded, and Red already sees where this is going. “Fortunately for you, we need you in moderate condition for the trials. This one will be just a preliminary, make sure you really are as talented as you seem. Perhaps after, we’ll see if you can keep up the humor.”

“Seriously, I’m like George Carlin. Funny all the time, but usually with a special message so you can learn something too.”

The wall he’s attached to moves, slowly turns a 180, putting him into a larger room (one that looks just like a training facility at the old Tower back where he was still the other Robin). He takes it all in, inhaling the dimensions, the probably reinforced window at the left with several lab coated baddies holding clipboards and observing, the floor tiles covering crucial network cables, lights above them but the ceiling tiles sealed, no vent traps, no computer pads. And…the twentyish young man facing him with empty eyes, standing completely, creepily still (and yeah, that coming from a Bat).

“I’m going to have such fun breaking you, you know.” The voice comes over the speakers above, “the strong ones are always the most challenging.”

Red stares going still, assessing.

“Ladies and Gentlemen: we have a new subject for the test trials. To give a more accurate picture as
to the quality of our product, we will employ the use of a live target.”

Red’s biceps automatically flex, sore and abused, his beaten body preparing to fight. The manacles open, dropping him to his feet, and a single unit in the floor moves, rises. A metal bo attached to a board. Huh, someone did his homework (not well enough because, you know, his hands are free). Red doesn’t even hesitate to walk up and take the thing, testing the balance, swirling it over his wrists while watching the shock-still pseudo-meta, wondering how many experiments they had in this God-forsaken place, how many innocent people…

And the plan takes more of a concrete shape as he taps the stupid disc on his neck with the bo maneuvering around his shoulders, but they probably didn’t think he realized it there anyway (really, people, get with it). Just a tap with the bo in the right place to get two of the wires separate and will probably deliver a slight shock when the disc activates. The thing pokes him, yup, wires good.

The voice comes over the loud speaker again, “07001-Alpha.”

The pseudo-meta’s head comes up sharply.

“Beginning trial 6.1, combat.”

“Attack.”

No change in the empty expression, just a blink, and the guy…vanishes.

Red hums a little, still twirling his bo, shifting his weight from one foot to the other (the pain in his abdomen fades, keeping his awareness on high alert) and closes his eyes, head bowed just a little (if he’d never learned from King Snake, had to take him out of the game…)

The meta is just a stealth model, not a speed or strength. It’s ridiculously easy to place him. Red doesn’t want to give in too soon, not when there’s things he can work with here. Like—

He snaps the bo, throwing the meta against the far wall, away from the viewing area (but cameras), already moving to the opposition, hoping to crack a tile just enough…

Red lets the hand close around his bicep and rolls with the throw, keeping his grip on the weapon. His gauntlet hitches in mid-air, the small, flat blade for lock picking in hand as he catches himself, uses the other to jar the tile just enough to—

Momentum makes him fall forward in front of the loose tile. The hand braces just behind him so the disc from his gauntlet can be dropped down in with the network cables (oh yeah, it’s going to be good when he activates that shit) while the other flourishes the bo, and Red makes himself look back and forth like he’s trying to place the meta (nope, even your footsteps give you away, man, seriously, you are not good at this).

He’s up, leaping over the meta, back flipping with fluid grace (*Dick could do better*) until he gets to the opposite wall, bounding off with both feet (one of the panels is hollow, score) to come back to the fight.

He lets the meta throw a punch, forcing himself to stay still for it so he can be knocked back again, drop the bo, hand splayed on the wall behind him, making himself pause again for the head swivel. He slides over the panel and just almost—

The meta’s hand smashes right where he needs it to, his left hand dropping so the second small device from his gauntlet can drop in his fingertips and be shoved in while the attention is one the back kick he delivers to what should be thin air.
Red swings around, locking his legs around the meta and takes them both to the ground. Invisible guy or not, nerve strikes are super effective. He stands gingerly, crossing his arms over his chest when the guy stops moving. It only takes about twenty seconds of unconsciousness for the guy to reappear.

The voice from the ceiling, same dick bag from before, “impressive, Red Robin.”

“I’m pretty sure I mentioned I have busy Wednesdays, right?”

The tiny shock on his neck gives the signal and Red allows his arms to fall loose, the bo to drop, and he just forces his body to go lax. The large blast doors open with three lab coats and four soldiers with very powerful looking guns, the groups bee lining right toward the meta unconscious on the floor. Someone comes in with a gurney and the guy is loaded up while the bad guys are talking about defects and more testing on the genes needed while wheeling the man out of the room.

It takes everything Red has not to start fighting back right then and there because he has no idea what kind of tests or experiments that guy is going back to. But, he needs just a little bit more data about the organization, the other subjects here, where they are, how many modes of transport are available. Once he has that, then shit is going to get real. For now, when evil baddie comes back into the room, he sees where this is going to go.

**

In Titan’s Tower, Batman’s gaze is narrowed on the glass vial between his index finger and thumb. Something crucial enough for Red Robin to leave in his harness for them.

Hood and Robin have done what they can from the Cave and have left Oracle in charge of running the result and Gotham from there while they (of course bow to Alfred’s insistence on packed dinners, ‘cause really, no one’s gonna piss him off. They all like their appendages) get in the Batwing to meet with the rest of the congregation of heroes.

In the meantime, Kid Flash has been hustled to the medical floor by Barry Allen, dressed in a mock Dark Flash costume without the lightning bolt, still made of the durable material, but lacking any insignia. The little talk they seemed to have made an impact, even with the decidedly upset look on the teenager’s face when they went into the elevator and left the Bats and Titans to do some leg work and coordination.

“I have a terrible feeling about this,” N starts still see the unbearably worried expressions on Kid and Superboy’s faces when they access the ghost drives, apparently checking to see if this was the finale reveal. N and B didn’t even let them have their little bro moment because, seriously, share the deets.

(“It’s not what we expected,” KF admits grudgingly under the Batman’s calm yet demanding stance.

“Explain.”

Superboy gives the whiteout lenses his full attention, “We just know he’s really not coming back if a specific file on that server opens up.” He waves at the computer screen where Robin’s access is apparent. “It’s not here.”

B and N exchange a glance, then back to the Titans while the jet gets closer to the Tower and Barry shoves bottles of water at the two, watching Kid’s arm move with obvious pain.

“He might be compromised or in a spot that looks like he might not make it, then he hits something
Yeah. He needs to have a real sit down with Timmy about make a fucking contingency where you call me, like make that a note for any and every plan from now on.

The Bat turns just enough to give N the usual go on without having to spell it out.

“Hypothetical. We finish the analysis, and that is a building block to the Meta Killer formula. Red figured out something before the devices were set. He cracked something in Luthor’s formula that spells oh shit, B. Like, it’s already pretty much oh shit, but he found something even more dangerous in the elements.”

B hums a little, “possible. Next theory?”

N gestures one hand to the working computer, “he created some kind of neutralizer for a crucial building block to the formula. Just like he did with the fear toxins.”

A corner of B’s mouth quirks up. “Also my theory.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course. Tim always has a contingency. It’s in his nature, his comfort zone. He wouldn’t have let the rest of his team go unless he already had something engineered to break down the chemical composition. He probably planned each of his people to be able to reach him before the detonation to combine the neutralizer, which is why he kept it in the harness.”

“Figured he would have to do something to do on his way to L.A., you know. Like, a good book wouldn’t be enough, right?”

The two Bats share a fond look while the computer system in Titan’s Tower works to give them what they already pretty much figured out and would be able to use once they have confirmation of Red’s abduction and location. So far, even with the Cave’s resources, they aren’t coming up with anything substantial.

Well, Red’s not the only one with plans.

**

“The results are accurate. Unbelievable but accurate.”

Sure, it’s easy to sound like a smooth dick bag when you’re not the one being tortured. The volts of electricity hit him again, a searing pain in his chest and brain, his body arching helplessly against the onslaught. (But, seriously, he’s been tortured, like really tortured. End game stuff. This is unbelievably… lame. Welp, long as they don’t know that.)

“You are one hundred percent—“

The voltage increases slightly. It’s not quite enough to get that itch on the back of his shoulder but whatev.

“—human. Extraordinary.” The baddie, Doctor Gregory Poehler from his log-in on the big screen. “My theory has always been the Batman and his compatriots have been in some way enhanced. This is quite a discovery, you know.” (Yeah, and what’s your secret power, other than, you know, failing out of evil bad guy school?).
The Doc hits the third button from the left and Red’s body sags, his chest heaving for breath, throat sore from yelling (since that’s what guy like these really expect so they buy the whole act…even though he is slightly feeling like ass right at the moment, something in his rib cage grinding and the damn knee).

“He’s—“ Red tries to get his breath, “the fucking night, man. Read. The. Papers.” He blinks behind the domino, trying to get his vision to clear since, you know, electrodes and shit on his temples.

The good doctor just laughs a little to himself while looking over the scans of Red Robin’s biological make-up again like he just can’t believe a regular guy can be kick ass.

“Perhaps I should subscribe to the Gotham Gazette then, do more research on the Dark Knight, Red Robin. However,” and the thick blast door slides open. Red Robin’s heart gives a sick thump in his chest because she, the same little girl he’s caught sight of before, looks utterly terrified.

"Caroline," the douche bag stands, places a hand on her small shoulder to steer her forward and away from the solidor holding a very big gun. "You are right on time, my dear. As he is very strong, you are just what we need to subdue him, yes? We need him to be useable, Caroline. Do you understand?"

Her eyes are so wide Red can see the whites, her pupils blown on whatever drug they’re using. She whimpers once, looking up at the doctor and her eyes turn to Red.

*You bastard. You FUCKING bastard, she’s just a kid!*

“P-Please,” she whispers in a tiny voice, lower lip trembling, and Red’s biceps strain with the initial ‘I’m going to rip you apart’ instinct, but he forces himself to breathe, to calm, to think:

*It’s all right, sweetheart. It’s okay. I’m not going to let them do this any longer. You just do what you have to so they don’t hurt you, okay? Do what you have to, I can take it.*

Her eyes dart to him, watery, when the hand on her shoulder tightens enough that she winces under the hold.

“Now Caroline,” the doctor’s voice is unruffled as ever. “We have talked about this. You know what you have to do.”

Red’s eyes behind the lenses are aimed right at her, *it’s okay. I promise. It’s okay.* And the plan evolves, gets bigger, more important. In the tightening of his muscles, the clench of his jaw, Red Robin sees a whole different group of children, and his convictions are no less concrete, no less crucial. Because shit is going to get real. Oh yes, oh yes.

She breaks a little, her small shoulders hitching with quiet sobs, breaking him in degrees.

*I know you’re scared, Caroline, but I’m not going to let them keep you. I swear it. They aren’t going to do this anymore. Just blink twice if you can hear me.*

Those brown eyes do it; she blinks twice at him. Good. That what she is. Okay, he can work with this.

*I’m Red, Caroline. I’m Red Robin, and Batman and Superman are my friends, you can see that from my memories and thoughts, can’t you?*

The soft, quivery voice skirts on the edges of his consciousness, *L-Leo’s favorite hero is Superman.*
He keeps himself from smiling at her, *He’s a good guy. I promise I will introduce Leo to him as soon as I get you out of here, okay? I’ll call him and Batman and Superboy and all my friends to come meet you as soon as we get out of here and these bad guys go to jail*. In his mind, his grin is that sharp one, and he makes certain she knows the plans are changing to include them, *all of them*.

*You really are a superhero, aren’t you?* She whispers sweetly in his brain, trying so hard to believe.

*Yes. Yes, I am. It’s my job to save innocent people and make bad people go to jail for their crimes. I’m going to do just that with these guys because they shouldn’t be doing this to you. They can’t do this to you and the others anymore, okay? I’m going to stop them, but I need your help, Caroline. Do you think you can do that?*

And he opens up that section of the plan, lets her see how things are going to fall. He doesn’t want her to doubt him, to fear. He wants this little girl to understand that someone, damn it, is going to make sure these guys pay for what they’ve done.

Under the hold on her shoulder, the child takes a shuddery breath, her small fists clench. *Okay. I can do it.*

*I know you can. You’re so brave, so strong. I can see it in you.* And Red forces his body to go slack in the manacles, forces himself to be “useable.” *It’s okay because you’re going to help me get them all out. We’re going to save everyone, aren’t we?*

While the doc’s attention is on Red, his eyes roll up behind the whiteouts to catch the look of determination on her features and damn if she doesn’t look like Cassie.

*Yes, she agrees with him, yes we are, Red.*

**

Kon has both hands shoved in his hair, sitting cross legged a few feet away from Robin. He can’t focus, there’s too many voices, and he’s trying so hard to hone in…the abrupt agony in his head makes him grit his teeth in frustration and self-loathing and—

"Do not."

Robin is folded in some king of complicated lotus bullshit with his eyes closed, lenses on his mask down. He’s the picture of calm and collected, just like a Bat.

"I can’t—fuck, I can’t, man." *It’s been over eighteen hours.*

"Do not be stupid." But the usual sneer, the usual heat, isn’t in his tone. “Of course you can. It is simply a matter of finding your catalyst."

“*Supes, you need to get Supes—*"

“He does not know Red as you do. He would need to comb through millions of people. It would take more time than necessary.” Robin answers calmly, not unfolding himself.

And, well, even with massive computers and three Bats running traces on all Red’s previous data, this is still the fastest way to find him since they still have no results. Seriously, no pressure or anything. You’re BFF is totally in trouble, maybe dead or dying, but just try to reach your inner zen, okay? Mother. Fucker. This. Sucks. So. Hard.

“I don’t get it,” the miserable meta breathes. “This only happens when shit really starts hitting the
fan, okay?” He has a moment of blind panic because the first time he had to find Red, the guy had just vanished from the Tower after his first abduction, fucked beyond reason and going back out to that ship because there were little kids on board and no way was he going to let them go, but Robin didn’t need to know all that. Nope. It was fear and immediate need that drove him to find Red that time, just like—

“Like, seriously, Robin, I only found KF and BB the time The Light had them because Red made me—“ and oh, Oh!

Robin just hums a little, nothing else need be said as Kon leaps to his feet, tracing the memory.

“I can’t, man. Fuck! I just…It won’t work!”

“Don’t be stupid, Blue.” And all kind of calm, cool, and collected. “Channel your inner zen, hold on to me and fly us up there,” that gloved hand pointed up. Grabbing his BFF around the waist, Kon did as he was told, taking them high up into the atmosphere.

When Red refused to give them his location, vanishing from the Tower like two days after he escaped his first abduction; Kon wasn’t going to just let him go alone, no matter what shit he was spewing. He flew up above the Tower and…

Robin is already standing, arms crossed over his chest, and Kon grabs the kid around his waist, floating off the ground to head out the window and into the daylight. He takes Robin as high as he dares, not wanting the guy to suffocate or anything.

“Now,” Robin’s arm comes around his shoulders, the gauntlet digging into the back of his shoulders, just like Red’s usually did. “Focus. Remember what Drake, what Kal-El, and what Batman have all taught you.”

Kon’s eyes slide closed while the air rushes around them, the elements against his skin remind him he’s alive, and the meta throws his head back to remember the feel of Red’s heartbeat in the back of his mind, to remember how his voice sounded in an echoing timbre…

“Remember how Bart’s heart sounds, how it feels in your mind when you have a lock on him.” Red coaches while they float in the atmosphere. “Remember what he sounds like when you hone in on him half-way around the world. Let your senses guide you to him. Don’t force it. Just let it happen.”

“Do not force it,” Robin instructs, “do not fight it. Allow your own senses to guide you, Kon-El. Be who you are.”

And his chest lurches, the pressure of need and fear and the what-ifs fall away as his sight becomes unimportant and his inner senses reach out across the land on all sides.

“It’s a strange feeling at first,” Kal’s voice rumbles beside him while they both float lazily over the Atlantic, “and you’ll want to draw back because it feels like not just your senses, but all of you is spreading out. It’s okay, it’s not going to tear you apart. You just need to go with it.”

“Don’t hold back because you’re afraid,” the Batman’s tone is the usual deep and dark, surrounded by the screeching bats in his Cave while they sit facing each other, “fear won’t help you. You need to believe you can do it. You need to believe that nothing is going to hold you back from that goal.”

Kon breathes deeply.

Still septic, over a hundred kids and thirty adults. The blood and burns on his back, his hands, forearms, knees, all fucked and he’s going back there alone…Dammit, Tim, you’re my best friend,
let me have your back—

**Thump thump.**

He chokes, spreading himself out more. **Thump thump.**

“There, now you’ve got them, don’t you? You found KF and BB.” “Yeah, yeah, Red, I’ve got ‘em. They’re—!”

_The startled pigeons squawked like fuckers when he yelled, finding the sounds of Red’s harness opening and the pahh of smoke pellets._

“You’ve found him,” Robin’s voice jars him right out of that meaty beat on the back of his tongue that means Red is alive. He didn’t die in L.A. Even with all the evidence they had so far, that asshole’s heart is still beating. “You have found Red Robin.”

“Yeah,” Kon’s voice is hoarse, overcome, “yeah.”

Robin already taps his comm, “team, Superboy has a lock on Red Robin. He and I will begin reconnaissance. We will need everyone to coordinate in order to meet once we have his location.”

Of course, _Bats_, “Robin. We’re warming up plane now.” And there’s a whole lot of _don’t even think about it, boy_, right there in Batman’s tone.

Robin sighs in annoyance, “Batman, time is of the essence.”

“We’ll be able to coordinate more effectively in the long run.” The Bat counters. “Wait for us, understand?”

Gritting his teeth while Kon sinks back down the landing pad on the Tower, Robin snaps out, “acknowledged.”

“Superman here, the JLA is also gathering at the Hall. Get us coordinates when you can. Titans, status?”

And while Red’s gone, BB’s voice takes up next in their ear, “Titans are at the Tower, Supes, and ready to roll.”

“Hope there’s plenty of room in the Bat Mini-Van,” KF breaks in, “’cause we are so on that ride.”

“Feel you, KF,” Red Hood answers and the low hum comes through the comm line. “It’s going to be ride to the rescue time. Amirite?”

“Whoo, we’ve got the Titans. So stellar, man,” N sing songs in the background, “we can play Yahtzee while we’re flying. I’m so good at that game.”

“Dude, we’ve got Uno already, ‘kay?”

“That game sucks, KF,” Hood interjects, “it’s like the never-ending Shoots and Ladders of lame.”

“Don’t say that to Rave,” BB advises, “she loves Uno.”

“Uno it is,” Hood amends, “and, like, just so she knows, I really need my soul, right? I already died once and that shit was—“

“That’s enough people,” because, well, the Batman, “Titans, meet us on the roof in ten. JLA, prep
for takeoff. Once we have coordinates and recon, we may need a *distraction*. One hell of a distraction."

Lantern laughs, “Oh, like that one time we *all* dressed like Batman and had the Power Posse convinced they were in an alternate dimension? Seriously, I could be tall, dark, and scary again. It looks good on me.”

“Anything other than your normal face looks good, Hal,” Wally jumps in, his voice distorted from wherever in the hell he might be. “Seriously, use the ring for *good* and give yourself a makeover. You totally deserve it.”

“That is so hurtful, Wal. Like the guy in the red onsie has a lot of room to *talk* or anything—“

Batman’s sigh is audible and does *nothing*.

“Jealousy is a terrible color on you, Hal, you know *green* and all.”

“So offended. Especially from the guy that could be a *fire hydrant*—“

“What?! Oh no you *didn’t*—“

“Am I going to need to separate you two?” Diana asks absently, sounding like she’s doing something super important, but still, the threat is all there.

“No,” Wally and Hal say in tandem with the same sullen tone.

“Recon and rescue time, you two. Let’s leave play time for after we know the situation.” Supes tries to placate because, yes, Diana is scary, and no one needs her coming through on that threat. Ever.

“Aw, that was just getting good,” Cyborg bitches good naturedly.

“Fine, Hal, DDR challenge at the Hall after everything, right?”

“No. Way. Like I’m going to go up against a speedster in Dance Dance Revolution?” Hal sounds genuinely offended, *like he’d agree to that shit or something*.

“Okay, fine. Laser Tag, man. Best three out of five.”

“Now we’re talking. Seven out of ten.”

“You’re on!”

“Heh. Let’s get on with the rescuing, people.”

“I have no idea how you two manage to fight criminals on your own,” Batman deadpans as his people stock up their utility belts and each one gets a vial of the second batch made from Red’s initial compound. Of course, it’s exactly N and B’s theory: a neutralizer for the Metal Killer. B has vials and canisters for the Titans and JLA in case the plan has to encompass more than he initially strategizes.

On the roof, Robin and Superboy are already waiting (impatiently) by the rumbling jet as B, N, and Hood cross the landing pad.

Darkness swirls and Raven appears, her arm around BB. Bunker and Wonder Girl fly up from the side of the building.
“JLA, we’re preparing for take-off.”

Superboy cracks his neck, “I can fly—“

“We have Red’s compound, we’ll brief you inside the jet.” Batman interrupts, “besides, flying might shake your concentration. You’ve got him, we are going to need to know the surroundings before we hit his location.”

“Ah, o-okay,” Blue and Robin follow the others up in the jet while B waits.

Barry and KF finally hit the roof, the younger speedster still looking a little too tight and uncomfortable, he’s limping slightly and the arm is giving him problems, the Batman shrewdly sees, but nothing short of knocking Kid Flash out is going to keep him out of this nor is Batman going to keep him from fighting, not when it’s one of his own teammates (it’s fine, Barry could watch his back for this one, and do what he needed to do once Red is secured).

With only a nod to the younger man, Batman follows the two up the walkway.

**

“I want you on site in less than one hour,” the voice is rich, deep. “This new form of genetic mutation will have an adverse effect on our business practices. See that the threat is handled.”

“There has been an occurrence, one of which may alter the plan,” replied with the deepest respect.

“Which is?”

“We have been able to access their security feeds, Sire. This is what we’ve discovered.”

The screen in front of him lights up and the moves are memorable.

“I see.” Ra’s sits back in his chair, ingesting this discovery. Others may do the majority of the work for them. “Prudence will handle this development. Should any of his...allies...make it, clear their way. Regardless, I want our competition eliminated. Am I making myself understood?”

“As you wish, Demon Head, so it shall be.”

**

Once the doc is gone and his internal clock is reading night, Red gives a small smirk where the camera can’t see his expression (and, really, the background noise supposed to keep him awake is just lame as hell. Seriously? He made sleep dep his bitch and that’s supposed to be some kind of torture method? Where’s the bamboo shoots and shit? Just, terrible bad guys, Red knew some kick ass ninjas that could school them).

And:

They’re gone, Caroline whispers in his mind. She gives him the deets: four young metas, Caroline the telepath, Leo the shapeshifter, Karmen the chameleon, and Charlie the technopath (which, what? That. Makes. His. Year. They could totally bond over tech, really kid, let me and Cyborg mentor the hell out of you).

They want to meet you.

Red keeps himself still, looking limp and pathetic, in pain because he’s beaten up pretty good (these guys didn’t know how to throw a decent punch, C- for effort and enthusiasm). They will. I’ve got a
distraction ready, so I need you to tell them not to be afraid and not to panic. It’s all in the plan, okay?

Her voice tickles the back of his mind, I think Karmen wants to help. She said she can make herself look invisible better than the others. The confusion is there in her thoughts. She’s so young, she doesn’t really get how the adults have been altered.

I appreciate it, but tell her I don’t want her getting hurt by accident, okay? She needs to stick with the plan.

Red presses his forearm harder against the manacles, maneuvering himself so he can just—

Shit, nope—

A little to the—

Ah, wait—

Yup. Thaaat’s the ticket.

It’s time. I want you to get everyone in their beds. Remember, don’t be scared, I’m here, okay?

Okay, Red. We’re ready.

A fun little blip blip blip and BOOM.

His body sways slightly with the force of the explosion in the room to his back, lights going dark immediately and emergency back-up coming up to softly illuminate... and empty holding cell.

In the control room, “Cameras are down. We’ve lost power!”

Chapter End Notes

The last two weeks at my job and RL have just been one long WTF moment after another. Apparently, I cannot write crap to make anyone satisfied, which has only recently become the case, so I’m a little shaky I guess. Seriously, I don’t even know at this point. But, ah, the comments on the last chapter and Tom Kat, just, I was crying. Not lying. It’s just, my best hasn’t been good enough, so yeah. That’s why. But, anyway, Dick, just Dick Grayson. He takes everything so hard, just like B. Seriously, the guy can be spacey and super busy and funny, but he’s also a person that takes what he perceives as his failings to heart. Red chooses to do what he does and Dick is all like “I suck and failed him” when he really didn’t have any part in this. Self-sacrificing Bats, sigh. On another note, so much of this ran away with me (Jason, really dude), just thing after thing after thing (Barry kind of showed up, I don’t know why) and B is totally a troll. Oh, and Tim is a bad ass, but like I told Anon one time, something has to move here. Maybe this is it, right? And Tom, Tom, thank-you. You said what I needed to hear to press that POST button. Just, yeah. Thank-you, man.
Chapter Summary

Sometimes, you might need a hug.... or a kick to the face.

Chapter Notes

Arkaedia get ALL THE KUDOS. And the rest of you! I mean, I am floored and humbled at the support and encouragement of everyone. Just, yeah. Okay, seriously, fuck, this was a hard one :O Ah, I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Seriously.

Red’s fist takes out an asshat with extreme prejudice because he is just so not a fan of human experimentation. Nope. Want to piss him off? Welp, this is one way to do it.

Shit, blood on my tights and I’m out of lemon juice. He pulls his knee back from the broken face and holds the leg up enough to look at the inevitable spurt with distaste. Gross.

He kneels more than falls (barely) and uses the zip ties from the guard’s own belt to subdue him, drag him by the elbow into the pretty ordinary broom closet since, you know, only the important doors had neat shit like control pads and scans. The ones with just a knob were pretty much broom and paper towel central.

Red takes the key ring and taser, pats the guy’s head before locking him in and strafing back into the corridor with a limping stride, the wings brushing oddly at the back of his calves without the extra layer of outer armor (so the wings and pack with his extra stash of whirlybirds were totally in one of those stupid storage lockers, just like he called it, score). The armor is always nice to have in situations like this, you know, random bad guys with no ethics holding them back, a shit ton of tech and capabilities and, well, time, but whatevs. He has work to do and small children to get back to. Like fast.

But first:

“All right. Come out.” Not a request.

Red doesn’t stop moving, even when the familiar shadow paces right beside him, twin .40 autos in her hands. And it’s really nice to see Pru since he usually only catches glimpses of her when random ninjas try to keep tabs on him (or as much as he lets them anyway) or during their non-frequent tag-ups when they exchanged crucial information about his apparent fan club in the League of Assassins (he’s already promised them Red Robin pins because that would totally be killer, pun not intended but still).
“Didn’t expect you guys to show up to the party,” he grins a little, giving her a flash of the smile. “I seriously have no streamers or glitter. Bummer, right?”

A soft noise as she looks over at him in the dim, black assassin wear of the real job instead of the punk girl that showed up to meet him in Iraq.

Scuttling feet and Red ducks back, his arm automatically coming up to push her at his side, lining them both up against the wall and out of sight. Not like she needs him to baby-sit or anything because, yeah, Pru has worked herself up in the ranks of the League, something she gives him kudos for since he unintentionally helped out on that one.

“Too much competition, love,” and like every time he hears her speak in that glottal, soft tone still with the twist of her cockney accent, a world of difference from her previous loud, he has a moment of conscience (if they’d never gotten involved, Z and Owen would be alive—well, maybe, assassins and such). Also, his fault intentional or not. “Demon Head wants them out of the game.”

“Fantastic. Glad our interests are aligning for a change. You know, other than the using lethal methods thing.” Red glances back at her and message received. Good. He most definitely wants prisoners alive to pay for this shit. “They have weapons of mass destruction. Want to tell me about that so I have one less thing on the To-Do list?”

She points a finger to their feet and raises an eyebrow.

“One floor down, sweet. Do I have production or just storage?”

“From what we’ve found, they’re looking into more than just this compound, Birdy-kins. You know how the crazies get.”

Fuck, what else is brewing in the labs?

“Well, when genetic splicing is on the table, there’s got to be more at stake. Shit. I was totally hoping to dip out early and catch a movie. The new Deadpool is finally in theaters.” He gives a faint sigh.

The noise next to him is an actual laugh (because he knows he’s winning if he’s got Pru laughing, her eyes lighter than normal), “I still dunno about you,” but even with the lack of larynx, he can hear the fondness there.

“I get that a lot, you know? No idea why since I’m such a nice vigilante and all. Totally not my fault shit just keeps getting dropped in my lap.”

“You like looking for trouble, arsehole,” she replies since she does know better, and her guns are gone which means—

“There’s a lot of ridiculous shit happening or going to happen, right?” Like he really needs to ask. “Just make sure I’m in the loop. There’s hostages I need to get out.”

The corresponding laughter is a low chuff of mostly air. “Maybe. We’ll see what happens next. Just don’t die. I’d hate to have wasted all this effort.”

And Red, Red just scoffs good naturedly because, really. They played that game once upon a time, so maybe third time’s the charm? He pointedly turns back to the oncoming guards to give her enough time to fade back and “vanish” into (the other corridor, like he wouldn’t know) thin air. He turns his attention to the next mass of guns and the immediate plan: hacking, stopping horrible chemical production, crash some systems, steal some data, get to the children, GTFO.
Contingency for release of man-made metas? Check

For more soldiers with guns than he can realistically handle? Check

For release of the potent holy shit bomb? Check

For meeting up with the good Doc and just really hoping he’s been a super good boy this year?

Double check.

He’s got it together, so time to bring one of them to fruition. The footsteps get close enough and he’s ducking out from around the corner, going low (because Dick and later on, experience, taught him that few people ever expect the low attack, it’s dirty and effective if you’re outnumbered dozens to one). The first three are absolutely no problem, fast and furious strikes take them out in one blow before a shot can get off.

The last five, however, are apparently on their game since, well, you know, their installation has obviously been compromised and a certain vigilante that can take out metas is just wandering around looking for a vending machine because Cheetos would be the shit right now.

The automatic rifles are AR-15s, rapid fire capabilities with clips, live rounds. No fucking around then.

Kick the first, knock his gun into the second, give a distraction, whirl so the wings hit the third and disorient him. Palm strike, kick combo, throw the whirlbird with the free hand. Take a hit to the right side of the abdomen since guy number four can’t wait his turn (it’s cool, Red considers anyone taller than him a tree anyway, just timber), and guy number five must have gotten some kind of specific instructions because he’s got a wicked hunting knife that sinks partially into the meat of Red’s thigh while the others want to dance and shit.

He backhands with full fist (because ow motherfucker, that does hurt) and the crack of cheekbone makes him feel slightly vindicated.

Jump kick with the other leg even though his knee is nothing short of moving by will alone and a molar flies right by his ear.

Spin, dip, come up for the last strike needed (get moving asshole, you told Caroline it wouldn’t be too long) but the huffing scream when his foot cracks some ribs makes his stomach abruptly drop.

Red back up until he hits the wall, staring at the bodies on the ground, breathing, alive, probably in pain, and he fucking sees

The pain is worse than the Clench, worse than the spleen, worse than Hood almost beating him to death; the pull of the gouges in his back, the burns, the contusions, the ache of his tortured fingers and arms in the gloves and gauntlets, but he can’t stop. He can’t stop until they’re all down, until he knows for fucking sure the White Triad isn’t going to get up and hurt anyone else. He can’t stop until all those eyes and small hands and scared, shaking cries stop because they’re not in danger anymore. He has to keep moving, he has to keep fighting, still swaying with the movement on that ship, no one coming for him, no one knew where he was or what he was doing. No one knew Tim Drake was there, no one knew Red Robin came back to end this sick practice, to make sure no one else was being sold…

The next broken bone, the next arch of blood dark in the dim hold of the ship, the next step, the next breath, all of it was to make sure the suffering stops here.
Red Robin moves.

Abruptly, he swallows back bile, gauntlet over his mouth to hold in the choked noises. His other hand is shaking slightly at his side, the guards still down for the count, still weapons of mass destruction in this place, still people to save. The system. He has to crack the system.


Red forces his body to unlock, forces himself to kneel and start zip tying them up fast, taking whatever he could off their belts to use (baton, nope, already have a taser, more zip ties, ooh Bubble Yum, yoink). By the time he’s got them lined up, thrown into one of the conference rooms, he’s almost done shaking, using one of his wing blades to tie around his leg since there can’t be any more distractions (and the pack’s shock won’t get to it there if he needs to flare the wings for a weapon). He completely ignores how the guards disappear as soon as he’s back out into the corridor since ninjas are sometimes pretty cool to have at your back.

Instead, he’s got to find one of the central panels, one that could access the main hub and give him the keys to the fucking kingdom.

**

Facing down the Titans, the Batman takes an important step and deactivates the security on his cowl. The team exchanges a what the fuck is happening right now? look between them as the blue eyed Bruce Wayne wearing Batman’s serious expression meets them.

“I understand you,” he starts in the deep growl that has to come right from his toes because, really, it would make anyone wonder what happened to that dude’s vocal chords. “I know you have every right to go in first, but you have to understand, stealth is necessary for the best possible outcome. With as many metas under mind control that may have possibly been created by now, technology with unknown capabilities, and a chemicals geared to kill any genetically enhanced as well as human, we have to tread carefully. The Bats are honed for stealth, and we’re going to need to deactivate their security measures then make sure any weapons are neutralized before we can call you in.”

“The minute we do, that shit is happening.” Hood throws in, his voice distorted in the helmet, “because we are having an ass-kicking-fucking-palooza today, peeps. I didn’t bring any streamers, but dammit, we’re all going to get in on this shit.”

Batman turns to Hood with a raised brow that is really just enough said.

“What? You don’t know how to talk today’s lingo, B. I’m your translator, right?”

The slight twist to the oldest Bat’s mouth almost makes the Titans take a step back because the guy has a face. Like, a whole face. Just…shit. He can smile.

Kid knows his mouth is hanging open. Whatev. (Stop laughing under your breath, Barry, I can totally hear you, man.)

B just turns back to them, a gloved thumb hitching at Hood, “what he said. We need you on this, all of you.” (Not really, the other Bats read, but hey, B knows how to utilize resources and talk the proverbial jumpers off the ledge). “Without knowing how many we’re facing in there, the Titans are crucial in finding Red Robin and getting him out if he’s incapacitated, rescuing hostages, and bringing this installation down. Part one, however, is all Bat. We have to get the layout of the facility...
and the numbers, we need to make sure they can’t kill Red Robin before you get to him. Everyone understand?”

The Titans straighten a bit at that, glances at one another.

N holds up both hands to draw attention. “Once we give the signal, Superboy takes point. Those blast doors need to be opened, Wonder Girl at his six for the first round of attack. Assume they have rifles, also assume they have some way to administer the chemical composition, don’t be afraid to use Red Robin’s neutralizer. Do NOT let them hit you with it, be aggressive and watch your asses. Kid Flash can be fast enough to disarm without killing anyone and can run interference. Beast Boy and Raven will have the best chances at hacking into their mainframe should they go into lock down.”

Robin straightens, crossing his arms over his chest, giving the Titans a nod, “should any of this plan go awry, we will depend upon you to make certain the threat of this destructive substance is handled. Red would be livid if it remains capable of killing innocent people. The Titans, however, are the line of defense against any outbreak. We do not want casualties.”

And, well, point, right?

N nods thoughtfully, “The JLA will be here in twenty or less, so we should be hitting you up right about then.”

And The Titans just kind of blink back at the two Bats because, well, Red did the same kind of directing.

“All right,” BB finally agrees. “We give the Bats twenty. You don’t call by the time the JLA hits our airspace and we’re coming in, you dig?”

The Batman pulls his cowl back up as N does a final check of his gear, Hood pops his clips one last time, and Robin pulls his hood and cape more firmly in place, hands fisting inside his gloves.

“Understood. Twenty minutes maximum.”

“Then you fuckers bring the snacks, kay?” Hood fills in, pointing a finger, while Robin seriously facepalms. “I’m sure Red’s going to be hungry as shit when it’s all said and done.” He flips them one last thumbs-up as the Bats do their thing and vanish down the walkway.

“I don’t like this,” KF doesn’t mind saying it even with Barry bringing the walkway back up.

“Dude, ditto. Sitting back-up is weird as fuck.” Because the Titans stopped calling in help, right? They figured shit out on the last few rounds of aw, aren’t you all so cute with those warning signals? The fact the JLA showed up for this little boom boom probability is seriously fucking with them since the group is very accustomed to working with more autonomy then they had even a year ago, their mentors giving them privacy unless serious shit went down. The last few hard warning calls hadn’t been triggered to hit the JLA’s systems, and it was all good because they had it (mostly).

BB holds up placating palms, “you two need to chill. We’re in the middle of fucking nowhere. Creepy underground bad guy complex that can’t be scanned from the air and that has to be some crazy shit since Blue can’t X-Ray into it.”

“So?! Like we haven’t faced worse?”

“Hey, hey,” Bunker pauses mid-tie of his mask. “Uno momento. First: these guys make metas, si? Of course they’ll be ready for us. Like, c’mon. They make people with superpowers. For what we know, there might be a conveyor belt in that place, right? Okay, so second, we agreed to give the
Batman and friends a chance, yeah? This is that chance. Twenty minutes, then we knock on the door.”

Fuck, Bunker has a point but that doesn’t stop Blue from making the face behind his back.

“Besides,” Bunker’s smooth tone cuts through the air of anticipation, “the JLA? And—“ his flourishes a hand at Barry Allen, lounging by the control pad. “Some else is going on here, amigos. Since when have we been warranting this much attention?”

“Oh,” Wonder Girl manages because ah-ha.

KF turns on his heel, facing Barry. The other Titans turn with him.

And Barry has a moment to recognize oh shit when he sees it.

**

Windows OS. Lame. He already beat his previous record by almost a minute, working the encryption like a boss. What Red finds is very not cool, very something close to a previous bad that makes the same feeling of dread in his stomach rise to the fore again.


(Hacking the White Triad’s system from the Batwing, on his way back to that torture chamber on his own—forcing himself not to include the Titans because they couldn’t be associated with this, couldn’t be near it if Tim Drake’s involvement comes out. Their systems are like child’s play, Assets —children you motherfuckers—buyers, backers, everything. He wanted it all because these guys weren’t getting away with it, they weren’t operating after today. Red Robin is going to take them apart and save those kids from—)

His attention zeroes right in on the Buyer’s list, showing a whole lot of private armies that would be right on point for a genetically engineered metas (one or ten, whatever). These guys haven’t really hammered down an unbeatable process since people aren’t like McDonald’s and have the same biological make-up, so their process has had successes and failures. Even in the successful trials, irregularities have still made the products (fuck he hates reading that shit, these are people you evil sons of bitches) unstable or deficient—not viable for the market. The speedster with a hitch in his step, the super strong with obvious weakness in his appendages, the chameleon that winks out every minute or so. The process isn’t perfected. So, small mercies because that’s the reason why these guys haven’t kidnapped a shit ton more people and started with the production line.

Red’s teeth grind when he hits the next report, Genesis. The four kids. Those children are the origin of the project, their DNA make-up used to start the initial processes and first round of metas. Of course, more metas are being scoped out by these bastards and the DNA they currently have altered to produce more capabilities, but that’s why the children are still alive and still in the compound. They’re the beginning phase.

Taking a deep breath through the haze of holy pissed off vigilante, Red looks for other installations, other network connections outside this place since he is going to make fucking sure these guys are out of the game by the time he is ready to get out of here. Seriously, he wants to know everything, who kidnapped the kids and the test subjects, how they were found, who is the big bad behind this, Every. Fucking. Thing.

Noise in the outside corridor, more guys that need their asses handed to them. No. Problem.

Red forces himself to get with the program in the next few seconds he has until the next round are on
him; he sends the documentation to his ghost since some buyers are going to need a little visit after he’s done with this vacay, and he pulls one of his favorite viruses out of the files and starts the worm working in the Praesidium system.

Next step in the process, finding the chemical production and putting a stop to it. He pulls the schematics of the compound, and the children are being held on this floor and now he’s at a quandary. Get the kids now, make sure the guards aren’t able to move them before he gets there, take them with him to shut down the chemical plant/genetic engineering farm, possibly throwing the four of them in a fuck-ton of danger; or, go shut down the labs and tech ASAP and potentially lose the hostages…

Decisions, decisions.

Welp, the voice in the hall are getting closer and first thing is first, right?

Red takes an important second to crack his neck, get his head in this game and out of the past, check the tie on his leg, say, fuck it to the other damage from the initial explosions that have been half-ass tended during his stay because There. Is. Work. To. Do. His grin sharp and dangerous in the dim, he waits by the door, ready to come out like he’s stepping from the night.

**

Vent crawling is never going to be an Olympic sport, but if it ever gets there, Demon Brat is going for the gold. Hood is humming the Mission Impossible theme under his breath while keeping himself sliding more than crawling to be silent (other than his mouth), and he has the most inane thought to ask N if he was enjoying the view back there, wiggle, wiggle, you know. Well, B would hear and they didn’t need that reveal in the middle of plan: Save Timmy’s Stupid Ass going down right now.

Right, focus asshole. Who knows what the fuck they’ve done to Baby Bird. Can guarantee you one thiiiiing, they’re going to regret it.

He wonders briefly if he brought enough clips because, like potato chips, hard to choose just a dozen or so, right? (It’s fine, the two lives are in a boot a piece. If B knew, shit would get real, but someone other than Red has gotta have a plan. Sometimes the plan includes blood and gore, sometimes sparkly dust and shit, guess which one this might be)

Demon pauses ahead of him, holds back two gloved fingers. Shoulda brought ribbon so the bad guys could tie themselves up for Christmas. S’okay, always next time.

Hood taps the kid on the ankle, ready little fucker, why don’t we have nice warm up, kay?

He sticks a gloved hand behind him at N, two fingers. The tap to his shin asserts message received. Almost play time. N does the same with B, the biggest and hardest guy to get through the vent in that armor (he manages but damn if it’s a thing, N knows that feel), and B taps the back of his knee in response.

Bats ready.

They’ve hit the central location, ready to take out the main control room and spread out; find where the chemicals are, where the people are, where Red is being kept, weapons deposit, any kind of douche bags that need the shit kicked out of them, and whatever else they can get into (but, the end all be all: if Red is bad off, some ignorant motherfuckers are going to get six ways to Sunday kind of beat, so help him and yeah, Demon and N are all in on that shit—B probably too even if he won’t outright say it but just show it with his fists). They need to map the terrain, let the Titan kiddos and
JLA in on the deets, and open the gates (this…this is why no one will ever beat B at Stratego, ask Ra’s— he’s a sore loser).

The screws coming out of the screen are silent and the kid is hooded, gone in a flutter of material. Hood uses his feet against the sides of the vent trap to shove himself in that familiar move up and down through the small hole. His holsters almost catch (usually do, regulation size doesn’t account for .45s, oh well, maybe he’ll write to his Congressman someday) before he’s down, right in the corner to brace a foot and leap half a second after the Demon did.

He feels N drop down behind him while he’s taking down guards one and two with a simultaneous kick, punch combo and Demon is gnawing on the third fucker’s ankle (no, not really, but wouldn’t that be a shitty way to start your shift at Bad Guys R Us?).

The finale is the Batman spreading out his cape and looking all kinds of you’re fucked, guy, get it? It literally takes them less than a minute to put the handful of bastards down and tied, B already at the main console that looks terribly dark with a whole bunch of I have a sneaking suspicion Red is already on his game.

“We may have intruded upon Red Robin’s plan,” Robin interjects with a sharp, yet satisfied smile.

“Twelve minutes until the Titans get more than antsy, B,” Hood cuts in, already taking a panel off the bottom of the main control station with a sharp chop, sticking his hands in to start looking for the right wires.

“We need to know what we’re working with first,” N replies, going to the wall unit that is softly lit probably working off another generator. He taps insistently while B gets with Hood’s program to get the main security cameras back up and running.

N, well, he might not be Red since that guy is like a guru of all things nifty tech, but he’s still got a whole lot of experience, skill, and a need to make sure the younger Bat is still moving (because there’s been too much Red took care of it, no big deal and way more we’ve been keeping that guy from dying but it’s a close fucking thing, N and those days are over. He meant what he said to Blue and KF).

Robin taps the comm in his ear, “Titans, we have infiltrated the command center. Currently, we are wiring up the security feeds. Once we have visuals and schematics, we will communicate this. Stand by.”

“Robin,” Superboy’s voice is low, as if there is more going on, “no sign of the JLA yet. What’s going on with the feeds?”

“It seems Red has already begun his own extraction and reconnaissance. The installation is dark. Batman and Hood are re-establishing connections so we may verify Red is free and fighting. Once we know his safety is secured and the chemicals found, the Titans will be welcome to join us.”

The clone laughs over the line, “you know, man, I seriously don’t remember you ever being this cool.”

Robin straightens slightly, “perhaps I am being influenced for the better. Besides, since you and your team have shown a propensity for being a pain in the ass, perhaps you simply need guidance on where and when to disperse such talents.”

The laugh over the line isn’t Superboy; actually, Robin is fairly certain that is Raven. Fairly since he honestly cannot recall ever hearing her laugh. He believes it is a good thing.
“Why are you really here?” KF finally bites out. “Truth time, Barry. I’ve grown out of the bullshit phase, man.”

The older speedster takes off the goggles and pushes the cowl off so it can really be Barry Allen looking down at him and, yeah, the guy does look older, more worn.

“I’ve been doing the time travel thing,” he starts slowly, “trying to stop a whole lot of bad coming down the pike, Bart.”

And uh-oh, real name time. “Okay, why didn’t you call me or Wally for help? You’re supposed to be doing the family thing, right?”

And Barry…Barry doesn’t want to tell him about the impending Flash Point, doesn’t want the kid to know about everything he’s been doing to try and stop it before it starts. Their world is at stake. Everyone they love, everything they care about and fight for is at stake. He has to save them, to keep the future from turning out as it does, to keep Bart and Wally and the JLA and everyone safe. If this is the last thing he does, it’ll be worth the sacrifice.

“There’s too much to go into right now,” Barry admits, still giving himself time to figure out what to tell and what not to. “But certain events are coming up that trigger something….very bad. I’m trying to keep those things from happening.” Because if he can keep Bart on the right path, if he can make sure the Bats don’t decline, the Titans don’t stop fighting, the JLA muscles through, then maybe that’ll be enough.

Whatever KF sees on his face is enough to make him step in closer, giving the Titans the signal to back off a little, look busy doing something else. Luckily, Robin takes that time to come through on comms, giving everyone else something in the here and now to think about.

“Okay,” slowly because he doesn’t get it all, but damn it now he wants to, “okay. After we take these ass hats down, you’re going to stick around for a minute, and we are so going to talk, Barry. Like, really talk. You don’t need to give me all the deets, but I’m either going to help or kick your ass. Those are the options.”

And for the first time in what seems like forever, Barry Allen can laugh, can look at this kid and see the resemblance he hadn’t really gotten until recently. Family. Too many actions fucked this kid in the future, and damn it, if he could get everything to fall into place the right way, then the horrific things he saw happening just wouldn’t. Barry has to hold on to that hope and with a catching in his throat, he leans forward to wrap his arms around Bart with a type of desperation, with hope that he can do what needs to be done.

**

“We need to get moving,” N points out, “we’re running out of time.”

B doesn’t even look up from splicing wires. “Agreed. We need to divide and conquer.”

N just gives a nod, already eyes the several vents in the room, “I’m on Red, B we’ll need you to coordinate the Titans and JLA to send out the schematics of this place once the system is up, find the place they’re making this holy crap cocktail and get someone on it. Hood and Robin can work out some aggression if you know what I mean.”

B gives him a sharp half-smile, it’s almost Bruce’s fond of this little shit grin, “good plan, N.”
Hood sticks out a fist and Robin (certainly rolling his eyes behind the lenses) finally gives in and does this silly ritual thing.

“Remember to keep up,” Robin says, already turning to leap back up into the vent system.

Hood barks out a laugh, “you little asshole! I’m twice your size in a vent’ and gives a wave to B as N hits another vent shaft.

**

*Bing, Bam, Boom.*

Even with his body aching, Red can put on a good show for the masses. He’s the guy that lies to Batman and Batman’s butler. So, he puts his hands up, palm out in that not dangerous, nothing to see here way that hopefully looks pretty darn convincing.

“Red?” And he knows that voice.

“It’s me.” He kneels down a little to put him on her level, “Caroline, are you okay?” And he doesn’t even think about it, just reaches out for the tiny blonde and pulls her in, apparently projecting Dick “the Hug Monster” Grayson when he folds around her, rubs her back gently with one hand. “I was worried about you. Did any of them hurt you?”

And it’s there for the youngest meta child, who knows this kind of thing means something important. The doctors that hurt them get to have hugs, the other adults that scream and cry because they’re in such pain have had hugs in their lives, but for Caroline and the other children who have been *Genesis* for so long…they’ve all but forgotten.

Caroline allows herself to sink into the embrace just a little…just-just a little wouldn’t hurt if he shoved her away, would it?

“We are not hurt, Red.”

His lenses are already showing him the huddling figures in the dim, right in bed where he’s told Caroline to keep them. He gives a wave for them to come forward, since awesome job, kiddo, you let them know help is on the way.

The boy he’d seen before, the ten year old with eyes so old and just, the kid isn’t a kid anymore. “They tried coming for us. Charlie kept them out.”

Ah, this must Supe’s number one fan, Leo. The second we’re out of here, I’m so calling that guy. He owes me a favor.

“All right,” Red looks at the four children, “you guys did a stellar job avoiding capture. Right on.”

Caroline actually smiles a little, her eyes bright in the dim, and he returns it with a grin of his own. He finally lets her go, but…yeah, it takes her a second to scuttle back and out of the embrace.

Red’s lenses go to Charlie, and his hand comes to the kid’s back, firm but gentle, “Charlie. You did good, keeping the baddies away. Thanks for looking out, man.”

The surprise, the shock, is right there, but Red gives him a nod. “Okay, first, because I know you guys are so awesome, we’ve got some things to do. I’m going to need your help, and then we’ve got a way to get out of this facility, so we’re going to have to get moving.”
And Leo, green eyes that remind him of Dami, pulls himself up, looking very brave. “What—what do we have to do?” And there it is, a wariness to the question. Of course there is, these are kids that have been treated like weapons, that have been tossed around, experimented on, and just fuck, he really needs to get his hands on Doc Poehler. Just. Once.

“The bad guys here are making a chemical weapon. It’s the reason they caught me in the first place; me and my team, the Titans, were trying to make sure the bombs they planted didn’t go off. It would kill a whole lot of innocent people.”

The three children turn to Caroline in one creepy, singular move. With her brow scrunched down, Caroline finally gives a nod, “he’s telling the truth. The bombs would have killed regular people and ones like us.”

“Yes,” Red agrees, “my team is all people like you guy, so no way can I let that happen. The chemical weapon has to be stopped, okay? So we destroy the weapon, and we are so out of here. I can make the call for reinforcements once we’re out.” Have the Titans pick the kids up, then come the hell back here just in case I missed anyone who needs a serious ass beating.

“What about the others?” Charlie asks quickly.

“He know Superman,” the taller girl rebukes like that’s an answer (ah, Karmen the chameleon, eh? Someone is going to hate 80’s throwbacks for life, but whatevs, she could pick a rocking name once she got older and laugh all the way superhero land in her sparkly tights).

“What others?” He asks instead and there’s a whole lot of whoa, change of plans already happening.

“The older people,” she comes back impatiently. “They’ve got all the adults kept in the room down a floor. They’re…they stick them with needles and test their powers there.” And…fucking what now? With the obvious deficiencies in the metas they faced during shit, shit bomb time, he’d hoped there wouldn’t be a room full of others somewhere and hadn’t seen any numbers on the creation side of things. Wrong on that count.

Red stares at her for long moments, his whiteout lenses keeping his thoughts behind them. “Okay. We’ll check out the situation with them. If we can get them out without my team, we will. If not, I get you four out and come back for them. They’re part of the plan now, okay?”

“The plan?” All four kids look at him with confused faces.

His teeth flash white in the light, “once, like, a long time ago, Batman told me to always have a plan.” He holds out a hand, “right now, the plan is find the chemical plant, set the final virus to trash all their data, and get the hell out of here. If we can, we get the others out with us; if not, I come back for them and do some more damage. So, who’s with me?”

**

And, there. After a few more seconds and B has the lights on in the control room, cameras operational. He sees the coding of Red Robin, and the smallest of smiles crosses his face; first, he searches the live feeds, connecting them to O for preservation of what may possibly be evidence against the organization. He doesn’t stop looking for flashes in the shadows, hoping Red is moving, not trapped, not being an experiment.

He taps the comm in his cowl, “cameras up, looking for Red now. Status?”

There’s enemies with assault rifles scattering, a few lab coats looking panicked, and a big room full of the human experiments and—
Ra’s. The Batman’s eyes narrow behind the whiteout lenses.

“B! Having the time of my fucking life here. Seriously, we should have brought fucking balloons for the first five to get kicked in the nuts. Next time, right?”

“Hood.”

“Right, right. Me and Short Wonder are on the second floor, and you know what we found?”

Robin blows out a breath because, yup, he got paired with that guy. “What possible reason could he have for sending ninjas?” Robin muses to himself, shaking his head while he and Hood move through the corridors.

“Let’s assume he’s not trying to be helpful,” B growls out, changing the camera angles.

From his place tracking Red’s previous fight (and oh yeah, only the spinning back kick of awesome makes bruises like that, Timmy for the win), N’s spine straightens a little, he and Hood know a little bit more about the sitch than any of them have let Robin in on—nope, he didn’t need to connect those dots yet, but now it becomes very, very important to find Red. Immediately.

And, ah, B traces a downstairs lab and production center where the apparent human experimentation is happening. That must be where the formula is being created and altered for their needs. It’s also where they’re keeping the human beings they’ve altered.

“I’m moving down, no sign of Red, just a few guys he kicked the crap out of, but I’m still tracking him.” And N notes the broken cheekbone for only a second before he’s moving through the shadows again, escrima sticks ready.

“We have the location of the chemicals. If that’s where he’s going, you may intersect.”

And another channel opens, “Batman, we’re five minutes out.” Superman sounds like he’s pushing as much speed as he can. Good. They’ll add back-up for the Titans, assure these people aren’t going to escape. The more details Batman finds on this operation, the more crucial taking them down becomes.

“Rendezvous with the Titans half a mile out. We’re close to finding Red and neutralizing the weaponized threat. Until that happens, stand by.”

“Batman—“

“Meta killer, Kal-El.”

“Everyone killer, B.”

“I’m aware. We’re moving on it. We won’t need much more time.”

“Acknowledge,” but the alien does not sound happy about it. “We’ll meet up with the Titans and wait for your comm. Don’t take all day with it. Copy?”

That half smile is back while Batman keeps digging through the system and looking for Red Robin since his own team of metas have somewhat of a mommy complex at times, still. “Copy. Batman out.”

Cracking his knuckles, the Batman starts with gaining access to that room; if he can lock the system down, remove all access for the controls, he can call in the others and get ready to avenge his son as
well as the people that have been taken and abused. He allots himself that five minutes to make shit happen and gets to work.

**

N moves with amazing grace, up and over the line of armed guards, coughing over the smoke pellets, and nails the landing (skill).

Escrima sticks working with the usual gusto, he gets into the first three or so with feeling because he just hates the hell out of guys like this, the whole ‘I’m going to ignore people committing crimes of this caliber because, well, cha-ching,’ when someone grabs his ass from behind and seriously feels him up. Oh yeah, that's a squeeze.

His eyes widen behind the domino because, you know, guys trying to maim and/or kill you don’t usually try for second base (and it's really rather creepy when they do).

When the bald assassin with wicked automatics appears under his outstretched arm, using the curve of his body to deliver a stunning kick, he gets that picture.

“Hey!” Good-naturedly he high kicks a guy before the automatic rifle goes off. “No fair getting a freebie! I’m totally filing a complaint here!”

The laughter is low and glottal, but still there so N just grins back as the two part to dive into the smoke cloud and take out more bad guys. And, in his long career as a vigilante, Nightwing has had his share of ‘What the Hell’ moments because, who hasn’t? So working with Ra’s al Ghul’s assassin squad isn’t the strangest thing he’s done and sure as hell isn’t the worst back-up he’s ever had either. All things considered, they aren’t actually killing any of the guards, so for the next three and a half seconds, they get a pass.

Besides, he knows Prudence Wood. She’s the assassin Tim talked about, the other survivor. The other one that believed in him (and the one that possibly keeps Baby Bird in the know for his little Wednesday meetings with Ra’s).

He ducks, sweeps out a set of legs, her elbows come down on his shoulders while she fires rubber bullets into the mass, moving in tandem with Nightwing when he dives, kicks up, rolls in a summersault, and comes back up with a spin, fists out.

“So, we should seriously have a pizza party after this,” N is saying when he comes closer to Pru, “I mean, Chuck E Cheese has skeeball and Hoop Shot. I’ll totally get enough tickets for a race car this time.”

“Almost forgot,” her voice is decipherable and N puts it together, obviously a throat shot. “Yer the talker, ain’t ‘cha?”

Using her back, N rolls right over her to deliver a powerful elbow up to a jaw, “that’s me. I find witty banter makes the medicine go down, better than a spoon full of sugar any day.”

“Oy, Marry Poppins?”

“Got it in one! Hey, you haven’t seen one of my Bat bros wandering around this place have you? Since Ra’s has really taken a liking to him, I’m sure you and yours have been on the lookout.”

Pru stops as the last one falls because that tone is one to look out for. She turns and Nightwing is close, close enough to take her out of the game before she can raise the automatics, and certainly, if she could see his eyes behind those lenses, the non-existent hair on the back of her neck would be
standing up. *Ah,* she remembers, *also the one that doesn't like anyone messing with the other Bats.*

“Didn’t even know he was ‘ere until we got a bead on the security footage,” she admits to the towering mass of muscle and *suddenly very dangerous aura.* The Bats might not necessarily kill, but that doesn’t mean they have an aversion to causing pain.

Nightwing hums, but the sound is deep in his chest, almost a growl. Those hips work when he stalks forward the last few steps, tilting his face down just enough that she knows she has a great deal of *attention.*

“I’m sure that’s the truth. I’m very *sure* Red is moving around this place, isn’t he?” And oh, the deep, dark of that tone.

Lady that she is, Pru can’t help but have a moment or two of interest.

“Sent ‘im on his way to the chemical lab, down a floor, Mary. No worries. Got nothing to do with your bird. We got other baddies to talk to.” She winks at him, “better get moving. He didn’t look his usual put together, though.”

And, dammit. She already knew how to get to him. *N* grits his teeth as she runs back down the corridor, not making much of an effort to step over the dispersed group of baddies laying around in various stages of *ow* and *unconscious.* He makes the tie up fast because Tim is close.

“Bats, have positive ident. Red is moving, going to intercept.”

**

As he expected: the masses of scientists and armed guards are finally getting through the deactivated blast doors, trying to get to the main lab. Another of the camera switch angles and—

Red Robin is standing by the huge blast door to the main lab, trying to shoving the thing open, muscles straining. *B* allows himself a sigh (relief, *he’s right there,* and of course, he’s got a plan to save himself and the hostages, why even think otherwise at this point). But…he has other hostages with him, four total, and—the Batman’s eyes narrow—no body armor.

*N* is moving, a few corridors down from the guards making their way through to Red’s location; Hood and Robin up a floor in the middle of their own brawl.

*B* hits the comm, “Titans. JLA. We have visual on Red Robin. Time to knock on the doors.”

**

And *this* kid is going to be the next great superhero. Red has an armful of Caroline holding on to him while Leo holds on to his wings with one fist and scuttles to keep up with the older man’s limping stride; Charlie is huddling close to his right side right inside the wings and Red’s whirlybird hand is right at his shoulder for in case, but Karmen is one fearless ball of *smart as hell.*

She is all about *the plan.*

The minute he picked them up from that room, she’s been the one corralling all the kids, giving him an idea where the patrols are, directing him where the adults were being kept, asking to have a whirlybird to hold (seriously? Yes. Oh, yeah. Here’s how it explodes, don’t make it do that until *after* you throw it, kay? You *like* having two hands), and even freaking out a little when random fast moving blurs hit the edges of their vision (don’t be so obvi about it, *Pru,* you’re scaring the littles and yes you know I’m glaring behind the whiteouts).
He totally sees this kid in the JLA one day (or as an epic supervillain, either way, hope for the best, prepare for the worst) just tearing ass and taking names. All of them are going to be so epic someday, well, they will be once he gets them out of this fuckery and into some semblance of normal.

Red pauses outside the room, glances down at the dark-eyed ten-year-old; he doesn’t need to say a word (it’s a terrible bad guy idea to keep all your eggs in one basket. Isn’t there a manual for this kind of thing?).

“I’m sure,” she mock whispers, “they’re all in there.”

“I believe you,” he sets Caroline down, kneels with barely a flinch (even though his knees and abdomen are most definitely not okay by this point and he feels queasy, hot—septic you dick—) by the control panel. Karmen pushes the other children against the wall for just in case. As an added precaution, she concentrates hard and just…

Turns the color of the wall, spreading her arms out to try hiding the other children as best she can.

Seriously, superhero material. In another seven or eight years he’d might be giving her the recruiting speech for the Titans. Take a pamphlet, keep us in mind when you choose what color tights you’re going to rock. And since lights are still out, he’s straining to get the blast doors open, digging his fingers in, biceps and forearms straining.

“Wait!” Charlie tugs one of his wing strips, pulling hard enough to get Red’s attention.

He pauses because, well possible trap, “What is it, man?”

“Stand back, okay?”

And Red goes with the kid pulling him back a few steps, showing him trust. Charlie just bites his lip, stands right in front of Red and—

Like with Kon’s TTK, the invisible feel of power at work runs over Red’s exposed skin, making goosebumps rise. The control panel flickers to life, lighting up with commands as the doors slide open, seamless, silent. Perfect.

This is totally his new little dude. Like, if he wasn’t a globe hopping vigilante, he would totally start planning a room (four) in the Tower. Well, Bruce’s tendency to adopt kids in need now makes more sense.

Red takes a fast knee once the door is open, his hand on Charlie’s back this time, “dude, that is so cool. Thanks for the help.”

Not so much shocked as pleased, good. We’re getting somewhere.

“Okay, let me check it out first. No one’s getting hurt here.”

But Karmen, whirlybird in hand just puts her free hand out, palm up, eyebrows drawn together. “Nuh-uh, that’s my part of the plan.” And she winks out again, becomes one with her surroundings.

She can’t fool Red, however, and his hand unerringly finds her shoulder, lenses directed at her face. “Go in, look around for a few minutes, then report back. Be careful. If anything is frightening, get back here immediately. Don’t take anything on without me, okay?”

“Okay!” Is the whispered response. “I’ll be fast, Red, wait here.”
Yup, she could probably have his job someday. Cute and smart, deadly combo just like Cassie.

The blast doors at their backs give a hard groan, shit.

“Red Robin!” Caroline calls and—

Fuck.

There’s always a factor for Murphy’s Law, isn’t there?

Red pushes the kids inside the room and around the wall, out of the way, hoping for the best outcome since, well, guns, and dives into the shadows of the corridor. The whirlybirds fly as the rapid fire sounds and bullets fly, ricochet. And Red jumps into the fray, moving like lightning in the dim, keeping an eye on the doorframe.

Don’t be scared, just stay out of the fighting, okay?

Red! Karmen says no one is in here but the others and they’re not moving.

Keep her inside. Tell Charlie he needs to access the mainframe, to find the virus I planted. He needs to watch the countdown and make sure it starts. Can you do that?

He strains to raise his leg for the kick, You’re hurt.

Yes, but I’m not going to die. I’m going to get you guys out. Believe in me, Caroline, just a little.

His blood is a splash on the pristine floor, but he can’t stop, there’s too much of a reason to fight. Those reasons are counting on him inside the door, are lined up on tables being manipulated and controlled like puppets, and will be sold off to the highest bidder.

Shit stops here. It stops now.

And from the vent right above his head:

N swings into the fray, a mass of movement and ass kicking. It’s the done fucking around Nightwing, one that’s intent on the fight, no funny banter, no extra flair to his kicks and jumps, no quadruples, just out and out brutal efficiency. Some very bad people are going to pay.

**

As N pretty much called, Superboy beats Superman to the main doors by almost thirty seconds with Wonder Girl right at his six. Even Supes leans back an inch or two as the younger man rips into the doors with extreme prejudice, his eyes on literal fire as the heat vision thing because this guy is so ready to fight. Seriously. Put some baddies right in his path, he’s going to mow some people the fuck down.

“Whoa!” Supes had him by the elbow before balls to the wall time. “We have the schematics from Batman, Blue.” And the projected hologram is nice, very pretty. Blue sighs impatiently and BB jumps right in, starts pointing.

“Blue there, me and Rave go that way, Bunk and KF hit this hall way, and JLA split up for these two corridors. Everyone good?”

KF jumps right in, “get the canisters ready, spray the shit out of them if they come near us with DNA chemical goop. Got it, we’re good. Let’s move. Our bird is in there somewhere.”
The Titans share a quick nod and move as unit, scattering down their respective hallways ready to kick some ass. The JLA blinks at one another for less than a second, kind of does that Three Stooges thing with the *what? Where? Wait!* and follows right behind them.

**

Robin sneers from his position at Hood’s back. “Honestly, you are *terrible* ninjas.” He breaks a man’s cheekbone with a palm strike that would have killed had that been the intent. From behind the domino, his eyes watch the dark blurs that vanish into nooks and crevices. Guards just simply *vanish* around corners. It had taken him and Hood much too long to find a fight, and no, the ninjas may not have these ones as well. These guards were *theirs.*

“Right?” Hood agrees with a grunt, putting some *feeling* into kicking a guy in the face. “I mean, we should get them *Ninjas: A Comprehensive Guide* for Christmas, yeah?”

His elbow takes out another face. “Perhaps we should have Red create a PowerPoint. That may be more effective.”

The helmet does little to cover up the boisterous laugh, “just when I think you’ve got the personality of a brick, kid, you surprise me with something new.”

“—tt— honestly, Hood. Witty banter does not affect strategy in a fight. You have been around N too long.”

“Oh? That’s the pot calling the *kettle.*”

And when the last one falls, Robin turns, hands on his hips. “And I suppose you honestly think I have not noticed the change in your relationship?”

Little fucker even uses quotation fingers. Well, the talk with Red he means to have—you know, the kudos for teaching Robin all about detecting and stuff—is going to go in a completely different direction after this.

“Ah, kid, look—“

“I have no concerns, nor any reason to inform anyone else of this development.” Robin’s gauntlet hand comes palm up. “Nor do I want any *uncomfortable* details. However, know this—“ and the air around them changes, demon as serious as a heart attack. “Should you harm Nightwing in any way, I will shame my Father’s legacy to *bury* you a second time. Even if he despises me afterward, even if they all do, I will not stop until I *kill* you and assure you *stay* buried.”

And that…well, huh.

Red Hood crosses his arms over his chest, leaning down a little so their lenses can meet. His voice is low through the synths. “*You better* have his back, brat. I’ma hold you to that promise, you feel me? This thing between me and him goes south, you better bring more than that pissy ass sword and you fucking *better* have the *balls* to back it up.”

And he feels just a little bit better when the little shit smirks, “Believe me. I shall.”

With that agreement (gutsy kid, damn he’s actually starting to like the brat), the two Bats turn and start down the next corridor side-by-side, all kinds of heckling the ninjas (and, yeah, they do suck), hoping there’s still a little something to work out their aggression before they get directions to ride to Red’s rescue.
He takes out the last scientist with a vicious back kick, making sure his heel nailed that bastard hard enough to break the cheekbone (because you experimented on children motherfucker) and catches a hand on the wall to hold himself up, taking a long second to be fucking amazed because he’s starting right at— N steps over the baddie to grip Red’s face in both gloved hands and just, there’s a whole lot of what the hell are you doing here?

(“No one is coming. No one knows I’m here. You forgot you don’t have a safety net anymore asshole. Why would they come after you? You aren’t a Bat anymore.” All these thoughts as the beating intensifies and the broken skin of his back breaks even more…)

“Thank fuck,” N breathes, “don’t ever scare me like that again. Do you understand? Don’t do that to me again.”

“D—Nightwing,” Red tries, his chest tight because fuck, just…fuck, right?

“We are so having a talk about your contingencies when we get home, okay? Like all of them ever need to include ‘Call the Bats but especially Nightwing because that guy needs all the deets.’” And it’s whispered almost again his mouth as N leans down to put their foreheads together. “You’re alive, T. Fuck, I knew you’d find a way to survive the explosion, but just…don’t scare me again. I can’t lose you, Tim. I can’t.”

And his chest stutters an important second, their faces so close, and it’s just like back when they were more and N used to take care of him when he got beat up too badly for B to see, and just…just…

Fuck, his vision is wavery behind the lenses of his domino, and N’s arms are around him, holding him tight against that chest in this familiar, full-bodied hug like when he used to believe this guy when he said things like ‘brother’ and ‘equal’ and ‘partner.’ It’s…an awesome hug, man. Seriously.

“Dick,” Red says low against the guy’s neck, squeezing his eyes shut against the wobbly vision and the pain in his chest (and he came for me this time, someone actually came this time).

“Red Robin?”

And he pulls back, shaken with all the what the hell, I totally had the plan, but oh, this is cool, too I guess looking down at Caroline, who is staring up at N with wide, incredibly beautiful eyes.

“Hey,” Red kneels down immediately, “you guys okay? No one got hurt?”

She shakes her head, N kneeling down beside him with a grin.

“We don’t have any injuries. Karmen says the equipment is down, but Charlie can get it working if you need him to. He’s found your virus in the mainframe.” She hesitates, her eyes go to N and back to him, “is that true? Does he really give the best hugs?” And that is the one of the saddest things he’s ever heard, the question in her tiny voice completely calculating the mechanics of what might make a hug superior.

“Yes,” Red breathes out while Nightwing stills slightly, probably amazed at a child in this place, but, well so was Red, right? “He is like, a Champion hugger, Caroline. Even Superman thinks so.”

“Oh,” and her voice is so small, so tiny, her eyes slide over because she looks scared to even give N a full turn. But, well, the thing about that guy is that he can recognize need.

“You’re Caroline?” And N’s gentle voice, reserved for any kid they come across in their line of
work, makes her eyes widen. “I’m Nightwing. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hi.” She whispers back shyly.

“Hi.” He touches the spot on his mask that pulls the lenses back so she can see his eyes. “That was a really scary fight. Do you think you’d mind if I hugged you too? Hugs always make me feel better.”

And, well, she knows he’s tell the truth, at least a little. He’s not a person that gets scared fighting for what he believes in, but hugs do make him feel better, so Caroline scrunches her forehead a little, opening her arms to try and get it right.

N is easy, not the rabid hug monster of legend, but he gently sweeps her in close, not too tight, not too loose. Just perfect. Caroline relaxes by degrees because, well, this is really nice. Nightwing is warm and smells good and he’s not hurting her, and there’s nothing in his mind that tells her he wants to. He’s like Red. He wants to save the world from bad people. He’s…a nice man.

“Okay, we need to check on the others and stop the machine. Caroline, can you hang on to Nightwing for me? I’m going to need his help in a little bit.”

Nodding into his neck, she doesn’t even mind when Nightwing picks her up and holds on.

Red breathes a sigh when Karmen, Leo, and Charlie are looking up at him from the main consul, apparently waiting for him to commence with the superheroing. No problem. He’s got that.

“Good job scouting Karmen,” he pointedly touches her shoulder, a gentle squeeze. “You helped Caroline keep everyone together when the guns started firing, didn’t you?”

Surprised by the touch, the girl just nods.

“You did the right thing. I didn’t want any of you to get hurt.” Another squeeze and the girl straightens a little, soaking in the praise.

“Leo helped too. He was trying to change into one of the guards in case they got through.” She hastily informs.

The kid, however, looks livid, “I couldn’t do it,” he sneers.

“But you tried,” Red reasons, “your heart was in the right place, Leo. You were going to try defending everyone, and that’s what heroes do.” He holds up a hand, and the kid blinks hard before giving him a hesitant high-five. “Don’t worry, I have a teammate that is a shape shifter, and he might be able to teach you some really neat stuff.”

Charlie’s mouth drops, “Beast Boy?!”

Red quirks a quick smile and nods (N’s here, who else? Need to get moving, sepsis is going to set in fast).

And Charlie, “he can turn into a Tyrannosaurus Rex,” and, oh yeah, there’s some serious fanboying right there.

“I know, right? I promise, once we get this done, I’m going to call him, too. He’s part of my team,” and he’s going to be pissed Red got snatched again, but maybe Charlie’s obvious adoration would help with that (or not). “Right now, we need to get into the system, find out what we’re working with, and then we’ll get out of here.”
N finally comes through the door since, you know, he needed Caroline’s help to hold the zip ties while he made sure the bad guys aren’t going to get up (and she totally was super helpful). She even let him hold her hand while they walked.

Now that everyone’s good, Red is taking the room in:

Twenty or so beds, the other pseudo-metas are out for the count, probably the mind control or something. His eyes move to the complicated chemistry set-up along the opposing wall, and Pru’s words come back to him.

“Okay, I need you guys to hang here, help Charlie get the consul up and running. I’m going to check out what kind of chemical they’re trying to make, and my friend Nightwing is going to help. He’s part of the plan now, too.”

“Got it!” The three kids straighten as a unit, looking at N with eyes that give the guy an in since the plan, and just, fuck his heart can’t take much more of this. When this is all done and over with, they are going to a massive playground for days (as much as Rave is scary, she would totally push Karmen on the swings, he knows it) and dammit they are going to play ALL the games.

Red gives a nod to N and moves across the room and Charlie makes with the operational, screen flashing on in front of him. The files are flickering by on this work station, the trials and evidence point to—

“A codable killer,” Red stutters a second, the abrupt pain in his abdomen flares and fuck.

“What is it?” N has come up to look over his shoulder, close enough to feel the heat through his body suit.

“They’re making a genetically coded weapon,” he feels a little (a lot) sick, almost numb (might be blood loss, but who knew for sure?). “They’re making weapons that can be modified to kill people with a certain genetic make-up. They’re even tweaking it to down to the one hundredth…” Red stops, staring. “They’ve already tested it in the Middle East, set off a bomb of it in a crowded market, counted how many people died…my God—”

“Not only that,” and that voice, “but we are still in the midst of creating much more that private armies will pay richly for.” Poehler stands in the doorway, hands in the pockets of his lab coat. He’s smiling, that bastard is smiling.

“I must say Red Robin, this is exceptional work. It seems I was, in fact, wrong about you. My apologies.”

The whirlybird is in his hand with the beat of his heart, the breath in his lungs, N at his back already has the escrima sticks out and the crazy Bat stillness, assessing, preparing because the good Doc doesn’t seem worried at all.

“You’ve taken down more than half my installation alone. Very impressive.”


“I see the torture didn’t phase your humor as I had initially hoped. Such things are unnecessary to the end goal. Ah well, we will still have time. Though, I do wonder what possible gifts lay in your genetic code, Red Robin. I’m certain I could extract a great deal, create another one of you with exceptional powers.” And the doctor moves deeper into the room, hands in his pockets still and the feeling of something wrong hits hard. “What would you prefer? Strength? Telepathy? Armored
skin?”

Red sneers, arm tense, ready.

“Perhaps speed?”

*Oh shit.*

And that dirty motherfucker vanishes in a burst of super speed.

**

Barry paces slightly behind KF and Wally, the three parting ways down each corridor, picking up the tied (or not) armed guards and other personnel in this little fun house of horrors. Each speedster gets the bad guys outside for processing, essential, housekeeping. Kind of a bummer, but well, Barry kind of missed this. He missed being one of the good guys on call.

Batman makes another call out on comms, “we’re moving to the main lab everyone. Looks like the majority of Praesidium is rounded up. We have not succeeded in containing the weapon. Everyone exercise extreme caution.”

**

Superboy and Wonder Girl meet up at the crux, listening to Batman’s message on the comms. They give a nod to one another, and pull the hologram again to find the lab.

Huffing makes the two turn as Raven and BB in bird form come out of the dim. Bunker literally takes out a wall, just smashes the shit out of it and pokes his head through to look around a minute before he gives them a wave.

“Wonder Woman here, Lantern, and the speedsters are loading the prisoners, do we need—?”

“You’re good, Wonder Woman,” Superman interjects, “get them bagged and tagged. We’ll keep you updated.”

“Titans here,” Superboy taps his comm since BB’s well, a fucking *bird* and shit, “on our way.”

He gives a nod and the team moves as a unit.

**

“Put. Him. *Down.*” The whirlybirds appears in both hands.

“Oh, I wouldn’t if I were you,” the good doctor smiles, “my speed is faster than even the meta you fought at the bomb site, and I am very certain I can shoot him or snap his neck before you throw your little toys.”

And shit, *fucking shit he’s an enhanced too.* Figures. Red actually planned for him to be one of the super strong ones. Oh well, next contingency is it.

But, sometimes the plan does fail—

“Caroline,” Dr. Poehler interrupts his lowering hand, the drop of the whirlybirds on the floor and N’s hand lightly taps him on the right side, a signal. Still, the Doctor pulls the hammer back, presses the barrel tighter against Leo’s temple. “Red Robin must be *useable.* Right. Now.”
Shrinking in on herself a little, but Leo, he’s going to hurt Leo, the child bites her lip hard, staring at Red.

And N just pauses as the very obviously insane douche bag with a wicked smile. His message (he hopes) got across as Red’s whole body straightens, arms lax at his sides, and N plays what he hopes is an epic role.

“Red?” N grabs his arm, turns the younger Bat, “Red?! Say something.” Gripping Red’s wrists, he gets the slightly apprehension because everyone in this industry probably knows what’s going to come next since, well, bad guys. They usually do terrible things, sometimes predictably terrible things.

“This one isn’t important to our needs, Red Robin. Caroline, dear? Have Red Robin kill him.”

Yup. Called it. N barely has time to take a breath before Red’s body gives an obvious twitch and holy shit.

Sure, N already had a dance with Red Robin (Timmy, angry, hurt, scared Tim) at the yearlies; he knows more about the fighting style and the moves and the possibilities and the contingencies. And he knows the bad guy messed with his own genetic make-up to have super speed, and this could be over a hell of a lot quicker than they plan. He knows a little boy is counting on them to outsmart the bad guy, and he knows if they fail, these kids and the adults in the bed are all going to die in horrible ways.

He also knows he has to play this smart, or they’re all dead before the JLA, Titans, or the Bats reach them.

(The under suit is ripped, stained with blood, the leg wrapped up. He’s favoring the right side.)

N lets Red make the first move.

Flat hand strike to the throat. (X-block)

Heel kick arching up. (Dodge to the right side, bring us closer to the kids)

Round-about backhand. (Take it to the face, fake fall and dip)

Duck and leg sweep. (Jump and twist)

Iron fist strikes. (Red takes them to the forearm)

Spinning back-kick (Red lets the damn thing connect, taking him down to a knee and that hasn’t happened since he wore the red and green Robin costume, please let this mean what I think it means)

Right arm throw (Red goes with it again, landing at a crouch, whirlies out)

Getting closer.

**

“Mother. Fucking. Shit!”

Hood tries to get purchase, he and Robin pulling the blast doors. Okay, ten more goddamned seconds and they’re getting the fuck back in the vents. This is some bullshit right here, so help him.

“There must be another way, someone has blocked this from the other side. They know we are
coming.” Robin grits out and taps the comm, “O? We are in need—”

“MOVE!”

The two vigilantes dodge hard, Hood catching Robin under the arms, pretty much taking the kid with him to the side just as a holy whirlwind of fuck this shit I am so DONE takes the damn door right the hell out. Just metal and wires and shit flying everywhere. Hood keeps an arm up in front of the eyes of the helmet while the other pins Robin across the chest to keep that little demon behind his leg.

Wonder Girl is right behind the busting ass Superboy, Raven and BB kind of flying behind them at a more leisurely pace. Just, you know, on a stroll or some shit. No big deal, man.

Bunker gives them a wave as he follows last.

Hood pokes his head through the massive hole in the door, “seriously?! How about a ride or some shit you assholes!”

**

Red’s grip on his wrist is like iron, but N’s eyes dart down to the free hand that taps the center of his chest lightly, purposely. He gets the ah-ha moment a second before Red fakes a throw but really uses the move to tap his mask and lower the lenses, already moving back at N to bring jumping knee to the face into play (and N’s the one that taught it to him, of course he knew how to counter). But N palms the pocket at his hip, catching the simultaneous fist flying at his face. He catches the other fist and uses that hand to push back. Red draws back, getting a fist free, but N already has him by the shoulder, wrenching them around so the smaller man goes with the hip throw.

And they’re finally close enough that when Red lets himself be thrown, he’s so close to the good doctor and his mental countdown has a whole lot of time’s up. His eyes slide to Charlie’s in the signal to start the process for those metas on the table to do the whole ‘wake up, new day’ thing and to trigger the contingency in the virus. The canister pressed in his hand from N is exactly what he was hoping for. Bat language FTW.

As he hopes, Charlie is right on point.

The lights flicker off as Red sprawls out in the landing, his foot hooks Leo’s, tripping the kid to fall out of that grip and away from the gun as Red comes up fast and sprays the canister right in the Doc’s face.

At the same breath, Karmen vanishes and grabs the younger boy with both arms, making him disappear too. She makes it to the others fast enough to make them disappear, taking his young hostages out of the equation.

Yup, next greatest superhero or supervillain.

Dr. Poehler screams, the gun goes off. The shot skims across his side, but Red can’t let it phase him, shoving the compound right against the doc’s nose, his legs tripping the guy up, both of them going down to the ground. Red’s got a fist full of hair, holding on, spraying the shit right at the pseudo-meta bastard.

Arms thread through the doc’s, not in time to stop one super-fast fists from striking out to take his shoulder out of commission and the canister goes flying; N using leverage and strength, keeps the guy from dislocating Red’s other shoulder. The pain aside, Red’s heel comes up with a satisfying
crunch to that jaw and puts the megalomaniac the hell out of the game.

N just lets the guy slump to the ground while the adult metas are coming to, the mind control bullshit deactivated. Karmen and Charlie reappear to hug Caroline and Leo, the four children looking shaky as hell but relieved.

“Fuck, you had it,” Red breathes, his eyes going to N, and a grin splits his face because the warmth, the relief, the everything in those dark eyes is just too much…

Dammit, he’s all swept up in another Dick Grayson octopus hug. *Fuck, he’s never getting away. Like, ever.* But, Red just holds his dislocated arm up by the elbow and lets his forehead rest against Nightwing’s shoulder, lets his weight be held up a little. He takes in a deep, painful breath while N mutters something low against the top of his head, probably asking if he’s good and whatever. Yup. He’s pretty rocking right now actually.

The lights overhead flicker before kicking on and the two part, face the door, ready for the next wave of things that might need the crap kicked out of them.

“Hey,” BB is standing in the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest and Raven’s expression is positively *murderous.* “So, we were thinking about giving you guys a hand out of the *Good Ship Holy Shit* here and maybe make a stop for pizza. You about it? I hear there’s a Laser Tag war later and I totes want in.”

Red’s eyes are HUGE.

Behind them, the crashing sound is KF driving a guard back with furious speed punches to the chest and abdomen, sending the guy flying down the opposite corridor. “I call Blue Team.” He grins around Raven’s hip, flashing a peace sign.

And Red…Red laughs abruptly, a little high pitched because *these guys* and grips his fucked right arm tighter when his brain trips back to the moment. He holds up a *wait a sec* finger and turns to the four kids, striding forward to take a heavy knee while Nightwing gets down to tie up the good doctor because *oh yeah, they’re not finished with him.* Not by a long shot.

“Hey, hey. You guys cool? Caroline, good job faking him out. That was right on. Karmen, quick thinking on your part, much appreciated. Charlie, you triggered the countdown just right. Perfect timing. Leo, you did the right thing. You were great.” Red hitches a thumb over his shoulder. “We held them off until some of my friends got here. I told you about them, right? So they’re cool, they’re on our side.”

And KF’s eye blow wide behind his goggles because *oh shit, little kids*?! He, BB, Rave, and Bunker come through the door to crowd around the children, kneeling so they don’t look like their looming or anything (well, except KF because seriously, he’s short as hell but whatevs, awesome things come in small packages, right?). N is already tapping his comm, updating the Bats and everyone else on what’s going down so the Titans can take a second to give the littles some reason to be calm and cool.

“Hey,” he waves a hand, “I’m Kid Flash. Thanks for lookin’ out for Red, peeps. He’s totally terrible on his own, right?”

“You can call me Bunker, little ones. Look at how cute you are! Red! Boss?! Can we keep them?” And he winks at all four of them, charming them with his obvious goodness.

“Raven,” her voice is smooth as ribbon, not frightening to these children that have already been
through hell. “Your assistance is much appreciated.” Caroline’s eyes go a little wider, but Raven just quirks a small smile at her.

“Beast Boy,” and because, well, Gar, he holds out a fist for each of the kids in turn, “you little dudes must have been pretty awesome! Like, I’m looking at future Titans, huh?”

Karmen’s chin comes up an inth to meet his eye when she bumps his fist with her own. Leo grins widely, proudly at him, but Charlie just stares with that sheen of hero worship.

“You’re my favorite,” he leans in to whisper. “You can turn into a T-Rex.”

BB grins back, “little man, once we’re outta here and chilling. I am totally going to turn into one and give you a ride, okay? No joke. Rave will vouch.”

Charlie turns to her immediately, and Raven just nods gravely. “He does not lie.”

“That—that would be so awesome, I can’t even tell you.”

“Consider it a promise, guy. C’mon, the rest of our team is on the way, and we’ve got to get all of you out of here, ‘kay? It’s all about rescue time.”

Red makes it to his feet as Karmen looks over at the adult metas coming to awareness. “I need a comm,” he starts, “we’ve got twenty hostages here, BB—“

“Aw shit! We missed the fun, didn’t we, Baby Bird?”

And just, fuck, Red’s head snaps up to Hood and Robin coming through the door followed by Superboy dragging an unconscious someone and Wonder Girl and Batman and Lantern and Cyborg…and they just keep pouring in through the door? (Whoa, is that Barry? What. The. Shit?).

His brain is so completely blown, just fucked at the wide group of superheroes crowding around him, looking at him like—

(I got myself out. It’s good. I got myself out).

“Guess we don’t need the plane downstairs after all,” is the only thing he can come up with while the heroes are staring at him all relieved and just dammit now they’re going to want to work like this more often.

A hand on his wings tugs, and Red looks a little woozily down at Karmen, whose brows are furrowed in confusion. “Red? No one else was in the plan.” She informs him, and the rest of the massive group completely pauses because, like, true. Seriously.

“Ah, well. No, not…not originally.” (He escaped fine last time, the plans didn’t include any of them…) “Sometimes, though, we have other contingencies, you know?” And Karmen seems to take this as gospel, staying at his side with Leo on his other (sure, he notices Caroline is standing with N, but shit, he can’t really blame her, and Charlie is still fidgeting with his fingers and looking up at BB like that guy walks on water).

Gripping his arm, he huffs out a long breath at the mass of superheroes right here. Batman doesn’t even pause a second, but comes right up to him, takes in a whole lot of you got fucked up again, didn’t you?

“We’ve got hostages, B,” Red tosses his head to the hostages behind them so B knows. “And crazy amount of genetic weapons and research and chemicals—“
The Dark Knight motions to the JLA and the group is on it, but, well, B. He is such a fricking troll sometimes. “Titans, Red has been compromised.”

And double shit, “Nope! I’m totally good, okay—“

But that…really doesn’t work for shit because apparently he looks pretty bad with the bleeding, dislocated shoulder, lack of armor and whatnot.

“Nope?” Wonder Girl’s eyes are right in his line of sight and dammit, now that he’s not focused on hiding, she looks all worried. “Red how bad are you?”

Blue grins at him, looking so utterly relieved, “we’re getting your ass out of here, man. Like, right now, man.”

N is right beside him with a “Hey, Leo? I’m going to get in here okay?” while holding onto Caroline’s hand again. Red’s good arm goes right over the guy’s shoulders, and, you know, that’s not even necessary man, he’s totally good because all the Titans are alive and the JLA and the bombs didn’t go off, killing millions of people, and fuck, these kids aren’t going to be anyone’s experiment anymore, nope. He’s going to take them to the playground and get them terrible junk food and watch cartoons and find good places for them to go. They’re getting out, no ‘too lates’ for anyone, right? Things are just stellar. And—(getting off that ship, into the life boat alone, being tortured for days hoping someone would find him, half hoping they’d just kill him and be done with it).

Red’s chest hitches a little, but N’s arm around his waist helps keep him on his feet, makes him raise his head to look right over Kon’s shoulder so he’s staring right at Pru.

Her grin is the same twisted one from way back when she had a hell of a mouth, and her brows arch at him. She shakes a cell phone over her shoulder. He uses his grip on N’s shoulders to straighten when she darts between Blue and Wonder Girl, giving him a raised brow and a once over before holding the cell phone to his ear.

Red ignores how she shakes her head at him and sighs after a once over.

“Didn’t die,” he objects before his attention goes to one of his least favorite villains, “Red.”

“Detective. You are speaking which mean you cannot be as badly injured as my people have reported.”

“…Not Wednesday, Ra’s. You know I have you penciled in.”

N’s feet shift a little, like he’s getting ready to throw himself at Pru and the ninjas outside the main blast doors. Red just grips his shoulders a little, holding him back without words. In his peripherals, he sees Hood step up beside him, slightly in front of Karmen, the glint of his autos in the light as he nudges her back a step. Robin cracks his knuckles by N’s other side in front of Caroline and the Titans file in around them with their JLA counterparts too because…

A whole lot of people came for him. The realization hits again, hits hard, makes the knot in his chest tight with something so profound, he can’t figure it out for a second while the he clocks the echo over the line wherever Ra’s is hiding out.

“Hm, true. However, as much as I enjoy our intimacies, these people were attempting to infiltrate my market by creating super soldiers for hire. How could I allow that to persist, Detective?”
Red chuffs a not-funny laugh, “couldn’t have that, could we?”

“Of course not. I am going to be exceptionally kind as you have obviously had quite a busy few days. I will allow you seven minutes to evacuate the premises before it explodes. No longer.”

_Fuck._ “Ra’s there’s children here—“

“My people have already decontaminated this chemical. The blast will be harmless to those outside the facility.” And just calm as you please. You. Fucking. Dick. This is why he likes the Joker so much better.

“Ra’s,” and the warning is there.

“You have already infiltrated their systems and corrupted their data. You have everything you need.” Ra’s points out shrewdly, “Seven minutes starting now, Detective.” And the line goes dead.

Red’s gaze snaps to Pru. She calmly takes the phone back and flashes both hands at him, fingers spread. _Ten minutes_, before she winks at him and the group of assassins vanish.

Aaaaaand, it’s go time.

Again.

Fuck. Just fuck.

Red tries to pull away from Nightwing because the kids, the other people, the Titans, the JLA, everyone needs to get the hell out _now_, there’s no way he can find those bombs _in time_, he’s got the get everyone out and the plan is already forming, his mouth opens to start with the first and foremosts —

N, however, lacking in the blood loss department, beat him to it and is already pulling him toward the door with orders going. The Titans and JLA move to snatch up children and the hostages. Bunker just does _his thing_ and scoops up the closest mass to hurry them out the door. The Flash, KF, Barry, Wonder Girl, Blue, and Wonder Woman take off in different directions, running to catch anyone they might have missed to pretty much _toss_ their asses outside and dive back for more.

“Supes,” Red says weakly, forcing his legs to work, “meet…Leo ‘n Karmen. Big fans,” he waves at the two youngsters, Leo who is staring up with rapt attention and Karmen that is clearly assessing. “Leo, Karm…Superman.”

“Hi,” the young boy says shyly as the group _moves_. Karmen just keeps up with the look.

“Nice to meet you,” Superman just suddenly has both in his arms, looking from one to the other, “would you like to fly?”

Both kids blink and give him the big _yes, please_, eyes.

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And still, they have three minutes to spare because, well, superheroes do it better. Natch.

The Titans are pretty much gathered around Red, taking note of _everything_ like, dude, no body armor. Seriously. What the hell do you think we’re trying to do here other than keep your ass alive?

“Hostages on the jet,” Batman starts immediately, “Wonder Woman, Flash, Lantern, with them. Get them to the Watchtower. Rest of the JLA here on clean-up with Praesidium. Titans, with us.
Superman, you’re with the kids. We’re transporting Red. Now.” Since N is pretty much holding him up and the arm is hanging limply, but somehow, Red Robin is still conscious, looking at them with dark eyes as the lenses are down.

“B.” His voice is wobbly, “the kids—stay with me, okay?”

The Batman closes in, “you need medical attention, Red, and these kids don’t need to see that, not with what they’ve been through.”

And, dammit, he’s got a point. So Red’s got to explain it to them so the understand no one is making them leave or leaving them alone or anything—

The fucking Batman takes a knee, looking at the huddling little ones. He’s scary, and he looks mean, and they all cower just a little (even though Karmen and Leo try to be brave) because he’s obviously in charge and what if he doesn’t let them see Red ever again and just, what are they going to do?

“All of you have done exceptionally well. You’ve helped save countless lives as well as one of my partners. Thank-you.”

Karmen’s eyes are HUGE. All the children speechless.

“Red Robin is going to need medical attention, possibly a great deal of it. We’re taking him and you to the JLA’s main base, the Watchtower where you can be with him there while he recovers. We will have rooms for you and places for you to recover as well. I expect all of you will need the time. Questions?”

The Flash’s mouth falls open this time because Batman?! This is, like their Batman?

Charlie clears his throat, “C-can I still ride Beast Boy after he turns into a T-Rex. He promised…” and the tone fades away as the Batman’s lenses turn toward him.

“We have a room big enough, so I don’t see a problem as long as he agreed.”

Charlie’s face lights up like Christmas.

“Um,” Caroline blinks at him, chewing on her lip. The lenses swing toward her and she falters a little.

“Mr…. Mr. Batman, sir. Can…Can I—“ she breathes out steadily. “Can I—?”

“She needs a hug, B.” N hurriedly explains while Robin steps up to lift the dangling arm and hold it up in the socket, giving Red some much needed relief. “She needs to see who gives the best hugs, okay?”

The Batman looks back at her, and those eyes. Just, those eyes.

Wordlessly, he opens his arms, allowing her to come at her own pace. Jaws. Drop. Everywhere.

Caroline sniffs a little because Red is just so hurt and now they have to go somewhere else and they just don’t know what might be there and there’s so many people and she’s scared—

The Batman is warm and strong, his arms gentle. Like Nightwing, he smells nice.

“We won’t let anyone take you away. No one is going to take you away. Everyone here will protect you.” The Batman’s voice is dark with promise, and finally, finally Caroline allows herself to
believe.

**

Superman and Martian Manhunter (because Karmen think he look so cool and Leo seriously wants to hang out with Supes more and Caroline kind of wonders if maybe…maybe if it wouldn’t make them mad they could, she could make sure Nightwing really does give the best hugs and how to quantify it and let her hug them too? And Charlie is okay waiting because Beast Boy is doing important superhero things and taking care of Red) are in charge of the littles on the plane, so the prisoners and hostages can be monitored by division of the JLA for the ride into to the Watchtower. They’re going to call the proper authorities and get things in motion for finding the hostage’s families and incarcerating the guilty. Faces are grim with determination at that bit.

The second the kids are carried on the jet, Red’s momentous strength finally seems to give out just as the teleportation device to JLA HQ decides to get with it.

Hood and N catch him, hold him when his legs finally give out, taking the dislocated arm into account just as their molecules do the whole scramble thing and Hood’s pissed off squawk “how the fuck is he still walking, Jesus Christ N?!” is the last thing heard before the two groups vanish.

And even as he takes into account the grievous injuries, Robin feels like he can stop this incessant nagging, this feeling of dread since he was able to access Red’s ghost drive. Even with the others and with Hood, he still could not simply allow himself the luxury to relax until Red stood physically before him, deplorably injured (and, honestly, did he really expect anything to the contrary?), and still fighting. Only then, could Robin breathe.

His shoulders and back remain rigid, however, when the Bats and the Titans arrive promptly in the JLA’s medical bay. Red is dangling like a piece of meat between Nightwing and Hood, his blood making an unsettling puddle on the floor. As the Titans are obviously accustomed to handling such things (well-versed, he notes, and files away for later examination), they move as a team should, with silent agreement. Superboy, in an errant moment in which he has no trepidation about his monumental strength, takes Red from the Bats immediately to lay the injured man on the first spare gurney.

Remaining on the outskirts of activity as he is (admitted only to Pennyworth) a terrible field medic, Robin has eyes for the Titans, observing how they move, how they function, and how they will make sure Red Robin is not permanently injured. He is not…comfortable with this; however, in light of Red’s obvious wishes in a morbid practical contingency, Robin has yet more to learn. It seems his list is still growing, and Red will simply need to acquiesce to the training.

"Begin preliminaries," Rave says by rote and Cassie appears at Kon’s side, a box of gloves set beside Tim’s hip. Even though, they are metas, all of them dive for the box, sterilizing themselves as much as possible while still taking speed into account.

Gloves, gauntlets, cowls, helmets, and dominos are shed as the Bats also retrieve gloves, stepping up next to the Titans. Bart, favoring his injured knee and shoulder absently, is on the gurney, kneeling with his thighs outside of Tim’s as Kon and Raven lift the upper body to begin removing the under suit. Bart is holding Tim’s face between his palms, keeping the neck straight. Grayson and Father step in to assist working the suit down the shoulders and back while the Titans work it down the arms.

Robin’s eyes narrow behind the domino as Father and Grayson obviously pause, both of their expressions taking on neutral lines without the masks. And Robin is very well aware of the men’s mannerisms at this point, able to recognize discontent, even shock. Silently, he moves from his
position as Jason also realizes something is amiss and the two pace in tandem.

When he can see, Robin also stills. Jason, however, sucks in a slightly hitching breath. All of them pointedly stare.

And Bart Allen has a moment of terrible satisfaction when he glances over Tim’s ruffled hair to see them staring when that damn suit is down to about mid-back because that’s plenty enough for the to Get. The. Picture. Seriously, why would he and Kon have fucking bothered to go have a little heart-to-heart if shit isn’t real? And yeah, if the Bats are as real as Nightwing made it seem, then this was probably going to air out sooner or later anyway, so really, no time like the present, right (even though Tim’s probably going to shit kittens once he wakes up, but well, what can they do)? He looks over at Rave, who’s got one arm free and is applying that nasty smelling crap to the domino over Tim’s eyes to get the thing off (just What. The. Fuck are those marks by his eyes? Holy shit what did they do?); she gives him an obvi side-eye and minute shake of her head that’s a whole bunch of keep your mouth shut about it, let them put everything together on their own. No prob. He’s tight. Kon just gives him an arching brow, almost done because he’s on the side with the dislocated shoulder and he’s gotta not fuck it up more than it is.

However, at the moment, the Batman is breathing as Bruce, his fists clenching hard so hard in the material at Tim’s back; his forearms are minutely shaky (not that anyone but Alfred would notice) and there’s so much he knew nothing of this in his mind, whirling around with this visual. The mass of fine lines striping his son’s back from shoulder blades vanishing into the bunched up material of his suit just emphasize how utterly wrong he’d been to let Tim fly without even a modicum of a safety net. He literally has to close his eyes and count to ten because now it makes sense, back in WE’s hidden room when Tim hid the majority of his body, when he didn’t strip down bare-chested for the yearlies, when he wouldn’t come back to the Cave for medical treatment. All of those actions are clearer, and Tim’s mistrust, the loss of his faith in his previous mentors... The more they discover, the more he understands.

But Dick. Dick reaches out with tortured eyes, the fingertips of his gloves gingerly trace one of the thicker scars gently, his eyes taking it all in, placing the hits, estimating the number of strikes. Not as utterly introverted as B, mutters a short but effect string of curses, punctuated with the hard edge of a growl in his tone and, yeah, he can put two and fucking two together to Get. It. He’s the motherfucker that knew Timmy was missing and didn’t tell the Bats right the fuck off. He’s the motherfucker that knew when they found his ass and that he’d been tortured by whatever ass hat of the month rolled up in. And God fucking dammit, he didn’t do shit about it. He didn’t do shit about it. Timmy…once shit settled down, he’s going to tell Timmy he knew. He owed the guy that much.

Cassie breaks the tenseness because Tim is still on the table, and his skin so hot and they all know what that means.

“We,” she starts to the general Bats but looks at Dick who is still touching some of those scars, “we need to assess him, Nightwing.” She doesn’t wait for any kind of answer since she’s pretty sure she won’t get one. Kon, Raven, and Bart ease him back down.

“KF, man, we’re going to need the RRK. His temperature is spiking.” Kon observes mildly, the back of his hand on Tim’s flushed face. And right behind that is a whole lot of sepsis has set in, Titans, time for worry mode.

Cassie hurries away from Dick’s side to the stocked shelves, past the shell-shocked Bats; Gar, and Miguel gathering things quickly. Bart hops down to help lift Tim’s lower body so the rest of the suit can come off, sticky with blood in places. Jason’s on that ride, helping out.

“We are seriously getting this guy a leash,” Miguel reiterates and just shakes his head a little at the
horrible bruising, contusions, and gouges on Red’s abdomen from flying debris, electric burns at his temples, the dislocated shoulder, the stab wound in his thigh, the other electric burn at the knees, the heat suffusing his cheeks from fever, and whatever else might be under the surface. He’s solemn (because, amigos, this is not the worst they’ve seen him, okay? You have no idea what bad is when you talk about this guy) and staying out of the way to keep from hindering the effort but close enough to offer supplies.

And Jason, taking point across Tim’s batter body from Rave, is staring at the half-assed patch job on the random places at Tim’s abdomen, obviously from the first round of explosions and holy shit is he going to pay those ass hats a fucking visit later, just so much pissed as hell to work off right now, but he breathes, he moves, he pulls off tape and cuts away old, stained bandages because he can keep himself together, he can keep himself away from the swirling mass of anger churning in the very depths of him; he needs to keep himself in check, at least until Timmers is out of danger, until he can talk to the guy, until he can tell the guy how fucking sorry he is about just everything and— and shit. Just, shit.

But Robin, even scowling with dark intent, breaks up the agreement between the gathered heroes and voices what the others will (or can) not. “That is a remnant of Red’s torture.” And no, it is not a question as he is not attempting to insult anyone’s intelligence right now.

B moving beside Raven, the look on his face is now enough to seriously wither Poison Ivy’s worst plants and none of them want to be on the receiving end of Batman death stare unties the wing strip from around the thigh and catches sight of sluggishly bleeding holes further up. Fresh ones without an exit wound, another one that’s a deep graze on the side, between the curve of rib and hip. He turns fast, but Cassie is right behind him, holding out a sterile, unsealed kit with forceps, medical thread, and needle. She hands it over.

“Yes.” Raven answers the question. “We were fortunate he was able to escape and contacted us.” She accepts supplies from Cassie while Gar waits with another kit. Miguel offers another one to B once the wing strip is discarded.

Jason doesn’t even hesitate, just takes that shit right from B’s hands, and cracks it open. He hurriedly hands him the forceps first to get that shit out so the bleeders can be stitched then goes back to the half-ass treated abdominal wounds with some antiseptic necessaries.

Bart tries to work his achy arm to get the RRK off his back, but the damn straps hitch in the worst damn place right over the other shoulder so his hurt one almost locks up a little to be a pain in the nuts. Kon (because that guy sees everything) helps a brother out, turns him on the good shoulder and unlatches the case, and sure, the Bats know what’s in it (now), but seeing Kon lay it by Tim’s hip and pop it open just makes another aspect in the reality that is Red Robin/Tim Drake’s fucking life hit home.

Everything is organized inside: a portable defibrillator, one IV bag, two glass vials of clear liquid, small bottle with four pills, antiseptic, roll of gauze, sutures.

The Bats don’t pause in their ministering but still take it in.

“It’s necessary,” Bart bites out since, well, they all just look so fucking shocked, right? The whole oh, we didn’t know. We figured he was just fine. Here, have a big dose of rude awakening. “He gets pretty fucked up on a regular,” and a glance at Dick and Jason, just a little reminder that they already pretty much had this talk. Well, now you can see shit in action.

"Humans in this profession have a tenancy to bleed. A lot." B deadpans and starts fishing the bullet fragments out of the first wound. “Red is more self-sacrificing than most.”
Dick moves to stand at Tim's head, gingerly cleaning the head wounds and blood off his cheek and lip. His fingers gentle, he turns Red's face to get a look while Cassie hands him supplies.

B has the bullet fragments out of the first one fast, already stitching the wound. "Kon-El, can you check him for internal injuries?"

The guy starts slightly and stares for just a second before he gets with the program. His eyes go out of focus, a slow sweep of Tim's form, almost bare on the table except for bicycle shorts and briefs.

"No skull fractures or concussions. Shoulder needs to be put back in. Collar bone is good. Ribs have some heavy bruising, bad, but no fractures."

"Dammit, man, that would have given us six weeks to make him stay the hell down," Bart bitches good-naturedly while he picks up the IV bag and tubing to hang.

"Oh," Gar draws out from behind them, "I think he’s going to have enough people on his ass to keep him in the Tower for a week."

Robin hums a little, arms crossed over his chest. "We could monitor him more continuous if he returns to Gotham."

This time, The Titans give a significant pause.

"We’ve monitored him fine for the last two years," Cassie observer with hooded eyes, "he’s still alive."

Miguel straightens with his hands still full, "and don’t get it twisted, yeah? This is no small feat we’re talking about here."

Robin holds up a hand before Jason or Dick even jump on that train, "of course you have. The Titans have obviously been the support system for Drake. This is understood by everyone here. However, the Titans have other live to which you must return. I am only suggestion Gotham as one of us would be available at all times to monitor his activities, rate of healing, calorie consumption, and sleep pattern."

And, who the hell is this and where is that little fucking brat because Kon knows he’s sure as hell staring at the blatant diplomacy happening here between them and the Bats. He really wants to open his mouth and say something to argue the point, to be angry as hell this conversation is even taking place, but just, dammit all of them look so fucking sorry and messed up.

"How about we compromise," Dick cleans the final cut on Red’s cheek, still not happy with the electric burns. "He stays here for the worst of the healing. We take shifts with him. The Bats will rotate with the Titans and whoever else wants to throw their lot in. It can give us time with the kids too since they’re going to want to be close to him."

Bart hangs the antibiotic bag ready with the tube and needle attached. He attracts Kon’s gaze since he’s favoring his leg, bent a little.

"I got it," he answers the unspoken question with a growl, cleaning Tim’s forearm and sliding the needle home.

B almost speaks out (since, well recent fear toxin episode and weakened immunities), but eyes the bag and apparently deems it acceptable.

“So, once he’s, let’s say, only 25% or so fucked up, he can pick where he goes?” Bart finishes with a
wave of his hand.

And, the fact the Titans have this kind of scale should be a cause for concern. But, well Tim, right?

“Sounds good,” Jason smears healing goop over the stitches, eyes for the bullet fragments B had pulled out of the guy and just (how many did I put in him? How many scars are from me?). “We keep him in the loop with what the shitheads are up to, let him work cases from here. Hell, he can lead you guys on comms since this fucking place has some sweet flat screens and satellites. We can get him cases from Gotham to work the backend. Give O a night off to go to a strip club or something. Then, we get him to put a training plan for those little ankle biters together because, wherever they go, they’re going to need that shit, you know? Seriously, we’ve got this, right?” And Jason’s eyes roll up, going to each of the Titans in turn.

The team considers the plan while Dick finally moves to the arm, blowing out a breath and cracking his knuckles audibly. "Sorry, Tim," he says low, gripping the wrist to get ready to pop it back in.

A noise and everyone freezes. A low sound of pain.

"Move!" Kon yells, an arm coming up over Dick's chest to push him back a step just as Tim's whole body shudders, jerks abruptly up with fists and legs fucking flying.

Ducking under Kon's arm, Dick has the fists in hand before Tim's eyes even open. B has his ankle in a tight hold so the heel doesn't connect with his jaw. You know, Robin training and shit. Tim's upper body jerks upright on instinct as everyone does a whole lot of back away so you don’t get a fist or foot, and the Bats recognize the same instinct Bruce ingrained in every Robin. One honed in real experience.

Tim comes off the gurney stumbling, the IV stand toppling over as he takes two shaky steps backward, thread hanging from half-stitched wounds, one hand up for a nerve strike. His woozy eyes flicker around, trying to track everything.

"Timmy, Timmy calm down. You’re safe. Can you hear me?"

Glazed gaze, wavering balance, and he’s blinking rapidly. "Dick…? What? Bruce?"

A huff and he's sliding down, legs giving out in degrees.

Kon gets to him, easing up slowly so he doesn’t surprise the guy.

"Hallucinating. Kon. Bart, I'm not… Revoke access…” Blackout time, Kon and Rave already lifting him back up and on the gurney to finish the necessaries.

Dick just closes his eyes for a second, breathes, and goes back to the arm. There’s a whole lot of failure here, just so much, but this, he can start with this, wincing at the groan from Tim when he pops the arm back.

And from the bottom of the gurney, half hidden by the Batman cape, Robin reaches out an unsteady hand, wrapping his fingers around Tim's bare ankle. It's a foolish thing, really, utterly deplorable; however...he has a need to assure Tim, even in this state of unconsciousness, that this is no false vision induced by blood loss and exhaustion. Robin feels the need to emphasize the physicality of their presence regardless of whether Tim is knowing or not. The Bats are here, and here they will stay.

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And…he’s really worried. It makes her worry for him.

Walking down the walkway of the jet now that they’ve made it to the Watchtower, Caroline looks the long way up at Barry and squeezes his hand gently, trying to be easy with him. Blinking, he looks back down at her with a small smile (because she reminds him of Iris and he’s had so many, too many, successes and failures). He wants to play pretend nothing is wrong so everyone else won’t worry; he wants to tell Kid Flash the truth about everything because the weight is so so so much sometimes that he feels like he can’t run fast enough—there too much weight and it’s crushing him from all sides. And he’s the fastest man alive that can’t run fast enough.

Karmen walking beside her eyes silently, slyly so he doesn’t know she’s looking, but Leo and Charlie are busy with Superman and Martian Manhunter to notice how this man looks like he’s come back from the dead without a celebration of life.

Karmen goes into the room he opens for her without complaint but with one finger tapping on her leg in their language to watch everyone, don’t trust them yet. There will always be the next person that wants them to do things they don’t want to do. And they are all so tired of hurting people. They want to be different.

And it may not help, she thinks while he opens the door to a room she can use (because there is no haves until something happens or someone makes a decision about them, but she’s going to tell him anyway.

“I…I’m testing something.”

And he gets down on a knee to listen, but still he’s so high up the she has to look far.

“Okay. What are you testing, kiddo?” Barry asks gently, his eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles.

“Red—Red said Nightwing give the best hugs,” she hastily explains, “so…”

“Ah,” he nods at her seriously. “Testing is very important. That way you can be sure of the results.” Instead of kneeling, the former Flash sits on the floor in the hallway outside the room, one knee cocked up.

“Yes.” She agrees and he opens his arms for her gently, allowing her to have control of the situation. Gingerly, Caroline reaches up high to wrap her arms around his neck, and just like Nightwing, moves her hands a little to rub his back.

And this hug…is also very nice, but it is not a nice as Nightwing’s or the Batman’s. She thinks he may be too scared to do it right.

However.

“There are…so many things we were forced to do,” Caroline tells him when his arms closed around her back. “And it hurt and it was wrong sometimes, but…but we always had each other. No matter what, we had each other.”

And Barry tenses a little before he relaxes again into the hug. And maybe…maybe this will help. Maybe he will understand that weight is so much lighter if only you can share it with others.

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Waking up is so utterly fucked.
He aches all over and considering his tolerance for pain, well, that's really saying something. Something like *holy owfuck*.

Everything swims in front of his eyes for too long, his thoughts a sluggish pull suggesting the good stuff—and no, not Joker venom because that shit is very *not* as funny as advertised (yeah, he would know). And something is very off here, even with his brain working at about 68.13% normal capacity, because nothing really makes sense: he's injured (for sure) and he's not anywhere immediately familiar (he *knows* ceilings).

Okay, no restraints (it’s a good day), not in the Red Robin costume (possibly a bad thing), IV is in (double tape means Kon since *that guy* has ridden this ride with him before), but the stitches don’t feel like his own. And someone put his damn leg up in traction which is just pointless as hell (what are a couple of bullet holes between friends? Really, Two-Face much?).

Tim swallows a little, closes his eyes, and breathes slowly through his nose. Just in and out. *Woo-saaa.* He gives himself the needed time to ease down in a meditative state, calming his body, calming his mind. The panic subsides, the pain does not. Which, he didn’t expect it to, so it’s fine. He’s dealt with worse, right?

And the ease that makes him breathe deeper, makes his brain kick back up to 75% then 83% and so on is in layers of peaceful meditation with underlying waves of pain bleeding all over his nerve endings.

When he opens his eyes again, the world isn't wavering, and he has more than bits and pieces of last memories. His arm is in a sling against his chest, the shoulder tightly bound (dislocation), something goopy on his temples (burns from the torture), his abdomen feels like a gauze factory (various and sundries), leg up in traction with no cast (knee fucked up), his other thigh is bound (bullet shards had to be dug out), and a whole lot of antibiotics since sepsis really has a certain aftertaste in various flavors of *ick*, *ew*, and *nasty*. Arms have various states of scratches, scrapes, and punctures that got through the suit (he was totally wearing a suit at one point. Maybe. Probably. Sure, why not?).

And someone took care of it all. Hm. Usually one of them is chilling out when he wakes up (well, unless he totally pulls a *ha, fooled you* on them which is probably not a possibility since his damn leg doesn’t need to be raised up like this, seriously). But when he gingerly turns his head, mouth open to talk up a little bit of *hey, still breathing, good day right?* for any one of the Titans, Tim’s stomach drops to the damn floor. Dick in civvies and Bruce in the Bat suit sans cowl are asleep in chairs next to his bed. Those two look like hell, and his eyes search out injuries even as his heart give a painful lurch.


They… Those two are right here, by his bedside. He hadn't hallucinated that part of it. It wasn't some stupid hopeful former-Robin cocktail dreamed up by his fucking brain just *oh, someone come get me, shit sucks and help would be just stellar even though there’s a sweet ass plane in the basement of this place and I’m kind of enjoying beating the hell out of people* (who the *fuck* is he kidding?)…it was real. They're sitting right here and he's alive to fight the good fight another day. And, just—he blinks, rubs his eyes, pinches his arm, looks up to calculate the number of spots on each ceiling tile, multiplies it by the number of tiles, assumes at least twenty some rooms exist, comes out with an estimate, and looks back again.

Still there.

B is totally snoring slightly.
Dick’s left foot twitches at random.

Tim re-checks the hanging IV bag for just in case.

Shit.

The Bats…

The Bats showed up.

The Bats came

for him.

His chest stutters for an important second on a choke as his vision wavers abruptly. He can totally blame the electrodes to the head if he wants (and seriously will if anyone comes through that door), but that’s…a whole lot of bullshit.

He’s not sure if it’s the injuries, the how close he initially came in that round of shit shit more bombs underground thing (this one hits his top five of I’m okay going out this way), or…the family that seems to be pulling no shit about this second chance thing enough to put themselves on the line (death bomb you stupid, stupid assholes, I had it, don’t you fucking understand?) cared enough to still be here is a mystery.

Regardless of the reasons, his working hand clenches in the sheet over his less fucked up leg, and he forces himself to keep breathing evenly, not to wake them, while his eyes spill over.

Damn it. There’s go my street cred. Alvin Draper is never going to be super cool again. And, fuck, he’s such a rad dude.

He tilts his head back against the medical bed, and moves the hand over his eyes to hide while something buried so deep, something that always made the ever-existing knot in his chest so fucking tight, finally lets go (when was the last time? When his father died? When he found Bruce? When he came back from taking down the White Triad and even Red Robin couldn’t save him, nothing short of keep moving, asshole, there’s people in danger could save him? That time by himself when Bart almost…again and just, they got to him in time but fuck he wasn’t moving?).

The tears leak through his closed lids against his will and gather at the bottom of his hand (be quiet, just be quiet). His breath hitches slightly, sore chest stuttering once with a nearly half-sob, half breath. Ruthlessly, Tim bites down on his lip hard enough to bring blood, to try making that pain more important, more crucial to everything. He needs something, something else to focus on. He needs a case, he needs to see Caroline and the others, he needs to be Red Robin right now, right fucking now, okay. He needs to make terrible jokes and to check his ghost drive and to make sure there’s no more networks he might have missed the first time, or to crochet some stupid pineapple doilies or learn Cantonese in ten easy lessons (again) or make Ra’s watch Sponge Bob Squarepants. Fail.

He’s alive, okay? He’s alive and he needs stop this stupid shit now before—

Hands are gentle on his arm, moving up to his shoulder, someone sitting down on the bed by his hip, the one that didn’t get the flesh wound (Fucking dammit. Too. Late. Dumbass). A palm is warm in the back of his neck, easing him against muscle and warmth and what was once comfort, putting his face in the curve of a neck so he can hide the fact. Gentle rocking, free arm around his back, rubbing
The smell of the neck, metal, Kevlar, and musk is Dick, Dick holding him like he could just break apart. Dick that showed up and fought with him, grabbed on to him, couldn’t lose him. Dick that sat and waited, Dick that's been trying to get him back, Dick that's trying to earn his trust again. Dick that betrayed him.

And now that asshole is still right here, saved him from scary guys that kidnapped his ass for fucked up reason (sigh, again). Full circle, man. Fuck, just fuck.

"You...stupid bastard. All of you." Choked out against Dick’s neck, “I had it. I'm a big fucking vigilante now, damn it. There was a plane in their bunker. It was ready to go.”

Dick just laughs softly, cheek against the top of his head and Tim's good hand just wraps around Dick's back and clutches the man to him while he shakes apart.

"Doesn't matter, Timmy. Couldn't leave you, not ever again, okay?" the older man murmurs against the top of his head while rocking gently, holding on like he would never let this kid out of his sight. And finally, finally here is Tim Drake, the nineteen year old that had been lost and abandoned time and time again, but just kept right on moving forward. Here is the boy that came to him because he needed to be needed, because he needed to save someone else he didn't even know. Dick finally gets the honor to see, to have permission to be here for this very rare vulnerable side, the real boy, the broken man that pulled his team, his incredibly complex mind, his mask, his mission, pulled all of it around him like a cape so he wouldn't have to get close to anyone else, so he wouldn't be crushed when he was inevitably left behind.

"You idiot. They could have had a thousand metas, bombs all over the fucking place. You. Fucking. Idiots." And Tim’s voice is just wrecked as hell and how humiliating is it that he’s crying all over Dick Grayson? Seriously, give a demerit to goddamned Gryffindor and be done with it.

"Yeah, I've been called worse."

Tim stutters out a laugh while his chest hitches and his good hand just holds on.

There’s no updates, no talk of the mission, no stupid jokes, or exchange of data. There’s nothing but the movement of Dick’s swaying upper body, his cheeks against the top of Tim’s head, the pressure of that palm over his back, and the steady beep beep of various medical machines behind the bed.

And not long (but long enough) later when the door swishes open with a slight sound, when Jason and Dami makes their way in for the next turn at ‘Watch Timmy actually Sleep and Shit’ (yeah, they’ve got fucking tickets to that show, man), they pauses significantly at the scene, taking everything in. It’s not the usual, geeze Dick, can you let up the octopus hold? C’mon kind of thing, not with the way Tim is holding on to the guy like that. And the two Bats exchange an eye glance, Dami is surprisingly not being a little asshole for once. He holds his tongue and ninja strafes into the room to sit by B’s chair, waiting with his knees drawn up. He does not flinch when B’s hand eases down on his shoulder for a slight squeeze, done pretending he’s still asleep.

Tim swallows and draws back once he realizes they have company, and he can look the guy full in the face again. There’s...there’s less reason to hide now.

Dick just gives him that soft smile, relieved and happy and all kinds of proud before he stands up from the bed to get Tim some water from the pitcher by the bed.

And Tim’s face just takes on the patient expression. “Seriously? B, c’mon. We’re all Bats here, man.
Not fooling anyone.”

Said Batman chuffs a laugh and his eyes are lighter than normal, that crystal-like blue when he’s not, you know, the night.

Jason pulls up a chair, cup of coffee in hand and points a free finger almost right in Tim’s face. “Ninety. Fucking. Hours.”

And yes, Hood, I can hear you capitalizing that. Thanks. Stellar. Staring into the guy’s domino without the lenses down, Tim gives a half-smirk because nope, none of the Bats got it did they? Meh. Whatever.

“Hey man. I totally got a nap in sometime between dealing with meta-making ass hats and fighting meta-making ass hats. That’s got to count for something.”

“Kid,” and Jason leans forward in the chair, enough to make sure he is getting the fucking point across. “If this shit happens again, I’m dragging you to bed and pinning your ass down until you sleep. Not only that, but I’m going to get Dick to help make sure you stay there.”

Okay. Now that is a threat. Tim’s wide eyes roll to Dick who is just nodding in agreement as he holds out the cup of water.

“I am thoroughly terrified, Jay. However, I would be more scared if I had coffee, just saying. Ooooh, so much more effective with coffee.”

“Oh?” Jason just arches a brow and holds up the paper cup with a flourish, “like this?” The asshat just stares at him while sipping the heavenly smelling brew with a smile, yet again making his point.

“Wow, if I had feelings, they might be hurt or something.” Tim just shakes his head, sips on water while the Bats stare at him. Like, really stare.

“You sleep another eight hours or so, asshole. Then we’ll talk about coffee. Not until then.”

But a slow smile crosses Tim’s face and just, these guys, right?

Dick and Bruce and the Titans and the JLA all just needed to Take. A. Fucking. Pill. Seriously. He didn’t die. Millions of people didn’t die. Hostages didn’t die. Bad guys didn’t die. Assassins are incognito, but whatever. He’ll tackle them next Wednesday, natch.

And no one, no one has let him move an inch for almost two day.

Two

Days

Sure, most of that was all about sleeping, but what the hell are they trying to do, make him nuts?!

He’s finally gotten his leg down (by his damn self fuck you very much), tested to see if it would hold his weight (it did, score, owfuck notwithstanding), and limped his hurt ass out of the medical wing in search of coffee without waking Cassie because she gets grumpy when she doesn’t get enough Zzzs (just don’t ever tell her he said that, he likes breathing on his own; it’s convenient). Point is, his leg can hold weight (mostly) and his shoulder is good, still in the sling, but great really, no problem.

He’s made himself a pot of coffee since he seriously deserves that shit (and Diana totally has his
back because they’re both Sumatra fans, winning) so much for kicking ass and taking names. So what if he has to pretty much use the wall to hold himself up and maybe take a few pauses to get a breath (did he mention owfuck?). The kitchenette is literally a few feet away. No problem.

Well, slight problem.

Midway through the brewing pot, the strength abruptly leaving his good leg, and Tim finds himself on the floor, breathing through the abrupt pain for a long second before he’s totally good again.

“Batman is going to literally get out the kryptonite gauntlet.” Supes says from the doorway with a sigh. He’s all Kal-El in sweats and t-shirt. “You have no idea how much it hurts.”

(Sure it does... to an invulnerable guy). “I’ve used it against you too, you know.”

“The both of you are scary people. I’m very, very glad you’re on our side,” the alien placates, reaching down to lift him up and literally put him on the counter with his leg stretched out.

“Better benefits package. Seriously, bad guys have terrible Medical, right?”

That gets him a laugh as a carafe is brought down from one of the magical cabinets and Supes raises a brow at him with the sugar in hand. Tim nods a little and sugar, creamer, something else that’s probably some exotic flavoring go in and coffee (that smells utterly heavenly goes in). A mug is set down before he’s all up in a superhero saving the day embrace. He grabs the carafe and mug with his good hand.

“Cassie is sleeping,” he tells Supe and they go to the empty conference room across the hall instead. And, really, dude, totally fine here, okay? Well, another chair is moved anyway, his leg propped up on it gently and some rummaging through the closet for a fricking blanket and stuff (but it is totally soft and fluffy as hell, who gives a shit if it’s pink? Soft? Check. Fluffy? Check. Good to go).

With some amount of desperation, Tim pours a mug full and just yeah, that’s the stuff.

“The kids?” He asks immediately when Supes sits down next to him.

“Everyone wants to keep them. Even Batman I think.” And Supes…is totally serious.

Tim sighs at him because kids, not synonymous with puppies.

“Any family?” He asks half afraid of either answer.

Supes hesitates and just shakes his head sadly, “No one we’ve been able to find yet. There are birth certificates, some early records of pediatrician visits, at one time there was family for each of them, Tim.”

Shit. He’d been half hoping there would be a generous support system for them, to help them deal with the trauma and...well, fuck it, he’d be there.

“Okay. Okay.” And now his mind is working on the next plan.

“We were waiting for you to be up and healed enough to talk about what the next step is with them. They...they’re going to need us, Tim. At least for a while.”

“Already on that page, Kal. I’m going to figure out the best thing for them. I have options.” He puts his mug down, thinking now.

The hand suddenly on his wrist is warm, a big palm that’s used to holding life, used to delivering
justice, used to taking optimal damage.

“For the time being, no one is going anywhere. You are in no shape to be up, and those kids need some time to deal with what they’ve been through. Everyone has been trying to keep them occupied and teach them things, like how to be kids. Miguel took them to a playground for the first time yesterday once they promised not to use their powers.”

And, well, damn it, he wanted to do that, but totally okay because there would be many, many more playgrounds they were going to visit. Seriously. He’s going to get a list of them along the East fucking Coast to start.

“So,” Kal keeps up, “we have time, Tim. Don’t start making plans yet. Let’s all talk about the options first and then we’ll talk to them about what they want to do.”

Tim hums, dislodges Kal’s hand when he sips his coffee again. “A talk, hm?” And a brow raises obviously.

Both palms come up in that sure, I'm an alien, but not a really dangerous one, mostly gesture. “Let me explain before you get mad.”

“The Titans have worked with autonomy since Kon, Bart, and I re-established the group. Dick pretty much stood up for us against the JLA at the time.” Tim deadpans, now turning the full weight of his gaze since really, did we all need that reminder? At the time, Dick had seriously backed them, pretty much telling the JLA to give them their privacy when they were gathered as a group. And, well, the JLA had listened.

Now, they’re not teenagers anymore (well, okay, semantics).

“And none of that changes,” Kal looks a little desperate, his face just all kinds of sincere and shit. “Tim, we’ve pretty much abandoned the Titans when you needed us. So, we’re talking cooperation between the two groups—“

And a tumble of superheroes just literally fall through the doorway (except B and Dick because, well, Bats and such).

He grins down at them, still holding his coffee, "you know, the other super heroes are going to make fun of us now."

Gar shoved Kon's arm out of his face and untangles his leg from Miguel’s, "what are you doing out of bed, dude? Seriously, Batman is going to have an aneurism or something and who's going to deal with that, okay?"

The Dark Knight doesn't react. Much.

Tim just shakes his head with a grin, unrepentant.

Dick, in the Nightwing costume, just steps and hops over various limbs all over the damn place (ah, Cassie get your hand off of— oh, maybe they’re dating again. Rocking). "It's been two days, Tim, you shouldn't be up yet."

"I think what you mean is 'it's been two days, what are you doing with your life, man?'"

And that, the easy comradery, joking and grinning at him like the old days, makes Dick’s smile under the domino huge, genuine.
Bart just throws his hands up at the two, "I'm getting grey hair. Seriously, Red. Grey. Fucking. Hair."

Tim shrugs a little, "it would totally look distinguished. No joke."

"You are such a dick."

Tim hums a little, "We've established this."

Bart’s eyes narrow, "Sometimes repetition gets the point across."

And no, he’s totally not biting his lip, grinning at his team while they grin right the hell back.

“Well, it’s nice of you all to show up,” Supes interrupts the bonding tone, chin in hand and brow arched. “Since we need to have a meeting. All of us. Now is definitely better than never.”

Yup, Supes really knows how to be a buzz kill. Just, seriously, man. What better way to make everyone fucking vanish than to say the inevitable ‘we need to have a talk’ (obviously when you can lock down a space station; welp, he should have seen that one coming. Well played JLA).

The Titans as a whole are suspiciously inching toward the door, pretty much just leaving his beaten up ass there to deal with the touchy-feely Superman because, you know, they’re assholes.

“That sounds like a good idea, Kal,” Diana just shakes the whole strategic retreat thing going down. She, Hal, Wally, J’onn, and Vic are just hanging out in the hallway since they obviously have nothing better to do with their time and shit (seriously, go bake banana bread and save people—we can Skype later or something). “It’s been much too long since we’ve been of any use to The Titans. Perhaps we should start working out some compromises.”

And that—

Bart and Kon both look at him with those brows up because this sure as hell isn’t where they expected the convo to start. Honestly, neither did he, so all Tim has for them is a whole lot of this could be good or this could be bad. So without seeming like they’re pushing, the rest of the JLA files in through the door, effectively looking at their younger counterparts, waiting for the team to join them at the table.

Chapter End Notes

I suck and totally forgot Pru has a cockney accent. Really, she’s the best ever. Oh, Anon suggested the whole bring everything back in this circular way with the kidnappings, so the parallels are there. I have the first one written, but I never find the right place to put it, so that might be one for Distractions. And, brilliant suggestion, I mean, really. Titans wanted a trap, so let’s have a trap; also the coddle time and Red with the kids. Well, a bunch of you were about the kiddos and I really rock them too. Arkaedia came up with the genetic bombs and SO MUCH other stuff and also reminded me these babies are treated as weapons, so no hugs, like ever. It’s kk, tho, we’ve got N. He’s on it. Promise. Azazel, graywhims, I’m working on it. Haven’t forgotten. Oh, and ALL of YOU are so bad ass and brilliant and I bow to your ideas and observations and encouragement and love.
Recover

Chapter Summary

Healing isn't just about the body.

Chapter Notes

I…will not ever be able to do something like this again. Ever. I can’t even tell you. Some of it is good, but just… Nope, never again. My. Fucking. Heart.

Ah, forgive the typos. I kept adding more stuff until I was like, nope! Done. So.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

None of them have seen Red since they came here, and the fact makes all of them uneasy.

Tablets, books (for babies, seriously Leo is like ten, okay? This stuff is even too rudimentary for Caroline and she’s seven), television, all of it provided. They can leave their rooms whenever they want because Superman said so. They can go to the control panels and create food (Charlie could do it if they couldn’t figure it out, but Martian Manhunter showed them). They can do whatever they want when they want.

Whenever they figure out what they want, it would be fine, wouldn’t it?

So, they stay where they’re put. Caroline keeps them connected, just like she did in the lab, but they don’t make trouble. They don’t, they can’t be sent away somewhere else. They can’t be separated.

And, the tests are coming soon (have to be) because there have always been tests. There has always been fear and reproach and gloved hands that grip and hurt. There have always been orders and tasteless food meant for sustenance, there have always been lessons on reading, writing, mathematics, but little else. There has always been fighting and needles and silent tears in pillows. There’s always been…things they have yet to experience here with the JLA and the Titans and the Bats, but, of course, it’s coming…It has to be.

They wait.

**

When the Bats are assured Red is bandaged up and resting, they agree to shifts with the Titans until he regains consciousness (and a shit ton of monitoring, visiting, tasking, and cuddling—Dick—right on that project plan). In that respect, Robin leaves Jason and Superboy (as Robin pauses long enough to merely glared at Kid Flash, pointed looking down at the injured knee and apparently willing the older young man to have it tended, and honestly, you will care for your fool self or I will use paralyzing pellets on you, do not test me) by Red’s bedside when he feels he can finally release the ankle he’s been holding since Todd has a propensity for useless prattle that will certainly permeate even a comatose patient (and, yes, he will care for N or his death will be painful and bloody). When he leaves the medical bay, Kid Flash is grumbling as the injuries are scanned, and the speedster can
complain to his satisfaction (Robin, however, will check the results later to give Red a report once he is also awake); the point is, he will ascertain the damage done.

However, there is still work to be done—as much as this should not be part of his duty, he owes it to Red.

The first door opens and Robin is staring at the small, blonde child sitting with her back in a corner of the room, looking startled at his appearance.

“I am one of the Batman’s partners, Robin,” he begins formally, “I am also a team mate of Red Robin’s.”

“M’ Caroline,” the child replies softly, fidgeting with her fingers. “Red…Red?”

And Robin…should have commandeered one of the Titans for this task; however, he does owe this to Red in a certain aspect, “he sleep as his injuries have been treated and will need time to heal as the Batman told you. However, should you the other wish to see him for yourselves, I will take you to him.”

The child’s eyes widen, “yes! Yes, please,” she hiccups a little, sounding somewhat desperate.

“Then we shall gather the others and pay him a brief visit. Brief, you understand?”

Nodding desperately, the child leads the way to the rooms adjacent to her own, gathering the other three children. He repeats his name and rank, to assure them that yes, he is on their side, and no, he is not a threat, and Red is in need of rest so this visit will be brief.

The elder female does not trust him, nor does he blame her. She seems ready to fight at any moment; he understands this concept. She seems to recognize a kindred spirit and paces beside him. The eldest male is one accustomed to hiding, to showing others only what he wishes others to see. The youngest male, however, is somewhat of the opposite, one that is an open book. No guess work needed to determine his thoughts or feelings. The youngest female the same. All four of them, however, are wary, too old for their ages. Robin can relate.

He leads them to Red’s room, holding out a silent hand for Hood and Superboy as he approaches the bed, allows the children to fan out at his sides. The Batman must have followed them in, standing behind the group re-cowled and gloved.

Caroline’s eyes are horrified at the machines and tubes going in him and…she finally breathes shakily when Charlie touches her back gently.

And since he has always had a soft spot for children (and a terrible knowing of how much medical equipment may terrify them), the Batman comes just a little closer to stand beside her, looking at Red from his taller height.

Caroline stares up at him with obvious trepidation, “is…Mr. Batman is he going to die?” She bites her lip because her voice caught and gave her away.

“No,” the low, growly tone is still scary, but the Batman isn’t mean about it. “We have treated his injuries. He won’t die, but he will need time to recover. A few weeks perhaps.”

Caroline nods, looking pale and just so fragile before she looks back at the bed, back at Red and all those machine and the tubes in his arms. She barely notices when the Batman takes a knee beside her, watching, trying to discern if he could touch her with frightening her more. But this child, her expression tries to stiffen up, to be strong even though some of it was their fault and they didn’t
mean for this to happen to him. Her small hands fist at her sides while she blinks back tears and the small backlash hits in a wave, making the floor tremble slightly under their feet and she just wants to cry so much because Red wasn’t going to leave without them—he wasn’t going to leave them behind.

The monitors around the head of the bed flash, flicker, and blip before coming back on-line as Charlie stands very, very still beside her, grave with the same knowledge, the same unavoidable fear of machines and pain and needles and tests but—but they had to know Red is okay and he’s not... (the discs on his head make his mind catch fire with pain all over again and please, please stop, please stop! I’ll do better, I’ll try harder, please just make it stop).

From Robin’s other side, Leo is staring hard, eyes moving over the bandages and bruises, the leg in traction (more as a deterrent cooked up by the Titans than necessity—not that he even knows that) as if memorizing each injury he can see. His eyes are distant because he can remember having parents once because the lady carrying him out of the supermarket was carrying him as a cat, not as a little boy, and his next memory after that was being in a bed like this with tubes and machines and pain, of sharp things scraping his arms and legs, of needles going into his very bones...

Karmen keeps her face in neutral lines, looking at the numerous other scars from times before this one. The slide of terror slides down her spine at the machinery; it’s simply not something she can help even if she already knows the machines are to help Red, not to get deep into his bones and see what’s inside (and they hold her down, ignoring her crying, screaming when the needles go in for “samples” to see why she blends in...and the agony is tearing, jarring and they don’t care) and she turns abruptly away, away from the machines and the hurt young man in the bed.

She takes a steadying breath because she’s always had to be the strongest of them, to try and take as much attention away from the others as she could, when she could. It didn’t work most of the time, but she still tries. With just a glance (the floors trembling, the lights and machine flickers, the fine tremble in Leo’s legs...) she snaps back into her role because she has to take care of them and moves. Caroline is up in her arms, balancing against her hip; she holds out her free hand for Charlie wordlessly, and he scrambles to latch on. She just has to turn and Leo looks up at Robin, nods thanks before following her and the others out the door.

Superboy stands up from his spot, already dialing Cassie on his phone, while Robin seems to be operating on a similar wave length, taking a step in that direction (his inexperience with children is irrelevant—those faces...), but the Batman holds up a hand in the I’ve got this motion and follows the children out. He pauses by the communal room for Superman anyway since Kal has an aura of soothing that usually is more successful on innocent bystanders and children than the Bat’s dark appearance (which is not actually true; scarily enough, usually when the Batman comes upon children in his line of work, the younger ones gravitated toward the feeling of safe and strength).

“B.”

“They saw Red.” Is his only answer.

“Ah, so his identity—?”

B sighs impatiently, “the medical equipment, Kal.”

The alien’s eyes widen with the implications of that (since he’s been in the whole study the specimen while we have him detained kind of thing), his strides lengthen.

The four of them are huddled in a group in one of the bedrooms when the Batman steps into the doorframe and with a look at the careful chaos, invites himself in while Kal eases in behind him.
The television and lights are flickering wildly. The provided toys and touchpads rock, whirl, and dance around the room. In the center of the small circle is a tiny, blonde puppy, head lying on his paws and utterly silent, sides moving as he pants. Karmen is staring up at them with angry eyes while they cross the room despite the obvious angry/hurt/upset meta kids: Go Away vibe.

He takes a knee outside their circle, his cape a puddle of night around him. “I apologize. Robin didn’t mean to upset you. He should have explained the equipment and what you would see before he brought you in.”

The puppy raises his head and the flickering lights, dancing book slow down but don’t stop.

“He wanted you to know Red Robin’s injuries have been assessed and he is resting comfortably. The machines are monitoring his heart beat, blood pressure, and oxygen intake. He…is susceptible to infection, so we need to monitor him closely when he’s injured.”

Karmen blinks up at the Batman, still a little…suspicious when he offers information so freely.

Charlie is the one that answers, even though he’s obviously trying to calm himself down with both hands pulling at his hair so hard his knuckles are white, “th-thank-you, Mr. Batman.”

He eases his cape back and folds himself down on the floor. “None of what happened to him is your fault. Rather, the people that kept you were breaking the law, and they have been brought to justice. No more testing, no doctors until you’re ready or if you may be injured. However, should that happen, everything will be told to you first and one of us will be with you the entire time. You won’t be alone.”

Karmen blinks at him because…they’ve never been told or asked or… “What did you do to Red?” She asks quickly, testing this honesty.

The Batman begins with the preliminaries, citing the burned temples, dislocated shoulder, the injury to his thigh, and on. He tell them how each wound was treated for the best possible recovery.

None of them flinch with the details.

Supes sits cross-legged beside him, holding his hand down for puppy-Leo to sniff his fingers. Easy, gently, Supes lays the puppy in his lap and pets his ears with one hand while the other goes out to the stiff-backed Karmen (who is weakening in the face of Kal’s most sincere it’s okay, it’s really okay).

“We coulda done more,” Charlie snaps out, wires sparking viciously by the television (neither B nor Supes bat an eye). “Doctor Poehler shot him.”

“Yes,” the Batman agrees calmly, “and Red Robin is accustomed to dealing with violence. I’ve spent years training him to know what to do in those situations. He knew how to turn to make sure the shot wouldn’t be fatal if not avoidable. You four, however, have had no such training, or the years needed to perfect it. One day, perhaps, but not yet.”

Charlie stutters a little, looking up at the Batman with hurt eyes, trying to understand how they weren’t at fault somehow.

“I watched the video feed,” Batman informs him, “Red Robin gave you the option to run. He would have gotten you out first and foremost, then come back for the others. You chose to stay and help, make sure his plan was executed. You put yourselves at risk just as much as he did.”

And Charlie’s lower lip trembles, his fists so tight with angry that Karmen finally pulls herself away from Supes’ inviting aura to grip both his wrists, trying to make him calm down. It doesn’t stop a
bulb exploding overhead that makes Caroline flinch and Charlie feel instantly bad enough to concentrate better because the doctors were *right about him*. He didn’t try *hard enough* when he needed to and he just *needs* to think and concentrate…

The gloved hand on his shoulder is warm and grounding, the Batman tilting his scary white eyes to look right at him.

“Red, his team, the Titans, the JLA, we understand the possibility of injury doing what we do. We accept it. Red accepts it just as he’s done for years. We do what we can to avoid it when all possible, but in the instances we *can’t*, we train on how to defend ourselves and the innocent people we protect.”

And just *whoom* and there’s a little blonde boy in Supes’ lap, wiggling to stand up and come within a foot of the Batman, “but—!” Leo starts almost desperately.

The Batman shakes his head a little, “you did everything *right* and everything you could do in the situation.”

Karmen finally lets go of Charlie, but the Batman just keeps his hand right there for just in case.

Leo huffs, back teeth grinding (and well, that just takes him right back to when Dick was about that age, still angry about the boots and long cape until B finally gave in. Really, the pixie boots were all Dick’s idea in the first place).

“Someday,” and *thanks for stepping in here, Kal*. “Someday, *if* you make the decision to do what we do, you’ll have to train hard, just like we do. And…it’s *unfortunate*, but you’ll get hurt, too. You’ll put yourself in front of people that *can’t* defend themselves like you can. You will be the only thing that stands between the bad people and the good people.”

And Leo, Leo falters a little, falling silent, his form shrinking to fall back into the blonde puppy. This time, Kal takes the puppy, holds him against the shield on his chest with one arm, other hand gently rubbing, stroking, petting, relaying comfort.

A beat of silence and Karmen leans over, gently strokes down his furry body, too. And gently, easily, the lights stop flickering and the toys right themselves in the silence. Charlie’s thin shoulders slump under the hand, his face so sad and upset but not angry anymore.

Gently, B presses at the right sides of the cowl and slides the thing back, away from his face, looking up with crystal blue eyes. And this…isn’t the face any of them expected to see under the mask because he looks like such a nice man and he’s so handsome and—

“Those choices,” B starts in his normal voice, “are ones you’ll have to figure out on your own and in your own time. But, whatever you decided, we are still going to be here if or when you need us.”

And Caroline gets to her feet, shuffling forward a little bit with teary eyes because…because it wasn’t *their fault* and Mr. Batman wasn’t just going to make them use their powers like the doctors did. She *believes* him without cheating.

B opens his arms to her a second time, his eyes gentle, but this time Charlie, Charlie who also hates, *hated* when they hurt him to make him do it *right* is so utterly *relieved* that the two crowd right up against the yellow oval on his chest and no, *Caroline* is the one crying because he’s *not*.

B rubs a hand down their backs, rocking back to sit with a child on each thigh, in each arm, and let them do what they need to do.
Karmen, her face suddenly pale, just bites out, “and—and if we never want to again?” If we never want to be forced to use our powers ever again?

B gives her a slight nod while he starts rocking gently, “then you never have to. No one will make you.”

At that, Caroline’s small hand fists on B’s bicep as tight as she can and Charlie’s back bows over, his forehead against the armor padding on the shoulder. And the puppy perks up, raising up on his paws. It’s a good sign when his tail starts wagging.

“It’s not we don’t want to help,” the eldest child rushes out, “it’s not that—!”

Kal pauses in stroking Leo to hold up a hand, “there are a lot of metas that don’t do what we do, Karmen. They live regular, everyday lives and don’t have to use their powers, and that’s okay, too. Initially, you’ll have to learn to control them so you can live with humans and not give yourselves away, but many people do it just fine.”

And this strong little girl, the leader of the four, finally seems crumble a little around the edges, her arms coming around to hold herself tight and she just has to slow down and breathe because there’s nothing wrong here…

Kal leans over to scoop her up the moment her lungs stutter, hitch, and her heart pounds faster; he holds the older children in his lap to hold close so he and B have the four held in a comfortable embrace. With his cheek on top Karmen’s dark head while she shakes and scrunches her eyes closed but the tears leak out anyway and get all over the House of El symbol on his chest. Kal doesn’t even give a damn, just cuddles the puppy close in one arm and the fragile, unbearably strong child in the other.

“I promise, once you have your control down, you never, ever have to use your powers again. Not ever, okay?”

And Karmen is nodding a little too fast with one hand over her face because Superman wouldn’t lie, he can’t lie or he wouldn’t be Superman…right?

**

Diana knocks politely, waiting.

The doors slide open, and the smaller ones look up at her with big eyes.

“Good afternoon, young ones,” she smiles at them gently, just in regular clothes, jeans and a t-shirt. “I hope you may have some time…?” She’s carrying a copy of Shel Silverstein’s Where the Sidewalk Ends.

Karmen blinks because it’s Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman asking them for their time. “Um, yes?” She steps aside to let Diana come in with her aura of power around her like a cape.

**

And Vic…is really a kid person without knowing he’s a kid person (since, well, still pretty much a kid himself sometimes, right?) until he’s got a whole lot of Charlie standing in the center of his living area, fiddling with his fingers. And Vic can just feel the kid trying so hard to keep his composure, his control resolute. Buried in the depths and the deeps of his electro-neurons and synaptic impulses, he can feel the kid’s power right on the surface, strained and tense enough to start giving Vic a headache.
He needs to talk to Red about this kid and the stress he puts on himself to stay in control as much as he can because the poor kid looks miserable as hell. He runs his systems check quickly before kneeling down in front of the kid.

“All right, little man,” he grins down, “hit me.”

Charlie looks down at the extended hand with a confused frown.

Vic takes his hand and slaps it on his, “it’s a low five, buddy. Just like that. Try it again. Hit me.”

Charlie feels a little warmer when he does and Cyborg smiles widely. “All right, my man! Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

**

“C’mon, you need to have some fun with it, little dude.” BB smiles down at Leo the puppy and changes himself into a husky, tongue lolling around.

Leo sniffs a little and whines, but BB yips a little and takes off at a running jump. When the puppy doesn’t move, seems frozen, the husky returns gently, tail whipping back and forth, nudging the smaller dog with his nose. The puppy starts at a cowering walk, tail hanging between his wobbly legs. The husky continues the easy encouragement, taking off at a trot with a bark over a shoulder. The puppy finally trots to keep up.

BB falls on his back, paws in the air, wiggling. The puppy follows suit, wiggling on his back, kicking into the air with all four legs.

Then they’re up again, BB jumping, twisting. Leo tries to coordinate his limbs to do it too. He fails but tries again with BB’s encouraging bark. And running, just full out, all around the huge training hall, running the way dogs should do. BB realizes his legs are longer, his stride hitting and tries to pace so Leo can keep up. They go a few laps, barking and yipping at one another. If they were human, they’d be laughing.

Then BB changes it up.

In mid-stride, he changes into a cat, all graceful and sleek where there was once power and muscle. Leo stutters a little, his ears changing in reaction, becoming cat’s ears on top his head.

It scares him, the suddenness, the fact that it can be done that fast. His bark is a scared, alarmed noise.

BB changes back, scoops the puppy up, pats him gently until the younger finally relaxes enough to make his ears change back.

“No worries, guy. It takes practice, right?”

The puppy’s big eye meet BB’s and the tongue licking him just makes BB fall on his back and laugh and laugh.

**

And the whirlwind coming through the door, make everyone else pretty much take cover.

Because when Miguel and Cassie get together, shit gets real. The mountain of Target bags they’re carrying just puts an exclamation point at the end of that.
The four children that just had pancakes for the first time blink at the two Titans suddenly plying them with shopping bags and chirping excitedly (because they’ve been wearing those horrible tunics and pants from that place and just, no, no, not anymore). At Miguel’s urging, Caroline starts gently taking things out of the bags he has strewn around the Communal Floor couch and oh, oh how— she gasps gently, holding up the pink t-shirt with hearts and flowers all over it and it’s so shiny and just… her eyes are HUGE and she’s utterly speechless.

With a hand around BB’s wrist, Cassie gets Charlie to open one of his bags and he holds up the green shirt with a T-Rex printed on it! It’s so—!! Just so…

“Hey guy, that is fricking sweet,” BB grins down at him. “You’re going to look totally cool, right?”

Raven smiles down at him and holds out a pair of tennis shoes also decorated with pre-historic animals. She enjoys his high squeak of surprise and pleasure.

Kon kneels beside Karmen, grinning as he doles out one of her bags and gestures for her to go on and look. Her tentative hands touch his heart a little, her brows furrowed as she brings out the t-shirts and smart sweater combos (because, seriously, did Red help you pick that shit out? Sigh) with plaids and solids mixed in and…

“Oh,” Karmen whispers gently, her fingers running over the patterns done in the sweater. She’s trembling a little, blinking rapidly with her hair unclipped around her face, but Kon…well, Kon sees it and whoa, chick freaking out, I need someone else here—

But he gently touches the back of her hand with the tips of his fingers, easing in her space a little.

“If you don’t like it,” he leans in a little to keep it between them, “it’s okay to say so. Miguel won’t get upset with you and Cassie will ask you what you like to wear, okay? You don’t—“

He flinches a little when she sniffles softly. “Uh, hey…"

“Thank-you.” Whispered low.

And Kon just remembers to make it easy when he squeezes her hand a little. “No problem, ‘kay? Glad you like it. Maybe, though, you should go try some of it on? Make sure it fits and stuff.”

And yes, yes, she grins up at him with watery eyes, but that smile is just what he’s looking for.

**

And she bites her lip hard.

Robin (*Damian*) merely raises a brow at her over his mask, but at least she can see his eyes and that’s…not so bad?

“It is peanut butter and strawberry jelly,” he gestures toward the white bread on the plate in front of her.

“Oh,” she nods, a little too quickly.

His eyes narrow a little. “You have not had this before.”

Caro bites her lip harder and shakes her head.

“—tt— nor did I before Grayson insisted. He claimed this,” Robin gesture at the two halves of the sandwich he made for her, “is an American staple. I do not see the appeal.”
But, she’s still staring at the simple bread like it might reach out to harm her and—

Ah. Robin pulls out the chair next to her and lifts one half of the sandwich, taking a liberal bite even with his slight aversion to it. And for a child not yet ten, she watches carefully, avidly, obviously a little suspicious (something those doctors have done to her, would Father only allow him a little time to visit the incarcerated scientists), waiting for some adverse reaction from the food.

When he shows no signs of pain or tiredness, Caroline gingerly lifts the other half and takes the smallest of bites. Robin says nothing further as no other explanation is needed, and his mind can remain carefully blank while her bites get bigger (and yes, child, I am able to hear your stomach rumble).

Robin finishes his half while she finally devours the rest of hers, and he brings the makings back to the table, creating another sandwich in front of her rather than at the counter where she is unable to watch. He is certain Pennyworth would impart perfect fractions of the substances on either side of the bread, making the sides even, cutting off the crusts. However, he is certain the child will not fault him for more jelly on one half than peanut butter the other.

He puts the two pieces together, lays the sandwich on her empty plate. Those little hands snatch it up like the last thing in the world to eat. She seems sated after the second sandwich is gone.

Robin hums a little, “another?”

Caroline just smiles a little shyly and shakes her head because that was so good, wait until she tells Charlie. The young vigilante just gives a sharp nod and puts the supplies away. He puts a glass down, pours her a glass of milk straight from the carton. She sips gently.

“R-Robin?”

“What is it child?”

And she's biting her lips again, looking at him with those eyes and standing by the table. "I-I'm—"

And Robin holds up a gauntleted hand, "you are making a comparison. Therefore, you must have sufficient evidence to support your conclusion."

Caroline blinks up at him, "yes, but I don't want to make you mad at me."

In reply, the fourteen year old takes a knee (looking very much like his father, Mr. Batman) and holds out both arms wordlessly. He’s…not hesitant about it but not comfortable either.

Timidly, she shuffles closer, waiting to be snapped at, to be hurt, to be thrown away...

And Robin, Robin just allows his arms to wrap easily around the tiny child against his chest, being careful with his gauntlets, spreading out his fingers on her back in an attempt to warm her slightly cool form. He remembers how Grayson hugs when he is worried or when Robin has done something dangerous that frightened him. He remembers Father's desperate hold once Darkseid released him from death. He remembers Drake opening his arms, folding around him with strength and support. He remembers that, as silly a notion as it is, those moments comforted him, made him understand the shadowy definition behind family.

And Caroline catches only glimpses of this boy, blinking at his determination to correct his former wrongs to do the right thing. He has an obsession to throw off the lifetime of training, of beliefs, and dark and snarly-feeling anguish that he did so much of it wrong and didn’t know it at the time. She feels his need to make certain the important people in his life are strong and protected. She feels his
pain and anxiety that he cannot always be perfect, no matter how hard he strives. And he knows, one
day, one of those he cares for will not come home, but that will not stop him from trying. He will
mourn with his whole being, but it won’t stop him.

Her small hands fist in his cape, tears in her eyes for this Robin. And this...this lets her comfort him a
little too because he's thinking of how nice it felt sometimes to not have to stand so tall. And
maybe...maybe this is the hug she likes best.

*

Dick smiles gently, watching this moment from Timmy’s bed on the procured laptop. He’s got one
leg on the floor, sharing the bed with the younger, half-drugged vigilante (since, well, keeping him in
bed takes coordination and cheating—a lot of cheating, but it’s okay, he’s got a lot of helpers on that
front).

“We’re keeping this for prosperity,” Tim slurs a little, a silly half-smile on his face that makes Dick
that stupid sort of warm. Sitting next to the guy after that scare gives him a whole lot of finally doing
something right.

“B is going to want to see this, you know,” Dick grins down at him.

Tim hums a little, hands resting on his laptop, listing. The older man just winds an arm around his
shoulders to direct that listing motion right against his side, happy when Timmy doesn’t fight it. The
weight is solid, comforting (getting him back) and Dick can’t help but nuzzle the top of his head,
snuffling against his hair.

The languishing laugh rolls down his spine, but Dick represses the reactionary shudder (he and Jay
need to eventually have a talk about this. Seriously).

“…Dick?”

“Mm?”

“You guys don’t have to stay, m’ okay. Really.” Tim slurs softly, not moving, but his hand grips
Dick’s wrist for emphasis. “Glad you guys...came to get me but not going anywhere for a while,
okay? Can’t leave the kids.”

And yeah, the Titans, JLA, and Bats all pretty much banked on that, Timmy. Like none of us know
you. Dick’s arm around his back tightens a little.

“I’m coming back whenever I can, Tim.”

“…Gotham...work...”

“Yup, I do that, and Gotham is good, don’t worry. B is there with Jay, Dami, and Steph when he’s
not here. Cass came in, too.”

“Need...to be up soon. Help out.”

“Nope!” Dick counters cheerfully, “you need to heal and watch the littles be adorable. Then you can
catch-up on the data pool, run comms, put a training program together, that stuff. That’s what we’re
going to need for a while.”

And the younger yawns widely, his grip on Dick’s wrist loosening, “gotta....the Mission, Dick.”
Gently, he starts swaying his upper body just lightly enough *not* for Tim to notice, “you’ve been fighting for so long, Tim. Moving from one crisis to another. It’s *okay* to take this break, I promise.”

The weight at his side deepens, the muscles under his hand relaxing in degrees. “Can’t…let you…them *down*. Have to keep—fighting.”

His fucking *heart*. Oh Tim… “Never, Timmy. You’ve *never* let me down. Not when you were my Robin or Bruce’s.”

The low, slurring laugh is something very unfunny, something so twisted even with the guy pretty much half gone. “Course I did…didn’t—keep—me.”

“Tim…” and Dick draws back enough to look down at the head on his shoulder, but Tim’s already passed out again, limp and breathing deeply. “That’s not the reason,” he says gently to the head on his shoulder, scooting the computer off Tim’s lap so he can wrap the other arm around him and shift them both to lay down in the medical bed, holding Tim gingerly. “That was *never* the reason.”

**

Miguel is so *stoked*, you have *no* idea. He smiles widely and holds out the touchpad to the four children by themselves in the common room (he is not going to think about how they are simply *sitting*, silent and still on the couches, touching *nothing*).

Karmen takes the device warily, looking down at the video playing. Her eyebrows come together in confusion as Leo and Charlie lean over to look too. Caroline just blinks up at him with her *a-dor-a-ble* little smile. Miguel takes a knee and opens his arms wide for her, no need to ask, he hugs as a matter of *fact*.

She giggles, actually *giggles* at him and flings herself in his arms. Miguel sweeps her up, swings her around a little with a wonderfully boisterous laugh because she only tolerates this kind of free hug from *him*. She’s so careful and cautious around the JLA and Titans.

“What is this place called, Bunker?” Leo asks, eyes not leaving the screen.

“*Amigo!* This is a playground.” Miguel manages to wrangle Caroline to his back, letting her hold on around his neck. “And we need to *go* here, right now, *ándale*! Shoes!”

The three children stare at him slack-jawed. They’re going to go *here*? Charlie leaps up from the couch, “we’re going?! *Really*?! *We can*?”

Miguel smiles again, “yes, yes! Right now. C’mon, shoes and let’s go!”

Leo doesn’t even question it, just leaps up too, running full tilt out to get his shoes. Karmen nods at him, gently placing the touch pad down before she follows. Charlie darts past her, and Miguel just follows with Caroline bouncing at his back.

On the way to the transporters, Hal stops them, arms crossed over his chest and a deep frown on his face. Miguel’s heart sinks just a little because *busted, man*.

“Uh-hu!” Hal wags a finger at the group, “no one even *asked me* if I wanted to go, too. That’s not okay.”

“Oh,” Charlie gasps out and comes right up to the casually dressed Green Lantern, reaches up with both hands to grab one of Hal’s, his eyes full of *excited*, “you’ve never been to a playground, too?!
Comes with us, okay Hal? You can come too.”

And even though he’d seen some horrific things as the Green Lantern and in the Lantern Corps., Hal Jordan feels the pressure build up in his chest, shoving itself against his eyes, making them hot and full. He forces himself to laugh, not to let his emotions touch the excitement vibrating from these kids (even the oldest who looks oh so calm, but is really shifting from foot to foot impatiently).

“That’s awesome! Thanks, Charlie. I seriously wanted to go.” He has Charlie up on his shoulders, winking at the others, ring flashing on his finger, “I’ve got dibs on the slide first!”

* 

Caroline’s hands are fisted in Miguel’s shirt, her face buried in his neck and she’s shaking like a little leaf. Every muscle in her body is tense, her jaw clenched, eyes squeezed shut.

“All right, all right bebe,” he waves Hal away to take the other three who are crowded around them off to play. None of them even move.

Miguel hits his communicator and—

Raven is just walking from seemingly nowhere, dressed casually in her Rachel Roth attire. BB, decidedly not green with the holographic projection to hide his skin tone, pointy ears, and fangs, paces lazily beside her with his hands shoved in his pockets and an easy smile. He lets her kneel by Miguel and Caroline (so many, too many, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts) while he shakes the others up a little.

“Leo, dude, how’s it hanging?” He ruffles the guy’s hair and holds up a hand for Charlie, who grins immediately and gives him a high-five just like Vic showed him! “Char-lie, I so totally wanted to come too, right? Rave tagged along since she thinks the swings are stellar. Karmen, chickie, we need to chill more, ‘kay?” Her eyes don’t leave Caroline at all.

He crouches in front of them, lowering his voice, “there’s a whole lot of people here, right? So that’s a lot of pressure, you know? Rave’s going to help her, so we’re going to go play for a few minutes and let her do her thing. When she’s better, she’s going to come play with us, right?”

“Are you sure it’s okay?” Charlie asks quickly before anyone else can.

“Totally! We can’t do powers here because, you know, these people are probably normal and stuff, but we can sure as hell play!” Now he’s grinning wide and bright.

“You two go on,” Karmen nods her head to the equipment, “stay with Hal and Garfield. I’ll wait for Caroline.”

The boys hesitate while BB stays crouched, waiting, not in any hurry at all.

“Okay,” Leo finally nods, “just—“

Karmen nods sharply, cutting him off. Hal and BB go with Charlie and Leo while Karmen (who feverently wishes Red was here, too) stays with Miguel, Raven, and Caroline.

Gently, so gently, Raven cradles Caroline’s tear-stained face between her palms, their foreheads pressed together, Raven humming softly, sweetly. And the pressure…all the press of thoughts and wants and needs and pain and hope…and of it just lifts and the intensity eases off so much that Caroline can finally breathe.
Her knees weak, the child just lets Raven hold her weight, letting Raven lift her up and hold on with both arms. It’s a hug, too, isn’t it? Woozily, Caroline blinks up at Raven’s small smile.

“It’s better now,” she whispers, “thank-you.”

“Yes,” Raven return as gently, “one day, it will not be so overwhelming. For now, I will help you.”

“Okay.”

Miguel’s heart climbs out of his throat, and he starts off in rapid Spanish, apologizing since he didn’t know.

Raven’s careful touch on his arm is echoed with Caroline’s hand on his wrist. “You couldn’t have known,” she tells him with a smile. “But, can we wait for a minute? Then…then I can go play too?”

And Karmen sighs a little in relief under her breath, looking at the two adults that are so worried and they care…

“Yes, yes una preciosa, whatever you want,” and he gingerly hugs her with one arm. “Perdón, perdóname.”

Caroline just hugs him hard so he knows it’s all okay. Everything…is going to be okay.

**

Even light-headed, he manages to get his damn leg down, to try getting up. Getting his feet under him.

He doesn’t even make it half-way to the door.

A blur of red and he’s back in bed, leg up in traction.

Wally looks totally unrepentant. “Seriously, Bats and Dick already warned me about you.”

Shit.

“I—“

“Need to stay in bed and rest? Sure do!” Wally grins like an asshole, plopping down in the seat by his bed. “And I promised on my unborn children you were going to do just that.”

“I don’t need a utility belt, you know.”

“Maybe. But you do need coffee, and I can make sure none will be had.”

“You sadistic bastard.”

“Right up there with Doctor Light, man!” And Wally cackles a little, sitting back for a long shift.

**

And Dick must know everything. He as answers before they have questions, and it’s kind of nice to have someone that will tell them anything they want to know.

He is, however, going to get them in trouble with Mr. Batman (“You can call me Bruce. It’s fine.”) because they should be studying the books and things he gave them so he knows where they should
be with school work. They should be answering the questions on the worksheets currently in their individual bedrooms on the desks so he can gauge where the curriculum should start (Leo loves the Science book, Mr. Batman, thank-you, thank-you!).

But Dick said this was important and they needed to come with him right now. Karmen had been preparing herself for the worst, afraid of what they might be walking into when he ushered them into the Commons Room and up on the couches.

The stuff (popcorn? What is…oh, oh!) he gives them to eat is salty but very nice and fluffy and crunchy, and he starts the movie immediately. Gravely, he tells them that everyone even the Bats needed to have a movie night occasionally because the mind has to rest at some point (Caroline understood immediately but she thinks not the way he meant), and the others would be coming to watch movies, too!

This one is from a company called Disney, and it’s a fairytale. All of them know that much, but the genie is so much funnier than they ever imagined!

Dick laughs at the genie’s antics, freely, and so it’s okay to laugh when those strange things happen. And he seems to know when they don’t understand why some things are funny, he’s nice enough to pause the movie and explain it so they do. Even Karmen is glad he’s so patient.

When Superman (Clark) floats in, he laughs a little, looking at Dick, who grins back unrepentant, and he changes super-fast into jeans and a plaid shirt, settling down on the floor by Leo to watch with them. He sometimes sings along with the music, making Charlie giggle (“Prince Aliiii fabulous he Ali a Bab-waaaaa”). Diana and Vic make their way down half-way through the movie and take up more space on the floor and the other side of the couch while Wally pretty much perches on the back of the couch by Dick’s shoulder.

By the end of the movie, he’s got Charlie in his lap sharing popcorn while Caroline is in Dick’s, Karmen is sitting next to Diana, and Clark has somehow reached up for Leo. When the credits roll, the kids cheer loud and happy since the movie felt so nice.

“Okay, okay! Next up,” Dick announces, pausing to look through the DVD cases on the floor, bending in a seemingly impossible move without displacing Caroline perched in his the niche of his folded legs.

“Beauty and the Beast.” Diana votes.

“The Emperor’s New Groove!” Wally chortls.

“Finding Nemo?” Arthur just has to.

“Naw, Cars, man. They’ll love it.” Vic grins and winks at Charlie.

“The Lion King.” Clark loves that one, and it’s Lois’ favorite too.

“Hm,” Dick lays out the DVD cases, “or the first Toy Story. Okay kiddos. Pick one!”

And that…

The four stiffen up a little, looking back and forth at each other with twinges of fear racing up their spines because is this a test? Will they get punished for choosing wrong?

“How about,” Dick interjects gently, rubbing Caroline’s back (the looks between the gathering pretty much made that clear) “all of you close your eyes and pick one? Okay?”
Caroline’s eyes are wide when she looks up, biting her lip.

“It’s okay.” Dick smiles down at her, “it’s the one that looks good to you. Pick whichever one you want to watch.”

Karmen’s eyes dart around to the JLA members quickly before she gives a nod, and Caroline chews on her lips, small hands touching Tangled. She visibly hesitates before picking it up, holding the DVD case to her chest with white knuckles and her eyes a little fearful still.

Charlie swallows and reaches out fast to get Monsters, Inc. He shrinks down just a little against Wally, waiting.

Leo eyes Clark for a moment before he picks up 101 Dalmatians so slowly, watching for a reaction. Karmen doesn’t even hesitate to take up Finding Nemo, holding it with challenge in her eyes, daring anyone to say she chose wrong.

“All good choices,” Arthur nods. “Which one first then?”

The four kids stare at him because they chose…right?


“Monsters, Inc. it is,” Wally speeds over, holding his hand out for the disc with a grin. Charlie finally smile back and hands over the case.

More popcorn is made and juice is consumed. The laughter coming from the Commons Room drifts out into the hall, and in his drugged sleep, a small smile curves Red Robin’s mouth while Bart grins in his chair at the bedside.

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And, really. It’s hard to find fault with a bunch of self-sacrificing superheroes when they’re being so damn sincere and apologetic and shit (why the fuck are you apologizing about letting us do our job? What. The. Hell?). Anyone that knows him knows Supes pulls off that stupid kicked puppy look like a boss and usually gets his way in all matters JLA or otherwise. It’s probably one of the reasons Red started helping the guy out with Kon in the first place (“I just don’t know how to connect with him, and I just want to get to know him, to help him if he’ll let me. What can I do, Red? Geeze, just give the guy the Academy Award and be done with it, fuck, dude, that is your real superpower. Don’t think you’re fooling anyone. At. All.).

Well, after the whole thing (which wasn’t at all what he expected), and the JLA took off to let them talk it out a minute since, well, he’d kinda gone from the whole shit, shit bombs and dying to ass hats with guns and weaponized chemicals and oh, let me just gather these littles to bring them along for the crazy Bat ride we’re on. Wheeeeee.

With his fuzzy blanket, carafe of coffee almost gone (so sad but BB will totally make him more if he’s guilty enough), and leg propped up on Raven’s thigh (because no, she’s not evil and yes, Kon, she likes me more), Tim takes in a little bit of chilling right here time with his people. He’s all kinds of happy to see them perfectly fine (except for KF, dude, don’t think I’m not seeing you limp and shit) even if they should be returned to their regularly scheduled lives right about now because, well, mid-week right?.

“So, this doesn’t seem like bad bad or anything,” Miguel starts out, arms folded over his chest.
“Right?”

The heads swivel toward him, and Tim calmly pours the last of the coffee in his mug. “I’m on the fence. Fifty-fifty at this point. We see how this works in practice, then I’ll make a sound judgement.”

And the floor opens up.

“They didn’t ask for any more access to our systems than they already have,” Kon points out. “More divisions of the alarm kinda seems logical. Like, three-alarm fire and stuff.”

Cassie just scoffs, “they have Vic, don’t they? No offense to Red but he can hack our systems should he need to.”

“True.” Tim allows because hey, man, he’s not half computer after all.

“I mean, they aren’t going to crack into every mission we get in on. They’re way too busy for that.” BB throws out.

“Well…who knows? It’s apparent they don’t trust us like they used to—“ and Kid Flash doesn’t need to finish that thought because, well, it’s there for everyone. Really. Well, it was twenty minutes ago. Shit.

Raven finally sighs and, yup, the table gives her attention since she is the very last person to get involved with the politics of being a Titan. Always has been. She’s been content to sit back and let Dick or Tim or BB or Cassie take the lead, deal with the JLA or any other fallout from their activities. She’s never wanted to be in that ring (not that anyone could blame her).

“From what I have been able to gather,” she starts slowly, “the aura here has not been one of domination or doubt in our capabilities.” Her eyes close momentarily, and under the table, BB takes the hand not on Tim’s calf and lets her squeeze the hell out of it. “The JLA are concerned, remorseful. These are the feelings I was able to gather from them. I believe this incident has given them a great deal to consider.”

“We have handled ourselves since re-forming the team,” Cassie inserts needlessly. “Where is this coming from all of a sudden?”

Tim sips his coffee, looking carefully at the middle of the table since nope, nothing to see here.

KF and Kon are doing a little of the same. Hm. What’s that about?

“All right,” BB holds up a hand. “Let’s just say, hypothetically—

Red’s eyes narrow, his hand comes up, cutting BB off. This discussion is going to get messy and little ears don’t need to be there for that. He doesn’t even need to turn. “All right. You’ve got all you’re going to get. C’mon.” His eyes fix at a spot on the wall.

Karmen appears, looking slightly irritated that she was found out. Her back is straight, expecting some type of punishment for being where she isn’t supposed to be, but…first off, she and the other need to know what may happen to them. They are already fully aware this situation will not be permanent and knowing the next step will help her and Leo prepare themselves so they can take care of Charlie and Caroline. Secondly, none of them have seen Red in days and they don’t know if he’s okay or not and they need to know what the next part of the plan is and what they need to do. They need to know their duties because the JLA and the Titans and the Bats have come to play and talk and stuff, but not to tell them what to do next.
“Hey,” The man waves his good hand at her.

Watching the Titan’s every move even though they were really nice and hung out with them while Red was down, she cautiously approaches, taking in everything—his bare face and blue eyes, his arm in a sling, his leg with one of those walking cast things with Velcro straps.

“Exploring or eavesdropping?” He arches a brow at her, and, yeah, this guy is probably Red. His voice is very similar, not as growly, but the smirk is the exact same.

And Karmen thinks he’s very…nice to look at. His eyes are clear, dark blue. Even bruised and beaten, she thinks he could take on the other metas on his team and win.

“The computer said you were awake,” she stands by his chair, looking up at him with those dark eyes of an old soul. “A-are you okay? Mr. Batman said you were hurt badly.”

He shrugs, unconcerned. “Meh. I’ve had worse. It’s not fun, and yeah, it hurts, but no permanent damage. Have you guys been hanging out with the Titans and the JLA?”

She nods quickly, “Diana brought us some good books and took us to the Grand Canyon, and Clark let us fly around with him, and, and we went to a playground where there were other kids. And BB is trying to help Leo and Vic Charlie, but…but Red—”

“They promised us we wouldn’t have to if we didn’t want to.”

“Good. Did BB give Charlie a ride?” Grinning over at said teammate (who looks affronted since, well duh).

“Yeah,” her eyes sparkle a little, and what Mr. Batman promised could wait until later, “he gave us all a ride, Red. It was so cool.”

“All right. I’m glad to hear everyone’s been keeping you guys busy while I was out of commission. You four are totally going to make a list of places you want to see and we’re going to do that, okay?”

“Well…” she starts and hesitates, fiddling with her fingers, “the plan, Red… what do we do next? What…what’s going to happen to us?” Because yes, it’s been so nice hanging out with everyone, but she knows they can’t stay here forever. The JLA and the Titans are superheroes, they all have other things they need to do.

His grin widens a little, “Well, first, I think I’m going to tell you the big secret since I’m pretty sure I can trust you, Karm.”

The ten-year old straightens because of course he can trust her.

“My name, my real name is Tim. Tim Drake.”

And her eyes blow wide, mouth a little ‘O’ of surprise because he told her his secret identity (sure Caroline already did, but him telling her is different, him telling her means he really, really trusts her).


He gives an amused nod. “Yup. You can still call me Red if you want, but Tim is okay, too when I’m not in the mask.” He moves a little to try facing her, but Raven stubbornly keeps her hand on his calf since, you know, mother hens. Geeze, they get more touchy-feely when they think he died and stuff. It’s cute, really it is.

“And the plan: right now, we need to work on introducing you, Leo, Charlie, and Caroline into
things you’ve missed, cultural and societal norms since the intellectual is there for all of you. We get you caught up for lack of a better term. This will help you integrate into society and give you references you’ll need to interact in the world outside Paeradium.”

Forehead scrunched, Karmen takes it all in, and she finally nods. “And after?”

“We’ll talk when the time comes. For right now, the JLA is fine with you four staying here, which is safest for you. Caroline only had to deal with a few hundred minds at a time, Charlie only had tech associate with the compound since they had him completely cut off from the internet, Leo hasn’t had any kind of instruction on shape shifting, and you’ve only had few materials to work with. All of you were limited. None of it is your fault, any of you, but we do need some more extensive training.”

Karmen sighs at him a little, looking down at his arm still in in the sling and then at the Titans.

“And we totally want in on that,” BB grins at her, getting exactly where she’s coming from, and gives an eye slide to their fearless, beaten up leader. “Red is going to get a training plan together for you guys, and we’re going to help. You guys aren’t going to have to go it alone.”

The table begins with a rousing agreement.

KF flashes her a wink and a peace sign.

Superboy claims “we totally have your back, okay?”

Raven merely bestows once of her rare smiles.

Wonder Girl claims training is much better with multiple teachers rather than just one.

Miguel laughs a little with a “you know, we have to stick together, yeah?”

And BB gives her the most perspective, “someday, you know, if you little dudes decide to go that way, we’d like to work with you. We can start you down that road the right way, you dig?”

And Karmen...Karmen kind of wishes Caroline is here because they all look so sincere and welcoming. They’ve all been so nice and it’s not like have to be, or that this will last. It’s not something she can trust, not with where they’ve come from, but if she just lets them have a tiny amount of belief, just a small amount, then that wouldn’t hurt too much when they would have to leave, right? It wouldn’t break any of them. It wouldn’t, she and Leo would make sure of it.

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Really, Kon. Not only is this embarrassing as hell, but you are so going to pay for it later, you ass hat. The meta seems to know what Tim is thinking without really trying, but, well, superhuman strength pretty much gives him an out on shit like carrying your team mates like fainting princesses and shit. And it’s really not the first time, he’s been carried by his bro, also he’s carried Kon’s ass out of the line of fire (more than once you dick) when there’s a little too much Kryptonite and destroy everything kind of shit around, but most of those instances are full of unconsciousness, so they don’t really count. This, however, is bordering on mortification mode. Dude, do you even know how long I had to be on fake crutches? Seriously, I got this.

But even fucking better: B, Jay, Dick, and Dami are just hanging out in medical when he gets there, like they’ve got a whole lot of random time on their hands, and this shit is a whole lot of embarrassing, for the love of fuck, Kon, put me down.

The grip on his side and knee tighten, the guy’s eyes sliding to his grimace with a whole bunch of try
“Stay there, man. Seriously. Don’t make me call Tam.”

Kon nods, his chin jutting out, arms over his chest. “We’re going to go check the Tower, but we’ll be back, man, to finish the discussion.”

KF just picks up Karmen, tossing her around, “c’mon, round up the others. Field Trip!”

“Oh!” Karmen waves at him from over Bart’s shoulder, “I’m glad you’re awake, Red! Um, Tim!”

“We’re totally going to hang out when you guys get back,” he replies with a grin.

Jay cuts him off as the guy lifts his hurt leg back up into the (torture) traction device, apparently noticing the involuntary twinges in his hands when the pain intensifies. When he’s apparently good, Tim realizes…the doms and cowl are off (even Dami…wow) and all the Bats are staring at him. Like right at his face.

Just like that.

“Ah, yeah,” the spot on the wall is something interesting, “thanks…for, you know, coming after me. I—uh, I had it, a plan, but—“

And B is right there, looking down a little at him with that expression, making him cut off the stupid sounding gratitude and the hold is suddenly a little this side of desperate. Just like the time he came really fucking close with the Clench, and B was one worried asshole, pacing back and forth outside the medical bed in the Cave, willing his strength into Tim because dammit, he couldn’t lose another Robin (but was that really it? Shadowy memories of being pressed up against the warmth and strength of Bruce’s chest while the guy whispered against the top of his head, “Tim…Tim, fight. Don’t leave me…”). And the arms aren’t trying to hurt wrapped around him, but he’s not getting away, that’s for damn sure.

Tim just sighs a little, his cheek finding the epically padded shoulder of the Bat suit, and he’s got a handful of cape in a tight fist.

He laughs softly, “seriously, B. This is like, a heavy Monday, okay?”

The soft chuff is totally a score. Not everyone can make the Batman laugh. Just means he’s doing the job right.

“Damian already berated me enough, Tim.”

“Oh?” He draws back to arch a brow, “for what?”

And B just completely deadpans, “for the fact that you are reportedly an asshole.”

Jay dies (not literally, you fuckers), bending over and slapping his knee because, yeah, at least it’s a fucking family trait, right? Dick discreetly turns his back, but I see your shoulders shaking Dickie,
Laughing makes his damn wounds hurt, but totally worth it. Even if Dami is giving him that smug look. Oh well, let the demon have his moment.


"Aw, Baby Bird. You didn’t get my good looks, but at least you got something, right?" The guy scoots up a chair, plopping his ass down with a sharp grin. Dick and Dami do too, pulling up seats around his bed. B gets his own, still fighting not to grin since, you know, the night.

"Least it wasn’t your propensity for dying and shit since I’m still breathing, man. See? I have a pulse and everything."

"You’ll do it eventually, but never better, Timmy."

"Aw, let me dream, Jay. Explosions aren’t the only way to go, feel me?" And, yeah, yup. That’s him being the smug bastard this time.

Jay’s responding eyebrow is unimpressed.

Dami, however—“It isn’t for lack of effort, Drake. At least you had enough common sense to avoid fatal injuries this time. Good for you. Perhaps a cookie is in order.”

Douche. But, yeah, that’s the other, more amused smirk. “Yeah, yeah. Don’t think I’m missing any more vital organs and shit. So, totally score, right?"

“Steph is all kinds of pissed off,” Jay, sitting backwards, with his chin propped up on his crossed arms, tisks, “it was her turn for megalomaniacal bad guys this week.”

“I got there first, Jay, totally called dibs.”

“I call bullshit, Timmy,” Dick throws in, waving a hand, “take a number like the rest of us.”

“No way, Dick. I always get picked last for the Vigilante’s Olympics, and that’s monumentally unfair. Those bad guys were so mine.”

“You could have shared,” Dami turns his nose up a little, “honestly, Drake. The middle child must be overly greedy.”

Jay hitch’s a thumb over, “don’t let Baby Bat fool you. He was running elbows over assholes to get in the vents and find you.”

“—tt— a strange man in a van told me there was candy, Todd—“

“I keep telling you to stop talking to strangers unless you need to break open their faces.”

“Why do you believe I talk to them at all?” Dami has his phone out, doing something as unimpressive as this conversation apparently.

“’Cause you like to kick ass with feeling, Demon. Don’t think you’re foolin’ anyone.”

“Hn. If one must do something, at least do it right.” And the phone is held out to him since—

Ah. Shrapnel. Over-extension. The other meta was also, apparently, a dick bag. Tim looks up from the report, just gives an arched brow.
“He’ll live,” the younger Bat shrugs, “Barry Allen decided to step in.”

Tim hums, hands the phone back. “Thanks. I needed to know.”

“We have met before, you realize?” Dami deadpans and, wow, whole lot of B there.

Speaking of which, Bruce is activating the flat screens around medical to…

Display vid feeds.

Of him.

Getting the shit kicked out of him. Consistently.

What. The. Fuck.

Tim blinks at the multiple screen of some really gnarly fights. His eyes slide to B and back.

The others are suddenly very quiet, the previous light-hearted bantering gone to leave a bunch of subdued Bats looking at him with solemn eyes. The old nuances almost come back, rubbing the back of his neck, biting his lip, fingertips twitching for a keyboard or punching bag (you know, which one comes first); his eyes roam the feeds from the last two years of his vigilante career…a whole lot of shit someone must have found on his ghost drive.

Shit.

Just…

“This is a terrible reality show channel, B.” He draws out, that sharp smile taking over his face so he can use it to hide how fucked up watching this shit made his stomach feel.

“Not the time for jokes,” B replies, eyes all for him with Dick and Jay on either side of him, Dami standing right by Tim’s bad side, blocking any escape attempt.

Oh. Shit. Trapped. (And his fucking team probably knew this shit was coming dammit.)

“Okay,” he drawls out, mind working. “It’s terrible you’re doing this while I can’t realistically move much, but whatever. Say what you want to say,” and he motions to the screen with a sweeping hand.

“We’ve been—“ and Dick just sighs a little at him, a terrible expression on his face, “finding out more about the last two years, Timmy. It’s…not good even for a vigilante.”

“Don’t fuck around with it, Dick, he doesn’t go for that shit,” and Jay’s eyes…that tone is fucking not— “It looks a whole lot of bad we’re not okay with, Tim. At all.”

And his heart hammers again, hard because he’s trying to remember where the black and white from the ship, from the White Triad, from day and days of Tim Drake, CEO, screaming for help might be at on the drive… (That shit is still buried, has to be. No one, not even Vic is cracking it).

“Been a tough couple of fights,” he replies oddly numbing out, the words feel like they’re just rolling out from his lungs. “How much of this—“

“You’re aware your drive unlocked,” B answers in a tone that is very not Bruce or Batman or.

Dami straightens, arms falling to his sides because he caught Tim eyeing the fucking door. Dammit.
“You kept everything together,” Jay mildly comes back, still with that look too much concerned, too much calculation, “all the feeds, the reports. O’ course we took a look at it all.”

Tim nods slowly, “yeah. Yeah, I kept that shit together.”

“I could give you the numbers,” B starts, “the amount of injuries, the close calls, lack of food, sleep deprivation, all the instances of personal disregard to your own safety, Tim, but I’m sure you already know the statistics already.”

“Part of the Titan’s spreadsheets,” he answers, blinking because grey is eating around the edges of his vision, a wave of whoa making him feel like—the fucking coffee. Clark, you sir, are a dick.

“Mmhm,” Dick’s whole demeanor gets…angry. “Not okay. A whole few miles past that, actually.”

“It didn’t matter at the time,” he snarls out, “what mattered was saving innocent people, stopping bad guys, and keeping my team from dying. Fuck, I always plan on not coming back anyway. There’s always someone on second for if that shit—” And what the holy fuck did Clark give him? He slaps the hand he can move over his mouth, but too late.

All four of them perk right the hell up after that—

“Wait, wait, wait, that did not come out right at all, okay—“ sodium pentothal maybe. “I’m just saying—“

Dick is out of his damn chair, completely ignoring the hand Tim’s holding out to stop all the presses because he didn’t really mean that in the worst way, okay? Seriously.

“I am not some suicidal crime fighter, no. I just have shit ready in case someone else has to take over. That’s it.”

Dick hitches a thumb over his shoulder at the running screens, “that isn’t what this looks like, Timmy.

“Looks a lot like you don’t give a shit whether you make it back or not,” Jay fills in, his tone deeper, darker with something more.

“That’s not it,” but it sounds weak as shit to his own ears even though that’s the truth. “There’s always—“

“You are the most,” Dami waves a vague hand, “pragmatic, Drake. Of course you plan for every feasible contingency. However, what Grayson, Todd, Father, and I are trying to make you understand is how little you regard yourself. It is not acceptable.”

And Dami looks, sounds…worried. The only time he’s ever seen it was way back when they thought Dick might die in the cowl, blood loss express, and not close enough to the Cave before—Fuck, they all look so worried.

His eyes dart back to the screens, watching himself take an epic hit from Brother Blood.

His head getting fuzzy, Tim rubs his temple with his good hand, trying to focus, to get it together.

“The Titan protocols are extensive,” B points out mildly. “Tim, you’re a detective. The fact your team feels the need for these procedures, for the RRK, for all of it should tell you how far past the line you’re going.”
And, well, what the fuck do they want him to say? Realistically, what the hell do they expect from him?

“B—“

“Now you get why we’re concerned,” B’s hand lifts to the back of his neck, gloved fingers rubbing the tension, the knots. Dick steps closer, “now you get why we want you to keep us in the loop. You have to, from now on, Timmy. The Bats are part of your contingencies now.”

Jay, arms crossed over his chest, stands by his good leg, his eyes still blue but dark with whatever he’s thinking. “No more close calls like this, Baby Bird. Pick up the damn phone, send a text, an email, set up some automated shit. Something.”

And Dami’s glove presses against his ankle, the hold not tight but, well, pretty pissed off anyway. “Family, Drake. We are family.”

And Mother. Fucker.

Tim ducks his head a little, blinks rapidly because nope, fucking NOPE, he is not going to do this in front of them. Oh hell no. Crying on Dick was bad enough, dammit. But this, just this and these guys… and they came for him this time. They didn’t let him get himself out.

“We’re here for you, Tim.” B says gently, “we’re not letting go again. Do you understand?”

And, yeah, yeah, he does. A hard fight, a hard week, a hard month, a hard year becomes tinny, fake even to his ears after a while.

When he doesn’t feel like the impossible pressure in his chest is going to explode, he can look around at the four of them, the Bats, and finally, maybe, possibly, he can really believe again. Not enough to fracture things that can’t heal in a cast if things go south, but enough that he can stop fighting them so hard for every inch.

“Okay,” sounds wrecked as shit, but fuck if he doesn’t really mean it this time. “Okay.”

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Diana raises a brow at Clark’s questioning glance when she throws the coffee away. Enough truth has been told this day.

**

The scream jars Tim out of a drugged sleep a few nights later, his body throwing itself out of bed, fighting against sedatives probably given by one of the Bats or the Titans to make him stay his ass in bed. In the motion, the bad leg tangles in the traction device until he just rips the fucking brace off, forces his body up.

He stumbling his hurt ass down the hall, moving through the shadows of the Watchtower, slapping the red button on the control pad to open the damn door.

“Caroline!”

Karmen, Leo, and Charlie are already there, huddling around the smaller child. Karmen is holding her tightly, talking low; Charlie has one hand in both his, and Leo is patting her back, her hair, anywhere she can reach.
His leg dragging, the pain like a biting thing, he’s across the room fast, joining the little group.

“Caroline, you’re in the Justice League’s Watchtower. It’s two forty-three am. I’m here. Karmen is here. Leo and Charlie are here. Vic is in the main control room monitoring for any sign of danger, okay? You’re out. You aren’t there anymore. Can you hear me?”

“Red,” the smallest whispers. “Red.” And he can see her body shaking under the other limbs trying to engulf her.

The other three let him take her from them, to hold her against his chest, his warmth, and the motherfucking pain be damned. His motions slow, the drugs still in his system, arm still pretty close to owfuck, he sits on his ass on the floor with the smallest cradled in his lap, her arms around his neck in a desperate hold while he rocks her gently, bending down to talk softly in her ear.

“I’m here. Caroline, I’m right here with you. You’re not going back, ever. You’re with me now, okay? Me and the Justice League and the Titans.”

The small body seems to relax in degrees and the sigh seems too old…Still half-fucked, Tim squints at the messy bedding and the three other children that also look more shaken than he’s comfortable with.

“All right.” He says calmly, “here’s the plan—“

*

Kon stretches, working the muscles in his back after shooting the shit with Vic for a while since that guy hates monitoring duty almost as much as BB since twiddling my fucking thumbs here is really tantamount to torture. Sure, give them something to superhero and they’re good. Just, watching out for the next big bad is really inviting trouble.

Aaaand, Tim’s gone.

Kon throws up his goddamned hands since really, dude? Fucking really now? A noise of pure frustration mixed with irritation and he shakes his head, whipping out his celly.

“I swear man. I’m totally voting with Miguel to get you a leash and shit, just, Cassie can pick it the hell out and I hope it’s the worst shit ever—“ his rant is super impressive while his phone zeroes in and he heads off.

He’d checked the security cams when he took over for Diana, hanging out in the control room since we’re done with this crap, Red, time to cheat.

The Entertainments Room slides open with a nearly silent hiss, and whoa.

In only the light of the huge TV (with the cartoon Inspector Gadget running), Kon sees the cushions from wrap-around couches are all over the place, blankets and comforters strewn about the floor, with suspiciously small lumps nuzzled up to a slightly larger lump facing the cartoons.

Red is out, breathing deep, his face shows in the moving light; Karmen is curled up against this good side, down by the hip while Caroline is propped up on his functioning arm, face in his shoulder. Leo is back-to-back with Charlie on Red’s other side, both boys slightly drooling.

Kon lifts himself effortlessly, floating around and above the little gathering until he settles down in a chair to wait until the next person up comes for babysit— ah, to “visit.”
He whips out his phone to hit up Bart after a second, he just turns his flash on and takes a picture for a group text.

-Protocol needs to be updated- Image sent.

He turns his volume down and waits for it.

Asshat: *Hide that forever.*

B2theB: *Rave says such things might be considered adorable to other people, lol. She totally awwwed.*

Bunks: *No fair. I want in!*

Me: *I’ll trade you shifts, man.*

Bunks: *Nah, you got class. XD*

GF: *Get more. Several more ;)*

Me: *On it*

He grins and float off the seat, high enough that he can get everyone and takes a few more shots for prosperity, you know?

**

Mr. Batman (Bruce) has his cowl on but the white eyes are gone and she can see him. His arms are folded over the insignia on his chest; he looks very tall.

“You don’t have to do this,” and the voice is that deep, raspy one when he’s being serious.

Karmen straightens up, hands at her sides while her eyes go from him to the closed sliding door. All she has to do is go up to the panel, put her hand on the lower plate, and it will slide open for her. She knows it. She’s aware of how it will work. She just…has to do it.

“It’s okay,” she replies firmly with more strength than she feels. “It’s really okay.” Red would be able to do it, Leo would be able to do it, she could do this. Deep breath in…

And Mr. Batman kneels down so she can look in his eyes without tilting her head up that far. “Years ago, Dick used to have terrible nightmares.” And he probably still does, but he’s an adult now, and B can no longer hold that little boy on his lap in the middle of the night, still in the suit, and soothe him. Sometimes, it’s a painful realization.

But Dick? Dick was Nightwing, and Robin?! She blinks up at him.

“He had nightmares of things he was afraid of, Karmen, so I’m going to tell you the same thing I told him when those things made him doubt himself. There is a *difference* between being brave because of something you’re expected to do, and being brave because you’re pushing past your fear to do something for the *right* reasons.” Mr. Batman waves a hand at the closed doors, “this? This has nothing to do with the right reasons. Doing this won’t save anyone or help anyone. This? No one will punish you if this is still too much to handle right now. It’s okay if you *can’t* yet. Do you understand?”
And...and, Bruce.

She turns into something needy, just like Caroline, when Karmen folds in on herself a little and lets Bruce wind his arms around her. No, she didn’t realize she was shaking; no, she didn’t realize her face is wet until the gloves wipe them off her cheeks, and he’s talking against the top of her head in a lower, softer tone.

“—already very strong to take care of the others, Karmen. You’ve already proven how incredible you are. This doesn’t mean anything.”

And his cape is different than Clark’s or Red’s, and it’s stronger, tougher, darker, and she can hold on until her fingers ache. But Bruce picks her up like she’s a baby and takes her away from the double doors (Lab 3), takes her away.

**

The screens cast an eerie glow in the dark while Tim navigates between them, taking in the data, tapping the comm in his ear to change frequencies and coordinate:

“Hood, three more on the way.”

“Gotcha, Red.”

Tap, “B. He’s moving. Fifth and Grand.”

“Understood.”

Tap. “Black Canary.”

Pause.

“Keep being bad ass.”

A chuckle, “you know it, Red.”

The outside line can only be one person.

Tap, “shouldn’t you be half-lit and shoving sweaty dollar bills in unmentionable places by now?”

“You are hilarious.” Babs deadpans over the line.

Red grins, still working his magic. “It’s a Robin thing, you know. Witty banter is really our superpower.”

“N always thought he had a sense of humor. I’m so disappointed you’re under the same delusion.”

Ouch. “If I had feelings, that would really hurt, you know.”

“Mmh. Like you’re fooling anyone, Red.”

Pause.

“I’m not going to tell them anything, relax.”

“I could ask what of the many instances you could be referring to, O, but I think for the sake of my
sanity, I’m going to let it ride.” Tap, “Robin…duck.”

Tap, “besides, I fool a lot of people on any given day.”

“You’re getting more obvious, Red.” And without the disguise, Bab’s voice is that sing song I’m being an asshole tone.

“I have full access to all of your systems right now.” He points out mildly, setting the parking lights for the next five blocks ahead of her. Red light central.

“I actually like reality television. Joke’s on you then.”

“Aw, shit. All my terrible plots are foiled.”

Camera shot at R’s location. He’s zip tying the baddies, so time for the GCPD. He send a short, sweet message to Officer Grayson via the tip line. Vigilantes are bad ass. Holy shit, the short one is scary. Watch your nuts by the City Hall District.

“I hate your Rick Roll talents, though.”

“Glad I have something useful in my arsenal of annoying shit, O.”

“Focus all that on Ra’s or something.”

“Where do you think I started the whole thing?”

Data coming in. There’s a whole bunch of new shipments heading toward Gotham Harbor. Time to run some numbers, see if anything pops.

“Red…”

“They talked to me,” he answers before she even asks. “I…I don’t know how much I can put in this, O. I don’t know yet, but fuck if they aren’t making it hard on me.”

Her van stops at the next red light; he can see it in the cam. “I think I should tell you—“ she sighs.

And there’s too much behind that. “Don’t,” he answers quickly. “Not now. Maybe…O maybe after I’m mobile, we’ll do something.”

Tap, “BG, take the next exit, you’re guys are in the sedan. License plate 14LSR.”

“Oh it. Thanks, Red.”

Tap. The light turns green, and Babs drives out of frame. He switches camera angles, as Batgirl leaps off her motocycle for a little kick ass.

“I think we should,” she finally tells him quietly. “After everything I’ve been finding out second hand, we should definitely have a word, Tim.”

He blows out a sigh, “it’s not what you think.”

“Do you still have the gun?”

“Of course.” He shrugs one shoulder.

“Is it still loaded?”
He chuffs a laugh, “no. Really. It’s hasn’t been…for a long time, Babs.”

She seems to breathe a little more, “good. Worst footage I ever watched, Tim.”

“You made N call me. It turned out fine. That’s…not something I’ll do again.”

“Nope,” she agrees, “instead, you’ll bury yourself in work and kill yourself that way.”

Officer Grayson and Henry are on the scene. “I’ve come to terms with it. No better way to go out than this, you know?”

And a laugh from her side this time, “yeah, Tim. Actually, I do.”

**

It’s one of those strange places, the same layout and content, but with a shifting duality all the same. Maybe it’s because he totally rocks all the museums on the National Mall (and seriously, yes, he will be taking them to the zoo, too. That. Shit. Is. Happening), but instead of going to the National Air and Space first, here they are at Natural History, weaving in and out of the crowds like a boss since he is totally good on crutches, seriously. And yeah, he’d wanted to take them to the National Children’s Museum first and foremost, but, well Karmen’s the one that got her stubborn on and said they weren’t ready to be around other children again yet. Soon. Just, not yet. The playground time apparently had an adverse effect he would discuss with Miguel personally. Nothing on feed showed an issues with the other children, but he just wants to make sure…

(“We aren’t like them, Red, and not just because we have powers.” And, fuck, his heart).

He’s on crutches in his old Tim Drake-Wayne wear, khakis and a polo, with four children holding onto his pockets and shirt so no one gets lost (well, he’s also got trackers in their clothes, so there’s that too) and they take their time, spending most of the day in the museum, looking long at each exhibit (Leo is enthralled with Ocean Hall). Karmen leads the way through the Human Origins section, reading plaques aloud for Caroline and Charlie even though those two can demolish a scientific journal. When they come to Social Life, all four kids stand to look up at the picture of a mother holding a small child and cooing, then move to read all the information intently, inhaling all the data they can. The Symbols hall has a bronze status of a child and mother that also gives each of them significant pause (Charlie’s hand grips his shirt tighter, eyes narrow on the bronze statue).

Moving on to Mammal Hall is Leo’s life with each continent exhibited. His excitement affects the others, leaving them all talking excitedly about the scenes and the animals, and… they look like children. Making claw hands and roars. He is so absurdly glad he pulled this off.

At the cafeteria, Karmen and Leo carry the trays of McDonalds. Chicken nuggets, double cheeseburgers, and fries for everyone; Caroline’s wide eyed expression is priceless when she tries fries for probably the first time in ever. The four kids demolish everything while he watches, grins. And, yeah, ice cream for everyone (eat it slow because—oh yeah, that’s called a head rush. Breathe, it’ll stop in a minute).

So, of course he takes them to the gift shop and yes, Karmen, you can for real have the microscope (I have a better one, but this is good place to start), and those mineral rocks are totes going home with us Leo. Caroline, that bear plushie looks very lonely, do you think he wants a hug and a home? Charlie, if you get only one dinosaur, he won’t have anyone to hang out and be a dinosaur with, okay? Better get him a friend.

But, they’re obviously found out since Dick, Dami, and Jason are casually waiting for them in the
rotunda, probably playing Angry Birds or something *(crap, we were still going to the Native American museum next)*.

“Ah, Baby Bird,” Jason nudges Dick in the side, grinning down at the four suddenly very nervous children. “Looks like you and the munchkin squad are having a good time.”

*Double crap, I checked for trackers three times.*

“We found your coordinates in the Watchtower’s portal database,” Dami fills in dryly while Dick just kneels down to obediently look at the big-eyed plushie Caroline is hauling around. “The Titans were also generous with their S.E.A.R.C.H protocol.”

Tim hums a little because *dammit*, “we needed to get out for a while. I totally had this, you know.”

Jay’s brow arches a little and wait, there’s only three—

“All right,” and his voice is *no-nonsense*, “little shit number 1, still see you. Get back here.” Karmen winks back into view, eyes lowered. Jay’s eyes go to Leo, “little shit number 2, hold her hand since she likes to randomly vanish and, no,” he gives her the *eye*, “that’s *not* cool.”

Charlie raises his hand a little, doing the *dance*.

“Demon, take little shit number 3 to the john. Big Wing’s got number 4. Then, we’re getting this train rolling, you feel me?”

“Where are we going?” Caroline asks, looking up, up, and up at him with wide eyes.

Jay makes it easier on her and crouches while Dami huffs and just starts walking, watching for Charlie out of the corner of his eye while they move to find the bathroom. “Circus is in town, and Dickie wants to go. We can’t let him go by his fool self or he’ll run away and join it probably, so you little monsters gotta come along n’ make sure he comes back.”

Her eyes round with surprise, “oh. What’s a *circus*?”

Jay blinks at her for a second, his expression falling in neutral lines because *yeah, this is why Timmy brought them out, right?*

Jay taps his temple and arches a brow at her while Karmen and Leo grudgingly join hands even though they’re both old enough and shouldn’t *need to*—

And suddenly, Caroline’s face splits into a grin because she *understands* now and now she looks so hopeful that maybe… she bites her lip and blinks up at him.

Jay rolls his eyes, “I know, I know, you need a hug, yeah? I get ‘cha.”

And this hug is also nice, but Caroline feels something very dark below this man’s rough exterior. Something scary that whirls and threatens to take his sanity away. She tightens her hold in the material of his hoodie because she feel how hard it is for him to fight it sometimes. He’s so…he’s so *strong* and now he has the others and he can’t be *Robin* anymore and that used to not be okay, but now it’s *more* okay.

“Jay,” she tests out.

“Yeah munchkin?”

“I—I think you’re my hero.”
He stiffens a little and she thinks maybe she said something wrong, but his arms tighten just a little more and the movement against her is him—laughing. “You got no idea, kid. You’re my hero, you know?”

And now the both of them are laughing and holding on.

Dick watches with warm eye, giving Tim a small grin. “We have a car, and yes, you are riding in it.”

He looks away from Caroline and Jay, Karmen and Leo looking at his mineral rocks, to get the Dick Grayson do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do look that looks so oddly familiar (Bruce). His leg is killing him, but it’s been a good day. “Seriously—“

“Nope.” Dick interrupts him. “You’re letting us check you out the minute we get to the car. Any blood coming through the bandages and you’re going right back to bed. No circus for you.”

“Not fair.” He points out mildly.

“You shouldn’t even be out of bed yet. Do you even know how hard B chewed out Hal and Wally?”

“They were in the middle of a DDR challenge, like I’m going to break up that?”

Jay has Caroline’s hand by the time he stands back up and bites his lip. Hard.

Dick just sighs and shakes his head. “Honestly, Timmy.”

Furiously, Tim leans in enough to whisper, “they’ve never had McDonalds, Dick.”

Yup, case in point.

The older Bat sighs at him with a whole lot of well we would have done that, too. “Then we’ll get them pizza and candy apples. But, not if you’re bleeding all over the place. That’s fair, little brother.”

“I don’t care what you say—“ “...need you to try and remember the old days.” “I can’t lose you.” Just dammit, Dick.

Tim opens his mouth, but Jay is right on that ride, pointing a finger right in his face. “Uh-uh. You don’t get to bitch. Shoulda called us first. Like I don’t want to go to the Aquarium?! You. Dick. The Aquarium is mother-fucking righteous, man. Every little shit needs to go to the Aquarium.”

“I was going to call you when we go to the Zoo,” he placates, forcing his face to stay in neutral lines rather than laugh his ass off.

“No dice, best Zoo is in Pittsburgh, and the best Aquarium is here,” Jay doesn’t even register Leo standing uncomfortably by his leg, still holding Karmen’s hand but looking around at all the people in the rotunda. He and Karmen are watching now, waiting for something.

Jay lets go of Caro’s hand long enough to just picks the brat up and pretty much settles him on Jay’s shoulders without giving up the fight and taking Caro’s hand again. Amazed, Leo holds on to his bag from the gift shop tightly, looking all the way down.

Tim looks down at Karmen with that patient expression, “this is really not normal—“

“It is becoming so,” Damian fills in, startling the shit out of everyone because dammit Demon, don’t use the kid to help you with that shit. Charlie is right beside him, sucking on a lollipop with half-lidded eyes. “And it should be, Drake, as you obviously lack the necessary survival skills,” with his brow arching, Dami’s free hand comes up to the side, offering a lolli to Caroline and Karmen
without *looking* at either of them. The last one is palmed in Jay’s hand and pretty much pressed in Leo’s.

Finally, Dami gives all the children his slight sneer, “do *not* adapt Drake’s behavior in this instance,” the teenager warns solemnly expecting to be obeyed. And since, well, he’s Robin and Batman’s partner, the four children exchange a glance and finally agree (Jay takes the lolli from Caro and gets the wrapper off quick before Timmy can see and gives it back; the kid’s eyes blow wide when she puts it in her mouth).

Jay just huffs with a shake of his head, and Leo just rocks with the motion, sucking on his lolli (and it’s *blue, blue tastes sooo good*). “And you didn’t even get ‘em some fucking balloons? Who *does* that shit? Seriously. I don’t know about you, Timmy.”

“We’ll get them balloons at the circus,” Dick soothes, picking up Caroline to balance on his hip when Jay with Leo and Dami with Charlie turn to start for the entrance.

Tim and Karmen blink at the three Bats towing the children are apparently set on the circus.

“Remind me to hack the feed later,” Tim side-whispers to her, “B is gonna want visual proof this happened, okay?”

Reaching up to hold the hem of his shirt, Karmen nods in agreement. She finally sticks the lolli in her mouth (green) and almost chokes a little on the intense flavor.

“Don’t worry, more where that came from,” he grins down as the follow the Bats.

**

And Dick…is like a little kid himself, all excited to show off the circus to kids who have *never even seen one*. He’s got Caroline (who he is now calling *Cuddle Bug*) and Charlie while Dami keeps the two children corralled with Grayson (as if, the kids haven’t strayed even a few feet from the Bats, but anyone wanting to get *near* them would need to go through Robin—like he’s fooling anyone). Leo has had a decisive hold of Jay’s jacket since they all piled out of the van, looking around at everything while Karmen paces with Tim.

Dick stops immediately when Cuddle Bug pauses long enough to take a quick look at a children’s duck pond game with brows drawn like she’s puzzling it out and he steers her over there while Dami keeps Charlie entertained to let her pick a duck and get a small prize. Her big eyes roll up to his encouraging smile before she chooses a pink duck over a yellow or purple one.

“The little lady is a winner!” The gamer, also taken in by her charm, offers her a choice of a puppet on a stick, a balloon, or a stuffed chimpanzee.

“Which one should I choose?” She whispers to Dick.

“Whichever one you like best.” He whispers back with a soft smile.

The puppet, a llama attached to a cross bar, is the one she likes best, and she can make it walk herself. Looking up, the little girl reverently whispers, “thank-you, Dick, thank-you so much!”

When Leo looks over at the stuffed dinosaur and thinks of Charlie, and Jay arches a brow and looks too. His grin is sharp with anticipation.

“C’mon squirt, what ‘cha looking at?” But he already picks up the toy gun, giving the vendor his money. With his other arm, he hefts Leo up to sit on the counter to watch.
The stuttering vendor claims he’s never seen anyone that good and asks the kid which prize he wants. Leo eyes the assortment for a second, “Charlie likes dinosaurs. A lot.” So, the big brontosaurus it is then.

Little brat wraps around Jason’s leg when Leo presents him with the stuffed toy (“Jay said you needed this one,” and yeah, making him look bad and shit) until the older man just lifts the younger little shit up on his shoulders so he can at least walk again while Leo walks with him (and you better keep a hold, kid, don’t wanna lose you in the crowd, feel me?). Well, he stops at every shooting booth to make sure Leo gets the Superman shield mirror (geeze, coulda gotcha one at Target, too, you know), Karmen gets the tall parrot (“it’s a Macaw,” she informs him with a slight, pleased, smile), and the last booth when littlest shit’s eyes go to the damn purple unicorn, well, he can’t resist.

Unfortunately, the vendor there is a lying, cheating, piece-of-shit motherfucker.

“Sorry friend! Better luck next time.” And, you assface, the light is rigged because that shot hit the mark. So Jason leans an elbow on the counter, beckoning the guy with a finger. The middle aged man seems like a jumpy sort but leans in obligingly.

“You and me both know that shit was good, man, so I’ma tell you what.” Jason’s jacket fall open slightly with a whole lot of hello, .45s. “I’ll get out the Real. Fucking. Deal, and prove that I don’t miss, feel me?”

The dickwad’s eyes go wide with that implication. “Y-you said the pink unicorn, right friend?”

“Yup. Matter of fact, give her two of ‘em. Pink and Purple.” Jason tosses another five on the counter, and holds the stuffed toys down for Caro’s (not calling her that idiotic shit, Dickie) huge eyes and open arms.

The littles shit is almost fucking crying, and his eyes immediately go for one of the others in the crowd since nope, this is not his deal.

But she just presses her face into his other side, “They’re so fluffy, Jay!”

He hums a little and gets her hand while Leo keeps munches on popcorn perched on his shoulders again. Kid wasn’t even shaken a bit at the whole shoot, shoot, bang, bang thing. Huh, he might start to like the little shits. When Leo leans over his head a little with raised brows and a handful of popcorn, Jay opens his mouth for the offering and likes them even more, goddammit.

Tim has Karmen at a guessing game (against his better judgement) and grins when she wins an excited goldfish, wondering where he was going to find a bowl at the Watchtower but figures Vic probably has an old shell of a computer tower he can repurpose. Some plexi glass, bag of aquarium gravel, water filter, some decorations and crap, wa-la, fish heaven (Dami would totally dedicate a batarang instead of the fake plants). In the meantime, Arthur would probably be happy to make something to keep it alive since, you know, his trident isn’t just for show or anything.

At the same time, Jay and Tim spot Dick and Charlie with a huge elephant at the back of one of the tents; the elephant’s trunk pets a giggling Charlie’s neck and face like he’s one of her babies.

“She makes me miss Zitka,” Dick is saying when the rest wander closer, “I couldn’t keep her when I left Haley’s Circus.”

“That musta made you sad,” Charlie observes while petting the trunk affectionately. “She was your friend, huh?”

Dick nods a little sadly down at him, “yes, she was. I hated leaving her, but she belonged there. I
couldn’t have taken care of her on my own, you know? I was too young back then.”

“Oh. Do you ever go back to the circus, Dick?”

“Sometimes. Some of the kids I grew up with are still there.”

“That good then! You know you’ll always have friends, no matter what, right?”

Dick laughs a little and nods, “yup. No matter what, I’ll always have friends.” And the elephant trumpets in agreement, making the startled little boy laugh while the others crowd next to him to look up at her with amazement (and they’ve never seen an elephant or any other animal this close before) as the trunk comes down to touch each child gently as the animal has an instinct about the four young children before her. Cuddle Bug watches with huge eyes from just behind Dick’s leg while Leo and Karmen lay their faces against the appendage.

While Dick has all four, Jason braces Tim and pretty much shoves pain pills and antibiotics at him to take; the guy arches a brow but Jay gives him no room to bitch, shoving the straw of a soda pretty much in his face. To keep the you’ll do it or else to a minimum, Tim swallows the fucking pills while his impressive Bat-glare has no affect whatsoever.

The merry go round is Cuddle Bug’s favorite ride ever, but Karmen requests permission to go on the Tilt-a-whirl twice more before she’s ready to move on; by then, Tim pretty much makes Dick go over to the Fun House where teenagers and young adults are running away screaming (and yeah, that’s where Dami must have disappeared to. Figures) while Jay waits for the kids by the rotating swings, eyes alert for anything or anyone that might pose a threat.

His phone chirps twice, and he fumbles to get it out of his back pocket with the crutches. Tim winces a little at the caller ID but resigns himself with a sigh because, you know, satellites and shit.

“B.”

“You’ve been out of bed all day. Take them on the Ferris wheel and get back to the Watchtower.”

Of course, Batman, right? “I’m—“

“Kal and Diana are taking them to several national monuments tomorrow, and it’s past their bedtimes.”

Well, very not what he expected but okay.

“And, your injuries are extensive, Tim. I’m checking you out the second you get back here and testing your immunities. Much longer and I’m calling in A.”

Tim’s eyes widen impossibly because no, not that much mother-henning. Just, holy shit, no. Please, not Alfred.

“Understood. Ferris Wheel and we’re heading back.”

“Good. B out.”

Dami is smirking at him when he can stop staring at his phone with a whole lot of what the fuck? He trades it out for should of guessed. And where the hell did he get face paint to get around his eyes and—? Tim just shakes his head a little because nope, don’t want to know.

“Have fun terrifying people?” He draws out instead.
Dami simply hums, tilting his head to the side to meet Tim’s eyes, “this American phenomena of amusement derived from fear is a curious one, Drake. To understand it, one must *interact*, yes?”

“I think that’s just a really good excuse for scaring the shit out of people,” but *dammit*, he’s grinning isn’t he? Yup. Yup, he is. Dami just hums again and grin back. Jay and Dick are coming back with the four, weary, happy children, and…

And, fuck, it’s been a good day.

**

And, yes, Batman has made certain he has read the JLA reports on these children and the horrific conditions from which they were gained. As he was dealing with tsunamis in Japan, he regrets his inability to answer the call once he knew the more extensive details. Thus he already knows this one is the eldest female of the four. She is also staring up at him with a—

*Ah, that explains it.*

He kneels down to her level, holding the trident in one hand. “You have a friend, I see.”

Karmen breathes deep, facing the King of the Sea with her brave face on.

“He…he was at the circus. I want to take care of him.”

“That is very good of you,” Arthur smiles gently at the darting gold fish. “He was not very happy in the tiny bowl.”

“Oh. Well, I didn’t *think* he would be. It *was* small and there was no room to swim around at all!”

Arthur hums, “a nicer bowl with some room would make him content.”

Now her eyes are wider, “okay! What— what else would he like?”

It takes effort for him *not* to laugh at her earnest, her excitement for he does not wish to make her feel self-conscious, and instead, focuses on the bowl, narrowing his eyes. He strokes his beard while wearing his intent look, nodding slowly.

“Hm. He would like an artificial decoration, not one specific, one he may perhaps swim around for exercise. He would like fed twice a day as the flake-like food is pleasing to his palate. And—”

Arthur pauses, visibly leaning closer to the small bag she is holding up for his inspection.

The fish winks at him.

“He would like a name.”

Karmen’s eyes are wide and warm, and Arthur is absurdly happy he could make this young one look so at ease.

“Did…did he say what he wants his name to be?”

“No, he did not, for that is a choice he wishes you to make. Ah, she that is.”

“Oh! He’s a girl?”

“Indeed. She knows you will bestow a fine name upon her.”
Karmen’s smile makes her face light up, truly a sight to behold. “Thank-you, oh thank-you, you highness.”

Arthur presses his free hand in a fist over his heart and bows his head to her, just a tilt. “It is my pleasure to aid you in this. You will care for one of my own, and for that, I thank you.”

“I’ll take care of her, I promise.” And the vow is so grave, a promise that as Arthur watches this little girl walk back down the hall, he has to wonder what feats this child would accomplish in a few years.

**

And Dami is just like B in some of the best aaaaand the worst ways, right? He’s got the same expression on his face when he’s got something he wants to talk about but had no idea how to approach the subject.

Tim heaves a self-sacrificing sigh and closes his laptop pointedly. With the lenses raised, he can see right into those dark blue eyes braces an elbow on the table to hold his chin in hand.

“I’m right here. Go on,” he quirks half a grin.

The youngest Bat’s chest lifts in a sigh and he dives right in: “have you given thought to the discussion we had months ago?”

Tim blinks once, twice.

Dami gestures with one gauntleted hand, “I asked you to consider what would have been should you not been the third Robin.”

Oh, not really where he expected this to go. ‘Grayson is a pain in the ass,’ sure, ‘I want to punch Hood in the kidneys, often,’ yup, not this.

Tim carefully draws himself up, giving himself time to consider what he should say when—nah, fuck it. Sometimes the truth might set you free and all that shit. “I did. A whole lot of what-if and bads are about what I came up with… B was on a bad road after Jason, even Dick didn’t seem to be able to help him even though I asked him to try again. Shit Bane, Jean Paul, No Man’s Land, the Clench, hell, there’s more instances I can think of that B and I did the job as a team. We worked well together through a lot of that. Mostly. We did good things.”

“And Grayson?” Dami asks in a tone softer than the usual.

“Dick…I’m sure he would have reconciled with B eventually. Those two weren’t…good when I hit the scene. Things were worse for a while after I did, but B raised him, Dami. They would have figured it out without me. I have enough evidence to support that theory as the most likely.”

“Mm.” Dami nods a little.

“Why do you ask?” All of a sudden.

“Without you, Superboy and Kid Flash would likely not have begun the path to re-creating the Titans.” And those eyes are sharp, narrowing.

“Ah, maybe? It took them some time to work together, you know? To be friends. Hell, it took us all a while.”
“They did so with your guidance, Drake. Without your influence, the group of them would have gone their separate ways, likely not stayed as a cohesive unit.”

And this isn’t weird at all. Nope. Just, Dami telling him he’s done something well is still kind of a strange check the zip line kind of thing.

“You granted me access, Tim. The Robin code.”

And ah, there is it.

Tim nods gently, “I did.”

Now the brows draw together like that constipated look right there. Tim just grins back at him when the expressions smooths out and becomes something infinitely softer for the demon.

“…at some point, I may attempt to follow your example as I have also researched the years you wore the cape.” Two fingers pull at the Robin emblem on his chest for emphasis. “Your milestones as Robin gave you what you needed to have a team.”

And, yup, that’s true.

“At some point…perhaps the Young Justice should also be resurrected.”

There he goes again, blinking when things start to come together.

“Dami…”

The youngest Bat hums a little, and his voice drops lower, quiet, “in a few years, Tim. They will be old enough to decide on a path to chose as we did, you and I. By then, I may have what I need.” To lead them.

And Tim swallows around the lump in his throat because fuck, he didn’t expected anyone, least of all Dami to Get. It. “Baby Bat—“ but his voice is edged with something raw and telling.

Dami just nods at him a little as Drake trusted him with the future of the Titans, to keep them moving forward should he die; however, once the children were of age, were ready to make a choice, he would be ready as well. For Drake’s peace of mind, he would be able to lead as he now understands what Tim had been trying to tell him without making it obvious. Taking the lead, taking responsibility, all of it is just another step in protecting that which is important.

**

“You’re not going without me,” Tim, Red, stares the Batman down without flinching.

“You still need crutches,” B points out, working the control to start plotting locations. “And, the JLA as well as the Titans will need you coordinating from back stage.”

“Bullshit, Bruce.” And, fuck, this shit is all kinds of familiar, isn’t it? Like he’s that Robin all over again and B pulled his vigilante card for the night: “Go home. Sleep. Eat. You’re not going out tonight like that.”

B sighs at that and turns to face his third son, hands on his hips, holding the cape back. “Tim—“

“I called dibs on this shit, remember? If you’re going after the League of Assassins in case they have anything from Praedium, then yes, Bruce. I. Want. In.”
“You are in,” B argues, “you’re going to coordinate a mass strike. We’re hitting three locations at once.”

And that’s…pretty epic, but no, B, no, you know what the fuck I’m talking about.

“And,” now B is leaning down a little so he’s right up in Tim’s vision, “Ra’s and I have had a conversation, Tim.”

 Uh-oh. Ignoring the sharp owfuck, Tim arches a brow with a whole lot of go on.

B crosses his arm over the insignia, and there’s something very dangerous in his eye, “he knows who he’s supposed to be dealing with, and that’s not you anymore.”

“What now?” And no, not really a question B since I’ve been dealing with him for more than a fucking minute here.

“He almost got you killed, Tim. He pit you against the League’s enemy like you were one of his assassins. He used you like a pawn, and that is very unacceptable.”

And, well, true, but—“But it okay because I crashed his organization, so really—”

“No,” and the older man draws the word out, “it’s very not okay. You go up against the Rogue Gallery on your own, and I understand that; you have the history, skill, talent, and what you need to win. Ra’s, however, has an army behind him, Tim. He’s not the Joker with fifteen or twenty thugs and his own brand of insanity. Ra’s has people all over the world, people that can find you wherever you are, that know who you are, and where you are. If you deal with Ra’s, you call me first from now on. I do not want anything remotely close to that fight against the Council of Spiders to happen again without backing you up.”

His mouth is open, but nothing is coming out.

B’s hand on the back of his neck, squeezing lightly. “I don’t care what you’re last name is. You’re my son, and I’m not letting Ra’s get his hands on you again, Tim. So, you’re going to coordinate the League and the Titans since we’ve narrowed down the possible locations they may have stashed some of the Luthor Tech. Once you’re at least 85%, we’ll go and blow up his cave.”

Tim chuffs out a choked laugh on that one, “we’ll tell Hood we were bonding so he doesn’t feel left out.”

And B…B smiles down at him. “Glad you’ve got a plan. Now,” the chair is wheeled over to the screens, “take a look at what we’re working with…”

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“Shh,” Leo hisses, “yer gonna get us caught.”

Karmen huffs a little and goes back to concentrating, hard. It’s so much to try hiding all of them for longer than a minute or two. It always makes her really shaky and light-headed for a while after she does, but this is worth it, so—

She bites her lip, the small pain brings her back to what she needs to be doing. It’s okay, they’re almost there anyway.
“We should have asked,” Caroline whispers again, her hand sweaty in Charlie’s. “They would have let us.”

“No they wouldn’t,” Charlie counters. “They don’t know what we can do yet.”

The jet is warming up and—

“Nice! Too bad the sensors pick up body heat though.”

Karmen gets jarred out of her concentration and the children appear in front of Dick and Jason, suited up to be Nightwing and the Red Hood. Next to them, Vic and Superman look kind of disappointed.

“Oh-oh.” Charlie swallows a little since, well, it was his idea.

“All right,” Clark starts, “what is this about?”

Leo huff and comes right up to him, brows furrowed, neck craned, “we can help!”

The four adults exchange a look with a little how the hell do we handle this?

Diana makes it relatively easy when she sashays around them and kneels down. “We appreciate your bravery, Leo. However, we cannot take you with us until you have had more training and have taken the Superhero Oath. Once you are old enough to do that, we will gladly fight with you.”

And oh. Well, they didn’t know that.

“So, we can’t go?” Charlie sounds so disappointed that her heart. “But, Diana—!”

She shakes her head gravely, “any mission against the forces of evil are dangerous, Charlie. Without swearing you in as honorary members, we cannot chance your lives. That would be wrong of us. Do you understand? All of you?”

Charlie looks down and scuffs his feet, and the rest look upset but not overly angry.

“Yes,” they chorus.

“Good. In the meantime, Red will be coordinating our effort. No one will be here to monitor his vitals, correct?” And she arches a well-manicured brow.

Karmen straightens immediately because Red is still using the crutch and— “we understand,” she promises solemnly.

“Thank-you,” Diana stands as the children, now with a mission, go back into the Watchtower proper.

“Nothing better than brains and boobs, Di,” Jason grins at her.

The Princess shakes her head at him a little, “honestly, Jay. If you swung the other way, I might give you a shot. Your loss.”

“Baby, I make exceptions for hot princesses, feel me?”

Dick is very much not laughing, nope.

“Hm. But would I make one for you? I’m missing vital anatomical parts that do it for you, Hood.”
His brows shoot up to his hairline as she goes to finish prepping for takeoff. Clark is biting his lip, hard.

“Not funny, Supes. I bet she’d be fantastic in the sack.”

Now the guy is chuckling, shaking his head a little, “you’d have to ask Lois about that Jason. They never let me watch. Anyway, let’s get moving.”

 Fucking what now? “Supes! Seriously, man. Install some fucking cameras, what the hell is your damage?”

Vic seriously does not want in on this and silently backs away since, wow, man, TMI. We work together, okay?

“I can see through walls, you know.”

“That doesn’t help the rest of us, man! Shit! Sell some tickets or something, fuck!”

And Dick just forgets about picking himself off the floor for a few minutes while he laughs like an asshole.

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And just...dammit. He breathes, calms himself as much as possible because This. Shit. Sucks.

For this, B is the man to take the lead since Clark looks like he’s dying.

“This meeting has been called,” Batman doesn’t even hesitate, just jumps right in, “to talk about the children. We all recognize they cannot stay in the Watchtower or Titan’s Tower indefinitely, and perhaps we should discuss options.”

The table breaks out in whispers and low chatter since, yeah, point B. Tim, likewise, knew it had been coming. Knew what the JLA had been talking about while he was slowly integrating Karm, Caro, Leo, and Charlie to the world and being, you know, kids and shit. He knows what they’re going to propose here. Yup. It’s coming and all he can do is sit here and try to keep his cool as much as possible, provide his argument.

A hand, stronger than B’s or N’s or Hood’s, is on his wrist, the fingers overlapping around his pulse. His eyes slide to the left and goddamned Clark looks like he’s about to fucking cry. This is Superman, okay (like, his and Dick’s hero from waaaay back in the day) This is one of the most bad ass aliens in the history of superheroes, and the guy looks like Tim is scooping out his damn soul with a spoon or something (and he’s glad he isn’t the only one in pain, for fuck’s sake, he’s glad). Tim says nothing about the hold on his wrist, does nothing to shake it off. Instead, since he’s prepped for this shit, he flicks the fingers of his free hand and the touch pads in front of everyone light up with the files. The JLA sitting down in a line on Clark’s left, the Titans on Tim’s right, N, Robin, and Hood in their unis and doms between the two groups since they also have a...vested interest. All of them start checking out the shared files—

Diana makes a soft noise of understanding, an ah, after a few flips of the electronic pages; she gets where this is headed. For a bad ass Amazon (“Just a moment.” As Robin, he watched while Wonder Woman used a tie to pull her hair up, her gaze intense on the warehouse of international thieves,
almost asking *what the—?* “I do not want to wreck my hair while I wreck their faces.” Ah, *gotcha in one*, the noise is plaintive, sad. She likes Charlie *so much* (and well, who *doesn’t*?).

Kon and Bart are immediately grim faced, looking at him intently with a whole lot of *what the hell* he can’t answer in this forum. Not when the JLA is ready to deny any request to keep the kids in their community. He feels it crawling up his spine, the sharp and painful denial of *losing them*. Like the Widower’s sword through him, a *killing strike*.

He already knows how disappointed Cassie is, doesn’t even need to look at her expression to get that message. Miguel, with his face bare, looks so utterly lost. BB and Raven very carefully are not looking up at him (because they *know* what this is going to cost him, don’t they?). Clark’s hand tightens an inth more on his wrist under the table while he’s absorbed in the files, the profiles, the plans. His jaw is tight, eyes narrow on the data. Gingerly, Tim turns his wrist slightly, and Clark lets him, wraps his fingers around his hand instead.

A movement from across the round table is N raising his lenses so his eyes are seen, the question in them, and Tim can’t even *look* at the guy. Hood isn’t even giving that shit a *second glance*; the tablet stays on the table top in front of his elbows, but he’s staring Baby Bird down from behind the whiteouts because there’s something *wrong* with the feel of this whole thing, and the tension around the table is fucking ridiculous. Demon Brat must get the same vibe because the little shit pointedly puts the tablet down, turns it off, leans back, and crosses his arm over his chest, waiting.

Well, then Hood’s gotta be *that guy*. No problem. He gives ‘*Being an Asshole for Dummies*’ lessons every Tuesday night at the motherfucking Rec Center. “So, you’re gonna pawn the little shits off on someone else? Is that what’s going down here?”

And Tim fucking *flinches*. The guy that can get shot, stabbed, beat, thrown without a hitch, *flinches*. Shit. Hood sighs because the guy’s not meeting anyone’s eyes, and everything in that stance just gives his ass right away. Mother. Fucking. Shit.

“This is the background research,” and it’s all that matter-of-fucking-fact tone all the Bats pull when they’re separating themselves. Really, Baby Bird? You think they *all* don’t *know*?

And right beside Clark, B’s expression is hard to read with the cowl and all. “You’re proposing to place them with a foster family? A meta couple.”

Tim swallows.

“You’ve done extensive research on the…possible families,” J’onn observes, very pointedly *not* looking in his direction (since Martian mind readers and shit, *stay the fuck out of my head MM; this is hard enough fuck you very much*). “Very good detail. Have you met any of them in person as of yet?”


“Tim,” N is leaning in on his arms, his tone soft.

“I don’t like it,” just gets shoved from his *fucking lungs* like a breath, “I don’t want to do this. None of them are stable, emotionally, mentally, physically. They don’t *need* to be abandoned—” They *need us*.

Gently, B breaks in, “Agreed.”

“They—” Tim and Clark both look over at Batman with wide, *holy shit what now?* eyes.
“This…plan, Tim. This is not the most plausible action for their health and well-being. I agree, we should speak with some meta family, one of these perhaps, integrate the children in with them slowly for times when the JLA and the Titans are incapable of caring for them—times when we’re inundated with bomb threats, terrorists attacks, crime fighting, and the like. They don’t need and shouldn’t be forced to be in that part of our world until they’re deemed old enough to make those choices. However, between the groups of us, we can care for them and see they’re integrated into society. We can keep them safe.”

Tim keeps himself from making a hugely embarrassing noise but just barely. He’s blinking rapidly, making sure only Clark and B can tell because fuck, he thought the JLA was going to make him give the kids up completely; fuck, just fuck. He couldn’t—Clark’s hand tightens just this side of pain, enough to snap him out of it, bring him back to the talk around him.

Kon, Kon is talking. “—I mean, Ma and Pa would really like them, you know? They could have a few days in Smallville and—

“I already have a permanent address set-up for them in Gotham.” B puts out there and just what? He already set up his parent’s address as their permanent—

“Really, they’ll love Central City,” Wally seems to be smiling so wide. “And you know I’ve got people that can get them caught up on the school stuff. Besides, the Meta Middle School is right outside—“

And he got this one…totally wrong, didn’t he? Just like he pegged the Bats wrong and the JLA wrong…Shit. Maybe—well maybe there are some trust issues here.

From across the table, Dami and Dick are looking worried, staring at him, and Tim’s got no clue what expression he’s making right then but his fucking eyes. Turning enough, he scrubs a hand down his face out of view, focusing on Clark’s thumb making circles over his racing pulse.

“And seriously, like, gimmie.” BB waves a hand while Raven does that freaky shit and smiles beside him, her eyes twinkling. “Just, all of them. Gimmie for a few days. We will hang the hell out.”

Arthur is holding out a hand to gesture, “it is not uncommon for land dwellers to visit us. Once they are comfortable then they may spend some time with my people.”

“And,” Dami cuts in, glancing over at Grayson, “they will have time in Gotham. It is necessary they practice maintaining a mask in public. They may do so in Gotham.”

Wally just waves a hand, “once they’re pretty cool on the idea of going to school eventually, like integrated enough to think about that, there’s two schools and—“

And his chest hurts too much, but he has to know he’s picking up what everyone’s laying down. “So…we’re keeping them.” His voice is rougher around the edges than he’d like, but this shit is crucial. Everyone needs to be on the same page.

Diana, who is usually the scary one, makes an offended chuff. “Of course we are keeping them, Tim.” Her expression, the looks between the JLA and the Titans is enough to let him take a fucking breath.

“You thought we might not,” Arthur fills in needlessly.

His good shoulder moves in a half-assed shrug. “When has the JLA taken on kids? Individually, sidekicks, yes, but this is four metas recovering from…” His brain kind of shorts out a little because holy shit relieved.
“Which is why we will share responsibility,” Diana counters easily. “Between us all, they will gain perspective, control, and be safe. You can work their training regime depending on who they are with that week, Bruce can continue with curriculum, and we will find special tutors.” Diana holds up the touchpad, “which you already have a list, Tim. Each of us will take a few names and give our recommendations. Agreed?”

The table breaks out in general approval, and fuck yeah man. He isn’t going to be doing this alone, and some of the most trustworthy protectors of the free planet and shit are going to be helping him keep the littles out of Child Protective Services and he’s already got idents set up, a training program for each of them, lists of learning milestones to achieve, and just…

Clark releases his wrist, moves to rest his palm at Tim’s mid-back instead and the two are pretty fucking relieved. In fact, he and Supes are all about grinning like dummies at one another.

Chapter End Notes

Arkeadia was crucial to getting this done. I was flipping out a little, not going to lie. I have a child, so writing this was seriously hard. And an overwhelming vote for keeping the littles, so yes, thank you all for helping out. Totally was not going to, seriously, I was going to find a nice meta couple to adopt them, but Arkeadia and the rest of you nixed that idea. And well, the more I wrote some of these scenes, the more I wanted them too. Big brother Red, lololololol. Yup. They’re going to hang out with the JLA and the Titans and stuff, not a consistent staple, but yes, kiddos FTW. And yeah, thanks for reading. You know you guys help drive the story.
Drabble: MIA

Chapter Summary

And they didn't take the Red Robin...they wanted Timothy Drake.

Chapter Notes

Ah, a few of you, most recently yangmallow on Tumblr (since I seriously needed some drabbles to shake it out), wanted the deets to the first abduction I allude to, so...I had this but there was never a good place to put it and I had to go back to edit a bit to make it fit (was going to put it in Distractions but oh well). Be aware, the voice here is different, almost a year before the First Chapter, so not full Red Robin you know. Also... a warning: mentions of torture, so please, if you are squemish about such things, don't read it, okay? Go to the very bottom and read the last bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One year and two months after Red Robin returned from Europe:

After finding his abandoned, wiped phone, the whole team has moved from slightly concerned to full-blown panic-time-\textit{holy-shit-where-the-fuck-is-Rob}, searching with every resource short of the JLA (because, \textit{those guys}), since last Saturday when they still received no communiqué from Red Robin.

He was supposed to show up Tuesday morning to get files together and do general Rob stuff (like creepy, stalkery, planning ahead for \textit{everything} stuff), but things sometimes happen in Gotham (because, really, that place is in a perpetual state of \textit{oh and shit}) so none of them were too concerned when they weren't alerted to his presence in the Tower. Maybe the Joker is being a dick bag or Pam Isley has a new, jazzy root, or the Black Mask needs his nuts kicked down the block, whatever. Rob will show up when he shows.

Right?

When Saturday morning hit and no word, phone going straight to voicemail and communicator off, the team is still chill about the whole thing because, like \textit{the rest of them}, the guy has a propensity of \textit{up and vanish} at random intervals. Kon took charge and started handing out other contacts in the vigilante community, getting together a list of places to check around the globe.

With a purpose and direction, the team splits to start the search. None of the Bats are on the list (seriously, \textit{fuck those guys}) since Rob had pretty much stopped checked in with them for over a year, so that would be not only a dead end but also giving up deets Rob told them in no uncertain terms he wanted kept on the low.

Cassie, Gar, and Raven infiltrated the Wayne Enterprises suites, looking for any clues that he'd been hiding out or working a case. Bart started checking the obvi, Rob's perches in Gotham, since he's fast enough to keep off Batman's main radar. He found nothing to suggest Rob had been in or taken
from any of those safe houses, only that a half full cup of coffee was in the sink of his apartment, days old. Vic lent them a hand with a thorough search for the sensor and trackers in his suit—nothing out of the ordinary, just that the suits were still in respective safe houses in Gotham or in the Tower’s perch. Wherever Tim was, whoever he was with, he didn’t have a Red Robin suit. However, with a grim front, Vic told them his cell phone’s auto-wipe feature had been triggered on the day he was supposed to have been on his way back to the Tower. Tracing it took some time, but eventually, he directed Bart to the side alley outside Wayne Towers, the phone apparently thrown.

Kon, with the beginnings of real worry riding him and no other option, calls the one Bat Tim would (hopefully, maybe, possibly never find out about) understand.

The voice that answered the phone is rough, "Who the motherfuck is this, and why do you have this number?"

*Going to regrets this.* "This is Superboy, Red Hood."

A pause. "Well, shit. Why is Superbrat calling me? Didn’t wrecking your fucking HQ pretty much get the point across, asshole?"

Deep breath because Tim is going to be *so pissed* about this. "When’s the last time you saw or heard from Red Robin?"

Jason Todd takes a few more seconds with that one. "Replacement… saw him a few weeks ago, here in Gotham."

Kon let's out a ragged breath, "okay, thanks."

"Wait," and the bite in the other man's tone is even more harsh. "You and the fucking Wonder Squad don’t know where the hell he is?"

*Fuck.* "…I shouldn't have called. He's got a thing with us calling anyone associated with the Bats. Sorry to bother you." Kon hangs up immediately, but gets a text a few minutes later: *let me know when he turns up or I'm going to come calling. You don't want that, motherfucker. Won't need kryptonite to kick your ass.*

And Kon…Kon oddly enough has no desire to test that, but, well, *super speed* and shit if it came down to it.

By Saturday night, with no leads, no signs, nothing, Cassie and BB urge Kon to contracted Superman at the League headquarters to ask for a private meeting. They hoped the guy could keep this from the Batman (who is actually Clark’s best friend no matter what the Dark Knight might say to the contrary), but secretly expecting he’d crack and let the Bat know one of his former Robins had vanished and even his team was concerned. It was a long shot, and Gar was definitely not on board with the plan, but as Miguel glibly pointed out, “if it was you missing, wouldn’t you want us to use every lead we got to look for your green ass? C’mon, *amigo*, chill.”

Against his better judgment since, well, Supes still wasn’t *okay* with him, didn’t want to *deal* with him, Kon still called the Watchtower and took in a deep breath before he started talking. Just the asking part. And Clark…immediately flew to the Tower just because Kon *asked* him to (a whole lot of weird there, just a *lot*, man…)

On the Communal Floor, Clark listened gravely to him, Bart, Cassie, Miguel, Rave, and Gar, asking what he thought were the right questions: Are you sure he's not out on some overseas case (which Tim is notorious for)? Or helping other crime fighters like Black Bat in Hong Kong? Or over trying
to foil Ra’s al Ghul’s newest plot (because, really, the Justice League is pretty thankful Tim’s newest hobby is foiling plots by the League of Assassins; like, they have *spreadsheets* on how many man/alien hours he’s saved them)?

All of which are good points and sounded just like their fearless, bleeding heart leader, but the team insists Rob always keeps them in the know with things like that no matter how deep undercover he got (or did he? Now they have more of a reason to worry). Since the *Tim’s just going to disappear for a while and look for Batman since he’s lost in time somewhere*, the guy had done a much better job at keeping the Titans in the know for things like taking a leave of absence without communication.

Even though they could tell the guy didn’t really put much credit into it (*humoring* them), Clark promised to keep an ear out and to use the League tech (because *satellites*) to search for any trace of Tim Drake or Red Robin.

However, an hour later, there is a terrible landslide in India and Superman is off to help in any way he can, Tim forgotten while the Titans can do nothing more and break for the week to return to their respective homes, planning to start the search anew if they still heard nothing by the following weekend.

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The following Friday, while en route to the San Fran, Kon's Titan phone rings, an unfamiliar number he's never seen before. He pauses mid-flight to answer with a patiently irritated, "hello?" in the case of telemarketers (*dude, I'm eighteen, I don't need new windows, okay? Take me off your list*). The voice on the other end sounds so wrecked, so broken, Kon almost falls out of the sky. "Kon…"

"Holy *shit*, Rob! Where are you?! Oh my God, we've been trying to find—"

"Taken… I'm out."

Kon runs out of steam immediately, his default *panic* and *worry* when it comes to this guy, takes root in his chest. But he’s gotta be *tight*, gotta find Rob *Right. Fucking. Now.* "Where are you, Rob? I'll come for you, okay? Just—just *tell me where you are.*"

"Can’t. Kon,” the weak voice cracks, “I can't. Be back…to the Tower. Time. Need *time.*" And Tim is saying something important there, something Kon should *get*.

"Tim,” just slips out because so much is wrong with this and he *can’t* trace that heartbeat and his own is beating *too fast* for him to focus on finding Tim’s voice and—

“Please, *please*, man. *Let me come for you*, okay?"

The phone disconnects, dial tone blaring, and Conner Kent realizes his hand is shaking. He comes perilously close to crushing the Titan’s phone as it trembles in his hand. That voice, that voice…the last time he heard his BFF that shaky, that utterly *fucked*—

“All you need to do is turn around and pretend you were never here.” And his enhances senses *picked up the gun oil a second before he burst in that room, fear a living thing in his chest and—*
Kon doesn’t realize he’s sinking because *those* fucking memories always shake him so hard (he was in *time*). Mentally resetting himself to make sure he’s on board the *shit, shit gotta find Rob* train, he makes a conscious effort to get back in the sky and dials the main Tower line, forcing himself not to dial hard enough to break the damn phone,

"Titans Tower," and Thank God, it's Bart.

"KF—!"

"Hey Blue, what's—"

"Rob. Dude, Rob just called me—"

"Thank fuck, right?!"

And he cuts KF’s laugh right the hell off. "No, man. He said he was taken but he got out. Bart, he sounded…" Kon chokes on whatever description might have been on its way out of his mouth, “I'm on my way to look for him in Gotham right now, can you—"

But, Kid Flash has already hung up the phone. Kon blinks down at the blaring dial tone with a *that little asshole*—when his expansive hearing picks up the familiar noise of *fuck that's fast*. He realizes the *why* when the blur is coming from behind him and the guy is going full tilt, like not even *joking* around about it. Suddenly worried it might burn him out since that shit is like *Barry* epic proportions, Kon just drops down out of the sky like a stone to swoop down for the pickup, grabbing KF around the waist without a hitch. The speedster is jittery (*since shit, bad news*), and in his civvies (*like his torn to shit civvies because hey, douche, your clothes don’t stand up that well when you put your fucking mind to it*), not even bothering with his uniform.

"Okay, give me the 'low," Kid demands winding an arm around Kon’s neck when the meta is suddenly done *fucking around* to put on the *real* speed.

Wind whips, the scenery blurs, but both metas have *that* sitch under control.

"He said he'd be back to the Tower eventually, that's it. I'm going to scan his safe houses to see if he made it back to Gotham. The number wasn’t his cell, so I don’t really know where the hell he is, I’m just hoping we get lucky."

"Do you…do you think the Bats got him out?"

"I hope so? I don’t care who helped, I just hope he didn't do it by himself."

**

Scanning the buildings where Red Robin has hidden perches showed activity in his most common apartment, the perch, apparently taking a shower by the sound of water running (and no, Kon’s not going to do the *see through walls shit*, no, just no thank-you). The two land on the fire escape by a window, trying to stay out of sight because, well, *Bats*, and pull it open to slip inside, glad the guy hadn't bothered to rearm his security system (which is disturbing on so many levels because one, guy had been kidnapped maybe and two, this is *Rob*).

Just to make sure he’s there (and not Stephanie or Jason because no one wants to walk in on *that*—well, maybe Steph for him and Jason for Bart, but *not right at the moment, seriously*), Kon walks to the open bedroom door and calls out, "Rob! It's me and KF. Don’t come out and try to beat our asses, okay? I do not need a kryptonite sandwich right now."
His eyes automatically fall to the discarded clothing on the bedroom floor, staring at the huge patches of old and new blood on the rag that may have once been a dress shirt. Implications are already going through his head while Bart, who doesn't have the same boundaries at all, just walks right in to pick up the shirt and hold the thing up. Both sets of eyes are staring at the torn cloth, dirt, and blood stains. Bart turns to the closed bathroom door, jaw clenched.

"Rob, Robin, answer me or I'm coming the fuck in. Don't try me, dude."

A few heartbeats of silence and Kid Flash doesn't even stop, just shove the door open to barrel the hell right through …and hits Tim's prone body sprawled out on the tile floor.

"Shit! Fucking shit, Tim! Oh my God."

At that, Kon is in the doorway in a flash while Bart is kneeling, blood soaking into the knees of his civvies while the horror takes over his features. Hands hovering, afraid to touch. Once his brain catches up with what his eyes are seeing, bile rising in the back of Kon’s throat that he has to choke it back or risk hurling.

"Oh my God," Bart looks like he’s in shock, like all his mind can come up with while he’s staring at the mess of flesh and blood that was Tim’s fucking back and his mind is going a mile a minute because... just what are they, how can they, what should they, he going to die like this if they don’t do something…?

Neither meta can find a place on the prone body that isn't bleeding, burned, or bruised. Tim Drake looks like he survived Hell and survived is a sticky word at the moment. Bart chokes on his own breath, his chest stuttering, fingers trembling minutely as he goes to press fingers under Tim’s nose and…air lightly hits his fingers.

"Call Cassie or Raven, now." Kon gently tries to feel for any broken bones with shaking hands because he’s totally not in the right mind to get his vision working, but if Rob made it this far, he could be moved, right? (He’s burning up, he’s so hot…please let it be from the shower).

"But, the—the Bats, Kon." Bart’s voice sounds hollow, the words just tumbling out. Kon gets it, the Bats are right in Gotham anyway, and they had resources, knowledge, probably a good medical bay of their own, but what kind of damage would it do to Rob in the long run? If the Bats saw him so utterly torn up, and serious shit went down with them and Rob can’t trust them anymore and just what if they said to fuck off…what else are they supposed to do here? The one guy that usually has the good ideas is the one sprawled out in his bathroom bleeding out fast.

"Fuck no. No, we can’t. He told us not to call them anymore, remember? Besides, they wouldn't have left him like this, right?" But the would they? hangs between them, is present in the exchange of glances.

"Shitfuckshitfuckshitfuckshit, okay." Bart’s hands flutter around and the movement helps calm him down a little so he can take a deep breath, expanding his lungs as far as he can, and forces himself to get his shit together. Now. Rob is bleeding out all of the fucking place. “Raven then, Cassie probably doesn't know shit about first aid."

He’s already taking out his communicator with his own set of shaky hands while Kon finally eases his arms under Rob's prone body and lifts, earning a small noise of pain and Rob's wet tangle of hair flopping on his shoulder. Both of them totally freeze. Immediately, waiting, both sets of wide eyes on the tangle of lax muscle…
Nothing. No auto-ass-kick instinct coming to the fore.

Not. Good. They’ve seen him to come to swinging ten-kinds of messed up…Kon moves. It’s awkward since he’s trying hard as hell to not make anything worse, to be easy, but he’s so shaky and his strength, not to mention Tim’s got a towel kinda wrapped around his hips, but Kon manages to get the guy out of the bathroom while Bart turns the shower off and throws other towels down to sop up the blood.

Whatever Raven is suddenly telling Bart about first aid supplies, the guy is whizzing around the bathroom leaving open cabinets in his wake. Kon focuses on laying Tim down on his stomach (even though it’s probably not much better) and talking in case they get lucky and the guy comes to swinging (which would be such a fucking relief right now, Rob, seriously man).

"H—Hey, Rob? Tim, Tim, it’s Kon. I’m here and Bart’s here.” But nothing, dude is completely out, “Rave—Rave's on her way okay, so I need you to wake up a little ‘cause she likes you best, you know? Well other than Gar, but c’mon, man, wake up just for, like, a second, okay? Please, Tim, you're scaring Bart." Scaring me. “The team, we got a list together of your places, the people you know, tried to find you. All the—all the suits were in your places, so we couldn’t track you that way…”

Kon takes a breath to calm his fucking shit down and has enough shaky control to attempt scanning Tim for eternal bleeding or punctured lung or something worse that they’d have no choice but to take him to a hospital or…

Oh God.

Holding his mouth, Kon backs up until the wall is bracing him. And…and he feels his eyes get hot. The legs give out on Superboy, horror-filled for all the never knew shit about this guy apparently. He’s not sure how long he’s against that wall, just staring, shaking a little, but Bart just has a hold of his bicep, shaking him, a big First Aid kit by his foot.


Finally, Kon turns eyes to Bart and he just can’t… Kon just take a breath and Bart chills out.

"No internal injuries that I can see, but it's…extensive, you know? I didn’t know he was missing internal organs and shit." Like a spleen, just fucking what?

Bart isn't buying it at first but then seems to process the comment. Kon steadies himself and gets back up, picking up the first aid kit and setting it beside Tim's hip to pop it open.

“What—just wait, what the fuck is he missing?” Bart demands, trying to keep Superboy talking in the here and now.

“Uh, spleen? I’m not sure what it does. Okay, gotta remember human anatomy. I should call Clark or something because he would know, right? Shit! Shit! I don’t fucking know what a spleen does, man.”

Bart grips his bicep harder even though, well, invulnerable and shit. "He'll just call Batman, okay? We've gotta have this." But Kon is still obviously half in la-la land, just staring at the mess of bleeding, broken skin, his fists working hard at his sides where his forearm are straining.

“Kon? Fuck, KON-EL.” The guy finally jumps a little, looking at Bart with eyes so wide, Bart can see the whites. But there’s no time, Bart is too busy fumbling to get gloves on, taking his own breath
to steady himself. "Dude. We. Have. To. Have. This. Get your head in the game and get over here."

Jumping like he’s been struck, Kon moves to Rob’s other side, crawling on his knees to get closer but not disturb the motionless body. Bart takes a long, deep, slow breath. “Okay, man, hand me cotton balls and antiseptic.”

Kon moves, opening the pack and setting a handful by Tim’s side then opening the plastic bottle. They both hold their breath as Bart starts dabbing away blood to access each laceration as much as possible. Since Rob’s, you know, human and shit, they’ve got to worry about infections and stuff, right? Bart douses the numerous lacerations just to be sure.

Not long and the air becomes charged, the scent of ozone spikes as Raven appears in the center of the room, her cape fluttering around her like wind. Her eyes widen just a bit as she takes in the man on the bed for a moment, her carefully controlled features fall, like she’s shaken up by what her eyes are telling her. Very not the usual Raven.

"What…has happened?" She pulls off her cape to lay haphazardly on the floor and moves to Kon's side and across from the working Bart, absently picking up another set of gloves while she stares at the mess (and she sees the times she has cleanses, treated Gar’s wounds…). The only indication to show she is affected is the tightening of her hands in the gloves, the curve of her forearm clenching.

Kon goes through what he knows while Raven helps clean the wounds with hands more sure than Bart’s shaky ones. Her features are pleasantly calm, but the air emanating from her is poisonous, angry. A pressure that has nothing to do with body, but spirit.

"Kon, put on gloves as well, you must open the packaging and thread the needle for me." Her eyes are knowing that he’s hiding his thoughts. "Why have we not called Dick? Or Jason? They are not as closely aligned with the Batman. Since we are in Gotham, someone from their side should know about this."

The younger of the two hesitates, "Rob said not to call them. Any of them, remember? ‘Doesn’t matter how fucked I get, don’t call in the Bats for me unless I specifically say so.’"

Raven hums as Kon finally steadies his hand enough to thread the needle and gingerly hand it to her.

"Jason Todd is safe to contact. He can run interference in case any of them are suspicious before Red Robin is up to dealing with them." She automatically wants to tell them to call Dick, to have her old leader, her friend here to see what their inattention has caused, but for Red Robin’s own peace of mind, she bites it back with effort.

"O-Okay," Bart fumbled but Raven calmly holds a hand out, "I'll do it once he's—" and a half-hysterical laugh while his hands keep moving—“not going to die? I don’t know. I’ll—“

Kon chokes a little, "I kind of called him to see if Tim had been spotted in Gotham."

Bart pauses, stares because Kon just violated the Bro Code of “thou shall not call thy Bro’s ex-vigilante team.” Kon ducks his head, "I didn’t…"

"You get to tell him, dude."

Kon flinches, "can we just let him assume-?"

Bart and Raven both give him the look. It’s super effective, almost makes his balls shrivel up out of fear.
"Fine, fine. Once he's not bleeding the fuck out, I'll tell him. But, let me call the Red Hood, okay?"

Raven arches a brow but nods and goes back to stitching up the worst lacerations, being as meticulous as possible and silence reins for a while, each of them looking at the plethora of injuries telling a vivid story of agony and stubborn will. Sadly, the team totally failed on this one, and Bart (in some attempt to even deal with what he’s doing right now because Tim… why didn’t I—) thinks about starting something, a “Keeping the Non-Meta Guy Alive and Not Fucked Up for More Than A Few Days” guide. Something. They needed something to make sure this shit doesn’t keep happening because it seems like every time they turned around, he’s in the middle of another crisis, another crazy string of events that leads to this dude just coming so close to broke for a fucking normal guy.

"What do you think really happened to him? I mean, no suits, what the hell did they want?" Bart whispers while he cleans the blood off Tim's torn fingertips, trying very hard not to think about why and what did this kind of damage to his hands and forearms.

"Torture," Raven replies easily, "these marks are from a whip, possibly one with glass or metal embedded. Some of the lacerations from a knife or straight razor possibly, something to intimidate, terrify. The bruises are beatings, multiple beatings. Some probably with fists, some with objects. Burns are from an iron possibly, some straight from a source. Standard. They wanted something from him. His hands are damaged but not broken; they needed him to be functional."

Kon and Bart both pale, looking from Raven back down to the prone body on the bed.

"The question is," Raven continues, "if they wanted something from Red Robin or Tim Drake. All of his Red Robin uniforms are accounted for, and thus the man behind the mask is the one sought out. If whoever took him knows who he is, then we will have a problem."

"We'll find out the who and go from there." Kon replies while gently touching a series of black bruises over Tim's kidneys and the heat of his body is getting worse but Kon really can’t gauge it without a thermometer or tell because, well, some people didn’t do temp regulations and shit. "We should get him back to the Tower as soon as possible. He'll need fluids, IVs, monitoring. Stuff for squishy people."

Bart takes the gloves off, bare hand gently going for Rob’s shoulder when he frowns harder and presses a hand to the back of Rob’s neck.

"Holy shit, he’s burning up!"

Well, answers that question.

Raven’s pauses in the last of her clean-up, also peeling off gloves and throwing away the supplies used. She presses a bare hand to his face, feeling the intense heat and…

“Infection has set in. We need to get him out. Now,” the tone spurs both metas into action, darting around to look for Rob’s phone, a change of clothes (in case) or anything he might have come back with, talking while they make a cursory search.

"We can't move him yet, can we?" Bart gives a worried glance, "I mean I can run him but…"

"Not without jostling him. I can flying him if we wrap him up in something, keep him warm enough —"

Raven just gives the two a long-suffering sigh like she gives Kori sometimes when the TMI about Roy or mental ramblings about Dick just gets too much (and no, Koriand’r, I do not wish to have a
play-by-play of Dick or Jason’s sexual prowess…please do not continue).

"I’ll take him and the two of you,” with the really? tone of voice she usually saves for Gar’s outrageous conspiracy theories. But, looking at her sometimes team mates, Raven has to remind herself that they are still so very young, even Red Robin. The days of her, Kori, Gar, Vic, Donna, and Dick seemed like a lifetime ago sometimes.

When she was certain Tim wasn’t in horrible condition (when she could handle the guilt better), she’d tell Gar all about it so they could laugh like fools. For now, she gathers energy around herself and imagines the massive medical center in the Tower, seeing it all in sharp, crisp detail.

***

Tim Drake doesn’t come to until a day later, lying flat on his stomach in the Tower and the pain (probably a twenty, even on the Batscale) coming through the haze of drugs and the high dose antibiotics (a third round) being pumped into him (luckily, before he passed out, he’d remember to take some of the special meds in the hidden back cupboard because the words septic shock hovered in the background). Before he chokes on a breath, his conscious awareness of something’s not right makes the Red Robin in him fight. It’s enough for him to combat the sedatives because he’s sure he didn’t give himself any such thing. Someone else must have.

Motherfucker is his first lucid thought and not just because he's in pain. His resolve to stay away from the team until he got his shit together was a solid fucking plan because none of them should see him like this (he’s weak, fucked up, broken; he’s a bad Robin; he should be ashamed because Bruce would be. Jason was right. Jason was right all along…). He hadn't wanted them to see, hadn't wanted them to know. They weren't supposed to come after him. That wasn’t part of the goddamned plan.

Besides, there was still work to do and none of it included the Titans. Couldn't, they would compromise everything.

Mind carefully blank, Tim glances around, sluggish and slow, to make sure no one is around before he struggles to push himself to sit up, to start pulling out the IVs with trembling, broken hands, and turn off the monitoring machines before they start beepingbeeping (get out, get out before anyone else comes in) as fast as he can manage. The drugs are kicking out fast because his fingers and wrists scream and his back pulls (ripping the skin and muscle, arc of blood across the room) with movement.

No one can come here, no one can see him like this. He wraps the sheet around himself, not caring if he's pulling the lacerations and contusions, the burns even more. He needs to get out of view. He needs to hide while he plans and then he has to move. Too much at stake, too much to do.

The elevator takes him to his floor once he feels steady enough on his feet to make it.

"Red One Alpha Protocol." Yeah, that's his voice: wrecked as shit. Luckily, still recognizable enough that his computer chirps, locking him in and the others out (the protocol from the last 'holy shit, someone's possessed' incident). One that would prep things he needed, that would monitor others in the Tower and let him know where they were, if they were approaching the Perch, if they found out he’s made his escape out of the medical floor. He couldn’t have anyone coming upon him yet; there was still work to do.

Finally, Tim stumbles to the corner by his system and lands heavily on the floor when his legs give out abruptly. With his back in the corner where he can see everything around the Perch, he gives in just a little and shakes for what seems like an impossibly long time. His eyes are glassy, dull with
pain and shock, his brain stopping and rebooting intermittently to register he’s *not* on the ship, he’s not tied down, he’s not in that room, he’s not—he’s out. He made it back.

Keeping up the mantra doesn’t stop the slideshow behind his eyes, the dim, rusting metal is all around, the consistent sway of the boat making his shoulders scream from the tension of his wrists bound above his head high enough that only his toes are skimming the floor. The eye of the cameras always on, always watching, and the screams…his or one of the others in the next row of rooms...

The putrid smell brings him out of his head, back in the Tower where he’s staring at the hologram wall, turned off because he’d been gone so long. Bile rises up in his throat, choking him for an important moment. He’d managed to steal a boat and make it back to Gotham Harbor, too fucked up to do much more than hack a payphone to call Kon since the guy would probably be a basket case and he didn’t need them showing up in Gotham to search for him. Mother. Fucking. Stupid. Move. Asshole. His actions has caused it anyway.

He should have waited until the job was *done* (it’s why he started as Red Robin anyway, right? To do things *Robin* wouldn’t do, couldn’t do).

Tim lets his head thunk back into the wall behind him, his fist shaking when the wall under it doesn’t give. He needs this to ground him, so he knows he really is out of there. He’s in his Perch. He can be Red Robin now, he can be *Red* (not Robin, not anymore; Robin wouldn’t be able to handle this). There is no need to hold back. And that thought makes his fear, his panic, his *revulsion* slide further away because the guy that screamed for them during the days of torture, the guy that gritted his teeth and spit blood was just a man, just a spoiled little CEO.

The guy that would be going back ASAP is going to be Red Robin, the one that’s going to get those others the fuck out, that’s going to avenge them; the one that will figure out all the moving parts to that organization is *going to be Red Robin*. And him, that guy, they won’t be able to break (either).

He was going take down the White Triad and their human trafficking/arms dealing operation. He was going to fucking *break them apart* and save those kids. Every. Last. One. Of. Them.

But, he has to get mobile, as in *yesterday*. He had to start moving before they could get further out and into international waters. He had to get fucking moving, *now*. With strength and purpose, more than when the moment he put the tunic back on after his Father’s funeral, when he stepped foot into the world of the Bats after Dick fired him, Tim stands, straightens, eyes *burning* with intent, and he *moves*.

**

"Holy shit, man!"

Bart almost speeds right past him before Kon snatches the guys arm. With a sympathetic wince, he hears Bart’s teeth clack together at the abrupt halt. "Whoa! Where’s the-?"

"Tim's gone, Blue." Bart is already jerking out of Kon’s hold.

"Fucking *what now*?! But, how is he even-?!" Kon draws in a deep, angry breath, already turning to the vid wall to get a bead into the penthouse Perch. "I'm so gonna—"

"As in, *not in the Tower* kind of gone, dude! And, even *fucking better*, the leftover Batplane is gone, too. Gee, let’s play *detective*, right?" Bart is panicky as fuck since, well, yelling while taking the few moments of slow time to shrug into his uniform. And Kon gets *that shit, man* because all these implications are bad. Kon goes one of two places in his head: Rob gone because he was just *too*
Kon whipped his phone out and put another call, this one with an urgent protocol. Everyone was going to need to know some of the deets.

**

Stealth mode is the greatest thing ever. It makes more vigilant than normal a must, though, watching out for other aircrafts while tracking the White Triad (his back is on fire, it’s agony). Red Robin banks hard to the right, his radar catching the small bi-plane in enough time to avoid.

(The gauntlets and gloves are too much pressure on his tormented fingers and forearms; his grips the controls harder, forces his mind past it.) The computers in his cockpit are thrumming; he’s already located and pirated the ship’s mobile network (a necessity for any bad guy with a moveable base of operations); the system just followed the signal and zeroed on the specific location by the network feed and mobile hot spot (You. Fucking. Noobs.). The plan is coming together. He’ll have their files in no time (the very bones in his knees fee fractured, pain spiking through the cap and down his calves).

His discreet contacts in various ABC agencies, ones he’s met in his time as a Bat and a Titan, are frothing at the mouth since he sent a communique about the Triad’s current activities in US waters. Of course, the agencies had to go through red tape and prep and whatever other bullshit necessary before they could get agents in the field, so no one wouldn’t make it to that ship in time to keep them from crossing into international waters (God, his throat was so raw from screaming, giving them what he thought they wanted so they’d leave the others alone…). No one except Red Robin and fuck yes, he’s going to stop them. He’s going to stop them dead in the water, give the Feds the time they need to get their shit together.

The computers in his cockpit are working, download starting. Fucking. Fantastic.

"Tower to Rob. Come. In, Rob." Kon’s voice all kinds of not happy.

Shit. (Intense pressure on his chest and sternum, and he’s waiting for his bones to finally fucking break.)

"Rob. You will respond." Bart sounds super pissed.

He blows a breath out through his nose. I’m not Robin anymore, guys.

"Red here, Tower." (It takes effort to make Red Robin’s voice sound as deep as it usually does.)

"You fucking douche bag." Bart is abruptly cut off for Kon's more charismatic style.

"Red. Location?"

Red Robin stays grim, silent.

"Don't fucking make me ask again, Tim."

Kon says it to piss him off because he knows the triggers, but Red can’t afford to get distracted right now. He’s got too much in this, he has to be tight for this one.

"This isn't a Titan's fight." He says instead. "These aren't metas. I'm calling in the agencies."
Apparently, Kon is not on that train. "I don't give a fucking shit whose fight it is, Tim. We're a team. Now give me your goddamned location." *Or else you asshole* is pretty much right there.

His system beeps, files downloaded. Red checks them briefly, skimming for similar sequences of code he saw on those crates on his way in and out of that cargo hold. He's looking for names, for dates, for buyers, acquirers, for everything. He searches for anything identifying Wayne Enterprises (nothing, okay, good thing), and finally sends a copy of the data encrypted to his contacts with lat and long, along with the time frame that will let him get in, disable, and get out before anyone has to compromise anything by seeing a masked vigilante and leader of the Titans there. He can’t be seen by the agencies; they weren’t going to be able to draw any connections between him and Wayne. No matter what those bastards said once they were in custody, Tim Wayne would be in public, working, no problems.

Client list. "Assets." And…

Red hacks the security feed files and his heart stutters. It's black and white of that room…

He saves all the footage and log files from the last two weeks, all stored on his ghost server. He obliterates the files with excellent encryption and corruption, does the same to the other old feeds from all servers, makes it seem like a malfunction while his pulse beats meaty and sickening in the back of his mouth. No one can ever have that footage. He digs in deeper for anything else the ABCs might need for a full docket so the bastards go away forever.

“Tim. *Tim*?! Respond **now.**”

"I can't, Kon." The drugs are out of his system and his back, his body is shaky with the pain. *Soon,* he promises. *Get me through this fight. Get me through this and you can give out.* "The Titans can't be in on this, not when they took the other guy."

Back at the Tower, Kon and Bart exchange a glance when a whole lot of pissed off teammates start storming the lower floor and flying up the side of the building with a some *where the fuck is he again?*

"*We can do stealth.* Tim, fuck, we can do this on the low. The Titans don’t have to be connected, okay? Dammit."

Five miles out and Tim's finger is on the key to disable the ship's navigation.

"We had this talk once," his voice is dark, threaded with pain because it's *not like he wants this,* like he's choosing to go it alone. "When I came back, Kon, when you stopped me from—we had this understanding that some things were mine and mine alone." *My job, my duty, my Gotham, my crime fighting, my patrols on the streets…*

"Dude," and Bart sounds pretty fucked up.

"I'll make it back. I always make it back. Red out." He closes off comms before he changes his mind. Because he'd like nothing more than to have his team with him for this, to have someone there when he goes back in that torture chamber.

**Nope.** He's already out of time to be a pansy *(it doesn't stop the cold fingers of fear gripping his lungs, seizing him for an impossible moment)*. He triggers the nave shut-down, then cuts all the ship’s power when the full thing comes into view, flying low, almost skimming the water.

His heart is pounding, fear like copper on his tongue, but Red looks in the dark screen at the white-
out lenses staring back at him. This guy isn’t afraid. His head back on, he’s Red Robin and every trick he’s got will go right in to making these motherfuckers fear the night.

**

Kon doesn’t give two shits about the secret ident. Not. Two. Shits.

He’s out of the Tower with his whole body thrumming with pissed-off-I’m-going-to-smash-some-heads-into-paste kind of mentality; he shoves his body through the air as fast as he can go, the weight of the force a completely non-existent worry as he drives himself up high enough to get a good radius and releases the mental block he has on his enhanced hearing (to keep himself sane just like Clark taught him one time in one of their few training sessions) so he can gather as much as possible without making himself a damn basket case.

He has no idea how long he’s hovering above San Fran with his eyes closed and trying to dig through all the sounds, all the people, all the events, everything for miles and miles and miles around him, searching desperately for some sign of Tim, of the Bat Plane, something, anything. His mind is all for one tiny indication that he’s right on and he’s got his best friend…

And that’s it. The sound of the harness opening, the tiny pahs of the smoke capsules, the specific whirrrrl of Tim’s Red Robin throwing disc.

“Got it!” Kon howls to, well, no one except some very startled pigeons that got comfy on his shoulder, and he’s fucking gone. For long moments, while he’s tracking the direction the noises are coming from, the escalations of the fight, the meaty sounds of fists and bodies dropping and screaming and…and…

He almost falls out of the sky.

Children whimpering in fear. Little kids.

“Fuck!” The wind whips the sound right out of his mouth and he forces himself to go faster.

**

He’s done…the right thing.

He’s done what he needs to do.

Red is on his knees, looking out into the mass of kids that aged anywhere from toddlers to young teens, and all those faces are so painfully hopeful, teary-eyed, half-afraid.

He finally manages to get his feet under him, to stand after the last son of a bitch is tied, out cold, and look out at all those hostages that were going to be sold like cattle.

“The police are coming,” he calls over the frightened whispers and whimpering. “The police are coming to save you and take these men away to prison. You don’t have to be scared when they get here, okay? You don’t have to be scared anymore.”

There’s a tug on his cape (and he had to go full cowl because he couldn’t chance any kind of recognition) and a dark-haired toddler is openly sobbing into his full cape, face red and snotty, her clothes dirty and worn. She’s shaking so hard her whole body thrums.

With difficulty because he feels like he’s dying, Red is kneeling, one hand slowly coming up to her shoulder. “It’s okay.” He gasps, “I know you’re scared. But the good people are on their way. I
promise. I called them. I told them you were here, and they’re going to save you.”

The girl doesn’t even stop, just flings herself against him, wailing. And no matter how much pain throbs through him, he just folds around her as the others come forward too, not afraid of the cowl or the fast and furious fighting they witnessed; the blood and the broken bones and the screams of pain didn’t bother them. They’re so afraid, and he’s the only one that made these evil men bow down. He gets it. He does.

“All right,” he finally tells the gathering around him, little hands holding onto his cape, gripping his harness, his forearms, anything they can because they have to believe. “We’ve got to go up to the deck so they can see you. Can everyone walk? I’ll need the eldest to carry the littlest, infants or young toddlers. Everyone needs to help and take someone else’s hand, so pick a buddy and don’t let go. I need all of you to do that.” Because there’s no way he can carry anyone right now; he’s already lightheaded, vision greying out, lost too much blood, in too much pain to be able to do anything other than direct and get out, set the plane to autopilot so he can pass out in it. He just can’t...

*Always thought I would die in the mask…in Gotham on the street…*

*Heh, Hood would be pissed if he didn’t get to kill me, right? Sorry man, totally could have put a few rounds in me at this point.*

One of the older children, a boy with light hair and a terrible knowledge in his eyes just stands up and starts yelling, shoving kids together and making them hold hands. He knows they’re getting out. Smart. Kid’ll be…

Red catches himself before he lists completely on the floor, one hand braced so he isn’t flat on his face. Deep breath in, deep breath out. His thoughts are getting muddied, unclear. He has to get them topside. Now.

He makes it to his feet a second time by some miracle, waving a hand, and the boy is pushing kids to follow him two at a time (Red totally ignores the way the boy kicks the tied up bastard on the floor. Actually, he wouldn’t mind if all of them got their licks in). The first two are clenching hands and his cape, keeping up with him as he takes the too small stairs up, up, up…

Fresh air is split with sirens, helicopters, the **fucking cavalry**. Thanks fuck, **saved**…. All of them…all of them will be saved.

The older boy comes up to him when his knees start to give out, bracing Red with a shoulder under his arm.

“Hey, hey Mister! You don’t look okay.” The kid’s eyes are huge in the moonlight.

“M’okay. Gotta go. Police don’t like me. You…You tell them about these guys, okay? Try not to tell them too much about me.”

The boy gives a sharp nod, “I’ll tell the others to keep quiet.”

“Thanks, kid.”

Red pulls away, uses the last of his energy to get to the side where the plane is still cloaked, shoves himself overboard with the screaming alarms and flashing lights in his horizon. The second he hits the water, frigid, biting through his costume, the pain intensifies and he gives in enough to cry out underwater. Because he’s really stupid sometimes…Bruce would be…so…disappoint—

Hands on him, the arms around his waist, and he’s moving, half conscious with the buzz of pain.
When they break the surface, Kon’s got him, getting them away from the scene fast as the helicopter drops agents on board and boats are starting to surround the ship. He can’t tell what Kon’s saying, wishes his ears aren’t ringing, wishes he could just…Red has enough left in him to tap the space on his harness and activate the plane’s autopilot for the Tower. Then…

Darkness.

**

Control is tantamount to safety; without control, the world would burn.

In moments like this, she meditates, chants, pictures things like Gar’s silly grin, Kori’s innocent observations of all things “confusing” on this planet, Vic’s hi-fives, or Dick’s terrible attempt at making borscht. All of these things give her a measure of calm that can combat the dark.

Nothing in this instance, however, is working, and she feels the shadows in her very soul trying to rise up to the fore. Rachel Roth, Raven, just stands at the window of Titan’s Tower and breathes.

She has not been a reckless child in years; in the first days as a Titan, she had been arrogant, striving for a place in this world, for a purpose. She’s wanted to use everything to fight the darkness, to find a reason not to give in. Thinking she’d found one, she’d become close to the other Titans, fallen in love with Gar, had been wooed back to the dark, fought against it, etcetera, etcetera. The wheel of Fate always brought her back to moments like these, when the darkness beacons so sweetly…

“Rave? Rave? You with us?”

And Connor Kent must also have some kind of sixth sense; she starts visibly and turns, whatever she is feeling must be in her eyes because he reaches out a hand. “C’mon, Rave, no eternal damnation to on behalf of Red. He would be super pissed if you went dark-side trippy, okay?”

Behind him, Bart chorts, but it’s a sad, small sound, not his usual gusto. In fact, the team seated around the table are all solemn, stone-faced and watching the vid screen to the right of the main seat. The vid screen is showing the (now) twenty-four hour surveillance feed of the Tower’s medical wing and the still form of Tim Drake, the Red Robin, laying on his stomach with IVs and monitors attached to various spots on his battered body.

Raven’s eyes are drawn back to Kon’s knowingly (because Kon is the one that went after him, that refused his request for the Titan’s to stay out of this one) and the moment her palm touches his, she is at once soothed and more distressed by his conflicting emotions. However, she allows him to lead her to the table so she may take her seat and resume watching as Tim just breathes.

Cassie, Miguel, and Gar exchange glances since they are the only ones that have no idea of the how or what, but it’s obvious in the set to Cassie’s jaw, the working of Miguel’s fists on the table, and the very serious look on Gar’s face that they are going to have answers and those answers had better come soon.

“We are…going to speak about what has occurred,” Raven begins slowly, “since our last gathering produced no results in Red Robin’s whereabouts. As you see,” her hand waves to the monitor, but she isn’t looking at the clueless three, rather, her eyes are drawn to the live feed instead, “it is much worse than we feared.”

“What happened?” It’s more a demand than a question, coming from Gar, Raven visibly flinches. “We get the call and the guy has already been here, took off again, and is now back with a fuck-ton of damage and he’s septic as fuck. Who the hell knew the guy is missing a crucial body part?” His
green eyes are fiercely pissed off, a muscle in his jaw ticking. “I thought we all had an understanding about this: the non-meta dude on the team gets a little more watch than the rest of us since, you know, he’s kinda squishy and that makes dying so much easier for him. Didn’t I make a damn Power Point about this?!"

Kon shrugs helplessly, “I swear man, I put out the call the minute we got him back here the first time —“

“From the beginning,” Gar shoots him a hard glare.

Kon runs a hand down his face and looks at Bart who just sighs.

“Okayokayokayokayokay, look, Red called Kon, Kon called the Tower, and I answered. He just got away from those fuckers, and we went to Gotham to get him, okay? We didn’t even know he was there until we got into his apartment. Then he was seriously fucked, Gar. Like, didn’t know if he was going to keep breathing.” And Bart’s eyes are huge because he’s trying to be such a dude right then with the watery eyes and Gar lets a little of the pissed off ease.

His eye slide to Raven; he doesn’t even need to ask.

“They called me,” she simply shrugs, “when his wounds were found to be…extensive. Neither Conner nor Bart know enough about First Aid to have kept Tim from going into shock from blood loss; therefore, I arrived to make certain he would not bleed out. None of us were aware he was also in septic shock until we were able to get him back to the Tower.”

Kon jumps in, “Gar, Cassie, Miguel, and I got nothing on hurt humans except basic First Aid and even I knew we couldn’t move him until we got the bleeding under control, okay? After we did, we brought him back immediately—like an hour tops.” He starts ticking off on his fingers, “high dose antibiotics, intravenous fluids, pain medication, constant monitoring. With his secret ident, we couldn’t take him to a hospital; there would be a lot of questions we couldn’t answer, not with how easy he is to spot, you know? We did the best we could in the sitch.”

The tension in the other three Titans eases an iota, but Gar still hasn’t lost the look.

“So he just up and peaces out less than two days later?”

“Pretty much,” Bart is still pissed off about it, too, but hey, Ro—Red. Enough said. “But, he said…seriously, he said he was kidnapped as Tim, like the CEO of Wayne Enterprises, not as Red, you know? He didn’t tell us because having the Titans go would compromise the ident. Shit, man, you think we weren’t trying like fuck to track him?! We’re lucky Kon got a bead on his voice before he passed out in the middle of the ocean with a dozen ABC corps there to fish him out!”

“ABC corps?” Miguel glances at Cassie, whose face is shocked.

“Like the CIA, NSA, FBI, like those guys,” Gar answers for her, and Miguel gives a little noise.

“This is loco, even for Red Robin.” the guy waves a hand and sits back, arms crossed over his chest, staring at the vid screen. “He doesn’t play with those kind of guys unless it’s last resort time.”

“So…” Cassie closes her eyes briefly, breathes through her nose, “Tim gets abducted because of Wayne Enterprises, tortured, comes back to Gotham, and just went back out after the group of international terrorists that held him captive for almost two weeks. Sounds about right?”

“From what we’ve gathered, yes,” Raven forces herself to push away the darkness calling for her to avenge. Her nails bite into her palms, the minute pain brings her back.
“Fuck,” Miguel breaks in again, “this is so far beyond fucked, I don’t even know where to start.”

“Agreed.” Gar and Bart say in tandem.

“This…we can’t let this just go,” Cassie is shaking her head, almost talking to herself. “He’s gotten worse since he broke it off with the Batman, too reckless with himself, but this—this was suicide. If we don’t do something, he’s going to get himself killed.”

“Whoa, chica, babe, that guy has his head together tight, you know? He’s one of the most together guys I’ve ever met.” But Miguel’s eyes won’t meet anyone else’s. He’s always had Red Robin’s back, always looked up to the guy. Even he is having doubts now.

“He was,” Bart interjects quietly, staring down at the table with his arms crossed over his chest. “Rob—Red…Tim was totally on top his shit a year ago. But, he just got back from being fucking tortured. He’s not going to be okay for a while, if ever.”

“Then what do we do?” Cassie gives a helpless shrug. “Where do we go from here?”

“What we have to do,” Gar starts, “is be smart about it.”

Miguel gives the others a half-smirk, already on that thought train, “you know, some of us got connections, you feel me? We get someone better to hack his phones, get sensors made for his suits, we keep tabs on that cabrón. That’s what we should do.” He gives a meaningful glance at Gar.

“Vic,” Gar nods absently, “Vic would do it because we sure as hell aren’t going to—“ he pauses, looking at Raven again with one green brow arched up.

“No,” she replies gently, “I did not contact Dick concerning any of this. I doubt Tim has contacted the Bats in Gotham at all.”

Kon’s eyes get angry, “none of them were there when we got to him. They didn’t get him out.”

“Shit,” Gar rolls his eyes back, a headache suddenly forming behind his left ear. “This is going to get complicated eventually, Rave.”

“It does not need to, Gar,” she argues, “we simply respected Tim’s request to leave them out of Titan business unless the situation is dire. Dick will just have to understand that.”

“Dire, babe? How much more dire are we going to get than this? Dick is not going to be okay with this, at all. And that guy is going to find out eventually. He was Batman.”

A non-existent wind makes her hair flutter, anger taking over her features sharply, “I have not receive any calls from him in concern to Tim during the last year, Gar. He has no reason to be… upset.”

“Fucking family drama,” Bart observes dryly, making everyone crack a smile.

“As the Bat Turns,” Kon comes back in a reflexive move, but he’s holding on to his own elbows tightly enough to make his knuckles white.

A noise draws their attention to the vid screen, a low sound of pain as Tim moves, hands finding purchase, arms firming shakily like he’s trying to push himself up.

Raven stands and goes to the vid wall, tapping out a quick command. The soft ‘pah’ in the room barely registers on the screen, but the high dose pain medication puts the human back down. Their
eyes take in his movements.

“Fine. I’ll call Vic after this, take his phones over to the Watchtower.” The sigh lifts Gar’s chest, “but we are doing something about this, dammit. Seriously, we’re going to be burying that guy if he doesn’t get his shit together about team mentality.”

Miguel taps his fingers on a miniature projected wall under his hand, “I know someone that knows someone... professional, like that can maybe give me some advice on dealing. You know?”

The faces around him are furrowed in confusion.

“PTSD,” Miguel replies with a raised brow, “my friend volunteered at the VA! Good shrinks there, amigos, and any advice will help, okay?”

Gar nods thoughtfully, “dude, that’s...totally a good idea. Find out if there’s like, a process or steps or something, and we can kind of ease it on Tim when he’s moving. So, cool. We’ve got everyone scheduled to watch Tim on shifts, any questions?” With no opposition, he claps his hands together, “let’s break and meet back when I get back from seeing Vic.”

“I’m first,” Cassie is already up, going to grab bottles of juice from the fridge before he heads to the medical wing, “and if he wakes, the lecture I’m going to give him will be one worth hearing.”

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In another forty-eight hours or so, the leader of the Titans is awake, mostly aware, and hurts like a motherfucker, with his tolerance to pain, that’s saying something (more than the first go-round because the drugs are obviously so far out of his system now). He’s again pulling out IVs again without bothering to look at the bags to see what he’s on because oh yeah, there was going to be a whole bunch of pissed the fuck off coming his way as soon as they all realize he’s semi-conscious. The pressing need to get away is just as strong as the last time he came to lying on a gurney in Titan’s Tower. He knows what’s coming like he knows how fast a batarang needs to travel to take out a guy’s gun hand before the gun goes off. He knows.

Getting to his feet is like stepping on broken the glass the first time, painful and biting until you get used to it. The pull of the not-nearly-healed-enough skin of his back is enough to make his eyes instantly water and that doesn’t even touch the whole-body ache from the numerous beating he’d taken tied to that rafter. If he still had functioning kidneys, then there really were such things as miracles because shit.

As a note to his paranoia, he pauses just long enough to turn around and look at the reflection of the parts of his lower back that aren’t covered with bandages in the elevator walls; no scar over his kidneys. Welp, he must still have them (probably).

The doors open to his perch, familiar surroundings making him breathe easier when he forces his legs to move.

“Lockdown,” his voice is scratchy, “Red Protocol GTFO. 8761152-D1” He moves slowly, carefully to the built-in kitchen, limping pretty much a given, but his throat is like the Sahara and he needs something... Clattering echoes as the reinforced steel blinds lower over the windows, the door by the stairs clicks with locks turning, the elevator goes back down so the plating can slide over the shaft and close him in completely.

“All monitoring off,” with a glass of juice, he sounds more like himself. “No audio or vid recordings. Shut off all screens.”
Whirling of the system in the perch complying.

“All feeds severed,” the androgynist voice informs him. “Lockdown completed.”

Tim drains his juice, glass in the sink and nods to himself, slowly moving down the hall to his room, hands gripping his biceps because he needs to hold himself together for a few more minutes…

The bathroom has no windows, only one vent with pressure bombs, no secret escape route. It’s alone as he can get.

His shoulder against the wall steadies him enough to slide down to the floor, sitting on his knees, bending over himself as much as his back will allow. Then, then, Tim can give in to the overwhelming *everything*.

He can sit there and shake and yell and grab at his own arms, and *remember* and be angry and be scared for himself, *for those fucking children on that goddamned ship*; he can be young and thankful he’s alive while, at the same time, wishing, just wishing…

*It’s like drowning but not, the cloth over his face, the tilt to the table so all the water goes into his lungs; the tearing of his skin under the whips, the fists, the kicks; electric jolts his body, shaking him to the core while the laughing in the background is a whole bunch of white noise; then the slow sizzle, the smell of his flesh burning, the pain while his legs are held down, the muscles in his back spasm, and he can get out if he wants. He can fucking end it. He can get out of the chains, off the ship. He can save himself…but there are so many little kids everywhere, and he might not be a Bat anymore, but he can’t just leave them to this fate. He’s got to figure out a way to save them and himself…*

He’s in his head for a long time, too long, too deep. He didn’t even…

One second he’s on that ship while those sons of bitches demand he give over his Wayne Enterprises Tactile Monitoring System, and the next he’s almost shaking himself apart while Kon is holding on to him on the fucking bathroom floor, the guy pretty shaky himself. But that’s Kon, that’s just *him*. He’s one of the strongest guys on the face of the planet and shit like emotional pain and fear just undo him. Watching Cassie cry that one time had nearly given the guy a stroke.

“Shit,” Tim starts to pull back hard, fast, but his body and Kon’s hold aren’t having it. Trying to be careful *so fucking careful* of the mass of bleeding, broken skin from below his shoulders to right above his waistline, Kon refuses to just let him pull away.

“I got you,” the meta keeps himself quiet, soft, like he understands nothing is okay right now. *Nothing*. Red Robin went back out there, brought Tim Drake’s captors down, save a boatload of little kids that were going to be sold off, made sure the crates of weapons were taken by the ABC guys and out of bad guy hands. He came back alive as promised. Red Robin’s duty is *done*. Now, Tim Drake had nothing to hold on to other than the last two weeks of his life.

“Kon. The best thing you can do right now is leave,” and Tim is fighting so hard to pull himself together, eyes closed, his voice wrecked (from screaming? From whatever else…?).

“Fuck. No.” A hand that could crush his skull if the damn thumb just itched or something, cradled the back of his head firmly. “I’ve had enough leaving you alone, man. Not. Gonna. Happen.” And Kon’s chest expands with *fear* (but he doesn’t smell gun oil this time, does he?).

Tim’s muscles tighten, bringing another round of agony, and with it, his head starts back to that cargo hold, that *room*…
“Don’t go anywhere. Stay right here with me.” And the chest against his gives a stuttering move, “stay with me, Tim.”

“How the fuck did you even get in?” Breathe in asshole because he could deflect now; someone else is watching.

“Not telling you, dude.” Kon just sighs.

“No fair, cracking my security,” but Tim’s voice cracks, his body wound tight, a coil ready to spring.

“You. Are. A. Douche.” The enunciation is perfect, “we just got you back and you lock yourself up here. Not cool, man. You scared the shit out of everyone, like for the umpteenth time. Stop that.”

Tim wants to laugh but the sound comes closer to a sob with a hysterical edge. “I can’t—I just…I need time to…I don’t know, I can’t face everyone yet, I can’t.”

Movement and Kon is nodding against the side of his head, “okay. That’s okay, man. I’ll tell them and they’ll understand. But, you can’t be alone right now, Tim. You just can’t. If not me, then someone.” And there’s that please don’t force the issue tone.

A long breath because there is no one else in his life, hasn’t been in a long time. “You. Just you. That’s it. I’m not going to talk about it. I’ll get over it. I’ll be fine eventually.”

“Okay, Tim. Okay. I’m just going to stay here with you, make you something to eat, check the bandages on your back, and we don’t have to talk about anything. Sound good?”

He swallows, closes his eyes and just nods against Kon’s shoulder because he could do this; it’s not going to break him.

Meanwhile, Cassie reads the text from her phone aloud, “Okay. Kon got in, he’s with Ro—Red now.” She sighs a little in relief as the others actively stop looking at the plans for the perch’s lockdown (because Gar already said he would turn into something small and crawl through the vents, no big deal, and Miguel just gave a grin when the elevator shaft was mentions because, “really bitches, you think that’s gonna keep me out?” “Let’s try not to traumatize him more than necessary,” had been Raven’s compromise.)

Bart still looks inordinately guilty that he had to use the bathroom, left Tim long enough to escape. She pats him on the head, ending with a hair ruffle before she sits down and pulls up the holographic draft document over the table. As a joke (maybe), someone added the title “Keeping Red Alive: Necessary Procedures, Processes, and Protocols.” No one voted to change it. The list, so far, is extensive. Everyone contributed since Red’s terrible habits are noticeable to most people (except himself). The team covers everything from combating sleep deprivation to activating sensors installed in his phones and laptops every eighteen hours to detect injuries; a few included the detection of multiple types of magic within a five foot radius or alerting the team if an inordinate amount of ninjas started up with the creepy stalker thing (again).

The team reads over what they’ve got so far, silence reining for a few minutes.

“We can add to it later if we need to,” Bart finally said because, really, he’s speedy at everything, even reading.

“True. I think it’s a good start,” Gar agrees. “We get this in the system, get some tracking sheets ready, and get some sensors in his perch at Gotham. We go from there.”

“I’m going to say it again, though. The names are dumb. Like, he’s a smart guy, okay?”
Raven raises a brow, “Red will discover the list before long; the point is that we are not hiding it from him.”

“He doesn’t like to be coddled, normal or no,” Cassie just shrugs, “he’ll put up with it because we aren’t keeping it a secret.”

Bart just sighs, “all right, all right, fine.”

Gar shrugs at him, “dude. Dick was an asshole about it, too. Seriously, talk to Kori about his ‘I’m not a pansy’ complex. I mean, I can turn into a Tyrannosaurus Rex and you’re throwing smoke pellets? C’mon, let me worry about your ass, but that’s just their way, you know? Red will deal with it because he’ll convince himself it’s more for us than him and we let him think that.” He waves his hands with a voila motion.

Miguel raises a brow at Cassie, wagging one finger, “hold up, can we get a rule for when el tonto goes for the kitchen? Mes amigos, we do not want a repeat of his attempt to make soufflés, sí?

Bart turns a little greener just at the mention. “Please don’t bring that up, I still get urpy just thinking —“

“You both suck,” Gar just laughs a little, “serious time, all right?”

Miguel (looking unrepentant) grins a little but…it’s not his normal devil-may-care, “I know, I know! A little humor to make this less harsh, comprende? Red is going to have a long recovery from this. We all know it, so we keep up the banter. We don’t treat jefe any differently than before. We give him normal because in here,” and he taps his temple with two fingers, “is not normal anymore. We give that back to him while he recovers, see?”

That makes the most sense, gives the team more of an idea as to what the hell…how do we…what’s the next thing to do? None of them are therapists, and all of them have suffered through trauma because of who they are and what they are capable of doing; Miguel, however, gives them a path to follow.

“I like that,” Bart nods.

Raven also nods.

Cassie grins and nods as well.

Miguel claps his hands, “settled! Now, we feed these into the computer and stick with the plan.”

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“So…” Kon breathes, closes his eyes because fuck this feels so much like betrayal. “There you go. That’s some of what wasn’t on the ghost drive.”

In the Guest Room at the Watchtower where he’s been crashing the last few days, he, Bart, and Miguel are sitting on the bed while Gar and Rave are in one of the chairs, Cassie is standing by the door to the bathroom, arms crossed tightly over her chest, pointedly looking at the spot over the Batman’s head.

Facing them, Jason Todd, Dick Grayson, and Bruce Wayne have been patiently listening after finding a file, a very short summary file on the White Triad and their attempt to procure Wayne
Enterprises technology.

So, while Red, Supes, WW, and Cyborg are taking the littles on a visit to Mike and Holly McComber, the meta couple that could act as a safe house/safe haven should the League, the Titans, or the Bats have some shit, shit, world-saving going down with a whole lot of get them to safety, the two groups are meeting just after Bru…ah, Batman set up some impressive tech to loop the feeds (thanks Vic, you are seriously the shit) so Red’s not getting this shit any time soon.

Batman with the cowl on takes a breath, only audible to the dudes with super hearing, but with the tells the Bats are putting off…he’s doesn’t feel incredibly terrible about telling what they knew. Well, they didn’t tell the Bats everything. Some details of his injuries, what they did to take care of him…not everything.

Kon nods to the file folder he’d brought along, the one that had their reports from the incident. Sure, a lot of stuff was missing but at least it would give the Bats an understanding why this Praesidium shit is more fucked up than any of them realize…

The Titans stand from their places as the Bats do.

“Thank-you for this trust,” Batman holds up the file gently.

Kon and Bart have a whole lot of we hope we made the right call before they take off out of the room, Miguel and Cassie right at their heels. Gar pulls at Rave’s hand, but she stays still. His brow arches as he looks at her, Raven just gives him a look and the shorter man presses a gentle kiss to her pulse before winking at her and heading out the door.

Alone with the Bats, she waits, mask still obscuring her face. Dick, who has been silent, still through the telling, finally touches Bruce’s arm and Jason’s knee.

"Give us a minute."

He can feel B giving him a raised brow through the cowl, knows when the second Robin and B exchange a glance. They don’t argue (thankfully). Once the two leave, Raven finally sighs and removes the hood to fully show her face. And he sees it, her eyes have changed again, a testament to her own trials since he was the one living in the old Tower.

"Hey Rach," and like that, the years between them melt away. She grins at him, that secret smile.

"Bird Wonder," she replied fondly.

"Good to see you," and his eyes go liquid with the same affection.

She nods, "I wish the circumstances were…better."

"Me too," he reaches out and she takes that hand, squeezing through her gloves like he's throwing her a lifeline.

"I couldn't call you, Dick. I'm somewhat sorry, but Gar and I couldn't betray Tim like that." Her eyes are stern, solid.

Dick Grayson, Nightwing, raises the lenses on his domino and breathes, "Rach, why—?"

She gets sad for whatever will come to light, "when he came back as Red, he said he wasn't a Bat anymore, Dick. He made us promise not to call any of you for anything. Gar thought maybe…I don't know. You know Gar and his conspiracy theories."
They share a laugh at that, but Dick is nodding because he gets it now. The months of Plan: *Get Timmy Back* has taught him so much and *not fucking enough*.

"I'm glad you hit up Jason at least because we never would have…Tim wouldn't have ever told us, you know."

She gives a small nod. "He…isn't the same. Hasn’t been since. The first few weeks after he came back was… The trauma and nightmares, he was more jumpy, more driven, he was just... frightening. We were able to help him after a while when he allowed it. He could fall asleep for a few hours when we made him come to movie nights. He was better if someone was there. Gradually, he started getting, well, for lack of a better word, more *Tim* than *Red*."

Her eyes close briefly. "Not long after, the Insurgents hit and that was also…bad. One of the team hit his mind traps and those memories were triggered."

Dick's eyes soften, "I heard it was something like that. A Titan went through his torture?"

Raven nods gently. "Yes. The mind field the Insurgents set was meant to trap the trespassers in live memories, a loop of them. The other team mate was…reasonably distressed, but is healing from the ordeal."

*Cassie*, he doesn’t need to say it. Her body language is enough to fill in the blanks. Dick nods gently, "I'm glad. Has anyone tried to get either of them—?"

"He has refused any therapy," she answers promptly. “She has been able to heal somewhat with her mentor and time."

"I figured."

Raven hesitates slightly, "actually, he…he has been…*better* since you and Batman have made an effort in Gotham. I cannot adequately explain it, Dick, but he seems calmer, I suppose. Perhaps less dark when he is not in the mask, almost like the old Tim. He shows more of his true face. It is a good thing to see."

A flare of hope makes him grin, "yeah? I'm pretty relieved to hear that. I noticed too, you know, that blank face he's got now. It, *fuck*, I *hate it*, Rach."

"Yes. Kon and Bart are relentless when he starts acting that way. Anything of shock value to shake him out of it. They are exceptionally creative, but as long as they clean up whatever mess they make, it is an acceptable price to pay."

And Dick's not even going there. Nope because then she'll start on the shit he and Gar and Wally used to do during prank war and yeah…

Raven finally shifts. "Gar is waiting on me, Dick, so I must go but," she pulls something small out of the pocket of her uniform and gives him her full attention. "Please understand, Tim can *never know* about this."

The weight of her eyes make him straighten too. She places a flash drive in the palm of his hand, holding on instead of letting go.

"Only Tim has a copy of the security footage from that ship. A copy of that file is here. I had to wait until he passed out at his computer one time to access it."

Dick’s heart speeds up, "you've—?" And his voice is just this side of hoarse.
"No need," her free hand taps the side of her temple.

He breathes…just breathes.

"Dick, you don't have to watch it. I'm trusting you with this because you and Bruce seem genuine and I can read your determination to make things right with Tim, but you can also let him tell you in his own time. Do not feel like you must view this. I can honestly tell you…it is horrific."

Dick Grayson’s jaw clenches and he immediately pulls Raven into his arms, hugs her tightly to his chest with the almost but not quiet octopus hold. And she allows this comfort, this thank-you for trusting him.

Still, when they pull back, she drops the drive into his palm and closes his finger over it. She sighs gently, looking up at him, "your heart is in the right place, Dick. It always was."

Sadly, he smiles down at her, "actions, Rach. Always actions."

"Yes," she agrees, "and now you are doing what is right. However, for Tim to forgive you, you must begin by forgiving yourself. And," her smile turns a little sly, "maybe you and Jason can finally have a…conversation?"

His brows furrow, "Me and Jay? A conversation?"

"Oh, Dick. You aren't fooling anyone, you know. Maybe Tim but that's it."

Oh. Oh, shit.

Raven laughs gently and reaches up to pat his cheek. "I'm not telling anyone, don't worry. However, who in your family would begrudge you two this chance at happiness, Dick? Why not talk about the more unconventional?"

And now he’s blushing. Which is just crazy as hell because he has a reputation in the superhero community and no one will believe he’s blushing right now, Rach, no one will even believe you. "Thanks, Rach," with fond exasperation but he’s laughing a little anyway.

She steps away with a smile, going out through the door to Gar waiting for her in the hallway, leaving the light scent of brimstone and ozone in her wake.

Dick is left staring with the flash drive burning hot in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

This isn't as far in depth as it could have been because well, reasons. Okay? But, still, thanks for reading everyone. Feel free to give me your thoughts and ideas. Also, I'm still not great with Tumblr yet but you can find me at https://www.tumblr.com/blog/iphoenixrising and I will totally keep trying ;)
Chapter Summary

The Bats are getting Timmy back, step-by-step

Chapter Notes

This is the amalgamation of drabbles I wrote when I first thought up the concept as well as ones based off comments from some of you (if I forgot to give you credit, please remind me and I’ll update); these are supposed to be steps in bringing Tim back to the Bats, so there are varying spans of time in between each and all of them have headings and stuff.

Ah, yeah. Also, I was talking to yangmallow about this, but…I would like to thank ALL of YOU. All of you that read and do the kudos thing. All of you that comment because you’re with me on this. Just everyone. You drive me, you drive the story, and we agree that THIS fandom is so full of such epically awesome, supportive, and wonderful people that just- yeah, wow. I honestly cannot express how much love I feel from all of you, how much I appreciate your kindness. I’m really humbled so thank-you, just thank-you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Practice**

“We,” and the little hand wave encompasses everyone gathered in a rocking semi-circle, “are so not doing this.”

Tim raises an eyebrow because, well, why the hell not? “We’re here. It’s here. Everyone said we could use it, so what’s the problem?”

The guy arguing with him—you know, the one with the Vanna White gesture thing going on—raises an impressive brow right back, looking down pointedly at the leg that had come out of the walking brace thing yesterday.

Yesterday, dude. Can we move on?

Cassie just makes an obvious trying-to-be-patient-and-failing noise. “The problem,” she starts slowly, “that is very valid, Tim, is how little time you’ve had to properly heal for this kind of activity.”

He tilts his staff down so he can brace it, lean his elbow on it pointedly, a very old school move. Like, he’s making a point here, a “Robin” type of point.

Then Bart has to get some stubborn on, drawing in an exaggerated breath, like he’s planning on giving out a super speedy list or something.
Tim cuts him right off with *that shit*, “I need to work out my shoulder and knee. I’ve been pretty much down for three weeks and the stitches are already *out*, okay?” See, *reasonable*.

“Give it another week,” Miguel has both hand up, palm out in the universal *slow yo’ roll, jefe.* “By then, B-Man will be able to participate, too, yeah? Then we can team it *up*.”

And Tim blinks, eyes sliding over to said Kid Flash again who *apparently* looks just as shocked and betrayed at that assessment as expected.

“Dude. *Bro.* I am totally *fine* with a capital ‘F’—“

“Oh?” The taller guy leans down a little, arms crossed over his chest. “You serious, man? Feeling all good now? For real?”

Kid does a few squats just to be *oh hey, look at that shit move.* “Oh yeah. *For real.* No probs right here—“

The purple block of power just *appearing* behind Bart’s bad knee takes a pot shot just to prove *nu-uh, not all good* when the thing gives out and sprawls the smaller guy all kinds of over the floor.

“Guess that answers that,” Tim observes mildly, snapping the bo in one hand while the other extends to help his BFF to his feet.

“My *ass,*” the speedster counters, “that was a dick move, Miguel.”

Miguel just grins wider since, well, *caught you pequeñito.*

Tim just shrugs, “it’s fine. We need someone to monitor in the control room anyway. Pretty much just volunteers you for the job.”

And back to the point.

“Maybe the both of you should monitor the simulation,” Raven observes without a twitch to her raised, well-manicured eyebrow. “Since both of you are so…*compromised*.”

“I *need* the workout, Raven. That’s the point,” Tim just starts moving down the hallway as he’d *casually* been doing in the first place when his team had pretty much ninja-ed out of the *walls* once *oh hey, dude’s got a bo, why not check it out* mentality showed up.

“Besides, as I’ve already *mentioned,* I am seriously good going in solo. You guys can go catch a movie, get some dinner, knit a sweater, make some banana bread—“

“Already *made* some, and it’s *the shit,*” Kon returns with his upper lip curled. “But, *no Tim,* the point is you shouldn’t be ‘working out’ the day after you get stitches removed and the *walking cast off.*”

BB just looks at him *innocently,* “you *know,* if we told Cuddly-Wuddly Bug or Karm about what you’re doing—“

“Oh-hu, no using *the littles* against me like that. Seriously, BB, get a dollar and buy some shame.”

The guy’s white grin tells so much *more* than Tim ever wants to know. Ever. It helps when Raven promptly slaps a hand right over his mouth to keep in whatever perverted crap is about to come spewing out.

“Rave for the win,” Kon observes absently, “*dude,* you are not going in there alone. Period. Pick up
what I’m laying down here.”

Still walking, still ignoring the glares at his back, Tim lets the sigh carry over his head.

“Why don’t we draw straws?” Cassie muses, hands clasped behind her back, nudging Kon with one shoulder while Tim’s back is turned. “Whoever draws the shortest straw will monitor the simulation. That would be fair, wouldn’t it, Red?”

And he reaches the labeled, reinforced door, turning on his heel to regard the members of his team with a raised brow since, well, it didn’t take a detective to see where this is going. But why not have some more fun on top of it all?

“You know, Cassie, I think that does sound entirely fair,” his responding grin is sharp and full of mirth.

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Now they’re all reeling with just enough disbelief because how did the normal guy always pull shit like this off? C’mon, some of them have things like super speed and enhanced senses, mind reading capabilities, (lassos of truth much?) and the like.

KF is seething, so angry his foot is tapping literally a mile a second while he folds his arms and watches out of the massive windows of the control room. BB, who also finds little mirth in the situation, is still puzzling out what the hell and how the hell it happened.

“How did he sneak in two short straws? I mean, damn,” it’s about the third time Gar has pointed this out. “He doesn’t even have a utility belt on.”

“He’s an asshole. I’m sure you got the memo,” Bart snaps out.

“True, but he’s our asshole, right dude?” And, really, Gar has to make it hard to be pissed off. Just because he’s Gar.

Rolling his eyes, Bart throws out his arms and sighs. “I know, I know.”

And they watch the team spread out a little across the room, watchful, instincts on high alert since this is the first time any of them have ever used the JLA’s personal training room (and Bart bets, 100%, that Tim’s inner fanboy is going ape-shit right now). They’re checking out the innocent looking walls and floor that will alter, start spitting out who knew what. So the next ten, fifteen, twenty, however long the team can stand it, minutes are going to be some new and unexpected and probably dangerous since, well, the JLA and all.

“All right,” Tim cracks his neck before he hits the comm, holds the bo in his good hand while he works the stiff arm in a windmill, working the muscles and tendons out since it’s been a minute. Kon automatically breathes in deep before slowly releasing the block on his enhanced senses. Cassie is going up and down on the balls of her feet to stretch out her calves since she really doesn’t get in enough step aerobics some weeks for upgraded ass kicking. Miguel is grinning, humming to himself while he eyes the walls, crouching and working his hips a little.

“BB, KF, let’s start out at 65% to warm up.”

The two in the control room do the eye dance thing, but Bart gets with it a little and sets the system to 60% percent anyway for just in case.

The lights kick off, casting the expansive room in darkness.
And the JLA…well, it starts with Wally throwing down a bet. The rest just follow suit. KF and BB are being so absolutely smug about it since the team is up to 81% and pretty much having fun with it.

A flying drone whizzes past the control room window, Tim crouched on its back with a handful of random wires to control it while he’s got the bo in the other hand. His mad cackling gets exponentially louder the closer he gets and slacks off while he steers straight at another drone and leaps off in the nick of time as the two collide. He rebounds off the wall, (Cassie takes a tiny breather—not like she really needed it—to float up just enough) off Cassie’s crossed gauntlets, back flips with his hair flying wildly, and lands it like Dick, still laughing his ass off. Cassie sets down beside him, her eyes twinkling brightly as they turn back-to-back and pick up again.

Meanwhile, Kon is just working it out with gleeful bam-bam-pow and his smile is wide and free as he turns to the next wave of robots and just plows on through with strength on one side, and his TTK on the other. Raven simply uses what she has and tosses random figments into his path, expertly dodging the debris; when she decides she wants to work a bit, she turns into a torrent of dark energy, crushing and expanding. Then Bunk, that guy, is almost skipping around, swinging randomly made objects to and fro to smash the hell out of automatons and machine guns and waving good-naturedly at the blacked out windows of the control room when the holographic enemies go flying. The digital blood is terribly done. Just, terrible.

Wally turns on Vic abruptly, “I’ve got ten on Bunk, man.”

“Whaaaaat?” Vic look almost offended. “He’s only got room for like, thirty at a time, dude!” The robotic arm gestures to the viewing window.

“You’re both wrong,” Supes jumps right in on it.

“Agreed,” Diana cuts in, one hand right on the S to shove Kal back a step, “Ten on Red.”

“Uh-hu! Not getting away with it—“ Vic starts in.

“Can’t take the leader, Di.” Wally pouts, arms crossed over his chest.

“Cheating,” Hal sing-songs.

Diana’s jaw drops in obvious affront, “he’s injured, that negates the rule.”

“Does not!” Wally shakes a finger right at her.

“How injured does he look,” Vic counters with a twist of his lip.

B…is so staying out of this, entirely (partially because he’s always accused of cheating just because he’s normally right. World’s. Greatest. Detective) just watching the obvious good time had by all in the next room, eyeing KF’s arrogant grin and Garfield humming to himself while he takes the system up another notch or two (or five at this point, why not?).

Idly, the Batman looks down at the speedster sprawled out in the chair, and stares behind the whiteout.

Kid shifts a little and finally looks up at B, “he’s an asshole, B. You caught that wave, right?”

“Because he made you sit out?”
“Because he totally *cheated* and made me sit out.” Kid corrects since, well, *yeah*. That’s *right*.

And that makes a low chuckle come out of the *fucking Batman*, dude…like, he’s never made Batman laugh. Ever. In *ever*.

“*You sound very surprise and offended,*” B clarifies. “*Especially surprised.*”

KF opens his mouth, *pauses*, thinks about it, and closes his mouth with a flapping wave of his hand since Batman really has a point. “*He’s breaking the bro code, Batman. Not. Cool.*”

“*Mhm. He must be more concerned than normal if he resorted to those tactics. I’m sure you’re aware of that, Bart.*”

Blinking (since Batman didn’t usually call him by his name—huh, maybe the Bat rules are changing for more than just Red?), KF shrugs a little. “*He worries too much.*”

“*More so since Barry showed up,*” B observes mildly, keeping it on the low (even though Kal is *right there*, sometimes the alien can be discreet. Not often, but *sometimes*). “*You okay?*”

And KF’s default to *Batman* of all people is “*totes. Glad to see the guy is still moving. Nice of him to stop in for a visit and everything.*”

And, well, B is already aware of the effects of an abandoned member of the family; he sees Kid Flash with the overlay of Red and has drawn disturbing similarities in the two. More so than with Superboy.

“I supposed knowing what the Flash Point is and what is could mean for our world may *help* with the explanation, Bart. He is…*concerned* for your safety among other things.”

The turn to the Batman’s profile is so fast, even the speedster gets a crick in his neck. “He already gave you the deets I take it?”

Just a shift in all the darkness of the Bat suit. “*I’ve convinced him to talk to you about it. Once things here settle down, we’re bringing you in for a brief.*”

KF blinks once. Blinks again.

“*Again, concerned for your safety. However, you deserve the whole story and to decide how far you want to participate.*”

And just… “*th-thanks, Batman. For having my back.*”

It’s a grudging, hard thing. Just like how Jason used to be back when he was Robin and B pulled him from some predicament. The reminder almost makes B crack a smile.

“You’ve come into your own,” he specifies instead, “*and this…issue is disturbing, I’ll let you know when we meet up to discuss the details.*”

A sharp *thud* against the windows is something mechanical pretty much falling apart and Bunk is hanging in front of the window by one hand, laughing his *ass off* and waving again before he lets go to fall back into the fray.

“I wanna change my pick,” Hal laughs a little.

“Nope,” Vic just shakes his head, “*too late, man! You get what you get.*”
The lights flash once, a warning before the automatons and VR simulations fade, fail, fall away. The Titans are left looking around with a confused sort of what now? when a good fight, with a little more “let’s just have a little fun while we’re at it” stops abruptly, leaving you with too much “aww, that’s it?” Back at the station, get off the ride.

Tim’s really the only one that broke any kind of sweat, not much considering he’s not hefting the usual under suit and outer armor. Rather, he balances the bo over his shoulders, wrists over the thing carelessly while Kon, Cassie, Raven, and Bunk meander over (and no Bunk is totally not scuffing his feet or Cassie pouting, Titans).

“So?” He calls to the blacked out windows.

“That’s the whole sess,” BB’s voice absolutely sounds smug.

The four exchange that look between them.

“You’re kidding, right?” Kon fills in since wow, he didn’t think the JLA would have such weak game.

“For Level Three,” the Batman comes over the line.

…Oh.

“Three of—?”

“Six.”

Oh.

“Hm. Why don’t we step it up then?” With a brow up, Tim looks around.

“Not until that leg heals more.” In. Stereo.

Kon, Cassie, and Raven pause, their heads swiveling to the control room when their words also came out over the speaker in Batman’s voice.

Chuckling, Tim lowers his head to shake it just a little and Cassie bursts out laughing, leaning into Miguel’s side while he completely fails at trying to keep a straight face. Raven gives a self-suffering sigh, shaking her head in fondness for these fools while Kon just throws up his hands, since seriously, you guys. And the back to normal is a little closer than before.

**The Right Thing**

(For Arkeadia and Nakomi)

Their apartment is not huge by any stretch of the imagination, not the size of even the communal floor in Titan’s Tower. However, when Gar first showed her around the empty space with that look and she was lost to deny him. In the last year of living together, she has not come to regret giving in —specifically since they have a few extra rooms that will suffice for the young ones to stay over when applicable. Caroline and Leo would benefit staying with them for training while Charlie may simply enjoy being close to his “hero” (and oh yes, she has certainly teased Gar about his little fan), and Karmen will have access to many amenities to satisfy her insatiable curiosity.

She makes rice while he chops the vegetables expertly (something the others must never know), and
adds them in right before a soft kiss on the side of her neck.

Rachel Roth, *Raven*, laughs, a soft, melodious sound, and keeps stirring. She is in an extra-long t-shirt and underwear, Gar only in his boxers, and some “jam band, babe” is playing in the background while their dinner cooks and he gets out things for a salad.

Finally, the questions she has been waiting for.

“…how did he take it?” With his behind in the air while he bends to get out supplies.

Raven is looking…at the refrigerator door, of course. “Not how I expected.” She admits, blinking and looking back to the rice. “He is…very determined. More so than I first anticipated.”

Gar is curiously silent, straightening to set out lettuce, cheeses, tomatoes, cucumbers, and the like. “How crazy is it that we both suddenly have low expectations of *that guy*?” The tone tries to be joking, but the hard edge is there, enough for Raven to read the depths of Gar’s frustration in their old friend.

Now, her thoughts are de-railed from appreciating his pleasing form to the very disappointed look on her chose one’s face. “He has come to realize the error of his ways and is now attempting to fix his mistakes. What more can we ask from him?” And yes, she has been of the same mind for quite some time. Once Tim was taken by the White Triad, once he *returned* on his *own* without any of the Bats coming to his aid, she and Gar, Conner and Cassie, Bart and Miguel all understood a very difficult truth—one they had been denying all this time: the break between Tim and the Bat family was *real*. They had waited too long for his other family to step back in his life, to help them regulate the risks to his health and stability; they had assumed the Bats would not leave Tim without a safety net for as long as he still fought the good fight.

His abduction proved them wrong. Rather, they decided as a team to step-up and become the new safety net for Red Robin as Tim Drake would barely allow them to *see* him.

And with this realization, nearly a *year* after the instructions *not* to call upon the cape and cowls for assistance, the Titans were too late to step up as the implications and consequences had nearly cost Tim *life* not to mention his sanity. He believed himself so smart as to hide his mental state after his abduction, but no, from the Bats perhaps, but not from the team.

Gar straightens, his eyes that wonderfully dark jade, “yeah, totally realized it babe. Good for him. Y’know, I’m so glad it wasn’t you or *me* or Vic since I really don’t want to know how *that* would pan out considering Tim was supposed to be his little bro, right?”

Her expression softens at what he is *not* saying but feeling instead (so *easily* could have been *me*, right?). “You must move on from this, Gar,” and it’s half plea, half admonishment.

He just shrugs since, well, not the *first time* they’ve had conversations about work while making food. “I’m good. Guy’s not *my* big bro or anything—“

“He was,” Raven turns off the fire and moves the pan to one of the other burners so she can move around to see his face where he’s chopping. “Or as close as he could be. And you looked up to him. We *all* did. Garfield, we all put him at an…unreasonable standard because Dick was truly a capable leader, a strategist, a *friend*. But if anything, he is not *infallible*.” Her hand gentle on his moving forearm. “None of us are. I turned *evil*, Gar. I was going to kill you *all*.”

And maybe this is why he and Raven finally gave in this time around, finally decided that *together, fuck the consequences* was better than staying apart to keep one another safe from their other natures.
Raven, Rachel, stopped taking the easy way, started to believe in the Titans as more than just a gathering of heroes. Gar, the fighter, the man with heart, started believing the team wanted him for him and not just what he could do.

“We all fail at some point, babe. That’s the nature of being human—or, well half. Whatevs, you know what I mean.” And then Gar’s voice is so suddenly quiet, she must strain a bit, “But…with as much as family means to Dick, I never expected something like this from him.”

“Nor did I,” and her fingers gently move, stroking the hard muscle underneath skin, her eyes for the movement. For the texture of him, the connection to him. “However, you must consider how much we do not know of the events of the passing of Robin to the current one or the rift that may have caused. I am not saying he was right, but I am saying Dick always has the best of intentions.”

“Agreed,” Gar’s other hand pulls hers up so he can press the underside of her wrist to his lips, close his eyes, use his other senses to smell her. To take comfort in the tinges of brimstone and jasmine—

“That does not mean I am fine with his actions.”

Gar pauses long enough to open his eyes and raise a green brow at her. “Babe. You fried the Blu-Ray player. Twice.”

And Rave opens her mouth, closes it, opens it again. “Yes. Yes, I did.”

“And four comms.”

She huffs a little at him.

Now he’s cracking a smile, “And the PS4. Didn’t think I’d find out it was you, huh? Well, I think we moved past disappointed to pissed off for a while. It’s okay, you can say it.” And his eyes are dancing with mirth behind all the other terrible things he may be thinking.

“Very well. I was angry. Dick is one of the first people that has ever earned my respect, Gar. I followed him when I followed no other. I believed in him, believed he could do no wrong for…” she sighs.

A half smile while Gar sprinkles cheese over the salad, “pedestal complex. We all did it with him. I mean, hard not to because it’s Dick. I sure as hell never expected him to just ditch Tim, like ever. It’s just not who I thought he was. All the crap we went through as a team, and he didn’t lose track of any of us. I mean, damn it, Donna almost broke him.”

“I know,” she gentles her tone for him as Gar was always close with Donna and mentions of her death make him ache terribly with regrets.

“I seriously think Wally still has that wall poster of them hugging after that ComicCom trip in his room at the Watchtower—”

And she tilts her head with that look of, ‘now is not the time for jokes Garfield.’ Just, sigh. He doesn’t want her breaking out the full name or anything (and she so totally will).

Gar holds both hands up, “all right, all right. I give. But,” he wags a finger in her direction, “you know we’re going to have a disagreement about this. And then we’ll sit on opposite sides of the couch for days.”

She takes his wagging hand, directing it to her hip, her free arm around his shoulders. “And then we shall apologize to one another, proclaim our propensity for stubbornness, and deem make-up sex an
appropriate course of action.”

Gar turns slightly to use his free hand in an exaggerated fist pump, “yessss! Make-up sex.”

And her laughter is one of the most beautiful sounds he’s ever heard.

**Example**

(because of Titans_R_Us)

It is such a terrible thing that his team has adapted the hell out of his techniques. Really, it’s so endearing and fucking annoying in the same instance.

But he has to be nice about it because of the way Karmen is side-eyeing him with tension in every muscle in her body.

Ten minutes ago, she hauled Kon and B in the Commons Room, eyes glinting with determination, enough that he completely leaves the reports from South Beach Harbor to stand up as she drags them along.

“Tim!”

And uh-oh. He doesn’t need to be a mind/aura reader to know this isn’t going to go in his favor—whatever it is. Kon only looks guilty as shit when he’s said something eternally dumb.

“Hey, how was the National Air and Space?”

She rolls her eyes with a laugh, “Awesome of course. Rachel and Gar were nice. I think Leo got into one of the exhibits, but as long as no one finds out he did, it shouldn’t be a problem. Charlie already erased the footage.”

He grins, wide and sharp because, really, his kids all the way. He gave them the basics of covering their asses and they ran with it.

He holds out a fist and she gives him and exaggerated bump. “Cool. So? What’s up?”

And there’s the something not okay right there.

“Karm? Talk to me.”

“I need…I need…” she looks over her shoulder at B, obviously asking for help.

B sighs gently and takes a knee while Kon folds himself to sit on the floor (something that is becoming rote with the Titans and JLA, finding floor so the littles don’t have to strain their necks).

“Like I said last time. You don’t have to if you’re not ready. There is no need to traumatize yourself.”

Now that wakes him up. “B,” and it’s the give-it-to-me-straight-or-ass-kickings-will-commence tone.

“I want to start training,” Karm turns back to him, “like Leo, Charlie, and Cuddle Bug. But I can’t until…um…”

Ah-ha, “until a diagnostic is run on your powers and you get a physical, huh?” Now, he gets it. B, giving you a thousand Dad points for not forcing this.
She nods miserably, “I can do this, Red, I swear I can do this.” But the shaking in her hands tells him a different story.

B gingerly takes one of her hands in his own while facing Tim, “as we’ve already discussed, there’s no rush. No need to do anything before Karmen is ready. However, Superboy proposed an alternate possibility that may…help the situation.”

The dude is totally smirking at him now and oh God what are they going to rope him into?

“Perhaps,” B gestures with his free hand, “if you submit to a physical and a scan, it would help Karmen feel more at ease. However, I am of the opinion she should do this when she’s ready and not before.”

Tim blinks. Turns to look right at Kon’s smug as hell face since really, can I guy get some kryptonite right about now?

“That’s…a viable solution,” he starts out slow, “and certain procedures will have to be avoided—“

“Why?” Karmen asks so innocently.

Heat diffuses Tim’s cheeks just enough to notice. “Because I’m a guy, Karm. The basics are the same, but some of the other tests are gender specific.”

“Oh,” and she nods with the wisdom of that explanation (thank GOD she didn’t ask him to be specific because those are not deets she needs). “That does make sense.”

“Yeah,” finds himself nodding because yes, this would make it better for her in the long run, wouldn’t it? “Okay, so I’m going to let B run the tests on me and take all my stats and stuff, so you can see what’s involved. If you’re still scared, then we don’t have to do this, just like he said, okay?”

Decisively, Karm looks up at him with a sharp nod of agreement, holding out a hand. Red sighs and takes it, leading her down the hallway to apparently get a damn scan and a physical.

Behind their backs, B turns to Kon and holds out a fist. His grin wide and sharp, Superboy gives Batman a serious bro-fist before they follow.

**Not Good-Bye**

(because of everyone that loved the littles)

This

Sucks.

So.

Hard.

Red sighs, erases that thought because it’s fine. Really because they were going to go hang out at the JLA established safe house for the littles as often as possible—so no big deal. Sure, they would have places with the other superheroes (Clark seriously already talked to Lois about getting some shit set-up in their house in Metropolis, Wally has a whole floor dedicated to them, and just everyone suddenly has so much extra room, dude. Help me pick out paint for Charlie’s dino mural. No, Red,
stop laughing, you dick.) but the kids would also have somewhere that could be a contact point, a consistency for them. They each had a room and stuff, so when they weren’t superhero visiting, said superhero could come hang out with them in their own place. Well, their incredibly well monitored place, but they wouldn’t be alone there or anything. They would just have an established home. Because that was important.

They had a place to call home. Hm, they would have several places to call home—including the Tower.

And Tim is a whole lot of proud at how excited they are to be going with Di first to hang out with the Amazons and be generally awesome little kids before he (and probably the Titans) would meet them at the safehouse to start some serious training in two or three weeks or so since he has a slight apprehension that Amazons might just cuddle them into oblivion and shit. The place itself, however, is in a sparse neighborhood, plenty of land and people spread way out so Caro could just chill and they could play outside (and you think I don’t know it was you that put up that play set, B? Seriously? Jay and Dami helped, I have the vid feed; next time get the one with the attached house, too). The supe community could come and go as they pleased without a whole lot of unwanted attention and a whole new pseud, Michael McConnel (more believable than Matches Malone any day) would make sure the bills were all paid and the necessaries are taken care of so, yup—all of them would have a home.

And Caro wraps her arms around him like a pro since she’s had so much practice, smiling into his neck with genuine happy.

Charlie gives him the one-armed bro hug and holds out a hand for a high-five. Seriously, dude, keep being awesome.

Leo has no qualms about on-the-fly changing into a monkey that latches on to him with his whole, furry little body, tail whipping back and forth. Red laughs as he hugs, a deep, rolling sound. Leo turns back into a kid and laughs right along with him.

But the hardest… is Karm. Because she is so his kid in too many ways. When she sighs against him, nuzzling as close as she can, he knows this is bittersweet for her, too. Even with all the excitement, all the new, all the free, free, all the superheroes that have their backs, Red is the one that made it okay to think things were bad and wrong and not going to keep happening. To save themselves both from this, he starts up the talk against her neck while he rocks her gently, she has his number, he gave her a touch pad for vid chats, she has to at least text him every day for a while so he knows they’re all okay, and if they’re ever for any reason not okay, he needs to know immediately. He needs them to be straight with him no matter what and they are never bothering him, and they’re all so important to him…

Karmen laughs gently against his chest, her eyes shining and just fucking bright and beautiful. So much more than when he first saw her in that lab, more full and alive. His heart stutters a little in contentment.

“I’m going to miss you,” he whispers for her only, “I already miss you. All of you.”

Her hands tighten on his biceps, “we have you to thank for so much, Tim. So much…”

“No,” his glove tilts her face up a little, “no, Karm. Don’t thank me for seeing you, okay?”

She huffs a little helplessly but buries herself against him again and just—please let them heal and be able to move. Please let them always call when they need…
And it’s so hard, but Di is waiting, so he can finally (just a little) let go.

**Research**

(For Arkaedia)

He’s spent decades cultivating a network of communications and information. Part of creating, maintaining the Batman is about the ebb and flow of information, not just wearing the cape, not just taking to the skyline. No, no. Something B tried explaining to Kal and the others throughout the years (long before Vic—who understood—started as a Titan or joined the JLA), being a vigilante, a superhero in their cases, necessitated an influx of up-to-date data of all kinds. Of course, they all were very assured his paranoia is what leads him to collect any information he can get his hands on, and thus put the seeds of an idea in Barbara’s head (of the need) while she was recovering from the Joker’s attack that left her paralyzed. The idea that perhaps birthed Oracle, the all-knowing.

But once he took in Dick Grayson, started the road to having a partner, the need to keep updated on everything, anything became even more crucial—not only because of the situations his young ward kept getting himself into as Robin but also because becoming the ward of a billionaire painted a target on Dick’s back. All the dangers of both his lives needed to be mitigated as much as possible.

With Jason, the same instance. How else would the Batman have been able to track his Robin to Ethiopia (too late, too late). Tim, however, the Robin most like him gathered information without the need of reminding or instructing. He became a mini data hub long before he took up a new cape, creating the organization system B uses to this day.

And again, while he sits in the Cave, gives Tim time to breathe in his perch, B uses the huge database—to track information into his own company.

Wayne Enterprises is secured, probably more so than the Pentagon. Years of Lucius Fox seeking out the right people for security, of slipping B names and resumes, of making sure they had not only the best but also the most loyal of security people made sure WE’s system is one of the most well-protected in the world. In fact, it takes him twenty minutes of coding and redirects to hack into the server for stored tech (well, Batman). He’ll have to give Tim the backdoor he created, just to watch the twitch of his son’s eyebrow when his tech is compromised. Even the Batman has to have fun sometimes.

And there, Wayne Enterprises Tactile Monitoring System.

The file from Conner is sitting by a cooling cup of coffee, Tim’s brief summary: the White Triad attempted to gain access to the WETMS developed for government use—

In WE’s files, the patent is filed under Timothy Drake-Wayne, the key creator of the system. Even ten and a half months after Tim’s abduction, the product is still in testing phases, not ready for production. Functionally, the system is geared for military use. Meaning, without having insider information, the White Triad would never have known Tim created the system himself. Someone at the company sold Tim out.

More searching and Johnathan Shaw, a Project Manager for Division 5 Weapons Development, had been a person of interest flagged by WE security.

The name leads B to another round of data: Johnathan Shaw is serving a twenty-five to life at Blackgate for Industrial Espionage. Interesting.
Apparently, he’d been selling company secrets and tech to terrorists on the Black Market for six months before Tim’s abduction; Shaw had been so adept at covering his tracks, he’d only been caught by cyber security after Tim was free and…back to work as CEO.

B’s brow arches as he reads: apparently, Shaw, who had been flawless at staying under the radar for months, just suddenly started making rookie mistakes, obvious enough for people to catch on. He’d been indicted on over a dozen cases.

B hits the comm line on the Batcomputer, dialing O. He needed to know more and perhaps, the Batman is going to pay someone a very unfortunate visit. He’s very, very convinced Shaw isn’t working alone. In fact, with the lines of coding he’s looking at from the past few weeks, there may be more of a problem than Tim originally estimated.

**Sleep**

(Initially a pre-story thing that evolved with comments)

Fuck, he's tired and the persistent knocking finally drags his ass up and to the door of the Perch with a very well versed, "please do me a favor: fuck off and die" forming on his mouth as he opens the door…

And a white bag is shoved right in his face, just Bat senses gives him the instinct to back bend a little so the bag is a few inches from his face (exploding bag would be bad right about now). Dick is out on his porch, soaked because of the rain, and grinning like a fool.

"Alfred sent cookies!"

Tim’s "fuck off" is replaced by, "you ass. Didn't Alfred send an umbrella?" Because, well, Alfred cookies.

Unrepentant, Dick comes in and pushes the hood off his wet hair, closing the door behind himself.

Tim’s already on his way to the bathroom for a towel and dry shirt. Dick is peeling the outer layer off when he comes back, accepting the towel with a rueful smile and peeling his current, soaked T-shirt off in the process. And…while the older Bat is drying his hair, Tim closes his eyes briefly and breathes deep because…yeah.

"Oh! Here," Dick holds out a plastic case while still bent over with the towel on his head and, damn it, it's the new Star Trek (the blu-ray in the Tower is still in the plastic. Seriously, nerd-fail). He wanted to see that, too. No one in the Tower enjoyed stuff like this but him (most days, KF is still a Trekkie, and no, Bart, I don’t believe your back peddling ass for a minute. Kirk over Picard? What the holy fuck is wrong with you?).

"I brought you movie night, so pizza will be here in, like, thirty minutes, okay?"

Tim just blinks up at him as Dick finishes rubbing his hair, dark sprigs sticking up all over the place. "Ah, shit. Don't tell me, you've seen it a dozen times already? Well, we could Netflix something you know—?"

"I haven't see this yet," Tim goes back to staring at the case. "Haven't had time, I guess."

And, a few seconds too late and he realizes he told the truth. Busted. Now the guy is going to get all Dick about it and...
"Hey, cool. I haven't seen it either." Dick is giving him that smile while pulling the dry T-shirt over himself, "and I brought the first one too in case we wanted to marathon it!"

"Ah, that's..." Tim glances back at his system since, you know, he's been in the Watchtower for a month and shit not out and about vigilantie-ing it up like he should be.

"Uh-hu," Dick waves a finger back and forth in front of his face, "no way, Timmers. It's my night off and you aren't even supposed to be out on patrol yet. We are doing pizza, Sci-Fi epics, and Alfred's cookies. Capisce?"

Dick's already got a hold of his bicep, leading him to his system with his wet clothes in the other hand. "Save whatever you've got running and shut it down, man. Like, ten minutes tops and I will seriously pull the plug if I have to, okay? Not even joking. I'm going to scope out your drinks, you save, then food and movie."

Tim's just staring wide-eyed at the tornado of fucking Dick Grayson because he completely forgot how the guy gets when he's got a plan in mind. Determined, driven, taking no shit (well, _Batman_). And, wow, Tim is actually saving his data and shutting the programs down (not really, analysis and data collection are _always_ running in the background processes)—

Dick makes a noise at his fridge, "seriously?! Tim...I am _so_ disappointed right now, I cant even—!"

Tim gets up to stand behind the bigger guy, standing on his toes to peer around the shoulder to look at his perfectly normal refrigerator. No crazy samples of bio-tech, no blood bags (currently), no rotting stuff, no various and sundries, so all good, right?

"Why? Because there's actually _food_ in there? Like vegetables, Big Wing? You know what those are right? Vegetables? Like one of the food groups that _isn't_ cereal, pop-corn, donuts, or take-out?"

And that, while his head buried in the fridge, makes Dick's face split in a huge grin. He's Big Wing again. Might have been a slip of the tongue but he'll take what he can get. He schools himself to look fondly exasperated when he straightens and throws his hands to said offensive item.

"You have beer in here, Tim. _Beer._"

The younger man blinks, mind changing gears abruptly. He opens his mouth to start back peddling like a _boss_ because he has contingencies:

* "Dude, it's Jay's."

* "I was holding it for a friend that’s legal, _Officer AssHat_"

* "That’s not beer, you’re seeing things,” Jedi hand wave.

* "Did you know aliens bottle their best stuff to _look_ like beer? Me neither until recently. I don’t know what it’ll do to you. Probably not kill you, but that’s based off what one did to my fake house plant."

* "Totally a gift from Ra’s, who would open that shit, or _throw it away_?"

* "Did I mention that’s drugged for a case? Go ahead. Test it. Spoiler: results may vary."

* "Who broke in and put that there?! I need a cop! Oh _wait_…"

Dick doesn't even let him start with any of the _good_ ones, "I mean, I was supposed to be the guy that
bought you your first sixer. Like, I had total dibs on corrupting you first. **Dibs, Tim! I'm heartbroken over here!**

Out of nowhere, laughter just bubbles up from deep in Tim's chest, escaping in a rush of breath. It's a full out laugh, making his sides hurt because, *jeeze*, Dick, that **face.**

"Fuck," Tim wheezes out between bouts, "you're a bastard."

And the soft smile, the genuine happiness is totally genuine for Dick Grayson, just as genuine as the laughter that has Tim covering his eyes and his side. When he's finally wiping tears out of his eyes, winding down, Dick is holding out a long neck with that smile.

"Fake ID, man. You know, *pseuds.*"

"That's cheating, Timmy!"

"**And?**"

"Still sad face Just **destroyed** over here. I might need multiple, various hugs to compensate for my broken **heart.** Since Cuddle Bug isn't here, it's all on you."

"How about you buy the next one and take a pill instead, okay?"

"Not nearly as appealing but fine."

Appeasing the acrobat for the moment, Tim just shakes his head and heads back to power his system down and grab the remotes to turn open the wall and let the flat screen slide out. The pizza guy is right on time (early), and it smells so good that Tim's stomach let out an embarrassing noise. Dick slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud but those eyes are huge. Tim points a warning finger that has…no effect at all.

The remains of pizza and Alfred's cookies are still on Tim's coffee table when the second movie is half over and the guy in question is slumped down in the couch cushions, eyes closed, breathing deeply. Dick is utterly silent when he packs the pizza leftovers away in the fridge and tosses the long necks away.

("**Big Wing.**" He feels just as warm and good as the first time Jason said it after he came back to the Bats.)

He eases back to his spot on the couch, casting the sleeping kid a calculating look since he’s the one that read those protocols **in-depthly**, multiple times, taking Kon or Bart aside to start up with the **tell me all about how this one came about** when he was in the Watchtower off and on.

In this instance, one stands out since all of them have nightmares because **Bats**, comes par for the course.

(Running down the Manor’s hallway full speed, still half-asleep but **Dami is screaming;** Jay crying in his sleep, begging his Mom to live, **to please don’t leave**; the images of his Mom and Dad falling, falling while they’re still holding hands…they died holding hands…They don’t talk about it in front of Bruce—unless he makes a point to **overhear**—because he doesn’t need any more **old** guilt about bringing other people into his personal crusade. Even after all these years, the guy still can’t believe an eight year old could make a choice on his own. B, enough with the recriminations already.)

And, well, with the last two years he’s slowly learning more about, Dick understands that **someone** gets horrific nightmares if he’s trying to sleep without the feel of someone else near (and so the...
constant sleep deprivation, naturally; imagining Timmy living through his father’s death over and over in his dreams makes Dick’s heart stutter—Jay has the same reaction, only in that Jay kind of ‘knock his ass the fuck out, Dickie.’). The problem is, again, Bat. Any sudden jarring will make the fighter in Tim wake up instantly, so compromise.

Dick turns his upper body slightly and uses on hand to time it perfectly, pushing gingerly on the cushions by Tim's left shoulder. As he expects, momentum causes the smaller man to slide across and end up pressed against Dick's left side, head landing right on his left shoulder perfectly.

With a grin to himself, Dick stays motionless for long, ticking seconds just to make sure Timmy’s not going to wake up before he lowers his left arm gingerly, holding on, and sighs—a deep, chest-expanding one.

**

He remembers the movie and—

Tim’s eyes crack open. Well, one does since the other is smushed with the half of his damn face right in Dick’s chest (he knows by the sound of the soft snores, the smell of musk and hints of Dick, the arms warm and soft around his back) since he just happens to be laying on top the guy like a damn security blanket or some shit…!

Breathe.

Woo-sa. Woooooo-saaaaaa.

Okay, nothing to see here.

He’s got to be super, extra careful. Move like he’s defusing a bomb. Be one with the shadows.

Dick lets out a soft noise under his breath, arms tightening, pulling Tim up enough for the top of his head to be right under Dick’s chin, and one of the acrobat’s legs wind around his, and…nuzzling. There’s nuzzling happening here. Shit. Cuddle monster engaged. Tim has so much oh God, no (but…is that the truth?).

“Mmh. Little brother…mine…” just a fluff of air through his hair, but enough that he knows the guy hasn’t woken up yet, just talking in his sleep. Still, he knows his chest expands too much against Dick’s when he’s lifted a little too high just breathing because…

And laying there, all caught up in such a precarious hold (‘I can’t lose you, Tim.’ And, fuck, he’s starting to believe that shit, isn’t he?), he shifts his hip just a little because Dick’s still wearing jeans and the belt loops are going to be permanently embedded in his thigh and—

Hello.

Freeze. Stupidly, his face goes warm.

It’s fine. Normal reaction for a red-blooded, sexually active male, this totally doesn’t mean anything —

Dick snorts a little, hums, and Tim forces himself to relax, to calm, to breathe deeply. Those hips roll up into him when the body beneath his stretches, and just a whole different realm of oh God…

So many, too many, old wants and needs and fantasies, hit him out of nowhere with the movement of muscle and press of sinew against the front of his body (it’s been too long, fuck). The body that is
accustomed to pain and fighting, the body that hasn’t had soft touch, pleasure and closeness in way, way too long and this is… He can never tell anyone, even his BFFs on pain of death, that just being…fucking able to touch someone else like this is so very nice.

Control.

The second Dick really wakes up, Tim is faking sleep like he lies to Batman, effectively (or he used to, things have apparently changed). His body is lax, staying nuzzled against Dick, making little sounds when the older Bat shifts slightly with a low, vibrating chuckle, when the arms and leg tighten just slightly. He’s good, or Dick’s not awake enough to know better (or the asshole is embarrassed enough about having a hard-on while Tim is literally laying on him) because the acrobat is gently rolling them both so he can slide out from under Tim. A blanket comes over him and the noiseless footsteps, water running, smell of coffee, and he’s just this side of comfy to sink back down a little and ignore what could have been a catastrophe—

Blood all over his hands, red, globule clots, wet and thick.

Steph’s eye are empty sockets filled with gushing, meaty gore

The whip comes around again, the movement catches in his peripheral with the glint off the metal and glass embedded

Bart is laid out over the examination table, the tendons in his neck straining while he screams and those fuckers opened his abdomen while he’s awake, pulling out intestines and ripe, red viscera, killing him in degrees—

The Clench is all over him again, but this time it’s Jay, Jay lying in his place, body dying in degrees and he can’t stop it, he can’t save Jason…

Superboy Prime cracking Kon open, ripping out his fucking heart, crushing it—

Dami’s corpse from Darkseid, only he doesn’t open his eyes…no, Dami please, PLEASE

Hands wake him abruptly while he’s choking, reaching.

“It’s okay! Tim, Tim! It’s me, calm down.”

His throat is raw and his hands move before his brain can engage because he always has to fight, to protect. Pain is secondary, making sure no one else dies on him is primary protocol—

And Dick’s eyes are huge and dark, deep blue with worry while he’s using his strength and upper body as leverage to hold Tim’s wrists down to the couch.

And no, he doesn’t do held down. At all. His brain blanks out abruptly, leaving to shove that PowerPoint slideshow of horror right into his fucking frontal lobe, the two weeks on that boat hitting him right in the chest where he suddenly can’t breathe. Lungs freeze up, spasm, eyes close, and the body under Dick tries to shake itself apart, tries to stop the reaction after the blows and electroshock—

“…I’m sorry, Baby Bird. I’m sorry, just keep breathing with me, talk to me—“ pause “okay, I think he’s coming back around.”

Jay’s voice over the speakerphone, “he breathing okay?”
“Yeah, yeah evening out.”

“Good, keep talking to him, Big Wing. I’m almost there.”

“Okay, okay—Tim? Tim, it’s okay, I’m here. Timmy, I’m right here with you.”

And the smell of the ocean, the stink of unwashed human, the undercurrent of gun oil and fucking evil—

“No. NO! TIM, don’t go there—“

But he has to take the torture, has to save them before they’re sold off…and they hold him down for the beating, for the burns…the bones in his wrists ache from the hold on them…

Pain. In his sternum. Nothing invasive. He’s had worse, but the feeling in his physical body jars him back, out of that slideshow, and Tim jerks hard, lurches to the side where his instincts tell him is prime get away space. A tangle of limbs stops him before he even gets an inch away, his chest burning from possibly almost hyperventilating if the dizziness is any indication.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Jason’s voice behind him, warmth pressing against his back and Dick’s at his front, an arm around his waist so tight, and he’s between them while they’re sitting on the floor in his Perch, and when did Jay—?

“Oh. Shit.”

Dammit, that was supposed to be in his head.

And somehow his legs are around Dick’s waist, thighs pressing into the older man’s sides while Jay is on his knees behind him with arms around his chest, not restraining him but holding on and this is something right from his imagination but on very different terms and holy shit he hasn’t had one that bad in so long…

“Baby Bird,” Jay breathes right by his ear, “you gotta talk to us now. Give us something here, you feel me?”

“…you can let me go. I’m…it’s all right now. It’s over.”

“Timmy, I think I’m going to have to call some serious bullshit on you.” Dick’s chest rumbles against his because that voice still has a hint of fear and worry, the hand moving to rub at his mid-back.

“She-fucking-nanigans.” Jay supplements, “and I’m only sayin’ so ’cause I know how shitty goddamned flashbacks are, Tim.”

Oh. Shit. Bonus, that one was in his head.

“I—“

“Think you’re the only one?” And the low pitch, the edges to Jay’s voice are very not the same as when he’s pissed off with guns/knives/fists/lamps/whatever. It’s a rawness Tim’s only heard a few times before, usually when the guy is punch drunk on blood loss, talking about his times as Robin or about his memories of his mother. Few and far between.

“Joker,” Tim calls it, trying to keep it easy. Not gentle because Jay would hate it.

“Sometimes…the Pit makes it worse. Whenever the flashbacks start, whatever the Pit did to me
comes back, too. Takes the last few years away and it’s all kinds of pissed off again.”

And this is more than Jason has ever talked about his mental state, his trauma in well, ever. Tim’s free hand unconsciously comes up, grips the wrist around his chest, trying to make the guy feel better. Shit, they can do more than trade witty don’t kill me, I’m on your side kind of banter.

“It’s better to stay the fuck back when that shit starts, Timmy. You don’t wanna mess with me when I’m riding that motherfucking train, yeah?”

“I get that.” And the words fall out, numbly since his brain is only half working, half back on that ship…

Dick’s hand on the back of his neck, turning his face up, making him look up into those blue, blue eyes. “Stay right here, Tim. Stay here with us, okay?”

A slow blink and he can nod a little. “I—I don’t talk about—”

“You’ve said so,” but Dick’s face is so intent, observing everything. “But I did something to set you off and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I at least need to know so I don’t do it again. Okay? Can you tell me just that much?”

And his chest stutters against Jay’s arms, his spine automatically straightening in that oh hey, all good here, move along. Only…neither of them are going to believe it at this point, are they?

“…held—y-you…” breathe dumb ass. Just tell them. “Dick, you held me down.”

And oh.

Jay stills behind him, Dick’s face turns slightly so they can look at each other over his head since, well, genetics and shit.

“I’m not…good with that.”

The weight of those eyes again.

“Don’t—don’t say anything. It’s fine. You didn’t know, so now you do.”

And shivers crawl up his spine, the last smells of dirty water fading, finally, so he can pull himself away from the attention, make his weak knees work to get him to his feet. He needs to pull himself together, pull back under the mask, and everything is fine. Nothing to see here.

Tim’s ready to deflect like a motherfucker, just so seriously deflect (‘let’s talk about that case,’ ‘did you know NetFlix totally has Daredevil?’ ‘Has Dami beat anyone’s ass at school this week?’) when both older vigilantes reach for him at the same time. Dick grips his fingers, Jay has a hold of his other forearm.

“Breaking old conditioning, Baby Bird,” Jay says low and his eyes aren’t the same blue they were yesterday, no there’s something very different…

“I don’t—“

“Me and Dickie are hanging around for the day,” abruptly Jay is on his feet, both hands on Tim’s shoulders, turning the younger man around and pretty much marching him to the kitchen, sitting him down at the table. “Lucky for you coffee’s ready and not that shitty Turkish crap you make for Demon. It tastes like balls.”
“Hey,” Tim argues back a little weakly as Jay gets with pulling pans and accessories out of place Tim didn’t even know existed (“Watch out for the counter, there’s a bo totally hidden in a secret compartment.” “Say what again? You and you’re goddamned plans.”). This completely proves in his theory that Jason Todd has crashed here more than Tim realistically knew about.

“It’s the truth, Baby Bird. And I’m going to start on breakfast so your stupid ass doesn’t burn down the damn kitchen.”

Dick pulls up the chair next to him, a half grin on his face, “I demand bacon, Little Wing. You make all the same healthy stuff Alfred does. Let us live a little.”

“You wanna I slather it in grease, too?” Opening the fridge, eggs, milk, and the usual breakfast sides start coming out, and Tim is fairly sure none of that was there last night. “Jesus Christ, Dick, I don’t give a fuck what anyone says, ya’ can’t live on cereal alone. That shit is not one of the food—” and a pointed pause.

“Jay?”

“You got beer in here, Timmers? Seriously?! What that fuck is that about?”

And the laughter bubbles up at the decidedly affronted sneer on Jason Todd’s face when he walks over to pretty much drop the mostly empty carton on the table. Like, visual proof is needed or something.

“And shitty beer at that?”

The last bottle clanks before the weight is enough to make it tip over.

Completely straight-faced, Tim looks up, “someone broke into my place and left one beer? What’s the world coming to these days, you know? We really should do something about it.”

No answers or hard questions about the last thirty minutes to an hour are needed while Jason gapes at him, Dick laughs like an asshole, and breakfast is surely going to be less burnt than if Dick or Tim got around to it (yeah, Jay’s the only one that took Alfred’s life lessons to heart; dude could probably macramé that hell out of something impressive). However, with a shake of his head and a glare at Dick, Jay heads back to the stove and starts up on what’s going to be a rolling rant about the glory of Old Milwaukee while the pan sizzles and the sound of chopping fills his lonely little kitchen.

Tim grins to himself and finally, his whole body eases. Answers…the answer they want can come later.

**Catch**

Of course he always figured he’d go out with a mask. Well, maybe a cowl, but it was really an expectation. He never thought he’d go as Dick Grayson, child star, nope. Needed to go out as a vigilante, no matter what name that vigilante was called. So, one of the worst ways (number four on his list actually), is this.

Even with a spectacular concussion, he knows the second the crane released, feels it through every cell of his body. The free fall without being able to fly, to catch himself, to save himself, is a replay of all the other times before—the moment he’s pretty sure this is going to be the last song and dance (and that’s the worst of it, you know you’re going to die if you’ve got no way to catch yourself). No one knows he’s out here, no one knows about the case he’s been working on the ‘low. He’d gone as
far off the grid as he could in Gotham since this started out with some pretty rank corruption in the PD, and he sure as hell didn’t want Dick Grayson anywhere near it if Nightwing is the one stepping up to investigate.

Hood is all the way across town, checking out some thugs recently out of Blackgate. B is running around to see if anyone from Arkham is hanging out a little too close to the fence (Harvey, Harvey is still out there, of course B is going to go running). Red and Robin are pulling their own track and trade up at The Bowery, and he’s…probably going to have a terrible night down here at Dixon Docks—too far for any of them to make it before his air gives out. Of course, that’s assuming he can’t pick the impressive restraints (what are supposed low-level drug dealers coming to these days?).

The cement crate pulls him faster than gravity, his ankles attached to it while his arms pulled tight behind his back, hooked to the ankle restraints. When the block hits the water, he barely has time to brace his feet before his legs or ankles snap against the pressure.

Water closes over his head fast even while his numb (maybe one or two broken) fingers worked inside the full hand restraints. He slides the lock pick set out of his wrist holders (luckily) to try forcing the seam open before the last breath he was able to take gives out. His rebreather is in one of the side pockets of his boots, no way to get to it unless he gets free.

Should have read those books on Houdini after all. Well, three out of four ain’t bad unless you miss this trick.

Down, down, down into the dark, depths. Slivers of moonlight cut the wavering pressure. Too many bodies here, no matter how many times the GCPD drug the river, too many souls are still here. It’s not the first time in his long career he’d thought he’d join them, watching the bobbing of half decomposed corpses float lazily around him…

This isn’t the first attempt to put him in the Harbor; hell, this isn’t even the best planned out. This is a half-assed attempt by what he’d originally assumed was a minor league criminal working in conjunction with some crooked cops; what he found out tonight is a whole lot of bad concerning the movement of mass products from Metropolis and Star City—all coming together under Two-Face’s little known organization, an off shoot from his usual heads: let’s just fucking kill everything; tails: we set-up the side jobs for denaro.

Unfortunately for him, with Two-Face as their backer, the small fries have impressive tech, arms, and thugs pretty far off the usual array. And if he gets out of this, he is so changing the suit’s composition to withstand multiple taser shots since those are apparently the rage. He would have been fine against just that, but sometimes, even the guy with the plan gets the shit knocked out him.

Pressure. Cold.

If the rest first string big bads ever find out he’s going out this way, the whole Rogue Gallery is going to be pissed, seriously. Well, the Joker always wanted two Robins under his belt since he pretty much assumed B had like, a conveyor belt spitting out sidekicks or something.

Shit. The seam won’t pop, his fingers are numbing out—at least the ones not broken are. Air would be nice right about now. Just, really nice.

Didn’t get to tell O, Babs, how much she meant to me. How I wouldn’t have been able to keep moving to be Nightwing without her.

Never went to visit Clancy when she moved to New York (the blade traces the seam as far as he can
Didn’t get to school Gar at Super Smash Brothers. Again. I’ll never get to make things right with him and Rave.

Wish I would have finally had the balls to give Bruce the stethoscope that was his dad’s

Wally is just as good a Flash as Barry was (can’t nudge the channel open)

Donna— I’m sorry I didn’t have enough time

Vic— (can’t reach the lynchpin) So proud of you, too much happened, and you kept your shit together for it

Clark— Too much left unsaid: I wanted Clark, not Superman even if that’s what I got. No, I wasn’t too young, stop feeling guilty for us

I should have told Tim why—

Something against his face makes him jerk abruptly.

Cowl.

Bruce.

Whiteouts. No ears.

Tim…? Figment. Down here too long, dammit Grayson.

Fingers hold his nose closed, other hand pries open his jaw, and a mouth is on his, sealing the water out. The pressure around his legs waves as Red kicks and sucks the water out of his air way. A rebreather shoved in his mouth, and he fights to breathe through it. Air.

Red lets go of his nose and blows out bubbles because he doesn’t have a second rebreather even with the added storage of the harness. He almost spits the damn thing out because Baby Bird…

Red kicks away, and hands fumble the restraints following them to his arms, down his legs, and the chains on his ankles are suddenly free. Without worrying about the hands, an arm around his back, and they're kicking to the surface. When did his legs get so long? Where did the old Tim go? How did he grow up while I was right there…?

Breaking the surface is like being reborn.

He spits out the apparatus to draw in a beautiful lungful of tainted, poisonous Gotham air. Never felt so good…well, maybe it did the last time he almost drowned. He’s too fuzzy to remember.

Getting back to the shore is a haze of Red hauling him through the waves, against the current, pulling him like a sack of rocks under the shelter of the dock. The dirt of the underworld is in his hair, against his face, and the seal around the dom must be coming loose. His arms are just suddenly free and his chest heaving for breath. Arms are shaky, but he’s got Red’s bicep, tightens the grip to feel something. He’s got the strength to pull, to get Red Robin to lose his balance and fall over, right into his chest so they’re both in the sand. His chest heaving under Red’s, the top of the cowl scraping under his chin.

Should have told Timmy—
Only a scattering of words sinks in while he holds on: "O…B…docks...No. Shit. He’s an asshole."
And Tim, Red, doesn’t pull away for it. He holds on too.

Like Mistah J, he wants to laugh and laugh and beat that bastard until he stops laughing. But, his chest aches and he’s coughing out the last dredges of dirty, tainted water while Red’s holding him up more than hugging him now.

A hand on his wrist pulls, pulling just like when he was Robin, just a kid and weightless. B used to haul him around, too, just pick him up and set him out of the way, or on top the console of the Batcomputer. Pick him up with one hand when he went clinging to the guy’s big back or shoulders. Up on the hood of the car to check out injuries. Up on the counter to be out of the way while analysis runs. Up on the workbench to talk about his school presentations or essays while B works on the cars or disguises or tech—always paying attention to the details. Up and to the left on the roof of GCPD when the old Batsignal used to swing around and blind the shit out of him with the whiteouts when he forgot. Up by the arm or leg and _thrown_ out of the way of some potential hit or shot or stab or…or… B used to…used to…

No one carries him anymore, no one puts him over their shoulder, no one pulls him out of death’s path. He's Nightwing. He’s been the Batman ( _more than once_). Not a kid. Not a novice. He’s the one that hauls all of them out of danger, takes the worst hits for them because _family_. Jason and Tim, Steph and Cass, Dami and Babs, the Titans, the Outlaws, the JLA. They’re all family in some way or another. They have to keep having each other’s back or the world will fall apart and they’ll just keep falling, falling…

But somehow he’s over Red's shoulder, limp and swaying with the movements, a hand holding the back of his thighs to keep him from falling down into the abyss. They all face the abyss sometime, don’t they?

"Don't jump." Mumbles but just lays so he doesn’t fall again, but it doesn’t matter because the _cold_ is still getting to his through the suit.

"Not without a line," Red finishes. "You are an asshole, you know. Next time, _fucking comm me._"

And he’s laughing, low and choked and hoarse. "My…line."

“How about we play it fair and square from now on, N. _Seriously_. I’ll tell you when shit hits the fan for me, you do the same.” Sounds of the dock under Red’s feet, the motion of movement not jerking but a smooth, shadow glide. He sounds pretty angry, very out of the usual Red Robin.

“Crooked cops, my case.”

"Lucky for you it intersected with mine or you would be a terrible stereotype right now. It's totally _not cool_ to cheat Crane out of killing you. Fucking inconsiderate, N."

“Need… _need_ you…Always needed…you.” He laughs because the water is still dripping off them, his fingers are starting to hurt, and the sand is still on his cheek. “…didn’t—didn’t disappoint me. Not why, _never that, Tim._” Because he never _told_ Red the whys, not all of them anyway.

And air hits, a leap, gravity pulling his heart up through his throat, “…couldn’t tell you the truth… just a _kid_—“

“Someday you can give me the deets when you haven’t almost _died_, okay? Dammit, _Marsha_. Don’t scare me like that again.”

He laughs this time because aren’t those _his_ words from last time, too?
“Missed you, Cindy. Glad you’re back.”

The purr of the car, the one he drove for a while with Dami riding shotgun. The one he drove when it was Tim riding instead. Both of them were his Robins at some point. They were both his Robins too.

He slides off Red’s shoulder, slinky and slimy in the seat, drenched, freezing, still loopy from the lack of oxygen and the beating, the tasers, the concussion when those assholes sprung the trap (he’ll never live it down, former Batman hits a trap).

And this is like old times.

"Get in," and the Batman isn't talking to him. He’s already in.

"There's still work to be done." Red answers over a shoulder, his voice further away. "I'll handle it. Get him to A, he was down there for too long."

"Red."

"Go." He blinks up at Red, and those whiteout angled down at him in the seat, the gloved hand finally releases his forearm now that he can feel the grip just on this side of painful through the suit. “Get him out of here, B. Me and Robin are on clean-up.”

(And B reads right into ass-kicking instead.)

The car is in motion when he finally eases out of punch-drunk and into concussion land of aching head. Batman is frowning under the cowl.

"B."

The head turns so eyes can take him in and the damn cowl is so much harder to work than a domino. "Hold on, we're almost home."

Home. No, that’s not right, is it? Where’s Jay? Home is where Jay is too…

“I’m sorry, Bruce.” And now that he’s warming up a little, the coppery taste of blood is taking over. “I’m sorry.”

The shadows pass overhead, and B just sighs beside him, driving the big car with one hand and pulling N over the console with the other. For a minute, he wonders why and how the console got so small and the mid-back cape isn’t tugging when he leans into the hold.

“Dammit Dick.” Bruce under the Batman admonishes, “stop scaring me.”

His laugh is less thank God and more did you really just say that? “Inherited…the worst traits.”

And the suit against the side of his face is padded, comfy, something to sink into.

“Seems like all my sons did,” Bruce mutters to himself, but still, it’s heard. “That sure as hell doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

**

**Consideration**
Jay blinks at him, not spewing out the usual combination profanity and sexual innuendo; they’ve showered, eaten, chilled a bit, and are intent on finishing up the rare night off with some mutually beneficial entertainment when he mentioned logging into the Titan’s Tower’s system to check and see what Baby Bird is up to while he’s in San Fran (and, yeah, that little asshole locked the shit out of his ghost drive, so no dice). Dick had only paused marginally, enough that Jay knew (had known) something was definitely up, following him from the back office in Dick’s apartment where the mini-lab, sweet system, and uniform storage was, pretty much trailing him through the apartment, demanding to know what was doing. He’d been pretty goddamn patient with whatever crawled up the guy’s ass and died, trying to wait his significant vigilante other since, well, Dick and he’s usually a talker. The relative silence about whatever is getting on his fucking nerves (worrying him) so’s it’s time to spill it.

“Dickie, like I never met you or something? I know that look and you’d better be fucking sharing with the rest of the class!”

That Batman-like stillness just exuded a lotta serious shit going down. What Big Wing admitted to sure as hell wasn’t what he expected. And now, those eyes, the ones with a tendency to darken into green, go back down to the scarred kitchen table to stare at the flash drive sitting in the middle.

Dick waits for it.

“Rach hacked his shit for this?” Those eyes come back to Dick, admonishment already there. “Fuck. I knew she was slightly more evil than most people, but that’s pretty damn devious.”

Crossing his arms over the old Gotham Knight’s shirt, Dick hikes a brow, “I have no illusions on how pissed she’s been at me, Jay. At least this means she’s slightly less likely to devour my soul in one go.”

“Gotcha. I seriously fucking hate that dimension with the brimstone and wicked, man-eating motherfuckers. It’s a special kind of hell.” And Jason smirks a little because it’s hard not to.

A half-smile is all Jay is going to get because their eyes are drawn back down to the drive still sitting on the table.

“You watch it yet?”

Dick shakes his head wordlessly.

“Gonna?”

“…on the fence. The fact that I triggered him to go into a flashback means I sure as hell should. It would be…I don’t know, Little Wing. I should watch it to make sure there isn’t something else that might set him off. If I could see what they put him through, I could have a better picture on how to help him. But, I want Tim to be comfortable enough to come to me himself when he’s ready. I want him to trust me again.”

Jay nods because he seriously gets that vibe. “We’re gettin’ there with him. Shit, even Demon is on front of that train. Who woulda thought that kid would be next in line for Titan babysitting duties?”

“He’d do fine.” Dick automatically defends, ignoring the damn thing on the table for a while. Instead, he feels better after basically telling Jay what’s been on his mind for the past few weeks.

“Him? Fuck, for people he can stab, sure. Why not?”
Dick’s brows furrow.

Rolling his eyes, Jason throws up both hands, “I’m kidding. Mostly. Brat did okay with them during plan: Save Timmy’s Stupid Ass. No bullshit. Demon’s all right in my book. Let’s just be glad there ain’t a need for it to be a permanent solution.” Those eyes roll back down to the table, “and that thing. Look, babe,” and there, the man that shares his bed, his shower, the tone of voice gets different than the mask, “you gotta do what you feel is right here. We already got a dose of what happens when Baby Bird gets whammied, so’s we got enough to put it together without whatever’s on that thing. You and me, B and Brat, Steph and Cass, O? All of us know what it is on some level, so it’s not just Tim. You wanna wait until we’re better with him, then don’t watch it. You know you. I know you. He eventually comes to you, you’ll tell you already seen the worst of it, and that’ll look a lot like going behind his fucking back, right?”

Dick’s eyes are sharp while he listens, considers. The detective in him turning the facts and weighs the options. If he were B, he would have already steeled himself, picked up a six pack, and watched the footage. B would have to know every possible neural landmine and try to diffuse as many of them as he could, get Tim as much help as he could.

“—Wing?” Jay’s hand on his jars him just a little. “Tell me where yer at,” the younger Bat demands.

“Just about everything we’ve gotten from Tim’s past has come from someone else,” the elder starts out slowly while his mind works, “Tim has given us very little to work with. I’m considering… giving the drive to B instead of keeping it. Maybe I shouldn’t watch it, but Batman might have a right to.”

“Why you say so?”

“If anyone can get into Tim’s psyche, find where the most triggers are, it’s B. Well, that and maybe get him to see someone professional, create a pseud just for it. The Titans haven’t had any luck so far, but B…B might.”

“You mean by dirty fucking tricks,” Jay’s brow is arched almost into the tuff of white hair.

“Manipulation,” Dick shrugs. “Not like he can do worse than where we were at six months ago.”

And that…had it really been that long since the Bats infiltrated Tim’s Perch, asking for a second chance?

(Apparently).

“Besides…” Dick continues softly, “I’m not sure I can be…objective if I watch it.”

And Jason Todd gets it without Dick’s little tells.

“Uh-hu.” The younger Bat hitches his elbows up on the table, gets all kinds of comfortable for the convo to turn this direction. “Dickie,” he draws out, “you finally going to tell me what’s doing, ain’t cha?”

And the older man looks like nope, not going there for about half a minute before he just gives Jay a patient look. “Jason. You know how I feel about you.”

Now his grin is just this side of sharp. “Sure hope I do. But ain’t it just fucked up how doing the right thing gets everyone all kinds of screwed, then here it is coming back ‘round again? Like fate or some shit, you feel me?”
“That isn’t what he needs from me, Jay,” and one of those hands covers his eyes.

Sure, once things were more together the second time around and the whole cape and cowl crew decided it was time Baby Bird got some fucking peeps to have his back, he and Dick had more than one of these little “talks” when Jay pushes him hard enough.

(“Still don’t get why you didn’t take Pretender as Robin and give Brat some other mask.”)

“Because Batman can’t fight crime thinking about fucking his Robin on patrol, Jay.”

“I can get—wait, what now? You an’an’ Pretender?!”

“I shouldn’t have said that.” Blood loss and booze are a bad combination.

“Oh, Dickie, I think you should say a whole lot more.”

“You,” Jay points a very unimpressed finger, “are a dumb ass. I love you enough to strangle you gently, but damn, you’re thick sometimes, Big Wing.”

Dick’s expression shuts down completely, all pleasant lines and just like he’s at one of those boring ass parties playing the nice, unassuming ward of Bruce Wayne.

And nope, not happening Dickie. Ain’t gonna let ‘cha.

Jay moves with that dangerous grace, a slink of muscle, a predator beginning to stalk, up on the table on his hands and knees work his hips over the slick surface and put them closer, give Dick just enough room to see his eyes.

“Dick,” his voice low, edgy with that you’re getting me hot and bothered, better be ready for it. “Here’s what’s gonna happen.” And Jason just leans, lets them get close enough for Dick to feel the skim of his cheek, gets close enough that he’s talking right in the other man’s ear. “We’re puttin’ that drive up somewhere safe an’ let it breathe. Maybe we wait and talk to B, let ‘im know we got it ‘cause he might trigger Baby Bird too. But then again, maybe we don’t. Maybe we watch it. Maybe we don’t. We take some time to think about it. Point is, Dickie: tonight, we’re gonna get up from this table, and I’m gonna take you to bed.”

Dick shivers slightly with the breath in his ear, the deep dark of Jay’s voice.

“I’m going to take my time stripping you down to skin, and you? You just enjoy the show. No thinking about anything but laying out for me, how I like it. You’re gonna feel good under my mouth, Dick. You’re gonna feel perfect under my hands. And when I’ve had every inch of you, you’ll figure out who’s subbing tonight—you want me on my back panting while you open me up, while you fuck me just right, just how I need it before we get to the hard and fast? Or you gonna be good for me, lemme fill you up all the way, lemme me bring you without even touching your cock, let you ride me until you scream.”

And Jay pulls back enough so he can look into those eyes, already heated, next steps probably starting to form, so Jay goes for the fucking jugular.

“And if you want I should get dirty, I’ll start tellin’ ya’ what we’d do if Tim was the filling to this hot vigilante sandwich.”

Dick inhales sharply, his eyes darken.

“Yeah, babe. I’ll tell ya’ all about what we’d do to Baby Bird after we get him all bare, lay him out
And he’s got Big Wing right out of his own head just like that, working them both up with his dirty mouth, with the old Gotham accent thick and curling right around Dick’s wants and needs. The older man lunges for him, the kiss hot and wet and hard, just perfect. And Jason is pulling him right up on the damn table with him so they don’t have to stop, so they can start up the good stuff right here, right now. For the main show, they’ll take it to the couch or the carpet in the hallway, maybe against the wall, might even make it to the bed since the table makes Dick’s bad knee ache like fuck and seriously, his back doesn’t need any more problems than he’s already got. But, for the moment, he takes Dick’s mind off of the horrific shit on that drive while they come together with a whole ‘nother set of events to consider.

**

**Relapse**

(This one is totally for me)

"Red."

"Tell me you're not in Gotham. Just fucking tell me that."

"What's this about?"

Dick breathes harshly over the line and the wind is whistling. He's swinging. He’s Nightwing.


"Yup."

"Fuck, just fuck." Fwip. Launching himself off the roof. "Get off the streets, into a safe house. Now, Red."

"You're ordering the wrong Robin, asshole." And there's a wealth of warning in that growl.

"Hood. Pit." Dick snarls back. "He can't see you or it's on, dammit. Just listen to me. Get the hell off the streets so I can keep him away from you."

And shit. Holy shit. Holy. Mother-fucking. Shit. A whole lot of images come from those two words (Hood. Pit. Nice, Dick) that have nothing to do with where he and Jason have come to nowadays.

"Tim!" And shit is bad if the real names are coming out. "If he hurts you now, it'll kill him. We're trying to get you back, and if-- FUCK! HOOD! It's me!"

Crash. The meaty sounds of fists, of hard breathing. He takes a breath at the sounds and knows.

**

And B is taking a nice little vacay off world with the Lantern and Manhunter because, well, everyone in the sparkly tights club agreed on one very important thing: alien invaders are seriously
dick bags. Like, all of us hate those guys.

So, if they’re facing a potentially insane Red Hood, they’re going to be doing so without the Bat for back-up. Sweet. He seriously needed a good cardio workout tonight anyway.

"I'm here!" Red yells even before his boots hit the roof, and the effect is exactly what he planned. Hood's whole body freezes in a scarily familiar way—the whole stab, stab, bang, bang way. "I'm right here, man."

"You idiot! Run!" Nightwing pulls that crazy leg lock thing that almost looks like he dislocates his hips to swing around and keep Hood from jumping up.

"Nope," Red just eases closer, hands up in an I'm unarmed, it's okay to kick my ass motion. "Not leaving."

Now Hood is struggling against the hold, throwing his real strength into it, making N strain harder. He's yelling wordless, enraged promises of blood and pain, all distorted through the synths but oh yeah, Red doesn't need it spelled out for him.

"I'm not going to be able to hold him for long!" And, of course, N could disable Hood twenty different ways (Batman), but he's trying to be cool about it since Jason is a Bat again. He's trying to be the good guy, always the good guy. Red sees it though, the device in N's hand for a last resort kind of thing. If Hood gets out of that lock, N is going to take him down, keep him from kicking the shit out of Red.

Nope, that wouldn't solve anything. N...that isn't going to make any of it better.

"Hood, Hood! Look at me," Red snaps, crouching down an arm's length away. His hands already deactivating the cowl's security. Cold air hits his bare face, his eyes adjusting without the lenses.

"Look at me!"

The helmet tips up, the arms not stopping to escape Nightwing to go for his throat or whatever soft weaknesses he can.

And, shit, how can he fix—?

"I've never said this, so maybe it's time," and Tim, Tim grabs the helmet in both hands, putting his face close enough that he knows Jason is seeing him through the whiteouts.

"Listen to me, Hood. Listen. Back then, when I was just some fucking stupid kid with a camera, following you. Back then? You were my fucking hero. That's why. That's why the pictures and the following and all of it. You were my Robin, Hood. Dick was B's Robin and he was my hero, too, but you were Gotham's Robin and mine. The first time I saw you, I knew. Do you hear that? I knew, and I never forgot... Yeah, I did it because B was going insane with grief, but also because you were My. Fucking. Robin, Jason. I couldn't let it just fall to the wayside, you get it? I couldn't... Jason, I couldn't let you go."

Tim drags in a breath and Hood just stops the rabid, jerking fight, he becomes that creepy Bat stillness.

"My first time with the R, I stood at your portrait in the big room and told you I'd never be you. No one could be you, but I'd do my best to earn it. I'd fucking do anything, everything so you'd be proud. So I would do the right thing. So I would do right by you."
His fingers are biting into the helmet, his voice harsh, unforgiving. "So I'm with you. You need to kick my ass? I'll take it. Whatever you need to make this right, I'll do it. Whatever you've got, I'll take it. None of it is going to change anything. Even after all this fucking time, you're still my goddamned Robin and there's nothing that will change that for me. Nothing. You get that?"

Tim doesn't see it because he's staring so hard at those whiteout, but the hand gripping Nightwing's thigh gives a light pat, a tiny motion. And the hold slackens off a little, enough for Hood to get an arm free, grip one of the wrists.

Nothing comes out of the synthesizers, but that hand pulls him in, reaches around his back to hold Tim close. The helmet against the side of his head, the other hand gets free and the glove presses to the back of his neck. And shit…

Tim is too still with the (hug? He's hugging me? I'm going to die, aren't I?) and gingerly his arms move of their own to return the hold.

Nightwing slides away, releasing the lock fully, watching with a hand in his hair and a sad smile, his throat tight.

"I wanted to make you proud," Tim confides again, numbly because he really did expect an epic brawl since, you know, Jason, but this could mean the Pit's hold on him was slacking off.

"Baby Bird," and even with the synths, the tone is soft, gentle even.

"It's true," Tim lets himself relax by inches, degrees. "All of it. I stood in front of that painting after every training session until I got the tunic."

Admitting to it makes him feel a little raw, likes he's giving a vital piece of himself up in a way he never expected. But…but…

Hood's arms tighten, pulling so Tim is almost in his damn lap.

"I'm flattered, Baby Bird. Wowed even. Want my autograph now? How about I bequeath you a pair of those terrible green panties, huh?"

And that. That's Jason. The one he knows in the right now instead of the back then, and fucking relief is palpable so much that Tim just kind of slumps against him, hands fisting in the worn jacket.

"Sign 'em first, asshole. I'll start a collection just to creep you out."

The laugh is messed up with the synth but still it's so good to his ears.

**

And after that shit, it's burrito time. Fuck yes.

(Here, N, take the money and just go get them. You're going to get the best ass in Gotham discount anyway and you love that shit. Don't think we don't know).

And he's sitting on the ledge of the roof and Jason's smoking a cig, cooling the fuck down from that little sprint when

"S'it true?"

Red doesn't even have to pretend or ask, but he does sigh a little before deactivating the cowl, sliding it off so he can look at the guy at least.
"Yeah. Yeah, it's true."

And the arm around him pulls his right into Jason’s side, a gloved hand on the side of his face to hold him there. The cig is in the corner of his mouth, but he talks around it like a champ.

“You’re... you’re making shit hard on us, Baby Bird.”

And he starts to pull away a little because not really trying to, but Jay tightens his grip.

“Not what I mean,“ the chest lifts a little in a sigh, “there’s... nothing I want more than to have your back sometimes. It’s fucked up, considering where we were a few years ago.”

Red sucks in a breath because he’s got it together. He does, it’s okay. He’s not a burden to anyone—

“And when we thought you might have died then... fuck Tim. Fuck. Dick was beside himself, and me and Demon were stuck in the Cave,” the hand on his bicep tightens painfully, even though the armor. “B didn’t let it show, but he was a basket case, thinking we’d never get you back again. Loosing you all over again.”

“Jay—“

But the guy doesn’t hear him.

“And all the shit we’ve been finding out, going through that drive looking for answers on who might have snatched you. Just... I... I knew, Tim. Blue called me the first time, told me you were missing, asked me when I’d last seen you, and I just—. Tim, I fucked up. I fucking up and left you out there.” And the cig must be gone because Jay’s chest hitches, his voice so rough and a whole different type of angry. “I didn’t come after you. I didn’t come after you and I'm so fucking sorry I didn’t. Christ, I'm sorry. I’m so goddamned sorry, Tim.”

And the well of underlying pain that’s somehow always just been there, buried, pushed to the back of his mind in lieu of other, more important things, breaks open a little at the admission. Red, Tim, grabs on to Jay’s side, just grabs the hell on because he’s never heard Jason Todd near tears, never thought...

“And I should have done something, gone to B, told Dick, fuck even Demon— done something other than let you just—“

“You didn’t know,” and that’s his voice, a little too hoarse, a little too raw and pained. “No one knew.”

Jay’s other hand, the arm, reach around, right under Tim’s ribcage to grip his side too, and they’re holding on to one another in what should be the most hilarious moment of his life. But... he can’t pull back, he can’t laugh it off as a joke or... he can’t. In some part of him, he needs, wants this, validation that someone gave a shit he was left behind. Fuck, he might have never known how much, but on that ship, on that fucking ship, he used to think about the Bats riding in to the rescue...

“I could have dug deeper to find out. I could have gotten O on the cameras, on your phone, fucking something. Jesus Christ, they were taking you apart and I knew your people couldn’t find you.”

This time, his chest hitches, and his eyes are hot and full and squeezing them shut isn’t helping.

“God, Jay, Jason—!“ Stop, just stop. I can’t let anyone see me—

“Not gonna happen again,” is said right against his hair. “I promise you, Tim. I fucking swear on my
second chance, you’re not getting lost. Me and Dick and B and Demon and O and all o’ us, we’re not letting you go with a fight, you hear me? We’re not letting you go anymore.”

And another hand on his leg, Dick back, sitting beside them, and he’s engulfed by the two on either side, smashed between them and oh God, he believes it. Jay doesn’t bullshit and Dick is shaking…

And something, some terrible wall or dam in him just breaks open wide. When he means to say something cute and funny, something to make them laugh through (eyes spill over, his face is wet, his hair is wet, and some terrible tension, some distance fractures apart), instead the spear of I want this, I want to be caught once and a while hit him right in the chest and expands out. What comes out, what he starts babbling, is the truth.

“The first day was about trying to buy me, what they could do for me if I gave the system over—“ and the details, sharp, clear, and so horribly painful are laid right out for the two vigilantes he’d admired, his heroes, the men trying to get him back… (and he really is back, isn’t he?).

He has no idea how long he sits crushed between them while the whole sordid thing comes out, spilling out of him like blood spreading out on hot pavement. It’s hard because he’s telling Dick and Jay, harder still because he’s never talked about it before. No one knew the whole thing, so the words stutter a little, catch at some points, leak out when his brain maps the progression of torture, of his body breaking open, of who the White Triad was and what they wanted with him.

(“That was the third chance I got to get away, but I couldn’t leave the kids, there was no way, I—I just had to keep biding my time, but th-the infection was starting to set in. I knew it, but I only needed a little more time.”)

(“I didn’t know until after I was out that the signal to the Cave failed, the message failed, but I tried. They caught me in the control room, and the burns started after that.”)

During the long monologue, the two make noises, soft to show they’re listening, they hear him, they acknowledge him. The hands squeeze at the hardest parts, grip to ground him when he starts to slip, when the smell starts to permeate his senses all over again. He can stay in the here and now because they’ve got him held so tight there’s no way he can be on the ship, not with them surrounding him like this.

And as fucked up as it sounds in his head, as crazy as it is, Tim doesn’t think this is an error in judgement. For the first time in a long damn time he doesn’t feel fucking weak, judged, like a bad Robin. He doesn’t feel the need to pull up any of the masks and hide.

**

Dawn is an hour away by the time he gets through the whole thing, and the burritos are cold. Neither vigilante bother with going anywhere other than his Perch even though he gave them a pointed out. Dick hadn’t given him time to pull his own grapple, just grips him around the waist and jumps. Jason had him on the next swing. And he’s shaky as hell, but good, seriously guys, good enough to— okay, well, that answers that as Jay pretty much picks him up at the waist against the front of his armor and flies.

When they’re in his window, nothing really needs to be said. Jay goes down the hallway while Dick start taking the suit off, and Tim makes coffee in just his bodysuit and boots, ignoring the shake in his hands (because, really, he’s shaking all over and that is just such a pain in the ass).

Old recriminations come up in the silence and first raise of light. He should have kept it together, he shouldn’t have been weak, he should have had his shit together—
The two turn him away from the counter and start getting the suit off, Dick tugging a t-shirt over his head, Jay lifting him up on the counter to get the boots and suit down his legs. Sweats go up and Dick is making them each a mug while Jay lifts him back down, leads him to the couch, and sits them both down. And, no, Jason Todd isn’t a touchy-feely type, well, ever, except for the fist bumps for Dami, the piggy back rides for Steph, carrying around (tossing) the littles, ruffling Tim’s hair, gripping B’s shoulder, and smacking Dick right before rooftop tag. But, Jay sits sideways and pulls Tim between his legs so he can wrap his arms around the younger man, just…just holding on.

He only frees one arm when Dick brings coffee and inserts himself right in, easily twisting to sit between Tim’s legs with his own on the outside of Jay’s. It’s cramped, but whatever.

Dick’s hand on his side, the cup of coffee in his hand, Jay’s arm around his chest, all of it is—fuck, it feels like family should, doesn’t it?

**

**The Call**

(I always had this written but can’t remember who asked about it? Probably a few people)

He hates this but…well, shit.

The voice is heavy, rough with sleep on the other end. "Hood."

Fuck. "Sorry," he wheezes, stumbling over a loose tile on the roof. "Thought you were out tonight."

"Hey," keeps him from hanging up but just by this much. "What's wrong?"

Mumbling on the line in the background, and now he really feels like ass because Hood has company. Just, of all the times, man, I am seriously not trying to cockblock you, my bad.

"Nothing major, just intel. Lost the guy, but m'good. I'll find him tomorrow night."

Then, "it's Tim," in the background. Really? Someone he knew, dammit. He pictures Steph (not that he’s really that pissed off because, you know, he thought she died for a while there and that shit kinda fueled the break-up), Kory (wow, awesomely hot and smart alien princess FTW), or Roy (and yeah, he could ride that train couldn’t he? Welp, not with his personal code of thou shall not mack on other vigilantes) briefly.

The line crinkled and he doesn’t even—

"Where are you?" Just as sleep heavy is Dick.

**Dick. Fucking. Grayson.**

It’s not often something gets the drop on him like this, but well. Yup, not what he expected. His mind goes completely blank, he freezes right on the edge of the Wallstone Apartments because holy shit, he didn't even suspect… some fucking detective he turned out to be. Red face palms at the entendre.

(And the two of them together, hands and lips, skin and tongues, taste and touch and why the fuck is he going here right now, oh God?!) 

"Tim." And Dick is already more alert, movement and sound like cloth sliding away. And he just cockblocked them both, what a douche move.
"I thought Hood was out tonight, that's it. Intel gathering," he starts moving again, down the fire escape to the right window. "Go back to-" bed, don't leave him you asshole, "-sleep. Both of you."

He's nudging the window open and (embarrassingly, like, seriously, he’s been at this how long now?) pretty much falls the hell through, dropping the phone with a curse. His chest is on fire. Maybe a punctured lung?

His name is shouted, tinny over the speaker.

"I'm fine," he grits out once he's moving again. "Just fell on the damn window. No big."

It's Jason that sighs. "We're getting dressed now. Where. The. Fuck. Are. You?" In that don't make me ask again, asshole tone.

"Nope. Made it to the safe house. I'm good. Tell Dick to take a pill and go back to bed." Please let this conversation be over soon before I say some crazy shit. Just, please.

"Fuck, seriously?"

"Yes. I've got what I need here. Take your night, man. Again, my bad."

Click.

He stumbles to the bathroom, disarming the system and the suit (please say I did not give anything away...Wow, mindblown). The outer layer of armor peels away, and he digs around for medical supplies. No X-rays here, he's not at the Tower. Wrap it for now because that's what he can realistically do.

His phone buzzes, a picture text that he opens one handed while searching. It's a pic of Dick sitting on the edge of a bed, hair a mess, pulling on the Nightwing boots with the suit almost on, his chest still bare. But, the expression is black, the Batman glare of death.

'Want that coming to find you?' Is Jay's message.

Tim huffs a laugh, ignoring the pain in his chest since, well these guys. Instead, he flips the bathroom light on and takes a pic of himself in the mirror with the undersuit covering the worst shit, grinning with blood still kind of on his teeth (a little psycho but whatever) and a thumbs-up.

'I'm safe. Drag his ass and get him back in bed.' Is his completely casual reply and then he's wrestling himself out of the body armor and under suit.

Fuck, yeah. The bruising is epic. This is gonna hurt for a minute, but no big. He didn't get it in the face that bad. He's good. The inability to take a deep breath notwithstanding.

He wraps himself the best he can, cleans up his face, his knuckles, shoves his tights down to check the swelling on his right knee, and grins. Good night.

The bedroom has different sizes of clothing for whoever stumbles in. Bruce, Dami, Dick, Jason, him, Steph, Cass when she's in town, whoever. There's probably something for Roy too just, well, because. So Tim grabs a standard dark T-shirt from the pile, throws it and sweats over one shoulder then makes his way back down the hall, one hand on the wall to keep himself up right for just in case that blow to the back of the head might have been somewhat worse than he first thought.

The television is a small one, rigged into the hotel across the street's cable. Tim hits it to the news for background noise and searches for the inevitable hidden computer somewhere to get logged into BI.
He’s balls deep in a good rendition of playing the Boogie Man to some noob drug dealers when his brain catches up with a little hiccup in his plans tonight: he hasn’t hacked the comm wave in weeks (and *Mother. Fucking.* he needs to remember to start doing that again and he is very pointedly *not* examining why his brain allowed him to let the comm slip his mind).

That means O can find him. O can tell them *where he is.* Tim's head comes up with a jerk, his body already overriding the pain sensors to arch up in a move to get off the couch because he left his damn cowl in the bathroom with the comm in it…as the window opens wider than he left it.

Like in one of those terrible horror movies, he slowly turns as the two come through with a whole lot of *ha, found you, dick.*

Fuck, just…*fuck.*

Pulling up his bluster, Tim points a finger at the frowning vigilantes (no, no, you don’t get to pull off a frown like B’s, man, that’s just fucking unfair), "told you to go the fuck back to sleep, assholes. I'm good."

Both men cross their arms in a creepy tandem (and why the *shit* didn’t he see this before because, really?) and he can feel the stares from behind the dominoes.

Tim throws his goddamned hands up, "fine, just fine. I needed help tracking a suspect. It's too late, guy's gone, and it'll be dawn in a few hours. He’s on the schedule for tonight. That's it. No big deal." He makes a vague shooing motion and goes back to his laptop.

A sigh from one of them.

Dick being, you know his namesake, just drops down on the spindly little coffee table, elbows on his knees. And he waits. Just *waits.*

"Dude. Go home."

And, realistically, the lenses in their dominoes *can’t* narrow, but only Dick Grayson can make that shit happen with the crinkle of his eyebrows, "the hell, Baby Bird?"

Tim looks up this time, for real. "It's not bad. Probably a broken rib hit me in the lung. That shit heals, you know."

"Not making it better," Jason sing songs on his way through to the kitchen.

Tim's eyes slide to his disappearing form and then back to Dick. He moves the laptop, gingerly leans forward. Dick meets him halfway.

"I didn't know," he confides. "My bad, okay? I didn't know," and he gives a smooth head motion to the hallway Jason disappears down.

Dick goes still for a minute like he hasn't considered, and, *nope,* he hasn't. Honestly though, we’re all Detectives, *how the hell did this happen and it’s not common knowledge or expected to be found out eventually?* Family. Of. Detectives. *Dude.*

"Shit," the older man says distinctly, drawing away.

Tim makes a rude noise, reaching up himself to get a hold of that domino. Dick's eyes are very carefully not looking at him when the lenses slide up, his expression dark and...
What. The. Fuck? What’s this about? Like anyone would begrudge them some happiness? After all the beatings and savings and do-goodery and horrible nightmares and scar and…? They’re not crazy vigilantes like (just throwing it out there) Green Arrow or Question or something. If anyone deserves to be happy, it’s Dick Grayson and Jason Todd, fuck.

Tim's hand is on the guy’s neck, threading in the short hairs at the back to make Dick look right at him. He hopes his glare is just epic since, oh yeah, the look on Dick’s face really pisses him right the hell off.


Just like that, Dick's eyes go soft and he grins a little. "Be nice, Baby Bird."

"Me and Dami, man. We don't suffer fools lightly. Seriously? Like I'm going to see you and him differently or something?" His chin jerks back down the hall where Jay is doing something (probably setting explosive since, well, everyone needs a hobby, right?).

A little helplessly, the guy shrugs. "Never know, okay? We just-

"Good," Tim interrupts pointedly, "it’s good that you two have something, Big Wing. You and him make a lot of sense, okay? Really."

Then Tim is smiling, genuinely happy for them both even though the pain in his chest has nothing to do with injuries and a whole lot to do with two bouts of old feelings from way, way back in the day (yeah, that whole crazy thing when the Pit was riding Hood? When the two of them took him home and held on? When he was actually okay talking them about all that shit? Just, uh, a little too close for comfort without an immediate cold shower).

Dick gives him that killer smile and lurches off the coffee table to do the octopus thing, wrapping Tim up in an embrace that has too much thank you and not enough I knew you’d have our backs. Tim returns it gingerly, still sore as hell but still pleased (and secretly hurt deep down where he will never let either of them see).

"Aw. Kodak moment," because Jason. Really, just Jason. The guy comes in and cracks the disposable ice pack, already prodding Tim's swollen knee before fitting the pack around it and winding a bandage to keep it in place.

Dick is grinning when he plops back on the coffee table. "Don't bother, Jay, we'll just take him back to my place before dawn hits."

"I'm already set up here, Dick." Tim motions to the half-assed report on the screen.

"Well, you can be set-up there just as easily." Dick's already holding the T-shirt, bringing it over Tim's head.

"Wait, just wait a minutes," Tim shoves his arms through and both men look at him. "I've gotta do this first, okay?" He shoves himself standing, favoring his knee and tugging the shirt down over the scars quickly.

And, well. It’s go time since some shit needs to be understood if this is how it’s going to be.

Tim turns his head enough to full-on face Jason, and his whole demeanor changes in an instant, eyes a frightening, dark blue.
Alarms immediately go off with the change and Jay almost gets his mouth open enough to form a word. With a scary speed, Tim is in motion, one hand around Jason's neck, thumb on a pressure point that locks him in place and could very well be his end. The other hand on Dick before the guy can even react or get to his feet. Both men are wide-eyed, staring at the sudden very dangerous person that could kill them with less than a pound of pressure.

Tim stares right into the Red Hood’s eyes, no fucking around. His voice is low, very soft. "Jay, you hurt him, and I will break the cardinal rule to bury you. No Pit, no third chance. I will make fucking sure of it."

The shocked man can't retort, can’t move or he’s a dead man anyway. Tim turns on Dick with the same ferocity, the same darkness. "You fuck him over and the next great unsolved mystery will be 'What Ever Happened to Dick Grayson?' That shit will give detectives nightmares for decades."

It’s the Red Robin voice, the dark and deep depths of truth. "Technically, I’m a master assassin. Get it?"

Jason is staring, mouth gaping a little. Dicks eyes are huge. "Be good to one another. Be happy. Fuck, you both deserve it."

With that, he released them both from the holds, the two men suck in a hard breath while Tim grabs the sweats and stalks down the hall to the bathroom, favoring the swollen knee. When his back is turned where they can’t see, his smile is brittle, sad but satisfied at the same time (they have each other to lean on, to take care of…that’s better than I could have hoped for).

"D-Did Baby Bird just give us the shovel talk about each other?" Jason is just staring while rubbing his neck.

"I'm equal parts disturbed and flattered," Dick replies with a shrug, tapping his domino to get the lenses back down.

"I…I'm really not sure how to take that, Dickie." And Jason slides his lenses back down as well, standing with a whole lot of kill him to keep him from getting me first or making sure he’s not gonna die any time soon…?

"As Gospel," Dick replies with a grin. Jason huffs out a laugh and raises a hand to run his thumb over Dick's lower lip, smiling softly.

"At least someone has a plan."

Dick just shakes his head as the sound of the ice pack hitting the sink brings them back to the asshole they both loved like crazy, the one that would be the cause of more gray hair and stress than even B.

"At least," Jason wanders down the hall to collect the guy.

Chapter End Notes

So yes, I realize 'where's Dami?' I suck and he's not in these, sorry. I have a few idea for
the next batch in Part II that may just interweave between these and yes, I'd like to do one or two with the littles and more of the Titans. I don't know yet, so if you want to see something, run it by me ;) These actually...I really needed to get these off my chest/plate/mind/heart/whatever so I would stop going over and over them instead of writing the ones that are still in my brain pan and finishing the few that are partly done. Ah, I hope you liked them because dammit, it's about time, right?
Round II. FIGHT. Lol, just kidding. Please, no blood on the carpet. Alfred will get that look. I hope everyone that had finals or are still taking them have rocked the fuck out and taken names. If not, stop reading and go study! This chapter isn’t going anywhere. Nope, just kidding, take your much deserved break. Btw, over thirty pages *looks and points to Arkaedia* she needs a shout out because I am a useless lump of not-writing without her. She poked me yet again. Also, you wonderful, talented, thoughtful people that give me ideas and encouragement and loves, I am eternally grateful. I love chatting with you on Tumblr after kiddo goes to bed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Anniversary**

(Right before “Research”)

The heat is starting to kick in during the day, but the nights are still cool, the wind picking up with a chilling bite, one that cuts through the legs of the suit where there’s less armor. His arms and chest are pretty much numb to it already anyway, swinging versus riding always hits him in the upper body first, get that initial hour or so of fuck this sucks and numb for the rest of the night.

He lands just inside the fence, luckily catching the high branches of the oak that’s stood at the front gates for who knew how long; the tree is massive, it’s probably lived forever. Regardless, it’s the perfect height to hide, to look around for anyone within radius; as he expects, the place is empty.

Red leaps down from the tree and takes his time, meandering over the hillside, the wind catching his cape. Further up, right on a flat spot under a massive cherry, he finally stops.

“I’ve been away for a while,” he starts, staring down at the writing rather than the ground. “Sorry I haven’t come by.”

He stands for what feels like a long time, not giving expressed details about the team or the Bats or his life outside this mask (because you just never know) but telling random things that come to mind:

“It might be stupid to take college classes at this stage. High School drop-out and everything, but why the hell not? I’ve got Bio Chem this semester, Physics, Writing for the Humanities, some Business class. I’ll be fine, all of them seem pretty straight forward. Easy.”

“The last mission was rough for one of my people, he…has some bad moments from the past and froze up. I should have made him take more time, maybe. Well, that’s kind of the pot calling the kettle, right?”

“I think I’ve found out how that organization is tracking people that are special. There’s something in the genetics that might have a trigger, something encoded in their cells that makes it easier to find them. If I can crack it, then I can take that organization down another peg, keep people safe. I’m going to keep working on it…”
“I found that stupid sweater in the back of my closet...I thought it might have gotten lost during the move or destroyed when the last house got hit. But, I just opened a drawer and there it was.”

The wind changes direction and he takes it as a sign. “All right. I’ll try not to be so long next time.” Red turns and his gaze is automatically drawn to a shift in the shadows, the tall form of Batman standing on the outskirts of the clearing—obviously trying to give him space, be unobtrusive. The white out lenses are the brightest part of him coming through the night and Red sighs through his nose patiently; even though the only thing he wants to do is go, leap back in the tree, fire a grapple, and take on patrol so he could escape this old pain. But, well...

And Red—just can’t believe his shitty luck. Trust B to seriously be waiting here since, well, he would know. There was no log in to BI this time, and he sure as hell ducked cameras (really, O is the ultimate voyeur and yes she admits it) just so he could... be here, do this without an audience. He hasn’t seen B since he left the Watchtower for home, and damn it, the Dark Knight should be out with Robin on patrol. Instead, here the guy is. He hadn’t expected anyone to really put two and two together on the date. Hell, he hadn’t said anything to the Titans when he came back to Gotham on Sunday (Cassie is apparently now Team Bats, like he doesn’t know).

He takes his time approaching, moving through the graveyard like a specter himself.

“B.” Keep it simple.

“Red.”

“Nice of you to come hang out. We should have met up at Chuck E Cheese instead. I’m craving some skeeball if you know what I mean.”

“It’s the anniversary,” Batman retorts in that dark gravel tone, the one where he’s laughing on the inside and maintaining bad ass on the outside. The wind catches his cape too, blowing it around the symbol high on his chest. From out of somewhere because, yeah, Batman, he holds out two white roses.

Red blinks down at the offering and back up from behind his whiteouts, his mouth downturned under the cowl (yeah, you are such a loveable asshole sometimes, giving you more Dad points here); his fist clenches for an important moment before he reaches up and accepts the roses from Batman’s gloved hand, his back straight and fighting the instinct to curl in slightly, a testament to that old pain.

“Thanks, B,” the words are whipped away with the wind, and he’s glad because the rest of it “—for coming—” gets lost out there in the night. He turns, waits a second, a heartbeat before he goes back and the Batman takes that as permission to follow.

The roses are laid across Jack and Janet Drake’s grave, a splash of color in the night. The two vigilantes stand there looking down, silent with their own thoughts and recriminations, their own memories and perspectives filling the space between them and the stone. The ghosts of past days flutter in the movement of capes, the rise of chests with breath, the creak of leather and Kevlar, the shift of the night around them.

“Where are you tonight?” Red finally asks quietly.

“Going down to the Port Adams. Hood asked for Robin’s assistance getting into a Triple Threat warehouse. So, I have some time for other things.”

Red nods, “Batgirl is on the North end, so I’ll take the South.”
“South is covered.” B replies and pointedly turns to face Red rather than the headstone. Something important. “Come with me. I have a ship that doesn’t smell legitimate.”

And maybe because he managed to get his ass kidnapped a second time in a year, but when B says ship, a thrill of panic, of fuck, fuck I’ve got to get out rushes back in breath-stealing anxiety. But… he’s got to heal at some point, doesn’t he? He’s got to keep moving forward and get his shit back together, get the glue he needs to put the pieces of himself in place, to keep them together—fuck the jagged edges. He’s going to face this just like last time, he has to.

And the Batman sees something very wrong in Red’s shadowy profile, his instincts picking up on the sudden tension, catching a hint of the slight tremble to Red’s hands, the brief second his mouth goes tight, the hard bob of Adam’s Apple when he swallows…all these things give B pause. Not Red’s usual, and in this, their first meeting after the younger Bat is back on patrol, out of the Watchtower, B is glad he decided to seek Red out tonight. He can see these reactions for himself and assess. B’s hand already reaching out turning Red by the shoulder to face him in front of his parent’s grave on the anniversary of his Father’s death with old demons (the Batman now knows something about) riding him, causing this kind of reaction.

“Tim,” he says low, leaving the darker voice for later in the night, the other hand comes up so he can still grip one shoulder and lay a hand on the back of his neck, to try pulling Red out of wherever he may have gone. The muscles are so tense he can feel it through the reinforced gloves when his grip gets tight; he doesn’t think, doesn’t wonder if this isn’t wanted because even as the Batman instead of Bruce, this is one of his sons.

He steps in, arms pulling, their chests together, the younger man’s rising just fast enough to be abnormal, telling. The top of Red’s head still fits under his chin when they’re standing flat footed. His arms tighten just an inth, not enough to be restraining, the hand on the back of Red’s neck pushing the side of his face in, cowled forehead against the lower part of B’s jaw. Red didn’t immediately jerk out of his hold and go back to fighting, so they’re accomplishing something. The man inside the legend is so damn relieved he can do this, in uniform at that.

The dark voice has no place in this moment, and it’s just a man that comes out with, “Tim, I’m here,” next to Red’s ear.

A full body shudder and Red straightens a little in the embrace, head tilting up just a little in B’s hold. “I know, B.”

Since he knows where Jason has been for too long, see the signs in Damian, has talked down Dick before, fought it in himself, B doesn’t let go and doesn’t make him take down the cowl to show his face.

Instead “…I was trapped in the boat once. More than once, but the worst one... The engines cut, electrical shorted out completely,” and Batman feels Red’s body go tight again, but he doesn’t let go, doesn’t stop, “emergency protocols not working. I was at the bottom of the bay, trapped. The cockpit was filling up. No other way out. I managed to use an explosive pellet and a hell of a lot of kicking to bust the window out before I drowned. I got to the surface. I survived it but none of that changed the fact I couldn’t get back in the boat for a while.”

Red is staring over his shoulder at nothing, hands working into fists. “How did you get back in?” The younger man finally asks, his voice hoarse in the back of his throat.

“At the time, you were out there and needed me.” There is was, simple explanation. “I had to get to you.”
And he feels Red’s chest expand sharply with the memory, the days of Robin. When he was Bruce’s Robin…

“The point is, something’s there, Tim. In your time, you’ll tell me, and I’ll be ready for it. I’ll be here for you if or when you need help. In the meantime, I don’t want you to force it. You’ve more than earned the right to take your time.”

And now the chest under his moves in a series of rapid flutters, the pulse under his fingers stays steady, the muscle lose just enough intensity for B to turn his face a little, to press against the cowled forehead when the hug tightens.

“I have to do it,” and Red’s voice is closer to himself, losing some of that rough quality, “for me. I have to keep moving forward. I—I can’t go back anymore Bruce. I can’t.” He can’t believe he just said that to the Batman, to Bruce, and immediately wishes he could suck the words back in, that he kept his fucking mouth shut.

But, Batman just nods against his head, “then let me be there with you, Tim. Let me have your back on this.”

As much as he shouldn’t, as much as he should laugh his ass off, he finds himself relaxing just a little because he’s got to process someone, the Bat, in Gotham having his back.

Finally…Finally, his whole body just eases in Batman’s grip. “Then I’m with you.”

As if they timed it, Red steps back as Batman opens his arms and they both give a nod, turning away from the gravestone on the same foot, on the same beat, both reaching into their belts for grapples, and ready to fly.

**Connection**

(Around the same time as “The Right Thing”)

His eyes are blurring, drying out, and Conner sits back a little, stretching his back muscles. Even though, invulnerable guy, he gets cricks in his neck, moments of pain in his joints. It’s cool because it gives him an idea of how it is to be normal some of those days. In the beginning, when he was first…learning (separating his memories from Clark’s)...and they’d started up YJ, Kon had spent as much time as possible observing the people around him, wanting to understand what it was like to be different than what he was. To be human. To be normal.

His initial facial expressions came from television shows and observations. He learned most the lingo from MTV, Tim, and later Bart since, well, bros for life.

It has taken some time to figure out that his body, as much as “invulnerable” means, still had the propensity of feel discomfort and aches. Whether it was because half his DNA (or whatever part of it) came from Luthor or because he wasn’t born or anything isn’t an answer he wants to delve into—at one time, he used to want to know; after his mind and body were pretty much hacked, he stopped wanting those answers. The massive file of papers is hidden under a loose floorboard in his loft room back on the farm, all the information Tim could hack from Luthor’s database about him, all the details. Tim could probably do some tests and figure out more, but those answers might be more damaging than helpful. As is, he knows there are no other possible ways into his brain without surgery, mind controlling alien assholes notwithstanding. It’s good enough for him, was good enough for his team, good enough for Cassie.
Besides, Conner (Kon-El, as you are now with the House of El) is cool with feeling pain sometimes.

Clark, feet kicked up on the foot locker at bottom of the bed, pauses in reading. He’s not wearing the glasses since it’s just the two of them and Lois in their Metropolis home, he looks more like Kal-El chilling out.

The words wash over Kon again while he looks at the guy he’d always wanted to impress, he’d wanted to emulate before he found his own way.

“Then spoke the thunder

DA

Datta: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms

DA

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

DA

Damyata: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
“Break time?” And Clark’s grin makes him look different like this, not like Superman or Clark Kent, reporter for the Daily Planet. He looks more human, approachable maybe.

“Yeah,” he stands off the bed (the room they made for him a few years ago when they moved here—he’d never slept in it) and stretches. “I think I’m going to go off the grid flying for a few, get some air.”

“I understand that,” Clark laughs a little, closes his dog-eared copy of T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland, leaving “What the Thunder Said” marked. “I think your professor hates your class if his reading list is anything to go by.”

Connor actually takes the time to open the window, shrugs, “maybe. It’s a lot of obscure stuff, isn’t it?”

Clark hums a little as the two maneuver out the window and take to the sky. “I wouldn’t say obscure, but better taught with other works of the time period so you get the references and literary movements.”

And the night sky is something endless and wonderful, something open and clear, stars glittering in the dark deeps. Conner, Kon, breathes it in while stretches out, and his body seems to ease.

“I talked to Tim about you,” Clark admits gently while they hover in the night.

Conner blinks his eyes open, “what?”

“Honestly, I wasn’t trying to go behind your back,” Clark holds up both hands, “but I wanted help connecting with you again, Kon. You’ve been through a lot in the last year or so…and I’m worried about you. I can’t help it. You haven’t had any time to really breathe since” back from the dead, battling Superboy-Prime in the 31st century. “you defeated the Black Lantern Corps and re-joined the Titans. From there, you and your team have been running ragged and I know you’re busy but I haven’t had any time with you. I just wanted—” Clark sighs a little, scratches the back of his neck.

Now he’s blinking at Clark like he just tried to high-five him or something, “uh. I…appreciate it, Clark, but really—“

“You had to walk in on your best friend about to commit suicide,” Clark counters gently.

Kon unconsciously sinks, his eyes wide because how the fuck did he know—

“You had to walk in on your best friend about to commit suicide,” Clark counters gently.

Kon unconsciously sinks, his eyes wide because how the fuck did he know—

“Bart was kidnapped and experimented on. As was Gar,” and Clark is right there, both hands on his biceps, gentle, grounding. “Cassie almost lost the Wonder Girl mantle. Raven had a run-in with her father. Miguel needed time off to spend time with his partner. Then the Insurgents Crisis. Not to mention the hard fights you’ve had on your own, without your team and you didn’t call anyone for help. It’s been a hard few years for you, Kon-El,” and Clark’s eyes are that stupid kind of kicked puppy thing, “and I just want you to know that I’m always here. We…weren’t okay for a while there, and I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to feel like that, and I want to fix it so much. I want you to feel like you can come to me with anything, that I’m always here for you. I want you to know how proud I am of you. You keep fighting, you keep doing incredible things. You honor the House of El with your sacrifices and strength.”
And there. Kon blinks hard, his chest expanding with a breath because (clone, Experiment 13, defective DNA, hadn’t the AI in the Fortress said that one time?) even with a large part of Clark’s, Kal-El’s, memories, he’d taken a crazy amount of time to study everything Kryptonian. Learned the language, learned the nuances of culture, learned the history, everything still on record, everything he could get his hands on (thanks Batman) because maybe it would make Clark more comfortable with him and—

Now the reminder that he’s part of the House of El and every time Clark outright mentions it somehow like it’s not a big deal or something (Kara never mentioned it, she knew how much it just fucked with his head. Really, no shit right?) still has the same effect, makes him want to go out and prove to Clark, to himself, to everyone that he’s not just a fucking copy...

So.

With a deep, painful breath, the guy that used to be such a little punk stutters out:*“You honor me with your esteem.”*

It’s been, well, a while, so he’s rusty as hell, but the strange, twisted syllables fall off his tongue like he’s always known them.

Clark, however, grins wide and genuine. *“It is you who has surpassed all reasonable expectation. You who has made a name for yourself. You who are synonymous with strength and virtue. Well done, Kon-El.”*

*“And what is the meaning behind this, advisor? Why now?”* Because, yeah. Good question.

*“I have not been the advisor worthy of you. I have not been the appropriate family. It is my wish to have an opportunity to rectify my mistakes, Kon-El. I wish for you to allow me the chance.”*

The younger hero blinks up at Clark’s sincere expression, the look of someone that really knew, that understood he’d pretty much abandoned—

“I talked to Tim about you.”

Maybe the thing with the Bats and Red made Clark think about…?

*“It is...not necessary to maintain my deeds, Kal-El,”* he starts carefully. “You don’t need to do this to keep me on the straight and narrow. Seriously, I’m a good guy not counting brainwashing and shit.”

Now that gets him a reaction.

“Kon, no. No, that’s not why—“

“Because I totally get that, you know? Crazy bad guy with Kryptonian powers on this planet is one hell of a destructive force and after that asshole Prime, you’ve got to make sure I don’t—“

“Stop.” The pressure in that one word is enough to make him shut up with the talking (the Bart in his head, “you’re backpedaling like a motherfucker, bro”). “I’m doing this wrong if you think, for a second, that I would put you and Superboy-Prime anywhere near the same category. Kon—“ Clark sighs down at him, looking a little lost— “I didn’t know how to do this in the beginning or what you would need that I could provide. I didn’t help you enough in becoming this extraordinary young man, you had to do so much of it on your own and I was wrong for just...letting it happen.”

If they were standing on the ground, he would be scuffing his feet rather than just looking way too
uncomfortable with this sitch because, yeah, it would have been nice to get more deets and, whatever, clone/donor time, but he’d come to live with what he could get. It’s fine. Clark came through time to get him, to bring him and Bart back to Cassie and Miguel and Tim and Gar and Rach. Clark…came for him. And fuck if that didn’t mean the world. It just…it’s the closest he’s ever felt to this guy.

“Can we just…” he sighs a little since not good with this crap. *“May we agree to move forward? Let us not look back at what was but ahead to what could be?”*

But he’s not looking up at Clark’s face since he is just too far over his comfort limit here. It’s…pretty fucked up considering how much this moment should mean to him; it’s something he’s wanted said rather than implied for longer than he’ll admit.

And Clark is quiet, just holding on to his biceps with a firm but not painful grip. *“It is my goal that you may someday rely in my strength, not only when you are in need and without other options, Kon-El. I seek your trust, your friendship. I seek to strengthen the bonds of family just as I do with Kara. Just as I wanted when I gave you the name of our home world.”* *

Family.

The Alpha Centurions

Young Justice.

The Titans.

Family.

And even though he’s not really that guy, you know, like Nightwing, Kon blinks up at Clark finally and lifts his arms, wraps the older man up in a hug. And, you know, he gets to lean on someone else’s strength for a change. It’s…kinda cool.

*“Forward, forward…is good.”* *

**Notes**

(Before and during “Catch.” Because, well, Dami and something Allseer said in a comment)

And, well, isn’t this some shit.

Dami is arching an unimpressed eyebrow, relaying with that motion alone how much he thinks Red is such a dumb ass to be gaping at the thick tome lying between them. As a matter of fact, it’s supposed to mean something. Red gets that. In his time keeping up with the League of Assassins, he learned about the Demon Head’s personal library, a compendium of knowledge from his impressive time span, and had even been in that room to look over (briefly because, you know, assassin on his ass and such) the amounted mass of books. He didn’t realistically think he’d ever see one of a similar kind up close and personal.

For Dami to bring one, even if it is his own, is really a way of saying we’re not good yet, but my desire to stab you has obviously lessened. Stellar, really.

“You know,” he starts, “I could read way too far into this and make the assumption you don’t want to kill me in my sleep anymore.”
Dami blinks behind the domino with the whiteouts up and the noise shoved out of his lungs with a breath is a laugh. No, seriously. It’s a laugh. “I should stab you just for the insult, Drake. You are confusing me with Todd.”

Red moves away, going into his perch while laughing out loud. He hits the control for the wall unit to slide out. “Yeah, yeah, you’d make sure I’m awake for it, right? Good for you, Dami.” In one of the hidden compartments—ah, there it is, still wrapped up in the silk. He carries it back to his table while Dami gives a hum of assent. The book is placed beside Dami’s own.

“Since we’re talking all League of Assassin traditions and you feel like sharing, maybe you can tell me a little about this.” Once he unwraps the oddball gift from Ra’s, he suddenly has a whole lot of attention.

Dami’s gloved hand reaches out, fingers barely touching the surface of the human-skin bound book, his mouth slightly parted in shock before his gaze shoots to Red’s unmasked face. “Okay. So, not good. Care to tell me why Ra’s would send me a book covered in skin? Not that I don’t appreciate presents from mortal enemies, but usually I get some kind of threat or disturbing souvenir along with it. This one is curiously without either.” He arches a brow because, well, reasons.

From the way Baby Bat’s expression closes up immediately pretty much tells him more than not good.

“I will need to speak to Father before we…discuss this artifact. How did you acquire one of Grandfather’s volumes?”

And the big deal is what again? “He sent it to me,” Red feels a little more creeped out by the look of comprehension suddenly dawning on Dami’s face. “After the thing a few years ago. You know, he wanted to kill everyone Batman cared about and take over WE? After I stopped him. And how about we talk about it now and fill B in on the deets later? What’s the DL, Baby Bat?”

“…Tim,” and oh shit, his first name, but whatever Dami might have said is wiped away with a gloved hand. “Have you read it?”

Then with the patient look because of course he did. It did nothing to lessen the vibe he always gets when dealing with that guy.

“Grandfather would not willingly part with his knowledge, especially a volume bound as such,” said slowly, like very slowly since there is obviously something here Dami wants him to get without saying it out loud.

“You mean not all the volumes are ah—“ he waves a hand around uselessly, “—made from people?”

Now Dami’s the one giving him the patient look.

Putting these things together is starting to give him:

*a migraine

*a need to never sleep again

*the burning desire to reevaluated all the security systems everywhere
*a reason to build a massive containment unit that could hold, you know, *immortals* (Superboy tested, Red Robin approved)

The alarm going off on his phone pretty much interrupts this Bat bonding session when the trips he set up for Two-Face are apparently working, even if the action is starting earlier in the evening than he planned—which is the initial reason Dami showed up at his window tonight in the first place. He logged into BI, activated his profile and *bam* Bats in the window. He should really test it someday, see how many people he can get to show up at the Rec Center for Vigilante Night. Call it an experiment.

“All right, we’ll talk more about creepy tomes and what the *fuck* Ra’s wants later. Believe me, Dami, that *shit* is happening, but right now, we have vigilante-ing to do.” He double taps the right spot on the harness to set the security system once they’re out the window.

The muttering of Arabic behind him is more relieved than snarky, enough that Red now has to wonder.

Since the alarm hits a secondary ring, Red Robin deduces the main two locations have been hit, so rumors about the big bad getting back in on the street action is apparently true. Since it is Harvey, Red debates calling up B to let him know the situation. He muses over the possibilities while taking off at a run, Robin right on his heels without even knowing what they’re going to be chasing this time around. But, the younger Bat is right with him, firing a grapple before the last step off the ledge and into the night.

**

He does end up calling B in on this shit because really, *Dick*? What the *fuck* are you thinking?

“B, Red here,” he pretty much is snarling while Robin is seriously having *the time of his fucking life* beating some criminals into pudding. Well, not that he can blame Demon because *Dick*, but the bad guy currently on the ground at his feet is seriously going to need some TLC during recovery. Like *serious* TLC.

“What’s happening, Red?” Since *Batman* and Red is very *carefully* not going to focus on how this is the first time he’s called out to B in a long, *loooong* time for anything (just, dammit *Dick*). He’s also not going to focus on how *fast* B answered his comm.

“We’re going to need back-up.” And he gives the roughly drawn bad guy plans another look, taking note of the crooked Gotham cops. “Looks like we’ve got some baddies that need a Bat beatdown while Robin and I go check out Dixon Docks. How fast can you get to Morrison Avenue Warehouse?”

“En route. ETA ten. Red—what else?”

And yeah, *Batman*.

“They have a vigilante trap ready—I’m pretty sure it’s supposed to be for N. But even *better*, in his usual ‘oh-shit-let’s-have-a-second-death-trap-ready, Two-Face planned some minor uprisings to keep the rest of us busy so he could take N out.”

“He’s been secretive the last few days.” B’s voice is sharp with a whole lot of *should have pushed the issue*.

“Crooked PD. It’s probably personal.”
“All right. Robin is still with you?”

Red idly looks over at the epic back-fist that lands the last thug here. When Robin’s whiteout raise, Red starts clapping with a wide grin because, well, they all already know he’s an asshole, right?

“Yup, Robin’s staying with me. We’ll head to the docks, make sure N is good. I’m going to hit up Hood and Batgirl to take care of the distractions.”

“Sound plan. Two-Face?”

“He’s scampered off to his hideout, I’m sure. Take him a nice housewarming present for us, okay? Try to make it something memorable.” Since, yeah. B gets so pissed off when one of the baddies takes shots at the others.

The growl coming from the comm gives him a moment to pause, but he waves at Robin to c’mom, man, we got more asses to kick and people to save and starts with the leaping jumps back up to the window they originally came through, getting enough momentum to launch himself up and through.

“I’ll follow the signs to Harvey.”

“Open up a can of whoop-ass on him, B.”

“Now you sound like Hood.”

“I heard it in a rap song somewhere.” Red flips to hit the roof, “we’ll comm you if it’s bad.”

“Even if it’s not, I want to know, Red.”

“Understood. Red and Robin out.” He reaches down through the top window in time to snag hold of Robin’s wrist (still shorter than me, Demon, and yes, I’m enjoying that shit for as long as I can) and pull him up.

“C’mon, we need a ride.” Robin’s grin is sharp as they take off in tandem, same foot, to run across the roof and leap into the night.

In two swings, they’d be on top the Grant Street safe houses, the one that luckily has a bike hidden in the lower floor entrance.

With time running out, Robin picks the lock in no time while Red keep lookout and coordinates Hood and Batgirl with the bad guy party time. As he expects, Hood cackles like a crazy fucker for baddies just offering themselves up for a beating and Batgirl sounds like she’s anticipating the hell out of a nice one-on-twenty fight. Well, kudos to them both, really. Team players all the way.

Robin shoves a helmet in his gut, already wearing one on the back of the bike for Red to tuck his cape under his ass as he climbs on and revs it up. The hidden door opens and they’re speeding out.

He taps the side of the helmet. “What did you find?”

“The bait is a shipment of heroin and three police officers to meet the boat. Of course, they are to disburse the drugs to other dealers; trapping N is simply the secondary motivation.” R doesn’t sound happy. Oh no. Not a happy camper there.

“Fucking Harvey and his double-sided shit.” He leans his body up, making the bike jump over the curb to avoid a line of traffic, Robin goes with it, gripping the back of the seat with one hand while the other keeps a Batarang for just in case. “What’s our plan when we hit the scene, Robin?”
He doesn’t need to see it to know R is giving him a raised brow. “We will assess the trap first and how deeply in peril N has gotten himself.”

“Good plan. Who’s on ‘damsel in distress’ protocol?”

“We shall see once we assess the situation. Their plans gave no specifics on what the trap may entail. We may both need to rescue his foolish self.”

“Let’s hope for the best and prepare for the worst since N is really going to get his ass chewed out for this.”

“Agreed,” For the sake of those criminal dick bags, Red really hopes N is okay when they hit the scene.

But, well, not so much.

He and Robin stashed the bike and are mostly over the receiving house roof when the shipping crane stationed in the middle of the bay releases and they see who the hell is attached to it.

Well. Fuck. Change of plans.

Robin roars, a dangerous, bone-chilling sound and leaps with hot anger in every line of his body.

“Shit, here we go,” Red mutters to himself and joins him, landing in the middle of only twenty or so low-level drug dealers that have somehow gotten the drop on Nightwing. The possibilities of how and what methods they must have used make him feel a part of Robin’s anger for his own because, dammit Dick, you fucker. He gets a whole lot of that picture when he catches the snapping white of electricity in his peripheral.

Dick bags. Seriously.

“Red! Get to him while I pulverize these peons!”

And, yup, Dami’s totally got this, just dodging the modified tasers with holy shit pissed off mini-vigilante, watch your ankles. Red cringes a little for the guy that suddenly has his nuts in his throat because that’s going to hurt in the morning.

Without a second thought to how many ambulances they may need once this fuckery is done, he takes a hard run off the pier and dives in the water head first.

**

With the punch drunk N holding on to him, saying this shit, Red is not going to admit his heart is pounding a little (residual fear from N’s dumbass almost dying, no way he could have gotten himself out beaten that bad with broken fingers), and the left-over too close, too close is fading away with the guy hacking up water.

“O, what’s the stats on Hood and BG?”

The link has a moment of fuzz when he knows she switches to him, “GCPD is already en route. Hood is very irritated you called in, and I quote ‘the big motherfucking guns’ for ‘some dumb shit like this.’ Batgirl says to tell you she expects a text for coffee and pizza soon or she’s going to come looking for you.”

And yeah, he doesn’t want her doing that. He’s got a plan. “Understood.”
“B is on his way to you. I filled him in on N’s little dip in the bay.”

“Two-Face?”

“In the wind, but we’ve got a ten block radius where he might be.”

And, oh. Oh. He wants in on that shit; his smile is dangerous in the dark under the pier while N is shivering hard against the front of his body, waveriong around. He doesn’t think of much more than, “thanks, O. Red out,” while holding on just this side of too tight but doesn’t think N can feel it for fuck anyway.

“B? ETA? We’ve got N at the docks.”

“Almost there,” the Dark Knight replies. “Status?”

“I think R is going a little postal, but I have faith in his skills, and N is going to need medical attention.”

“We should be used to this,” B deadpans. “Apparently, N needs a refresher lecture on working as a team.”

“Well, no shit, B,” Red snarls a little at the Nightwing symbol he’s pressed against while those trembling arms hold him, “he’s an asshole.”

“He give you a reason for the solo act?”

“I assume it’s because, as I mentioned, he’s an asshole.”

Now that gets a chuff from Batman. “Get him up, I’m two streets down.”

“Acknowledged,” and he’s rapping hard in the center of N’s back when the last bit of trapped water comes spewing out. Red just grits his teeth and grips a wrist to pull his injured Batman—partner—(Fuck) Nightwing over his shoulder and get them out from under the dock.

A glance at Robin finishing off the last three with some epic gusto, Red just gives a whistle to let Demon know it’s all good. He gets a green gauntlet wave.

“Don’t jump—“ from somewhere over his shoulder.

And his hand reflexively tightens on the back of N’s thighs while he very pointedly does not think about the body he’s holding against himself.

“Not without a line,” come out by rote, bringing up those old good times with it. “You are an asshat, you know. Next time fucking comm me.” Since, yeah, that’s what should have gone down.

The laugh is weak, making his heart knock for a second.

“My…line.”

Hitting the dock and rolling his eyes behind the whiteouts. “How about we play it fair and square from now on, N. Seriously. I’ll tell you when shit hits the fan for me, you do the same.” (“I can’t lose you.” “Timmy, I’m right here with you.” God is this how they felt when he got snatched up? When he got fucked up by Crane’s gas and didn’t tell anyone…?)

“Crooked cops. My case.”
Red chuffs while Robin is zip tying these assholes, fending off the impending realization with witty Bat-banter. “Lucky for you it intersected with mine or you would be a terrible stereotype right now. It's totally not cool to cheat Crane out of killing you. Fucking inconsiderate, N.”

“Need…need you…Always needed…you…didn’t—didn’t disappoint me. Not why, never that, Tim.”

His steps falter, catch on the rough-hewn wood of Dixon, his heart stutters because—something down deep, a wall against pain fractures a little more, busts open to bleed and maybe even heal this time.

“…couldn’t tell you…just a kid.”

And what the hell is that about—? Swallowing around the curious lump in his throat when he hears the roar of a familiar engine and shadows move, Red shakes himself, files everything here away for later and old memories start becoming more familiar and less filled with old hurts.

He hopes N is too far gone to realize his voice is wrecked when he says, “someday you can give me the deets when you haven’t almost died, okay? Dammit, Marsha. Don’t scare me like that again.”

“Missed you too, Cindy.”

The Batmobile slides to a harsh stop right by the dock as Red is stepping off and the dome slides away with B’s usual dark expression. He gets even more grim at the sighs of N laying over Red’s shoulder like a massive sack of asshole. Robin has made his way up to grab N’s legs and they slide him down in the passenger seat together, taking stock of his injuries (singes in the suit from the high voltage shots, no wonder he went down).

Red, feeling the rise of pissed off, just looks over at Robin. Demon looks back.

They turn away from the Batmobile together.

“Get in.” B calls to them both.

“There’s still work to be done. I’ll handle it. Get him to A, he was down there for too long.”

Which mean now. And Robin elbows him pointedly in the side with a sneer. Well, at least it wasn’t a knife or some shit.

“Red,” and that’s B’s warning tone.

Red turns back just enough to grip N’s forearm one last time. “Go. Get him out of here B. Me and Robin are on clean-up.” And the two of them? Oh yeah, they’ve got this.

**

Since Two-Face, like the rest of the Rogue Gallery, sometimes makes shit easy, finding him is really…anti-climactic. Even better, Robin did an epic flip to snatch his coin from mid-air and pretty much render the gangster a weepy mess of gimmie, gimmie, gimmie. Well, the tommy gun was a bit of a pain in the ass, but meh, not like they didn’t expect it.

Well, it wasn’t really that easy because Two-Face, just like the Joker has learned a very important lesson in his years as a bad guy extraordinaire: always have options.

Luckily, Red has a knack for contingencies. Even luckier, Robin is apparently taking up the habit.
And while they’re on the roof, waiting for the Arkham Unit to come by and pick-up this saucy little package of beat up bad guy, they can check on N’s progress because, A? No fucking around with that guy.

Over the comms (and his boots are still wet inside, gross), Alfred tells them Master Nightwing has been on oxygen since his arrival and is coming around quickly. He has not sustained permanent damage. He has two broken fingers and electric burns, but he will survive.

Red totally does not point out how Demon seems to sag with relief.

“Thanks, A,” and Red can’t help how soft his tone gets, very far away from his usual while in the mask or cowl as the case may be.

“My pleasure Master Red. I dare say—it has been quite some time since you have visited. I assume you shall very soon.”

And no questions there. At. All. Red swallows a little because this is pretty much a do not test my patience, I shall come find you if necessary.

“Not this time I’m in, A,” Red placates, “there’s too much to do. But, I’ll make sure it’s soon.”

“Very good. I shall make your favorite when you decide to grace me with your presence.”

Now he laughs a little because, well, Alfred. It really takes someone that kind of special to put up with Batman’s shit. Seriously, the guy is a walking disaster.

“Thanks, A. Red and Robin out.”

“I would not wish to be in your boots if he comes to your Tower, Red.” Robin gives him a side glance and nope, he also does not want that shit to happen. Isn’t there some international crime he could be fighting that day? Probably. Maybe. Well, he could make some and then fight it. There.

Plan set.

“That totally makes two of us. But, I’d go visit Ra that day or something. Try to bring him down again,” with a careless shrug while the sirens fill the night.

“The Council of Spiders is still lurking,” Robin draws. “Contact me. I would enjoy the challenge.”

“You know it. Seriously, Baby Bat, we could have a tag-team match.”

Now the Demon is laughing a little as the cops pull their pieces and bust inside.

“All right, let’s go.” Pulling his grapple, Robin turns away and starts to the other side of the roof for the first swing off.

“Not going to stay for the best part?”

Robin throws it over his shoulder, just completely deadpans it: “My balls are cold.”

And what?! Red’s jaw drops because…because from Demon?

“—tt—remind me to never listen to N’s advice again.” Turning, Robin’s hands waffled back and forth, “he claims witty repartee would be an acceptable method to aid in this…bonding.”

Now, Red is just gaping. Like obviously. Even with the cowl on if Demon’s irritated sigh is anything to judge.
“What—just, no way. Keep doing that shit, seriously, and I will stop being surprised eventually. Holy shit, Rob, that was fantastic.” He pulls his own grapple, grinning like an asshole under the cowl, and...reaches out to ruffle Robin’s hair. Just like that. “Epic, man. Perfect delivery and everything.”

And yeah, rolling eyes behind the whiteouts. Still, Demon gets points for trying.

The sound of grapples firing in the night doesn’t make the slight grin on Robin’s face any less cool.

“You know,” he starts, giving the customary tug to test the line, “I am seriously introducing you to the best thing ever next time I’m in town. We will totally have something to bond over then and we can practice your banter skills.”

“I will be sure to clear my calendar, Red. Make certain it is worth my time.”

“You know it, Baby Bat.”

And by the time they jump, he’s grinning even wider.

Saved a brother. Brought down the bad guy. Made the other brother smile without bleeding. Definitely a good night.

**Flash Point**

(Before “Consideration”)

And Bart’s eyes move over the screen in an instant:

*Bruce Wayne/Batman:* Maintains an industrial empire as CEO of Wayne Industries and Batman Incorporated and is a standing member of the Justice League when not fighting crime in Gotham City; currently is an amnesiac with no memories of being the Batman or of his former partners.

*DAMIAN WAYNE/Robin:* The third Robin and a Meta Human; currently MIA

*Dick Grayson/Nightwing:* First Robin and alter ego Nightwing exposed. Deceased.

*Jason Todd/Red Hood:* currently a free-lance vigilante with roots in Gotham City’s crime syndicates.

*Kal-El/Superman:* After the death of John and Martha Kent, Kal-El’s Kryptonian powers began fluctuating; instability continual. Is on hiatus from the Justice League and his secret identity, Clark Kent.

*Diana Prince/Wonder Woman:* after discovering the truth of her origins, Wonder Woman left the name Diana and the Amazon tribe; during her constant struggle with the Gods and demi-gods, Wonder Woman was unable to save her mother from being turned to stone and the Amazons scattered. *In between fighting the Gods, saving her people, Wonder Woman maintains her position as a founding member of the Justice League.*

*Kon-El/Superboy:* creation of N.O.W.H.E.R.E as a living weapon in the attempt to control metahumans on a planetary scale. Named ‘Kon’ by Kira-El as *abomination.* The Teen Titans under
the direction of Red Robin mounted a successful rescue and recruitment.

Cassie Sandsmark/Wonder Girl: stole several artifacts from Paradise Island to originally gain powers commonly known to the sidekicks of Wonder Woman; after joining the Teen Titans, she was able to unlock her demi-goddess abilities.

“Tim Drake” real name, unknown/ Red Robin: put himself and his parents in mortal danger by stealing from the Gotham criminal, the Penguin, to gain Batman’s attention. His parents were forced into Witness Protection Drake was given the secret identity, Timothy Jackson Drake. Batman permitted him to become Red Robin.

Garfield Logan/Beast Boy: detained by Harvest in The Colony, Beast Boy and several other metas later known as The Ravagers undergo extreme torture and testing to find the strongest metas for N.O.W.H.E.R.E’s use.

Rachel Roth/Raven: Queen of the Under-Realms, called “the Black Bird of Terror” by her Father, Trigon. Able to gain control of Beast Boy to betray the Titans, Raven intended to destroy them; however, overwhelmed by human emotions, she frees Beast Boy and joins the team. Her connection to Trigon, however, leaves her battling her dark nature.

The volumes are there. More on the fractured Justice League and the Outlaws. Lists of more super villains with a decided edge over them, and the compendium makes Bart Allen’s heart start to pound…

Bar Torr. Murderer, Thief, Agent of the Purifiers. Relations: Deceased

He sucks in a breath, chokes on it.

But Barry, his—his grandfather is kneeling to look at him, to turn his face away from all the very bad, bad news up on the big screen in the Hall of Justice.

“My memories—“ he’s half-afraid to know the truth.

“We were erased when you came back to this time,” Barry fills in gently, “we’re not sure if it happened before you were sent back or after you got here.”

Now he’s blinking rapidly down (and he had thought taking the last name Allen had just been so he would have a pseud other than Impluse…) and trying to remember (a race around the world…Wally…B, Batman named him Impulse in the first place).

“M—Max. I stayed with Max for a while,” he blinks again, feeling a little numb all over.

“Yes, that happened in the current time line.” Batman agrees gently, kneeling by the chair Bart is sitting in, still look up at the big screen.

“So this,” he clears his throat, waving a hand at the screen, “is one of the possibilities if the Flashpoint happens?”

“This is one of them, the fifty-second,” Barry fills in and a hand comes up to the back of his neck, to rub the sharp muscles suddenly tense. “With the multiverse theory, the Flashpoint cause hundreds of alternate realities to happen. This—“ Barry’s free hand waves at the screen, “is the one I sped into, so the most common time line change. The fifty-second. I still don’t know why it’s the most prevalent alternate time line, but it’s the one I kept coming back to when I tried to get through to the future and stop it from happening.”
Bart sucks in a breath because shit is getting real right here. “Okay,” he looks from the very serious Batman cowl to Barry’s dark Flash face. “Let’s just review. Group of evil bad guys are going to set world destroying bombs at key points in the universe at different time/space points to try doing a…a factory re-set on our reality. This one, the most probable, has a pretty screwed up JLA and more formidable baddies than our world now. All of us, our lives change, we change.”

The Batman’s mouth quirks just slightly. “That works for me. Basically, yes. We believe The Weapon’s Master has returned to our time and gathered several of our other enemies to plan out this universal destruction attempt. The drawback is, we aren’t sure when this Flashpoint will happen. All we have now are rough estimates, so we’ll need more time to nail down the specifics. Once we do, we’re calling those able to travel through time to work out a plan of attack.”

Bart nods, a jerk of his head since he’s still scrolling through the data, inhaling the changes to his team, to the people he cares about and pointedly trying to ignore how good it feels for Barry to be here, hanging out with him, needing his help.

“Okayokayokay. So, with Wally, we can take different spots in the future to try—“

“Hold on,” Batman holds up a gauntleted hand, “take a step back, Bart.”

“This can’t happen, B.” KF snarls. “Look what happens to Kon and Cassie and Miguel and Red. You? Supes? Dick is dead? Fucking everyone?”

“He only faked his death. Actually Dick somehow became a spy,” Barry shrugs a little, “don’t ask me how his Nightwing persona was compromised.”

Bart just blinks, “Tim never gets to be Robin, Kon is some kind of weapon…just, we can’t let this happen.”

“We won’t,” B agrees immediately. “But we still have to be careful. Time travel for you, with your different type of access to your speed ability is going to work differently than with Barry and Wally. They have the speed force to catch them while you don’t.”

“Bats, c’mon!”

“I’m not saying you’re going to be sidelined, I’m saying we need to plot the exact places and times so you don’t get caught with your power substantially diminished. Bart, it will kill you if we’re not careful.”

“And if we don’t hit the right points, our universe as we know it will end. Will turn into one of these other possibilities,” Bart’s eyes harden, his hand waving at the screen.

Barry’s hand goes tight on the back of his neck. “That isn’t going to happen, so Batman is going to do all the triangulation we need. Bart, you’re with us, but dammit, we’re not jumping in without a plan.”

“Fuck,” and his chest gets tight because Barry and looking down at him from behind the mask and it just…it just. Like old times, like old hair ruffles with the Impulse costume and races and fast food and video games and advice and fighting side-by-side. And now how much of all that shit was a lie? How long did Barry know who he was? Why not tell him? (Why abandon him? Why leave him to get fucked over and die?).

“It’s all right shorty,” Barry bends down over him a little, “it’s all right. I’m here, and I’ve got you. Bart, I’ve got you.”
A little helplessly, Bart Allen, Kid Flash, laughs without humor while he cradles his face in his hands.

**Hold out your hand**

(Because of Arkeadia.)

Robin's right side breaks the window with little effort. Through the noise, his huff of irritation is lost. Shards are an annoyance, tiny wounds an utter waste of precious time needed elsewhere. He despises them due to the time needed for treatment, and A is very impatient when he has to dig out dozens of glass shards. However, for expedience, this is a necessity, and his armor will withstand a majority of the impact regardless.

Behind him, the plume of gas follows him out, but he's already in free fall. The tendrils of effect are starting because he’s already lightheaded, his chest aching and he needs to throw the line, to catch himself.

Arms catch him around the chest instead. Faster than he can fight dosed with this annoying substance, something cold is pressed into his neck and the injection is made.

"It's me, Robin. Close your eyes."

"Red." No, that is not relief in his tone but he is merely satisfied the elder has returned to Gotham without needing to be called back.

The rooftop is hot and Robin closes his eyes behind the domino, forcing himself to focus on reality: hand on his shoulder, solid beneath his feet, Gotham air in his lungs mixing with whatever spewed from Mr. Toxic’s wrists.

"It'll help combat the effects of the toxin. Batman is hunting down Hagen."

"Go," Robin blurts out. "I shall be fine here until the antidote takes effect."

"Okay, I'll be back for you. Sit tight."

"I am not a child, Red. Go!"

Flutter of cape against his cheek and Robin sits back to meditate and breathe. Time lapses he knows, and he can access the outside, can feel the presence around him should another come after him. However, he is able to keep the poison down by simply remembering the faces of those he can now consider family. He can fight this, not with fists or gadgets, yet he is strong enough to fight.

“Robin.”

He does not open his eyes, “I am here.”

“Heh, glad you are, Baby Bat. What effects are you feeling? I need to know if the antidote is working.”

Few others would be able to discern the silent footsteps, Robin is one of those few.

“The antidote is still working.” **Translation: I am still feeling the effects.**

“Okay, so we need to get you to the Perch and get an analysis started in case we’ve got a new strain
of holy shit to deal with. I’ll need your help, Robin.”

_Tt—like he does not think I know what he is doing. ‘We’ this, trying to placate my senses so I do not have an adverse reaction._ The fact he knows Red is treating him…delicately…does not mean his chest unconsciously warms at such care; he is being included in the process. More and more, he is being inducted into the group Red considers trustworthy.

“I am able to return to the Cave on my own.”

“I told B to hand Hagen his ass, so it’s us, Baby Bat. Think you can ride with me? I’m not that bad of a driver, seriously. C’mon, take my hand and keep your eyes closed for the time being.”

Robin scoffs because this is _ridiculous_, utterly and truly, but he is already reaching up. “Red, if you say anything about this to anyone, I will _break_ your face.”

The hand that wraps around his is stronger than he recalls, one that effortlessly pulls Robin to his feet and the attached arm winds around his torso. “I think we’ve already had that phase of our relationship, so can we move on to something _better_? Like maybe, ‘I’ll rip strategic holes in all of your tights until the bad guys make fun of you.’ Or ‘I’m going to put gummy worms in your utility belt on a hot day and that shit will melt all over the place.’ Something that takes planning?” Red very thoughtfully doesn’t point out that he, in fact, was the one that broke the kid’s face last time because, you know, they really hated each other.

Holding onto him, Red leaps without hesitation and the kid just chokes a little.

“Gummy worms? I do not know what this is, but truthfully, Red, I would sabotage all the pellets in your utility belt and _wait_.”

“See? You’re getting the idea. Now, I’m nervous. But hold on, you’ve been in the US for a few years now and you don’t know what gummy worms are? We are rectifying that tonight after we analyze your blood and you stop shaking.”

“I am not——”

“We need to know the symptoms, Robin.”

“Adrenaline.” He immediately deadpans.

“Got it,” _Bullshit_.

“I…am still practicing the witty banter, Red.”

“I think you’re starting at a good place. N’s references are too old. Seriously, he needs more up-to-date material.”

Starting to pant slightly at the spikes of panic in his chest, Robin’s fist is gripping the back of his cape tighter but he laughs, not such a small, broken sound. And Red already knows the rest of the night is going to be about espresso, blood analysis, and video games; patrol is officially over for the two of them.

**

Two hours later, B is sliding through Red’s Perch window to pick up his wayward Robin (and see how Tim is faring), anticipating the two probably haven’t killed one another (yet). Hagen is down for the count and B is thinking how much he needs a vacation. Maybe he should just go on another
year’s training journey or take a look around the US for another BI interview line. He could leave Dick and Jason in charge, perhaps even Tim would stay for longer than a few days—

His train of thought it promptly derailed when he notices Red’s living room furniture is pushed against the walls and Damian is out of uniform, fighting like his life is on the line, mid bone-jarring upper-cut.

B blinks behind the whiteouts while his son faces the wall of television screens and proceeds to decimate 3D characters.

Also out of uniform, Red just steps up beside him, holds out an extra cup of coffee while he watches the youngest Bat at work.

On instinct, the Batman takes the cup and gratefully sips.

“Blood analysis came back clean twenty minutes ago. He’s good to go.”

“What did Toxic hit him with?” His free hand deactivates the cowl, sliding it off his sweaty hair, letting the upper half of his face breathe.

“Trace amounts of a similar building block to Crane’s fear gas; luckily it was an old compound so I doubt they’re having a team-up. More like Toxic wants to try something new and deadly to add to his back of trick. The anti-toxin was ready in five.”

B looks over at Tim, taking in his profile. “Of course it was.”

Red gives him a nod and goes back to watching Dami kick some ass.

“And he’s doing what now?” B asks in between sips of coffee, waves his free hand.

“I needed to get his heart rate and respiration moving for the anti-toxin to kick in, so he’s playing my modified Assassin’s Creed. Next time he swears to bring his katana.”

B looks over with an arched brow while Tim grins back at him and waves the caped crusader down on the couch to watch since, well, just about that time, Dami delivers a punishing kick to the last character who brilliantly spits a mouthful of blood before falling.

“That is not very realistic,” Damian deadpans. “Nor do they vomit when I punt them in the balls.”

Tim steps up beside, covering his choking laugh with a cough. “Hey, give me some credit, Baby Bat. It’s a work in progress. I don’t even have a second set of VR glasses yet.”

“I hope your coding skills are superior than this,” and, no, the youngest Bat is not smirking at him without hate. He almost looks like he’s trying to crack a real smile.

“Regardless, let’s show B what the thing can do. Next time, I’ll have more realistic looking blood spurts. Deal?”

Dami gives a nod, “deal.” He waves a hand to pull up the menu and select multiplayer free style, clicks until he gets about ten regenerating opponents each. “Father. Any complications?”

B, sitting himself on Tim’s couch with his coffee takes a moment to crack his neck, “nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Excellent.”
Tim cracks his knuckles and pointedly does not move away when Dami’s back is just suddenly braced against his own. Really, it’s good in that crazy nostalgic kind of way. And if B is smiling widely while drinking his coffee as his two youngest are kicking ass in Tim’s apartment—well, no one except possibly O would even see it.

**Training Day**

(Post “Catch”)

Karmen and Leo take the front with Charlie and Cuddle Bug riding back on the front stoop where Wally and Bart dropped them off in front of the huge house, large spans of land with gentle rolling knolls. It looks…nice. Like they could run and run and run.

Without a hitch, Cuddle Bug turns back to the big door, Carl the Unicorn (the purple one Jay won for her; the pink one is still at their house and she’s Stella the Unicorn) clutched against her chest instead of in the straps on her backpack. Wally understood she wanted to hold Carl while they ran so fast and made sure he wouldn’t get left behind. In front of her, Karmen is balancing the glass bowl with Maris the goldfish swimming around (a little woozily, Cuddle Bug thinks, because she’s not used to going so fast) and her telescope in the special case so if they happen might see Red this time around (he’s on assignment with the Titans but maybe he’d get done early?), she could show him the results about her automatic responses to stress Bruce and Barry have been trying to figure out. She thinks he might be able to help out with the final answer.

Leo is sporting his Superman backpack (a gift from Lois who said he had to have the lunch box and thermos too; he was so in awed of her set that it was just natural she picked up on it) with the special side pocket for the mineral rocks he found outside Star City and the big book from the Natural History Museum so he can compare. Charlie, even though he’s really too old for it, is carrying around Mr. Dinosaur and has a bitching (Bart told him not to say it around B but he could say it if Red or Hood were here) T-Rex backpack with wicked teeth. He’s got “Harriet the Spy” and “The Giving Tree” copy from Di to read after homework is done. He can’t read it with Cuddle Bug because it makes her sad, but she’s got “Where the Wild Things Are” and “The Velveteen Rabbit” to keep her busy.

The big door opens, and an older man stands there, straight-backed and dressed in a well-pressed, clean suit. The four children are suddenly very aware of their dirty faces and wind-blown hair (because Wally and Bart couldn’t believe they’ve never built sandcastles before and that was just…it was neat because Bart actually laughed out loud and Wally let them bury him). Karmen makes a small, disgruntled noise, already trying to tame her dark, curling mass.

“Good afternoon,” his accent is a gentle burr, easing the four’s natural aversion to strangers. “I assume you are Karmen, Caroline, Leonardo, and Charles?”

Blinking up at him, the four exchange a fast glance because it’s not Mr. Batman (Bruce) or Damian.

“How Leo,” he asks, remembering his manners, “please. Um. He-he goes by Charlie. And, Dick and Gar like calling Caro ‘Cuddle Bug.’”

The youngest boy waves a little, Mr. Dinosaur still in the crook of his arm while he takes in the older man, wondering what his impression is, if he’ll just shut the door on them, if— (out, we’re out). While Cuddle Bug uses Carl’s sparkly hoof to wave since she’s concentrating because Mr. Alfred’s mind feels very nice and calm, like taking a warm bath.
“Very good, Master Leo. Children, welcome to Wayne Manor.” And he opens the door wide, a small smile under his mustache, motioning the kids to come into the entry way. And Alfred Pennyworth doesn’t miss the side glances watching him, waiting for him to do something. The tension and strain when they shuffle quietly over the threshold, automatically lining up from tallest to smallest along one wall, averting their eyes.

As Master Bruce has certainly filled him in on the JLA’s young charges, he is aware there may be many things to overcome with the children; however, they are no different or any less deserving of the chance as a young acrobat that just lost his parents or a street urchin in need to support and attention or a brilliant child determined to save someone he barely knew or an even younger boy with eyes too old and feelings too raw. Rather, just as those young ones were in need, Alfred can see the same in the four shuffling into the Manor for the first time.

“I am Alfred Pennyworth, Mr. Wayne’s personal butler.” He begins as the door closes. “You may leave your larger bags here. Once we have finished up lunch, I will move them to your rooms upstairs. For the time being, each of you have a hook here,” and Alfred gestures to the set slightly above their heads, “of which to hang your knapsacks. Perhaps we can wash up before luncheon. By then, I am certain Master Damian will be finished with his current project.”

Silent, the four start taking off their backpacks (“May I hold your goldfish for you Mistress Karmen?” “Oh, yes. This—this is Maris.” “How lovely, you would name her star of the sea.” “Yes, I think she likes it too,” “Most certainly as you must have put a great deal of thought into it.” And yes, yes she did so she gives Mr. Alfred a small smile). Of course Alfred Pennyworth is an expert at multitasking and ushers them into a bathroom to wash up, provides towels, gives them a small tour of the first floor, and makes them feel his welcome at the same time, giving them information freely, without holding back. He’s firm when Charlie just runs his hands under the water, making sure to offer soap immediately, and pointedly looking at Cuddle Bug when she has a question but hesitates. He waits patiently, stands perfectly still, until she understands his answer.

And the big table is just…big and shiny. And Mr. Alfred already has some things ready for them and it smells really good, better than Clark’s twice baked potatoes (don’t tell him ‘cause that would hurt his feelings) and Leo’s stomach rumbles a little loud.

“Very well then, up we go.”

Alfred holds Maris’ bowl again so Karmen can sit at her place, by her silverware is a container with fish food already so Maris can have lunch with them, too. Alfred starts handing out salad first (Charlie gasps because the lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, and cheese are all moved around to look like a dinosaur and he doesn’t even know how Mr. Alfred even did that). Leo’s doesn’t have cucumbers but extra carrots, Cuddle Bug gets more cheese, and Karmen gets to put on her own dressing.

“Mr. Alfred,” Charlie starts out, fork poised in mid-air, “should—should we wait?”

From the sideboard, Alfred returns to the table with a basket of bread and tongs to place a piece on the delicate side dishes, “under more formal circumstances, it is in poor taste to begin a meal without the host or hostess present. However, we are eating informally today, so you may begin at your leisure, Master Charlie.”

With thank-you, Mr. Alfreds all around, the kids dig in since the salad tastes cool and refreshing while Alfred fills up their juice glasses and gives small pointers, a finger tapping at Leo’s elbow on the table, or sliding a napkin close to Cuddle Bug’s hand when she has dressing on the side of her mouth. He praises Karmen’s careful use of bread to scoop up her last bite. He discreetly shows
Charlie the right fork and brings a second helping before time for soup.

In his presence, the newness and quality of Wayne Manor wears down along with the tension, and the children answer his questions about their experiences and schooling in between bites, instantly coming to like the older man.

“Mr. Alfred?” Cuddle Bug finally speaks up.

“Yes Mistress Cuddle Bug?” He smiles a little and she knows it’s really real.

“Are you going to eat too?”

Gently, Mr. Alfred explains his role in the Wayne household while he whisks the empty salad plates away and replaces them with tasty soup and grilled cheese sandwiches.

“But,” Leo inserts when Mr. Alfred is done, “if—if we don’t tell, can you sit and eat with us?”

“I very much appreciate your kindness, Master Leo, but another time perhaps.”

And Charlie makes sure he swallows his whole bite before he tells Mr. Alfred this is so good and can he maybe have some more soup if Mr. Alfred isn’t too busy?

The first familiar person they see is Robin (Damian) coming through the den in regular clothes, no mask.

The youngest Bat tisks at them, “I see the Flash and his upstart actually have a sense of time regardless of their excuses to the contrary.” He looks around at the four, “I suppose Pennyworth has introduced himself?”

Cuddle Bug smiles up at him, so happy to see Robin again. “Mr. Alfred is so nice, Dami. He didn’t mind when we got sand in the entryway and, look! He made a place for Maris the Goldfish.”

Damian obediently looks in the direction of her pointed finger, his expression mild (and no, Todd, he does not fawn over this child. Do not forget, I know where you sleep).

And since Alfred said nothing of the sort (even if he was entertaining the notion of a doily there should the bowl slosh), the butler files this bit of knowledge away for later.

Charlie grins up at Damian with unabashed comradery even with the semi-permanent sour expression on the older boy’s face (because when he’s fourteen, he’s going to have a cape with a hood, too). “Hi Dami! Do we get to see your cow while we’re here?”

“I promised did I not?” The elder raises a brow, “however, not until later, perhaps tomorrow. Pennyworth and I will get you settled first. Then, we shall explore the grounds. Titus is certainly ready for a run.”

The four perk up because now they get to explore.

Dami takes his normal place at the table, thanking Pennyworth when his lunch and a sweet smelling tea is placed before him. Karmen’s eyes narrow a bit on his profile because something looks really off about his throat—

Cuddle Bug gets a fast and furious impression of patrol the night before and she can’t help staring at him because she doesn’t like it when anyone gets hurt.

“It is fine, Caroline,” The current Robin doesn’t even need to look up from his lunch to know.
“Are—are you sure? You…Dami, your arm is all bruised.” Is Leo’s careful question because he doesn’t want to make Damian mad.

At this, he does look up, look around at the four children avidly watching him, and—his first instinct is to sputter indignantly since children are obviously worried about him. It is unnecessary. He is stronger than a simple few bruises. But, he breathes a little and recalls what Grayson said during their meeting about how to handle these four: “they’re going to need us, Dami. They’re going to need us for more than just a place to stay and food. You understand? They’re going to need us like me and Jay and Tim and you had needs.”

With these thoughts, Damian Wayne sets his tea down and straightens, looking at the four younger children with a somewhat softer expression. “I am…accustomed to injuries. These are not serious. Just bruises. Your…concern is noted.”

Karmen’s eyes narrow again while the other three seem to accept his answer as acceptable, but Damian picks up his fork regardless.

“It is not unusual to sustain damage in our line of work. What we do is dangerous, which is why I will parody Kent in this. The four of you should take your time before making a decision to utilize your gifts to join the likes of the Titans or the Bats. While it may seem like the right thing to do, even the honorable thing, there are dangers of which you cannot imagine.”

Standing at the sideboard, Pennyworth is smiling at him. Tt. Absurd. He is only telling them the facts.

“Do you wish it was different?” Charlie asks, and it’s not quite what he means to say, but it’s close.

Damian chews thoughtfully before answering. “In truth, I would have my current situation no other way. Being Robin is the culmination of my ideals, my ethics. Things I have had to define my own way. No one else’s. The decision was mine and mine alone. When the time comes for you, all of you, you should not rush into taking up arms against the evil in our world. Rather, take your time, train your mind, your bodies, and your powers to be able to withstand the possible threats to your lives. Learn your limitations and then exceed them.”

All said calmly, matter-of-fact, Damian’s expression mild when he resumes eating.

Charlie is grinning brightly (since he really does think Damian is bitching) while Cuddle Bug goes back to her soup and bread with a small smile. Karmen is shrewdly assessing since, well, at one time she was very determined not to go that route, but it seemed there are more factors at play to being part of this community on that level. She has a great deal to consider. Leo, because his power is an active one and he was thrown into more fighting scenarios than the rest, catches Dami’s side eye for a second and gives a subtle nod (and the bad scar on his back that he hides, that one…he understands what Damian is trying to say).

“Oh! We’ve got visitors!?”

That voice as Officer Grayson, fresh off the beat, comes grinning into the formal Dining Room.

“Dick!” The kids chorus and dive away from the table to throw themselves at him willy-nilly while Mr. Alfred purses his lips but doesn’t stop them at all even though they know they’re being uncouth. The older man laughs as he’s covered in children on all sides, Cuddle Bug in an arm, hugging him around the neck, Charlie clinging to his back with arms and legs, Leo on his other side, and Karmen standing a few inches away to let the others take him over.
“It’s so good to see all of you,” Dick gives them each their own squeeze, leaning down to empty his arms just to sweep Karmen up into a crazy octopus hug and grin widely at her.

“You knew we were coming today,” the girl guesses shrewdly.

Dick just grins wider, “guilty. How could I not stop by to see my favorite littles?”

Karmen just sighs at him, gently touching the badge on his chest, “Did you have a good patrol?”

“Yup! Pretty good.”

Cuddle Bug grabs on to his other sleeve, “did you get hurt?”

“Nope. I’m okay.”

“Were there any break-ins?” Leo asks immediately.

“Just two. They weren’t very smart.”

“Did you get to shoot anyone?” Charlie is grinning up at him.

“No, but maybe tomorrow.”

And Alfred just slides right into the situation, “now children. Allow Master Dick to eat his lunch as well. I am certain he is famished. Back to your seats.”

Even though they don’t want to, Mr. Alfred has a point and the four bound away, back to their places.

Alfred raises a brow once they’re seated again, but Dick wave the butler off, “I’m serious, Alfred. Good patrol, no injuries.”

The butler hums, picking up a sleeve to observe a stain, “Small mercies, Sir. Change and bring me your clothing. At least one of you should look tidy.”

With a laugh, Dick turns to the staircase, taking the steps two at a time to get off the remnants of Officer Grayson and slide into a different skin.

And since Cuddle Bug is essentially the cutest kid ever, even Alfred can’t tell her no when she explains she’s been conducting a study on the effect of different types of hugs. Even Bruce let her hug him (which earned a blink from Mr. Alfred) and Damian admits he is probably low in her research but her methodology seems sound regardless of whom she is using for her test cases. Dick promptly flips him off with a smile while Alfred’s back is turned and the kids are all looking to the butler for the few but fair rules in going out to play on the Wayne Manor grounds. Dami just sighs at him.

On the way, Alfred gracefully takes a knee and allows the small child to step up for a hug before shooing her away to play. He also bows slightly to Karmen, promising to watch out for Miss Maris and to be certain she does at least three laps around the bowl (“The net is in my backpack in case she needs the motivation.” “Of course. We shall endeavor to make an extra lap.”).

And Damian whistles sharply, the sound cuts through the Manor and to the second floor where ears perk up immediately. Titus takes off with intent as the two eldest take the youngest into the vestibule.

When the large dog comes barreling into the entry way to slide to an easy stop right at Damian’s heel, the four children gasp oh, doggy!
“Titus, good boy. These are the children.” Damian scratches behind his ears while Charlie comes a little closer without touching.

“Stick out your hand and allow him to smell you.” Damian instructs while Titus already gets with the program to stretch his neck out and scent like crazy. He goes nose first into Charlie’s presented palm, the younger boy laughing. Each child in turn gets a sniff (Leo, brows furrowed, leans to get a sniff too, wondering if he turns into a dog right now, would Titus attach him?).

Dick just grins and opens the door, “all right, training starts now!” He throws up a hand to point, “last one to the tree out there is a rotten egg! You, too Baby Bat!”

He takes off laughing like crazy with the group running after him in a tangle of arms, legs, shouting, and barking. It’s going to be a good day.

**Relapse Redux: The Red Hood**

(Yangmallow wanted Jason’s perspective of Relapse, and, ah, I’m trying something new, so be kind okay? And a flag for language because Jason. You may/will be offended. Oh and here’s the answer to one of those questions.)

What’s green and yellow and splattered red aaaaalllll the fuck over?

Me.

Okay, okay, fuck all o’ you, that shit was hilarious. Dickie never laughs either, but fuck him too.

Anyway, Kory asked me about it once, way back when it was the three of us: me, her, and Roy after we’d just fucked some of the bad shit outta our systems. Dickie’s asked too. B lets it ride ‘cause he knows better. Sometimes ya don’t wanna really know the truth, you feel me? Truth don’t make the bad shit better, don’t making anything right. All it does is make you feel guilty as shit for what you can’t control, can’t fix. Never got Dick to understand that, you know. Well, he’s an asshole, so no fucking wonder, yeah?

So’s, I told Kory, Roy, and later Dick the same thing about the Pit.

It’s my vice.

We all got one—don’t let those motherfuckers tell you any different. Superheroes, vigilantes, just semantic bullshit’s all it is ‘cause they’re the same pile of do-gooder shit in a different shaped box with another type of bow. Meaning, they—we—all got our vices. You don’t break yourself wide fucking open for the greater good without one, gotta have something to balance your zen or whatever. Long n’ the short of it, we’re just people, get it? Evil is just a part o’ our nature, so’s you gotta have the scales square, balance the self-sacrificing, world-saving with something that gets to the evil in your soul.

Supes does it by fucking.

B broods like a motherfucker an’ sometimes the Bat gets a little more rough than necessary.

Wals is a goddamned kid for life.

Di has an addiction to control, the Princess maybe. Who the fuck knows?
Dickie craves to be *useful*, doesn’t want to be left behind.

Demon digs *deeper* into what a Bat *should* be, strives to make himself in that image.

Red *is* the mission.

Kory’s is *freedom*—all that time as a slave (and if I *ever* meet her *cunt* of a sister, I’m going to *tear that bitch up*, you can take *that shit* to the bank and *cash it*).

Roy’s used to be booze and smack. Now, it’s Kory’s snatch. Can’t blame him, gotta be better than a fix anyway.

And me. Mine is *complicated*, so some of it ain’t your *fucking business*, get it? The important part, the part that makes it or breaks it always stays the same. Me and Ra’s? We’re *there* ‘cause it *calls* to us. Take a dip in that shit and you’ll want to go *back* again and again. You’ll *want* that insanity, like the best hooch, you’ll want to taste it, roll it around in your skull and let it shut out *allll* the other *fuckery* happening in your brain. You’ll want the red haze of bat-shit crazy to take you *over*.

And it’s taken me a while, maybe too long to fight against it. I spent too long digging my goddamn hands right into it, letting it *use* me, letting it *be* me. Too pissed at B for not avenging my dumb ass, too pissed at Timmy for taking *my* place, too pissed at Dickie for everything in between.

But, see, they never stopped *fighting* to get me *back* and maybe…maybe that’s alotta reason why—

Anyway, point is, sometimes, all of us fall back on our *vices*.

That night Dickie told me about the flashdrive from Rach…about the footage of Timmy’s torture, I got ‘im good and tired out, you feel me? Got him snoozing away before I went back to get it.

And yeah, I watched it. Had to. Watchin’ it woulda killed Dickie and *that guy* can be an asshole (as you gotta remind him once and a while). So, sometimes you gotta go to extremes to protect him from himself, just like with B. You gotta be a dirty fucker and *cheat*.

So.

I watched the damn thing.

I did it so Dickie wouldn’t have to. I did it so I would finally know what kind of hellhole I left Baby Bird *rot* in while my head was still ten *shades* of not right.

Lot of it was there in black and white. Some of it off camera. Other files were different footage from other cameras so’s I knew what those cock *sucking sons of bitches* did to some of those kids. I knew what shit they did to Timmy. And as fucked up as it is, whiles I was drinking the hard stuff straight from the bottle, trying to hold back *bile* and *all* that anger—all I could *think* about, with every strike, every *scream* (when the fake ones started being *real*) is—

I could have looked over at Dick still in my fucking bed and say “Baby Bird’s team can’t find him.”

That’s it.

That’s all I had to do.

But, Timmy, fucking *Red*, stayed in that hellhole ‘cause I was too fucked up over B, over startin’ this thing with Dick that I didn’t give a shit about where he was or what was happenin’ to him.
Five days into it, Baby Bird made his move, finally figuring something out apparently with his goddamned plans, and I watched him slip those chains, all kinds of tore up at that point, and I get this fucking sick feeling. It’s the same one I got watching Roy shoot up that one time before I got his ass into rehab, just like when Talia put those pictures of the new R in front of me, like when Dickie’s bleeding out and there’s no end in sight, even like waaaaay back when I was laying on the floor of that warehouse with the timer counting down, beat to shit with a crowbar, and my mother crying. The same Oh God in my gut just before that bomb blew—

Shit. Wasn’t going to go there. Ancient history.

Anyway, it’s like I knew what was gonna happen ‘fore it did. Foreshadowing and shit. And the next file, the next feed is Tim in the control room, tryin’ like hell to get his fucked fingers to work and get a message out when they found him.

Up until then, up until then, there’d been a lot of playing it up for the baddies. Baby Bird putting on a show. Playing the image.

When that group came up on him, pipes and chains and fists—it stopped being an act.

So’s I took a break to empty my guts, but the acid burn of guilt? Yeah, that shit isn’t going anywhere. Still, I got back to it. I go back to it because I owe Timmy that fucking much at least. And I did the deed, for Dickie, for Timmy, and when I’d gone through it all, I hid that sombitch and crawled back into bed with twenty minutes or so until Dick would need to be up and…as shitty as it is, I let him curl around me. I let him hold on. Sleep though? Naw, that didn’t happen.

But that’s…where it started, get it? The old anger and recriminations—the things that give the Pit teeth, bite, to sink in the tender meat of your soul and hold on.

‘Cause now I was pissed I was an asshole. Pissed that B just let Baby Bird go the fuck off on his own without tabs or a net to catch his stupid ass. Pissed that Dickie didn’t ask who the fuck was on the phone that night. Pissed at Demon for helping drive Tim outta the nest. Pissed at Tim for not throwing that shit, that fucking failure, in our goddamned faces and spit on us when we asked for another shot. Pissed at his team for taking too long.

Alla that. Probably more. Shit. Probably pissed at Alf for not puttin’ enough milk in the scrambled eggs or that Superbrat for his stupid spit curl or some fucking thing else.

And all of that just made it easy to be especially hard on dumbshit goons, to let it burn and itch under my fucking skin—

But really, not my first rodeo with the Pit, so yeah. Shoulda stayed in a safe house—away from the streets until I had my shit together since sometimes it takes absolutely nothing to throw me over that edge (used to be seeing Tim in the tunic—my tunic, even now I can’t look it Demon sometimes).

Just happened to be the smell of sulfur and burning in conjunction to that cock-sucking clown on his joyride outside the looney bin. Luckily, when B’s out of town, Dickie and Demon are usually on point and had a whole of t handled by the time I got there. Mistah J was already in cuffs and his goonies all zip tied up tight. And it’s that laugh, the echo, the way it fucking resonates—it’s the last piece to snap.

That laugh.

He replaced me

That Laugh.
With a younger kid that could die

THAT Laugh.

Little fucker wearing my R

That LAUGH.

Swinging on my line, in my city, doing my job

THAT LAUGH

Trying to be me

I didn’t know what happened by the time the rage set it. I don’t always get the nuances (but Dickie will tell me later that Demon waited around for the 5-0). Alls I knew time to hunt.

I needed to find that kid, to get my place back as fucked up as that sounds. It’s like all the years of hard work and effort and the steps toward realizing, all that just—gone. The Pit took it all away, took everything away, made life real, real easy.

And now I get it: “The monster is not in my face but in my soul.” Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, the creature.

When Timmy showed up as Red, I was about ready to do some permanent damage to Dickie so’s I could get at him, you feel me?

That’s how far gone I was.

And at first, nothing he was sayin’ was getting through the Pit. Naw, too much I wanna rip you apart, I wanna bleed you while his mouth moves and it doesn’t matter if he ain’t wearing the R anymore, not one fucking bit. He’s still that guy, that little bastard that—

“—my fucking hero—“

What?

“—Dick was B’s Robin—you were Gotham’s Robin and mine—“

It jars the red rage ‘cause…wasn’t that one of the reasons why I was good taking up the cape? Dickie had been my Robin and when he left it, I—

“—couldn’t let it fall to the wayside—“

And I…

“—Jason, I couldn’t let you go.”

Jesus Christ. Jesus H. Christ, Tim. Timmy…!

And even if I replaced Dick, even if I got why he hated me at first, I couldn’t let him go either—

“—No one could be you, but I’d do my best to earn it—“
Oh…God. Baby Bird…Baby Bird…

“—I’d fucking do anything, everything so you’d be proud— So I would do the right thing. So I
would do right by you—“

And the memory hits right there in the fog, coming through the Pit like a beacon.

Flying with B over the east side, lookin’ down at a shadowy fire escape and my fucking legs are cold
as shit in the short pants, but I remember looking down in mid-air and—

A kid, too young to be out this late, but we’re right on Crane’s ass and there isn’t time—and his face,
his expression, his awe.

I—

I was his Robin back then, wasn’t I?

“Even after all this fucking time, you're still my goddamed Robin and there's nothing that will change
that for me—“

And I get it, Baby Bird, Timmy. ‘Cause after all this time, Dickie is still my Robin, too.

And I let ‘Wing know he can ease off, and I ain’t even mad when he does it slow. But he didn’t get it
that this, this? This ain’t gonna end with Baby Bird hurt. Naw, he got enough by my hands, and here
he fucking is again trying to save me. Stupid, stupid little asshole. Just like Dickie and B and Demon
and O, he couldn’t just let me go.

“—fall to the wayside—“

“—do right by you—“

“—you were my hero—“

And I let you down, didn’t I, Baby Bird? I let you right the fuck down, but his eyes without the
mask, yeah. His eyes are still the same eyes as the kid from that fire escape looking up at me and—

Fuck. Fuck. Now I get where Dickie’s at. Now, it’s all that much more clear why Dickie tells me it’s
complicated.

The second I get my hands on him, pull this self-sacrificing pain in my left nut right up against me—
more than the usual I could hit that make me wanna punch something all over again ‘cause I didn’t
mean for this to happen. Dickie’s already a lost cause for Timmy and one of us should be objective
about it all. Too late. Already too late and I fucking realized it when we do the back and forth about
those ugly scaly panties. It just stopped being about making Dickie happy or how sweet Timmy’s ass
looks in the suit.

It started being about this guy. The guy under the masks and Kevlar. The one that would take one
hell of an ass beating to save someone that sure as shit didn’t deserve it. Tim Jackson Drake.

Yeah. Oh yeah. I’m fucked.

**

So maybe I shoulda told him back when he had those flashbacks. But, as wrecked as he was, I
didn’t. Now was the time to spill my fucking guts and hope to hell I don’t lose ground. ‘Cause it’s
time, and Timmy has a right to know I coulda gone to the Bats and saved him. He has a right to
know I didn’t.

So I tell him.

I tell him how panicked Brat was and Dick and B freaking out in that calm-but-not kinda way. Shit, when we thought he’d been blow to kingdom-fucking-come and we’d lost him—not like last time when no one but me knew he was even gone. And the guilt, man. The guilt eating me alive, churing in me still after I watched that horrific shit because

I

Fucking

Knew

And I grab on because that means he made it out. It means this little asshole is right here and I can grip him to remember I—we—didn’t lose him.

Never thought he’d suddenly come out with it all. Didn’t think I’d earned that kind of trust what with I told him.

But the whole ordeal just spills out of him like puke after a binge night, fast and furious. He told us what they wanted, what they did, how he tried to fight. Baby Bird never told anyone the whole of it (’cause, believe me, I tried getting it outta the Titans, none of them knew shit but the aftermath). And here we’ve got him back to the Bats enough that he’s pressed between Dickie and me spilling out his fucking soul. And he don’t even realize how much he’s breaking me down like this, just by being who he is.

So’s he gets through it, looking pretty damn shell-shocked, and for some fucking reason he just thinks oh, Jay and Dick are going to ride off into the almost-dawn and piss off. He won’t look me in the goddamned face and still gives us an out.

Asshole. Seriously, takes right the fuck after Dickie, don’t give a shit what he says otherwise.

And I take a shift carrying him through the last turn of the night, keeping him pressed tight so his head don’t take over and it’s about goddammed time I play the motherfucking hero to Baby Bird, you feel me? About. Fucking. Time.

So me and Dickie just know what’s doing when we get to his perch. We don’t need to talk about it and shit, we ain’t gonna push right then. That shit is for later when he’s less shocky. Naw, we get comfortable and hold Timmy between us while the sun rises—give him some positive reinforcement for being good and giving us a whole lot of trust. Now, we just gotta keep him on this road.

Well, now, we just gotta get him to let us keep him. Period.

**Coffee and Pizza**

He stares at her, his breath huffing out in a sigh. She’s looking back at him through a completely different mask, a different persona, the embodiment of a Bat (since, really, it’s in the damn name isn’t it?).

The old feelings and the old pain and the past recriminations well up in him, taking up much needed space in his abdomen.
“Batgirl.”

“Red Robin,” and the tone is warm, like she’s genuinely happy to see him.

A half-smile plays at his mouth. “Mid-patrol snack time,” he comes back easily. “And I have…company I need to hang out with for a while. You get the coffee, I’ll pick her up and get the pizza.”

Company? “Sounds fair, Ex-Boyfriend Wonder,” and that smile breaks up the night.

“Meet at the Pylar in twenty,” he shoots a grapple with a wave and she laughs out loud, heading for the vigilante-friendly place on Madison and Pike (if N was with her, he’d get that stupid discount, so unfair since her ass is fantastic in the suit).

When she lands it, grins because he comes out of the shadows and—

The small child with him is stop, rewind. Company?

“Batgirl, this is Karmen.”

The eyes looking up at her are filled with amusement and excitement. And Steph, before the mask became her life, remembers that feeling in vivid technicolor.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” she starts, holding out a hand. “it’s so nice to finally meet you, Karmen.”

The girl, Karmen, furrows her eyebrows and just wow, familiar. “You’ve heard about me?”

“Sure! Robin, Nightwing, and Red Hood are most def fans. I hung out to watch the city or I would have come to visit too.”

“Oh! Well, of course you couldn’t leave the city without a protector. I’m sure Kal-El would have come to help if you needed it. He’s very nice.”

Batgirl gives a laugh and slides down to a crouch so she can hang out with the little chick. “He is a pretty awesome guy, huh?”

“Yes! He and Lois took us to a concert in the Park and it was amazing. They had approximately twenty-seven fireworks in their display.”

“Wow!” And just like that, Batgirl is so hooked.

Red carries the pizza, and the trio sits down to eat, the girl talking in between bites.

“—Leo and Charlie are with Gar and Rachel for a few days, and Caroline wanted to hang out with Wally, so I said I would check up on Red to make sure he isn’t horribly injured.” Karmen explains brightly.

And Red is actually smiling with the cowl pulled back, his eyes soft and warm for the little girl beside him acting so animated and calm.

And so speaking of injuries. “We have a game now,” Batgirl grins down at the child, “since Red is…really not good with taking care of himself.”

The child blinks up at her. “Oh? What’s the game?”
And he sighs a little because *really*, what the hell is he going to have to put up with now? “Well, we’re going to call it *Where’s Tim?* And everyone in the Bats and Titans and JLA *all* want to play.”

*Oh shit,* this…this does not sound promising.

But Karm is already side eyeing him and scooting just a little closer to Batgirl. “How do you *play*?”

“Well,” and he *knows* that sly grin when she’s planning to be a world-class pain in his *ass.* “Whenever anyone spots Red and he looks like he’s *hurt,* they’re going to put a call to everyone with *Where’s Tim?’* so everyone knows it’s time to find him.”

“What now?” He deadpans with deadly intent because you have got to be kidding. No, you had *better be* kidding.

“That sounds…effective,” Karmen starts with some hesitation since, well, he’s probably radiating a little *holy pissed off vigilante right here.* Batgirl gives no shits and her smile gets wider.

“Oh, I *hope* so.” And he is *seriously* going to—

“But you little guys can help out, too, *right?*” She goes right on with that sickeningly sweet tone, looking down at Karmen. “I mean, you don’t want Red fighting crime when he’s injured, *right?*”

His eyes get huge behind the whiteouts, “*Steph,* this had better be—*a joke.*

“Cassie and I have been *talking,*” she snarls right back and yeah, he knows *that* tone. “And those *talks* have been very informational.”

*Oh God.*

Karmen cuts right in with, “Red, this is a good thing, okay? None of us want you to be fighting when you’re *hurt.*” And there, she’s making a logical point so Tim can *see* it for what it is. “No one’s making fun of you. Everyone just cares that you’re okay.” She smiles at him, *smiles* and looks back at Batgirl with a grave nod. “We’ll play too. Just to make sure. I’ll let everyone else know.”

And hell no. The littles don’t need to even worry about shit like that because they should be focusing on *being fucking kids, okay?* He shoots a death glare at Batgirl with full intent since she so neatly overstepped the boundaries on making the kids (his littles) face adult responsibilities they shouldn’t have to—

“You know,” Karmen interrupts his death glare and her tone draws him in immediately. Her eyes are slightly dazed, glassy with old pain. “Back…back when we were *there,*” her tone cracks, her shoulders caving in, “we understood *pain,* Red. They made us—they *made* us do terrible things and no one cared about it but us. No one cared but the four of us, and it’s so nice to have people that *want* to care. It’s so good they want to try to help you if you’re *hurt.*” Her face tilts up, her eyes watery now with that desperation to believe, the look he thought he might not see again. “I don’t care how smart you are or how long you’ve been a vigilante. You can still get hurt. You can still *die* and leave us.” Oh God, *his heart.*

Red has her in his lap, holding on just this side of too *tight.* “No, *no,* I’m not going to leave you. *No,* Karm.”

The little girl sniffs delicately, leaning into his shoulder, putting her forehead against the soft cloth covering his neck. “We don’t want you to suffer, okay? Just—just it’s a good thing they want to help, Red. It means they love you too.”
His gloves hands moving down her back in gentle circles, an attempt to soothe her, Red mutters, “I know. It’s okay, I know.”

He completely misses Karm’s face turn just a fraction toward Batgirl and the sly grin followed by a wink. Batgirl pointedly bites her lip and flashes a quick, subtle thumbs up.

Red just sighs a little, rocking gently because this…this is going to complicate things.

**

A day later and Charlie is in his perch with Raven who is apparently here to swap out littles. “We have need of Karmen,” she answers his inquiry smoothly, looking down at the child in question. “Charlie has already been to the Aquarium and he claims he will be bored.”

“Aquarium!?” Her eyes are blown wide, “can I bring Maris too, Rachel?”

“Of course. There is no better place for a creature of the sea than with her kind,” she runs off to get her things together while Charlie climbs up his body suit to latch on around his neck.

“Cool, I have someone he needs to meet anyway.”

“Ah, I assume you are speaking of a certain all-knowing figure?”

Red grins in reply and Charlie lays his chin over Red’s shoulder, blinking, and with bags under his eyes. Turning his head a little, Red’s mouth turns down.

“When is that last time you slept?”

Yawn. “Last night.”

“Okay, what time last night?”

“Went to bed at four,” is mumbled against the side of his neck.

Raven is just eyeing him with that look. Aimed at his face.

“All right, you are taking a nap before we do anything. Have you already eaten?”

“Mmhm, Gar made me fish sticks.”

Wait. What? “Gar?” And his tone makes that point because, really, the only one worse in the kitchen than him is BB.

Rave just blinks at him, “I supervised,” she fills in quickly, too quickly.

Red’s eyes narrow at the obvious bullshit, but she stands with it, so whatevs. He makes a mental note to plant a camera in their kitchen and look for evidence.

“I’m ready!” Karmen already has the lid on Maris’ bowl and her backpack on.

Raven jumps right to the next thing, “very well. Red, we shall see you in a few days at the Tower.”

“Oh-hu,” because now he has a sneaking suspicion here while balancing a fading Charlie on his back who is getting heavier with tired.

“Oh!” Karmen looks up at Raven while the Titans has both hands on her shoulders, “we also need to
talk about the new game. Batgirl asked us to play."

Shit!

“I am already intrigued,” Raven assures her. “Good-bye Red.”

“Bye Tim!”

And they’re gone in a puff of brimstone.

With a shake of his head, Red sighs because now he’s going to need a lot more contingencies.

**

Charlie is so rocking the domino. He didn’t think Red would say yes when he asked, but he totally did and this is just so wicked and he holds on under Red’s cape so he doesn’t fall off but the wind rushing past them is incredible. He’s never ridden a motorcycle before (and he’s going to do research on Ducati since this one is obviously heavily modified and the best superhero thing ever).

The comm in Charlie’s helmet clicks on, “you doing okay?”

“This is so fucking cool, Red!”

“Hey.”

“Sorry.”

“When you’re older, you can say ‘fuck’ until it loses its appeal. Not until you hit the big leagues, ‘kay?”

‘’Kay.”

“All right. We’re almost there, but we’ve got to do something cool, so hold on tight.”

Charlie does, his own gloved hands clamping down harder on Red’s harness in just the right spots. The bike revs hard, skidding as Red makes an abrupt jerk, sliding to the side, and jerking up so the thing hops hard enough to catch the sensor in just the right way.

“THIS IS AWESOME!” Charlie squawks out when he feels his stomach drop with gravity bottoming out.

“Right?” Red grins as he rights them, lands the slight jump, and the garage door further down Crime Alley opens for them.

The minute they’re walking into O’s sanctuary, Charlie’s feelers immediately go up and he sucks in a breath, just breathes through it. His fists automatically clench down by his sides because he needs to be in control, to fight the instinct to reach out and lose himself the in the incredible network connections, to become strings of code and data. He has to fight against it.

O, however, turns around from her system and smiles widely up at Red Robin, but, well, Bat. He can see the strain behind it, see the shadows in her eyes when she looks at him. It had been too long, hadn’t it?

“Oracle. I brought you company.” He stays still when Barbara wheels over to gently take his free hand in both hers before looking down at the little boy right under Red’s cape on the other side, his big eyes taking everything in.
“Hi,” he blinks at her, trying to clear out the DOS coding in front of his eyes, “I’m Charlie.”

“Hey Charlie,” and her smile turns more genuine because, well, anyone that could earn Batman’s respect certainly had to be something else. “I’m Babs, the Oracle for the Bats. I’ve heard you’re pretty good with computers.”

He smiles widely and just giggles.

**

In twenty minutes (after a juice box because no, you cannot have coffee yet Charlie, sorry buddy), Red has the cowl back and gloves off, facing Oracle’s secondary back-up, hands ready. O is at her primary station. Charlie is standing in between the two of them with a happy grin.

“Ready?” O is smirking.

“Ready,” Red and Charlie say at the same time.

“First, as a warm-up, we’re going into Gotham’s DMV, get Harley Quinn and the Joker’s original licenses.”

Red makes a rude noise, Charlie laughs a little.

“Then,” she continues on, “we’re going to freak out some criminals in the Black Mask’s network. I want them down with the worst possible entertainment you can think of.”

“I seriously like where this is going, Babs,” Red cracks his knuckles.

“Finally, we’re going to leave our mark on the Hall of Justice. Let’s see if we can give Vic a run for his money. First one to accomplish all three tasks with the most effect, wins.”

“Agreed.” Red and Charlie glance at one another with obvious mirth. Charlie’s eyes gleam and he’s completely blank because he’s not gonna cheat.

“Go!”

**

Much later, when dawn is closing in, Red is ushering a sleepy Charlie back to the Ducati with O’s wheels making gentle noises beside them (she totally won by a miniscule margin; he, however, finally hacked Vic eye so take that shit). “I want you to come back,” she pretty much orders. “We need to talk about some things.”

Red spares her a glance with the lenses down so she can see his eyes. “Things? The BI mainframe —“

“Is secure,” she side eyes him pointedly.

He sighs a little, “you accessed the ghost drive when it opened for Robin.”

“You bet your ass I did.”

Red’s jaw tightens, “all right. I’m going to be nice about it and tell you to leave it alone, O.”

Her hand on his wrist stops him mid-step while Charlie yawns widely beside him and walks on to the bike, waving a hand at the two adults because he’s a smarty. He knows when not for children
means he shouldn’t be listening. Instead he goes to the bike and keeps himself occupied and awake by jumping back into O’s Wi-Fi for another episode of Firefly on Hulu as soon as he hacks his way into their mainframe.

“Babs,” Red says low.

She pulls harder and he turns slightly, looking down.

“You came really close, Tim,” she pulls out the real name without a hitch at the transition. “Too close too many times I didn’t know about.” Her eyes search his face, intense, a Bat. “I’m pretty sure you were also considering leaving Gotham behind if those idiots hadn’t ambushed you.”

He sighs a little, holding her gaze, wondering how they’d come so far…

“I was…going to give you admin rights, take myself completely out,” he admits. “I thought—it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Cut ties as cleanly as possible, set up somewhere else in need of a dashing vigilante.”

Her grip tightens a little, her brows doing that scrunchy thing when she’s not happy about something. “I hope that’s not the case anymore.”

Red’s mouth quirs up in a tired-looking but genuine half-smile, “I don’t think the Bats would leave me alone if I vanished this time.” And, fuck, he realizes he believes it.

Babs pulls him down to meet her and presses her lips to his cheek before pulling him in to a tight hug, her strength so vast.

“Missed you in the city, Tim. I’m glad they’re getting you back.”

He chuffs a laugh against her softness, the light scent of vanilla and coffee. Really, it’s no wonder Dick fell so hard for her, age difference be damned. “They didn’t really lose me. I got their damn intel, didn’t I?”

“Don’t be difficult,” she returns against his ear, “they lost you, Tim. Red Robin is the mask, but Tim Drake is the real guy everyone needs, okay?”

He blinks at that, his chest slightly hitching.

“Someday,” her voice lowers slightly, “when you’re…better to talk about it. I’m here, Tim. Just remember that.”

And if his arms get tighter, if he almost lifts her completely out of her chair to hold on, she doesn’t say a word against it.

**The Talk**

(Again, for Arkeadia since, well, my muse)

Dami blinks once. Twice. He opens his mouth, sucks in a breath, and says…nothing which is fine as a few seconds later:

“God-fucking-sonofabitchin-cocksucker!” Jason’s irritation is palpable without the profanity, the fact he is under the kitchen sink in Dick’s apartment, apparently further breaking something already broken, bring multiple scenarios to mind.
“Every. Mother. Fucking. Time. That guy is a walking menace when he’s not in the Batsuit, Demon. You get me?”

And, yes, Todd, he is rolling his eyes at your compendium of idiocy.

“What has he done this time?”

“Oh, you know, the usual! Stopped by after patrol, bleeding all over the place—“ and one hand comes up to feel around the counter, obviously for the massive wrench balanced precariously on the edge “so we’re closer than the safe house a few blocks east. No problem, B, c’mon in and kick your feet up instead of passing the hell out. Which, he almost did.”

“And you are irritated he did not send a signal I take it?”

“Oh, just wait for it, brat. His stupid ass is only part of the equation here” and the wrench if finally knocked off by Jay’s reaching hand, falling right on the side of his knee cap, “goddamned it, ow.” The hand with the wrench vanish under the murky depths of the sink. “Anyway, ‘course Dickie’s still out on night shift and I’m helping him get the damn suit off enough so we can get to the bleeder, and do you even know what he did?”

“Enlighten me.”

“He started giving me, me, the talk.”

Ah. Dami silently goes through his mental rolodex to assess which one would perhaps most fit the situation.

“You know, the one about,” both hands, one with said wrench, appear long enough to wave around, “drunk driving is so dangerous. ‘So many people die every year, Jason. Such a tragedy for them and the families. And no one even remembers them, they become a pointless statistic. Promise me you’re always thinking, even if it’s after a patrol. I never want you to become a statistic, Little Wing.’” The brief hand mimicry done, the wrench disappears back under the cabinet and Damian is not holding one hand hard over his mouth to keep from laughing. Certainly not. How undignified.

“Like, what the ever-loving shit are you talking about, B? Just, what?! And then, and then, Demon, get this. I get his dumb ass stitched up, okay? Get him some juice and shit, and I tells him, ‘B. Stay right here. Don’t move. I ma get you some civvies, then I’m either taking you to the Manor or I’m putting your hurt ass in Dickie’s bed, okay? Like, I leave him for five damn minutes.”

Dami’s hand presses harder, and he’s desperately trying to breathe normally through his mouth, but —

“And I’m digging out some sweats and shit, and just—this noise, like glass in a meat grinder which is really fucking close to that. When I get in here, he tossed the bottle in Dickie’s fucking garbage disposal and turned it on.”

With his chest stuttering helplessly, Damian finally lets go, laughing out loud where Todd can hear him and probably curse him as well.

**

Alfred simply…sighs. Deeply.

If Master Bruce hears it, he ignores it, and stays focused on the phone sitting on his desk, talking at it while going through some files on his laptop.
“I understand if you need things like those is all I’m trying to say. If Babs can’t help you, then I’m readily available, okay? I’ve already made sure to stock some of those things here in the Manor for just in case, but I can be in the Batwing and on my way to you. Or if you want to tell me which types you prefer, then I can get those instead.”

The sound of light breathing comes over the line and Alfred can deduce Mistress Cassandra has fallen asleep. He isn’t certain how long she may have been since the Master began his very uncomfortable talk about the female reproductive system and the products she may require. Since he brought Master Bruce coffee and a light repast two hours ago, taking the time conversion of Hong Kong into consideration, Alfred can imagine it has been quite some time.

From the furrow of the Master’s brow, he can also assume this talk is far from over.

**

Officer Grayson rolls his eyes and blows on the steaming coffee so he doesn’t burn his tongue. Again. He’s down on the East side with McHenry, taking a breather to get a few subs before they go back at it. The phone call, however, is really just a throwback to his days wearing pixie boots since, well, B.

“And I’m very well aware you’re a grown man,” B is saying over the line in between the obvious beat-down he’s handing some purse snatchers. Officer Grayson checks his watch again. Damn, he’s only ten minutes in. “I’m not trying to say you’re doing anything wrong, on the contrary, I’m proud of all the things you’ve accomplished. But, I just want you to remember we all have limitations—“

A hard oof is a kick to the gut over the line.

“And you have a propensity for ignoring yours. I just don’t want to see you get hurt or more hurt than we regularly know how to deal with. Pain is a part of this life, but there are other injuries you might not be able to heal.”

Now Officer Grayson is rubbing the bridge of his nose because he’s fully aware Batman is out haunting the street with three broken ribs and possibly a fractured leg.

“When you started out as Robin, I had faith in your abilities. I’ve always believed you could do great things, but it’s not necessary to push yourself so far past the line—“

Officer Grayson takes the phone down and shoots a quick text. Then two more. By the time he has the phone back to his ear, he feel somewhat better.

“This life is taxing on all of us, it’s a strain on everything we have. Everything we are. But I want you to know you’re always going to be one of my sons first and a vigilante second.”

Officer Grayson makes a soft noise of agreement. He hears the soft noises of B tying up the bad guys and the grapple coming out of the utility belt; he mentally counts down as B fires the line and gets himself up the roof where—

Over the comm, he hears: “B. Seriously, A is going to tie you down one of these days.” And Officer Grayson can picture Red and Hood standing there waiting, arms folded over their chests and looking appropriately disapproving.

“What in the fuck are you doing out? It’s your night off, asshole!”

“Oh,” breathed out because, well, busted Batman. “I apparently have to go. It seems I’m being detained.”
“Good,” the only thing Officer Grayson has said since he picked up the phone, “you should let them see you to a safe house, B. Make sure those ribs are okay.”

The sigh over the line is very put-upon, but as he’s a good guy, Officer Grayson saves his laughter for after he hangs up.

**

“And you need to be careful of these things,” in the back of the Bentley, Damian Wayne is polished to the nines as Pennyworth made certain he would look like the mini-CEO in time for the meeting with the Board of Directors as Drake is unavailable (he reads as injured or looking for something to keep his wayward attention) and Father is the one that must step in. He’s staring at his father’s averted eyes in the rearview and wondering idly who the older man is lecturing this time. Really, he can take a guess.

“I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable, but I want to make sure you’re being safe. That’s all.”

There’s someone talking loudly on the other end of the line—

“Oh. Dick, I meant to call Stephanie. Ah, sorry about that. I already gave you that talk.”

Now the talking on the other end is even louder.

“Well, what do you mean she already knows about it, Dick? I do have her medical records, you know.”

The turn is slightly sharper than expected, and Damian is very…uncomfortable with where this is going. He takes a moment to consider gouging out his ear drums with one of the ice picks in the back for random champagne parties.

Now Grayson is on a tangent.

“All right. Dick. Dick. Stop. Talking. If she doesn’t want to get her tetanus booster, then I’m not going to force it on her, but it is my job to let her know all the—what do you mean that’s not where you thought this was going? What else do you think I’d be talking about?”

Less grumbling and some laughter.

Father gives an impatient and put-upon sigh, “are you kidding? I gave her that talk years ago when I knew she was dating Tim. I gave them both that talk as a matter of fact.”

Damian…facepalms with a low groan. This…is not a discussion he wishes to have. Ever.

“No, no, I had a PowerPoint presentation that time. You only got the text book photos of STDs.”

He glances out the window, calculating their speed and how badly his suit would be sullied were he to throw himself out into mid-day traffic.

“Well, I thought it was very effective. You and Kory were safe, weren’t you? What about you and Clark?”

He can almost hear Grayson stuttering.

Father is a bit too smug, “then there you go. I’m a better parent than Ollie at least. Who do you think bought Roy his first pack of—well, of course I did, Dick. Who else did he have to go to?”
When he catches the tall form of Wayne Tower rising, Damian breathes a sigh of utter, unmitigated relief.

**

Red is standing at his hologram wall, arms crossed over his chest. Only a Bat can make him stare up at his speakers *dumbfounded* like this. Really, that guy needs to *take a pill*.

“I have no idea where this is coming from,” he interrupts the rolling lecture when the guy pauses to actually *breathe*. “I mean are you trying to *punk* me or something?”

“Baby Bird,” Dick comes back patiently. “I’m trying to make sure you aren’t working yourself into a vigilante *coma* since you are the absolute *worst* at taking care of yourself. You know, we all have our limitations and it’s important to recognize the fact that you do and not pass the *line*—”

“You know you sound just like B,” Red deadpans. “I am *seriously* having a throwback to this very same lecture.”

Over the line, he can hear Dick abruptly choke on the next words out of his mouth.

And yeah, he’s such a douche bag that he grins before hanging up.

**

In the Cave, the sound of a Ducati echoes off the walls and the live-in bats scatter, creating a wave of moving shadows. Damian is on feeding duty and idly puts out hay for Batcow.

“Ah, Master Damian,” Alfred sets down the bucket of oats. “I am rather pleased to see you are giving your animals proper nourishment.”

The youngest Bat holds up a hand, palm out, his eyes narrow. “Before you even *begin* Pennyworth, Father has already taken an *absurd* amount of time to lecture me on the dangers of Mad Cow Disease as well as the immense responsibility of being a pet owner. I regret to inform you that any lesson to that man on how to properly *care for himself* has been an utter *waste* of your time. His tuna fish sandwiches are deplorable, and I am honestly entertaining the notion of becoming a super-villain should I ever have to suffer through any lecture pertaining to my bodily functions.”

Alfred blinks pointedly and his mustache twitches noticeably. Damian’s eyes narrow since he is *completely serious*, Pennyworth, do not snicker. This is grave foreshadowing of the future indeed.

---

**Drop off**

(Post “The Call” a surprise for my muse because *reasons*)

Tim has his domino on with the lenses raised, in one arm, he’s carrying Charlie who is drooling all over his shoulder and snoring softly, but hey, all good. He opens the fridge on the Communal Floor and pulls out the paper bags with snacks for the littles so they’d have something to eat on the way to Smallville… and be stuffed to the brim by Ma Kent once they get there. Since Clark’s on assignment and Kon in class, B is sending Alfred to pick them up in the Batwing, and that just gives Tim the golden opportunity to do some major overhaul to the Batplane currently in his bunker. And *no*, he’s not making last minute checks around the Communal Floor (because he hasn’t seen Alfred in *years*) to make sure Kon’s MP3 player is put away, Bart’s shoes aren’t just thrown around, Cassie’s hand weights are under the couch, Miguel’s *Vogues* are neatly stacked, Gar’s comic books underneath the
pile, and Raven’s yarn for her “projects” in the basket by the last couch. Everything is neat and in order.

Since they still have some time, Tim gingerly leans down to lay Charlie on one of the couches and covers him up with the green and white blanket Rave made last week and faces the others. Cuddle Bug, Leo, and Karmen are packing their worksheets away, small suitcases already at the elevator since they didn’t want to keep Mr. Alfred waiting. They liked Mr. Alfred since he treated them like he treated Dick and Jay and Damian.

“All right,” he starts out, softer because well Charlie is just beat after an all nighter in the Tower’s test domain simulation and training his techn-powers (give this kid five years and small countries would quiver in fear). And, no, Rave’s not here to glare at him. “Clothes?”

“Check.” The three kids parrot.

“Text books?”

“Check.”

“Laptops and power chords?”

“Check.”

“iPods with rad music?”

“Check.” Even though Karmen is shooting him a sour look (all because he downloaded Karma Chameleon and locked it into the iPod and nope, he regrets nothing).

“Maris’s food and supplies?”

“Check.” Karmen holds up small pack with the lid for Maris’s bowl (thanks again Arthur, she’s the most well-travelled fish ever), fish food, extra filters, and the like.

“Carl?”

“Check.” Cuddle Bug already has the unicorn tucked under criss-crossing straps of her backpack.

“New samples?”

Leo picks up the little plastic bag off the couch to hold up, his new find for analysis, “check.”

“Okay, we’ll movie it up until Alfred gets here to pick you up.” He’s already turning on the massive system, wondering if Frozen or Mulan is in the Blu-Ray player.

Well, Karm just gives him the look, “instead, we could go down to the training floor.”

He arches a brow at her deceptively mild tone and just—oh yeah, sparkly tights all the way. He can already see it.

“We’ve spent two days on the training floor,” he comes back without a hitch, “didn’t we have the talk about letting your muscles and powers heal?”

Now with the pout and sullen, “yes.”

“Good. It’s a hard lessons, believe me. My first year training to be Robin was murder. I eventually got there, and so will you, but you’re going to do it the right way.”
She sighs a little, perturbed, “okay, okay, Tim. I get it.”

“I hope so. B shouldn’t be over working you four, neither should anyone else.” In that of course you would tell me tone.

The ten year old gives him the look. “Everyone, even Wally isn’t letting us get to our potential, Tim. It isn’t fair.”

He pauses immediately since, well, this is the first mini-blow up and just a glance at the other two gives him the feeling this isn’t a new sore spot. On one hand he’s glad to see the littles getting so much better; on the other hand, he needs to be that parent for a minute.

“All right, hold up.” He plops his ass down on the coffee table so he’s facing the three children head-on. “We are going to talk about this.” And oh God, that sounded just like Dick. Mental wipe. Just, wipe that thought right out.

Leo crosses his arms over his chest and sticks his chin out, “Tim, we can do a whole lot more than anyone gives us credit for. We can help, you know.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” he comes back, “we escaped a facility full of bad guys. I already know how capable all of you are, Leo. But, the point here isn’t what you can do. The point is whether or not you should be helping out.”

And that takes the kids a minute to think through. Obviously, the possibility of the hero groups not thinking them incapable is a thing. Nope, that shit isn’t going to fly.

“Everyone: the JLA, the Titans, the Bats, everyone is aware of where you four are power-wise and what you’re capable of doing. So, that isn’t an issue. Yes, you need to be more in control because none of you have had to use your abilities under intense stress or in extremely dangerous situations. We’ve been focusing on finding your control triggers first. No real combat scenarios.”

He taps a few seconds on his wrist computer and the large television boots up. This…isn’t a good idea because they’re all still too young, but sometimes visual aids get the point across.

The screen fills up with footage from the Titan’s fight against the Church of Blood, angles of ass kicking and beating all around. Then Red picks one of the JLA matches against invading dick bag aliens. He doesn’t let either video run long, just enough for them to get the point.

“That,” he is saying as he shuts the feeds down, “is combat ready. Well, honestly, it’s as combat ready as superheroes can realistically be. And it’s going to be years before any of you are close to that. Not because you’re incapable, but because we’re going to do this right.”

Karmen blinks at the blank screen, her expression more sad than he wanted. Leo is quietly thinking, looking down at the carpet with a pinched expression. Cuddle Bug is holding on to Carl, peering at him over the fluffy ears.

“I realize I’m the guy without powers,” Red huffs a little, “but it doesn’t make me any less right. Okay? No one wants you guys to get hurt because you aren’t ready.”

“…B said our powers won’t fully manifest until we’re in our teens,” Karmen starts.

“The tests support that hypothesis,” Red answers in the best way he can.

“Okay,” Leo holds up both hand, still with that expression, “but what about emergencies, Red? Can’t we help then?”
He shrugs a little, “I trust your judgement. If the Titans or JLA or the Bats or whoever is in over their heads, then I know you guys won’t just stand back and wait. I know you’ll fight. What I need to know is that you won’t fight unless there is absolutely no other alternative. Not until everyone agrees you’re ready for the real deal.”

Cuddle Bug puts down Carl and ambles over to him, standing on tip toe to wrap his slim arms around his neck. “Promise,” she breathes against his shoulder.

Red returns the embrace, looking up at Karm and Leo.

“Agreed,” Karmen finally sighs.

“Ditto,” Leo just shakes his head a little.

“Thank-you. I know you won’t let me down. All right, we are doing movies and popcorn before Alfred shows, so you three vote now.”

**

In twenty minutes, Dick and Jay are the ones that come out of the elevator (and his heart isn’t beating a little harder, hell to the no), and the kids run past to throw themselves at the older Bats until Leo is perched right on Jay’s shoulders, Cuddle Bug is balanced on Dick’s hip, and Karmen is tugging both their hands to come see how much Maris has grown and look! She has a Micro Machine Batmobile in her bowl now and it’s just so cool!

Both vigilantes in their daytime wear make appropriate commentary on the addition. Jay is still vehement that a good burger would do the small fish good while Dick offers to get Maris a friend to share her bowl (and Karmen remains steadfast that Maris needs room to grow and swim by herself for a while—besides, Dick might get a boy fish and Maris doesn’t need the distraction).

While the news and how’ve you beens? go around, Red nudges Charlie awake and has his snacks ready to help with the whole ‘oh, sleep dep is kinda bad when you’re not used to it.’ While he sets the child in a stool at the island, going back to the fridge for juice, the thing his eyes skipped over the first time gets him this time because it’s not Alfred, it’s Dick and Jay.

On the down-low, Tim slides the picture off the fridge and into a drawer.

“Whatssat, Baby Bird?” Jay asks from right behind him, his breath warm on the back of Tim’s neck (because, well, Bat).

“Old team picture. Do me favor and make sure Mr. Dinosaur is with Charlie’s backpack.” He opens the fridge for the juice this time, holding it when hands are just suddenly on his hips pretty much lifting him up and out of the way so Jay can get into the drawer for himself with enough speed that Tim can’t get to it first.

Oh shit.

Tim puts the juice down without looking because Jason Todd’s face is utterly shocked. He does that thing with looking at Tim, back at the picture, back to Tim, back to the picture, back to Tim.

“Baby Bird,” and now there’s a whole lot of warning in that tone, “why the hell haven’t I seen this before? Seriously, you think this isn’t shit you should be sharing with the rest of the class?”

“It was for a case,” he tries, expression completely serious. “Photoshop for the win, man.”
“Aw, I’m calling bullshit on youuuuu, Timmy. It’s the real thing, completely authentic. Think I can’t tell? Hey Big Wing, you need to check this shit out.” And like an asshole, Jay is waving the 8x10 in one hand with his eating grin.

Tim sighs and strafes to snatch the thing out of Jay’s waving hand, landing at a crouch on the countertop (oh yeah, totally regretting not putting the thing away before but Bart isn’t here and he’s usually the one that remembers to put anything to do with Red’s unmasked face out of sight).

“Oh?” A brow rises, “that how it’s gonna be, Timmy?” And Jay draws his name out.

And it’s really on the tip of his tongue to say this isn’t good behavior for the kids to see when Jay’s expression goes scary, predatory and his stance is a completely different type of oh shit.

Tim is moving as Jason leaps after him, summersaulting over the other vigilante’s smooth arch to hit the island on his knees and slide across to the other side. Jason just rebounds off the cabinets and comes right after him, managing to knock the wing pack off in an attempt to get him by the arm. Tim manages to swing around by the floor to ceiling windows just in time to avoid the Red Hood’s full lock and rebound again, acutely aware of the littles and attempting to leave them out of this fuckery.

What follows is an odd type of keep-away in which Dick takes to the hanging lights, the .45s need to be knocked out of Jason’s hand (once), paint, spackle, and other sundries will be needed by the time this little thing is done, and he’s going to need a whole new pair of tights if there to be any fighting crime after this (Batarang fail). At the very least, Dami isn’t here because, well, more property damage than he realistically wants to deal with. He manages a good kick-off from the back of one of the couches when the Bat-attack hits him just right and Dick gets the perfect angle to get him right in the back, taking them both to the ground to grapple around in a tangle of arms, legs, and vigilante justice. Since Dick is obviously not fucking around, they manage to come as close to a draw as Tim can possibly manage without seriously trying to snap the older Bat’s neck (tempting, just not tempting enough). So even though his thighs are locked around Dick’s neck, Dick has his wrist and opposing elbow with pressure points that are really going to hurt if he gets the right kind of motivation to hit them with a certain amount of pressure at once. Meanwhile, Tim is trying very hard to ignore the fact he’s perilously close to Dick’s perfect ass as one Bat leg has managed to somehow trap him right in the crook of that knee (nope, not going there).

Between the two of them, there’s a whole lot of owfuck possibly going down here today.

Jason, howling with triumph, is all over him, snatching the picture out of the pocket in the back of his armor, free hand helping Dick try to keep him down, but Tim’s got a plan for that and arches his hips up hard enough to bring Dick completely off the ground and right into Jason’s unprotected abdomen while freeing himself from the hold.

“Winning,” he deadpans hoarsely from the thigh previously pressing into his trachea.

“Joke’s on you, Baby Bird,” Jay snickers right back, holding up the picture on his phone triumphantly, his other arm wound around Dick’s shoulders. The two of them grin across the few feet of floor at him, laughing like assholes when Jason hit’s Send and who the hell knows how many superheroes are going to get a load of that.

Tim sighs right into his goddamned hand and flops back down on his back on the floor. Nope, he’s staying here until embarrassment kills him. Seriously.

“You are a terrible blonde, Timmy,” Dick is still laughing, eye bright with the tussle, “how did you manage to get arrested anyway?”
"...would you believe it was for a case?"

"Fuck no," Jay returns, tossing his phone, "not for a second. What bad were you up to? C’mon, it’s just us here. Oh—" Jay straightens from his place on the floor but makes no real move to get up. "Hey! Little shits one through four. You good?"

"We’re good!" Called back as the littles take the chance to peek over the couch at the three men still sprawled out all over the place.

"Luckily I grabbed Maris in time," Karmen’s expressions is extremely reminiscent of B when he gets in Bat-Dad mode.

"Totally good thinking," Tim doesn’t bother moving, just holds up a hand so she can see his thumbs up.

"And the arrest picture?"

"Never telling, get over it, Jay."

"C’mon," Dick’s face is just hovering over him, grinning like an asshole. "You can tell us, Tim."

He hopes his glare is just this side of epic, opening his mouth for another denial when Jay’s face is also hovering over him, and the middle Bat wraps an arm around his mid-chest to pull him up like—

A strange feeling passes through Red, bottoming his stomach out slightly in some strange vertigo when his face and Jay’s are a breath away, with Dick hovering so close behind him he can almost feel the heat off the eldest’s skin…

"Bar fight that definitely wasn’t my fault," with unconscious grace, he’s on his feet, offering a hand to both vigilante, not really expecting Jay or Dick to take him up on it.

"Shit," Jay says with feeling, and does reach out to grip the extended hand, “that means you already scrubbed it outta the system, Baby Bird.”

"You bet your ass." Both of them reach for him with lighter, fond eyes. Red makes himself calm and pulls the two up. “Like I need Alvin Draper to have a rap sheet.”

"It might help with an undercover MO," Dick supplies helpfully, squeezing Red’s palm before letting go.

"I have another pseud for the down and dirty," he promises, already turning to finish getting the kids ready.

But he doesn’t miss, “whole lot we can teach you about the down and dirty, Timmy.” Red pauses, noticeably. Blinks where those two can’t see him.

"Ha ha asshole. Not in front of the kids,” he doesn’t even look back because, well, Jason. At least it wasn’t some damn dead Robin joke again. “All right, c’mon! Ma Kent is probably making pies already.”

With the Bat-calisthenics apparently over, the three of the four jump up to finish getting ready since pie. Ma Kent’s pie! Cuddle Bug, however, stays exactly where she is, eyes moving from Dick to Jay to Tim and back in a circuit. She blinks delicately, considering her options.

“Caro?” Red’s voice finally draws her out of her thinking. Dick and Jason are juggling the other
three around. “You okay?”

She hums a little, giving him a dazzling smile, pulling his wrist so he leans down, close to her. “Yes, I’m fine. Tim, the next time we come to the Tower, I need to talk to you. Alone, okay?”

His eyes darken, and Red takes a knee, “Caroline—“

“Nothing is wrong.” she immediately pats him on the shoulder. “But I think we should talk about some stuff.” And her eyes are so blue, her smile very gentle that Red almost thinks—

Oh. Oh no. Is she crushing on someone? She’s seven. (Dammit Dami).

Red forces himself not to sigh, just to keep smiling. “I got you. Next time, we’ll talk.”

With a decisive nod, Cuddle Bug gives his shoulder a quick squeeze before she hops down off the couch to run and gather her things.

**Diversion**

(Post “The Call”)

It’s been… a while. Not that he has any reservations about how all this is going to go.

And the dank dark still smells like old sweat and blood, rancid copper of too many fights in one shitty arena. As Red, he’d probably be a terrible addition to the roster since, well, vigilante and such. But, the fighters are all volunteers, the bets made in the back, and considering some of the criminals he’d busted in his long career, these guys are harmless. He’s used the gathering to track information, drugs, more, worse out there. So, as long as things stayed on an even keel and everyone comes of their own volition, no death matches, etcetera, etcetera—Red Robin isn’t going to show up and bust them all for participating in an underground fighting ring.

But back when he’d gone in as Jack Foster, the initial idea had been to integrate himself, follow the trails, see what he could dig up. It was never a part of the plan to actually enjoy it.

And yet, here he is, back in the sad excuse of a back office while the organizer looks him from head to toe, taking in the beat-up kicks (he’d read that somewhere), ripped jeans, tattered t-shirt, and stained hoodie. He looked the part, even doing some of the old ‘Alvin’ tricks, the nose ring and semi-permanent tats, contacts to change his eye color.

“I thought I told you not to come the fuck back. No, I’m pretty goddamn sure of it you little wiseass.” Nick Bolling used to be the man. He was ruthless as fuck when he could still take down just about anything under professional coming his way. Five years ago, a robbery gone wrong put a few bullets in him and that ended his illustrious career inside the make-shift ring. He’s the guy been running things ever since.

Jack just laughs a little, scuffling his feet against the dirt floor. “Yea, yea. Y’ did.”

“So what the fuck you doin’ in my office again?”

Shrug, averted gaze. “Need some money in a bad way.”

Nick’s eyes narrow, like his bullshit meter is going off.

“I can make it easy,” Jack goes on. “You know I can.”
“Kid, I ain’t in the business what lets stupid punks get the better of my clientele. I told you that shit last time.”

Jack holds up both hands, already wrapped at the knuckles, “I won’t wear a mask this time, and I’ll even take a beating if that’s what it takes. Hell, you’ve got new fighters, new clients. Not like anyone’s going to recognize me.”

Nick sputters less than a second because this kid has never been one to underestimate, but he knew bupkis about business. “That ain’t nowhere near that point, Jack. I trade out guys every three months and you know it. The point is my reputation. I can’t be the guy known for putting a ringer in. That makes business look back, and I can’t have that.”

Jack sighs hard, jaw clenching slightly.

And maybe because Nick’s had a good week, maybe he’s feeling magnanimous. “Look,” over his carefully written ledger books, he holds out a hand. “Kid, I’ma be straight wit’ you. The first time around in the ring? You didn’t find whatever the fuck it is yer after, you get me? Whatever it is you wanna get outta fighting, you ain’t going to. Not then and not now. Better get yer shit together and look somewhere else for it.”

The kid’s eyes narrow at him, but well, sometimes the answers aren’t something black or white, but the fight goes out of him abruptly.

“I seen your type before, Jack. Believe it. You’re gonna move from one thing to the next running the fuck away from something you just ain’t gonna out run. Not by ripping inta someone else. So you just stop wid’ da fightin’ against whatever it is. You go face it. You hearing me?”

Nick watches the kid straighten up, his fists working by his sides, but it ain’t for the fight. It ain’t to step back in the ring and give or take an ass-kicking. Naw, kid’s got his demons right on his fucking back and he’s the only one can’t see ‘um.

“Thanks Nick,” is said in a slightly different voice, making the older man blink. “See you around.” And “Jack” takes a breath because, well, Nick had a point, didn’t he?

Time to stop running.

**

The great thing about being an international crime fighter is—there’s always crime. Always. Like, that’s one of the things you can realistically depend on when everything else goes to shit.

And yet, as he gives the older villain ten feet away from him a calculating look behind the domino, he cannot believe this is happening. Seriously. How is this his life? However, his goal for the duration of this conversation was making Ra’s snort wine out of his nose. Across the room and he gets bonus point.

“What do you mean all your ninjas are still healing?” Because, you know, Ra’s.

The immortal raises an unimpressed eyebrow, “as I am already aware you speak several languages fluently, Timothy, I relay it again in English just for your comprehension.” Ra’s Al Ghul sips his wine with the chessboard on the table beside him; the strange part, Ra’s is actually smiling at him. Like, not the ‘oh how cute this little vigilante wants to fight’ smile he used to get but the ‘something has piqued my interest.’
“We have no dastardly plots afoot and my people are currently incapacitated. We simply do not have the manpower currently to comes out and play.”

“Dick used to say shit like that when he was in short pants, Ra’s, not me.”

Ra’s, the bastard, just hums and now he has to wonder (because that might have been something he would have said in his teenage years; who knew the equivalent of terrible yearbook pictures would be crime lords remembering when you said some dumb cliché in the heat of the moment, and yeah….yeah. Guilty).

“However,” just as smooth and unruffled, voice deeper and just here we go, “feel free to come for a visit if you are in need of play, De-tec-tive.”

There it is. The insinuation of things like naked, chained to a bed, collared, and ew, ew, eeewww.

“I already have a date for Valentine’s Day but thanks,” he deadpans.

“Timothy, haven’t I told you to leave the jokes to Richard? If not, please allow me to request you do so—“

“I can make Razorburn laugh, and, you know, that guy.”

The immortal just huff a little, “honestly, one day you will realize joining me, giving me the heir I crave will be beneficial to us both.”

“We’ve seriously had this convo already. I’m just looking for a platonic villain/vigilante relationship. It’s not you, it’s me, yada, yada.”

“Your reticence has been noted multiple times, I assure you. I have not forgotten your boundaries in our previous encounters.”

“Good, glad we’re on the same page. So, you can tell me, is it the Council of Spiders being ass hats again?”

Those eyes narrow and Red, schooled in the art of Bat-reactions, doesn’t really move, but he has a whole lot of plans ready. He hasn’t forgotten who he’s standing in front of or where he’s at—Ra’s al Ghul is still one of the most dangerous men on the planet.

“The Council is still in the wind, so to speak. I am very much still interested in them, but it has been a…trying time with the Justice League’s unwarranted attentions.”

Oh. Oh. So B wasn’t fucking around then. Well, that’s actually pretty nice since now he has a lot more time to focus on other crime (it’s the right code, you already knew it—just need the hard proof).

Behind the domino, he’s blinking, trying to think of something to say since yeah, sorry about that. Superheroes and such, right? is just not appropriate at this juncture.

“Which ultimately begs the question, Timothy.” Now Ra’s is leaning forward in his chair, straightening, his eyes predatory, but Red’s hands are close enough to the whirlybirds in his belt to have a few seconds before Ra’s goes for the swords. “Why have you come seeking a fight?”

He almost hitches both thumbs up (“who has two thumbs and fights crime? This guy.” Nah, that’s something Jay might say) to answer the best way possible, but whatever strange powers prolonged exposure to the Pit had given the villain, seeing through bullshit is apparently among them.
“Of all the Bats,” creepily, Ra’s rises with effortless grace and walks around Red with the bad guy monologue thing going, “you are the most grounded. I am somewhat disappointed in you actually.”

Wait, what now?

“No clue what you’re talking about.” Okay, so witty banter time has passed.

“Oh?” While circling him, Ra’s raises a brow and keeps moving, “I suppose the last few weeks of very sloppy and more violent than usual fighting does not offend you? Or the fact that I refuse to cater to your need for a…diversion.”

Shit. It’s good now, seriously. That’s why I’m here.

“Moving from place to place without your team, trying to fight the good fight.” And Ra’s just pauses right in front of him, those eyes dark jade with the layers of contained madness underneath, always so close to the surface. “What are you running from, Timothy? And how strange that you would run here.”

And no he doesn’t have an answer for that (fuck, yes he does, more than one answer actually), but a sneer is all Ra’s is going to get out of him at this point. It’s enough the villain has guess way too much about how fucked he is trying to stay the hell away from Gotham, which is only recently a problem in contrast to the last few years.

“There’s not fuck all to run from, Ra’s,” he bares his teeth with the snarl. “So why don’t you tell me about some terrorist out in the Mediterranean instead?” And maybe there’s too much history with this, maybe this one is just a little too close when he has a very terrible suspicion; all of it makes him take that all important step closer, to put himself right up in the taller man’s scowling face. “The kind that like to sell fucking children among other things. The kind that make special deliveries right to the fucking League of Assassins.”

And it really is a nice thing when big bads are shocked into silence.

**

B cracks his neck before checking the time. He’s done here. The night is over and it’s about time to go upstairs and pass out for a few hours before he needs to be mobile, getting ready for some party or other in the mask of Bruce Wayne, socialite. On nights like these, it doesn’t pay to have four sons that can’t go in your place.

Before he moves, however, he places a call with no illusions it might be answered. It’s too early in the night there.

“Red.”

Surprise of surprises.

“It’s been a few weeks. N tells me you’ve been too busy to talk.” B starts out, “how are you doing?” The pause is a little too obvious, makes him straighten in his chair in front of the big computer.

“Red Robin?”

There’s a breath over the line, a steady intake that has him standing before he realizes it.

“I…I can’t—talk right now, B. The next time I’m in Gotham—“
But the Batman, Bruce, B, has heard the same thing in different ways too many times. Something about tonight, something about the lack of movement in the background, in the undertone, something makes his instincts rise to the fore.

“Where are you?” He asks, dangerously low. “Tim, where are you?”

“I’m not—B, I’m okay. There’s something I have to check on.”

“None of that answers my question.”

In the modified Batwing, Red is staring at the touch screen giving him all the details he needs to know. The crates en route, the stylized code on each container (being yanked through the ship’s underbelly, eyes taking in all those crates and the numeric code on each one—). The evidence is right in front of him and it’s oh shit time.

B isn’t going to let up, just the tone of the older man’s voice tells him that, and, no, it’s not the time for the Bats or his team. Not when he might have really fucked up.

So, compromise.

“The next time I’m in Gotham, I will sit my ass down in the Manor and…I’ll answer whatever you want. Robin’s promise. Right now, I need to go.”

He has the timeframes mapped out and ready.

“Tim,” and the warning is there. The ‘I’m almost ready to pull out all the stops to get to you,’ it used to be comforting. Now, interference is not what he needs, it’s a diversion.

“I’m tracking something, B.” Not really a lie, so kudos to him. “I have to go in deep. You can’t just show up.”

The quiet is unnerving as fuck since he can’t even hear the movement of the bats.

“Twelve hours.” B relents. “Whatever you’re into, I want to know you’re safe in twelve hours, Tim.” The ‘or I’m bringing the Bat’ is simply understood.

“Eighteen. Then I’ll have what I need.” He argues.

“What aren’t you telling me?” B counters.

“Talk to you then,” he disconnects from the control panel, angry the call had the complete opposite effect than what he’d originally intended when answering. He was going to tell B everything was fine, crime fighting going well, how’s it hanging in Gotham? But, well, World’s Greatest Detective and all just blew that plan all to hell.

But really, it’s fine. He’s going to get what he needs to find out the truth, and then, worst case scenario, fuck some bad guys up a second time.

Bonus Drabble: Robin

(Totally for me so yeah. Take this flashback.)
In the original Teen Titans Tower

A young Garfield and Victor are on monitoring duty, and it is seriously the pits. Like, worst job ever. Total necessary evil, but man. This is the suckage right here.

He and Vic are entertaining themselves with a great game of darts in between bouts of what can’t Gar change into? And how many secret government organizations Vic can hack in under a minute (24 and counting).

The call is a much needed distraction.

Gar hits the red button on the console, “Teen Titans.”

“…Nightwing. I gotta talk to Nightwing, is he in the Tower?”

The two Teen Titans blink at each other because that’s Robin, reaching out from Gotham to touch someone.

“Hey Rob,” Gar starts hesitantly since, well, yeah Dick’s in the Tower, and if they’re not on a mission or chilling out in the Commons Area, then he’s with Kory and—dude, no one wants to walk in on that. Not when he’s trying to mack on Rave, and he is convinced he’s going to wear her down eventually. “Hold on for a minute, bro, and I’ll check.”

Vic steps a little closer, “hey man, you okay? You don’t sound—“

“M’ fine, get it? I just need Dick.” Is the somewhat vicious reply.

Gar puts him on hold with a raised brow at Vic, who just shrugs as he calls down to Dick’s room two floors below.

“Bats, man. Those guys need to relax.”

“Preaching to the choir.”

The intercom from Dick’s room chimes, “what’ve we got?”

And oh yeah, he’s got sex voice going on. Gar and Vic snicker to themselves.

“A certain bird from Gotham wants to talk to you. He sounds like shit,” Gar fills in. “Want me to patch him through.”

A significant pause, “yeah. Put him through to my cell, Gar. Thanks.”

In his bedroom, an eighteen-year old Dick Grayson is struggling into a pair of briefs while Kory watched from his bed, already pulling the sheet around her naked body.

“Sorry—“

She smiles brightly, not bothering with her clothes, “Richard. He is still young. He needs you as much as he needs to Batman. You should remember this when you talk to him, yes?” She kissed him on the mouth, hands drifting over his hips before leaving him to handle whatever crisis from Gotham has come to the Tower.

Dick opens his flip phone, “Jason? Little Wing, what’s wrong? You okay?” He sits down on his rumpled bed, running a hand through his gnarled hair, already worried since, well, it’s Jason calling him. His replacement. The kid that hadn’t wanted his help training to be the next Robin. They aren’t
good. Might never be. So him calling meant—

“Jason? Talk to me.”

A harsh breath over the line and an exhale because the little shit is still smoking. If he’s in the Manor and Alfred catches him—

Dick would like to see the ass chewing. He used to get it just because he hung from the chandeliers in the downstairs library, but smoking. Alf would have a cow.

“I fucked up,” the younger teen’s voice is low, edged with tears, hysteria. “Dick, I fucked up. Bruce—oh my God.”

A spear of panic hits Dick right in the chest, spreading out to his fingers and down low in his abdomen. Bruce, Bruce. He forces himself to be the leader of the Titans, to stay composed. “Hey, calm down. What happened? Is he hurt? Are you?”

“He’s got broken ribs, punctured lung, broken leg, and…” and there’s the edge, like Jason is barely holding himself together. “I didn’t—I didn’t follow the plan. Goddammit, he threw me out of the way and got the full force of Crock. I got him fucked, Dick.”

On the top most part of the roof of Wayne Manor, a thirteen-year old Jason Peter Todd feel like an utter piece of shit. Not only because he royally screwed up the fight with Killer Crock, that bag of dicks, and got B all kinds of beat, but now he can’t even go down in the Cave where Alfred is putting him back together to look the guy in the face and say he’s an asshole and he’s sorry.

Even more on top that, the only one he can talk to about this crap is Dick fucking Grayson.

The guy that hates his guts.

The guy that’ll always be better.

The Robin he used to watch fly over Gotham from the street below and allow himself those few moment to be in awe.

“I shouldn’t have called,” he spits out while the cold breeze of autumn goes right through the t-shirt he wears under the tunic and hits his bare legs still in the armored underwear like the sharp edge of a knife. He’s trembling so hard the cig between his index and middle fingers is a jumping orange flame. He’s sweaty as balls, stinking of Gotham’s sewers and failure. ‘M’ sorry, just fucking forget it. I shouldn’t have—“

“It happens to him,” Dick’s smooth voice comes across, cutting him off when his chest hitches hard and he almost chokes. “It’s going to happen, Jason. Okay? Listen, it’s not a science. Bad stuff is going to happen to him, and yeah sometimes you might miss a step and he has to yank your butt out of the fire. It’s all part of being—“

And there it is. The thing that hangs between them, weighs them down even thousands of miles away.

Robin.

Jason sucks in a breath.

Dick sighs.
The perfect son. The true partner. He knows Batman better than anyone, can predict the next move, the next jump, the next punch, can be the exact counter to every move. The natural. The guy Jason Todd is never going to be.

The soldier. The real chosen one. He has natural fighting capabilities and strategies it took Dick years to hone, to perfect. He’s the counterbalance to Batman, the right combination of street smart and gritty realist to keep the Batman grounded. The Robin Dick Grayson wasn’t, the Robin he could never be again (taken from him, stripped away).

“It’s all part of being his partner,” Dick finishes softly, unconsciously curling in on himself just a little, just enough.

“…he’s going to send me back to Crime Alley for this,” Jason answers sharply, “and I fucking deserve it. Shit. I almost didn’t get him to the Batmobile.” He failed Batman. Just, fuck.

“Don’t even think that. He picked you for a reason, he’s not going to abandon you, Jason. Hell no.”

The laugh the breaks from him is teary, broken, “don’t bullshit me, man, all right? I can take the truth.”

“C’mon, Little Wing. You think I didn’t fuck up too? You’re a vigilante for God’s sake, there’s aren’t rules for how the bad guys are supposed to play fair. They’re going to cheat and sometimes, it’s going to come around and bite you in the ass.”

No shit. He figured that out a year ago.

“Don’t start with the what-ifs,” Dick goes on, the voice of reason, “because it’ll just make you crazy. You just have to take it in, learn from it, and keep moving.”

“Shit, if you would have seen him,” Jason swallows and sucks in another hit, squeezing his eyes closed because he can still feel that residual fear the moment he pulled Batman’s arm over his shoulders and pretty much dragged the Dark Knight up out of the sewer and thank God the Batmobile honed in on the utility belt even underground—

“Yeah,” and Dick’s voice is rough, low with memory.

Jason jerks abruptly when a blanket falls on his head and he drops his cig and almost the phone when he whirls around, staring up—

“Y-You idiot! What the hell are you doing up here? You’ve got a broken leg for shit’s sake!” He just starts yapping it up, spine automatically straightening.

And the beaten up Batman is in a walking cast with a cane, dressed in soft looking sweats and old t-shirt, looking down at the terrified teenager he’d managed to seek out.

“—and I swear to God, Bruce, where’s Alfred? How the hell did Alfred let you come up here like that? He didn’t. No way. You just—you just—“ and he throws up his damn hands because this guy is going to make him so much older before his time.

Bruce, a smile curves his slightly more battered than usual face as he looks down at the animated berating, noticing the cell phone in Jason’s wildly waving hand while they stand on the roof the Manor in the freezing cold with dawn two hours away.

“It could have been worse,” Bruce observe, breaking into Jason’s rolling rant easily. “If you hadn’t thrown the Batarang from the angle I threw you, he would have possibly broken my hips, Jason.
You did the right thing.”

And that makes the kid stare up at him dumbfounded, a little helpless because he obvious blamed himself too much. Too much for a kid. Just like Dick always did.

Speaking of which.

Bruce gently takes the phone from his hand, snatching the discarded blanket with two fingers of the same hand. He smoothly drops it on Jason’s head a second time, watching the teenagers quickly wind it around himself before he puts the phone up to his ear.

“Hi Dick. How are the Titans?”

“Bruce,” and it’s also Dick’s berating tone.

“I’ll heal. You should come for a visit soon. Alfred’s promised to make pizza. He’ll even do a meat lovers for you.”

He grins a little wider when his young ward sputters over the line, “Bruce. Just—you are so infuriating sometimes, you know that?”

“I raised you to be a detective, Dick,” Bruce deadpans, “I’m sure you figured that out long before this.” Bruce raises the hand with the cane to give Jason a push at the mid-back, ushering them back to the hidden latch in the roof. One he used himself on multiple occasions and still does to this day when he wants to watch the dawn rise.

“You know what? You make everyone crazy. That is your real superpower, you know.”

Watching Jason lose some of the tension in his shoulders, listening to Dick laugh a little over the line, Bruce, beat to hell, still feels like he accomplished something better than taking down Croc. And he didn’t even have to do that much.

“How long did Alfred say you need to be down?” Dick asks urgently while Jason drops down the hidden latch and leaps halfway back up the rickety ladder to brace a hand against Bruce’s uninjured leg.

“You know Alfred. He over-estimates.” Hopping on his good leg, Bruce hangs on to the phone while his arm winds around the ladder with the cane in hand.

“My ass, Bruce. I will hang up this phone and call his room or the Cave.” And Bruce hears it in Dick’s tone, the so help me, boss. God, how long had it been since he heard that? Good to go, boss.

“He said two weeks,” Bruce hedges as he and Jason make it down in one piece, and the younger, rough boy fits himself under Bruce’s arm on the good side.

Dick sighs angrily this time.

He stands up, snatching a pair of jeans off his bedroom floor, struggling into them while holding the phone between his neck and shoulder. He moves to the closet, pulls out his beaten up duffle bag.

“All right, here’s what’s going to happen,” he fairly snarls, Jason’s broken tone still bothering him. “I’m getting a flight out. Send Alfred to pick me up at the airport. I’ll go out with him while you’re out of commission.”

Bruce pauses, causing Jason to look up at him with furrowed brows. Dick hasn’t been back to the
Manor since—Bruce carefully doesn’t look down at the younger teenager by his side because, yes, he did the right thing by taking in the kid. But, he didn’t do the right thing by Dick, and this might be the opportunity to heal those wounds. Instead of staying in a hotel for this stint in Gotham like he’s been doing, Bruce hopes they can start to bridge the gap.

“I would appreciate it, Dick. I’ll have your room ready.”

Dick pauses in tossing the pieces of his extra suit in the duffle, realizing— “I’ll stay in Gotham. I can meet him—”

“Dick,” and Bruce’s voice over the phone just makes nostalgia, the old feelings rear up, “come home.”

And it’s the first time he’s really asked. It’s the first time since their partnership broke for the last time, and Dick didn’t think he’d ever come back to fucking Gotham again (even though he had, few and far between).

Staring at his room in Titan’s Tower, the messy sheets still warm from Kory’s body, his own place, his own team, Dick…

Come home.

“Okay, Bruce,” he finally says in a low tone. “Okay.”

**

(Years later)

The Red Hood and Nightwing ride tandem to find Batman returned from his JLA vacay, sitting at the computer to catch-up on the usual he missed.

Tonight, he’s just in a tank top and ragged old shorts that might have been sweats at some point, and when the two vigilantes de-arm at their workstations, cleaning and putting away their gear while talking with him about the goings on in their world, they both notice how tired he looks. It was a bad run apparently. Dammit, Kal, you’re supposed to watch out for shit.

Out of the helmet and domino, jacket and body armor discarded, Jason is only in the t-shirt he wears under the suit, hair still sweaty and the scent of old blood and gun powder around him. With a glance over at N, the two pretty much strong arm him with nope, not taking your shit, B back upstairs to have a cup of coffee before they send his ass off to bed.

Hood shoots a text to Demon who’s been back for an hour or two. Short and sweet: get any tablets or computers out of his goddamned room. His ass needs sleep.

The return text is fucking priceless: too late fool. What do you take me for?

He takes a sip of his coffee to wash down a bite of sandwich Alfred left out for them before he went to bed for the night. Dickie is listening to B’s ramble about fucking aliens, obviously listing in his chair since he’d been working the beat for five days straight and been Nightwing for as long, only catching a few hours in the last week or so.

Since, well B and that guy sees it all, he gives Dick the look.

“I’m going, I’m going,” the eldest son holds up both hands palms up. “Glad you’re back and relatively unscathed, Bruce.”
“Me too. Good to be home. Good night, Dick,” B returns as Dick throws a half ass wave over his shoulder and heads upstairs to crash here for the night.

Jason just grins down at his plate and takes another bite. He’s glad B is good since the guy has a fucking tendency to get his shit all kinds of messed up.

“The Joker is back at Arkham.” B observes mildly, downing the rest of his mug.

Jason pauses but nods, “yeah. Dick and Demon handled him.”

“You got a pretty good head start on him. I’m glad Tim was in Gotham to talk you down.”

Now Jason looks up, sighs a little after he swallows. Of course World’s Greatest Detective. “… Yeah, me too.”

Leaning down on the island on his elbows, B’s expression is carefully neutral. “How long were you feeling the Pit’s influence before it happened?”

His mouth goes dry at that and Jason almost says something—

B’s got a hold of his wrist, not angry, not lecturing, his eyes that stupid kind of concerned—

“I’m proud of you,” in that low voice, the one that always made him feel like he was better than just a fucking little punk from the wrong side of Gotham. One that made him feel like he was worth a shit. “You’ve been fighting it, beating it. You did it again, and I’m so proud of you.”

With a small laugh to cover up how much he needed to hear that, Jason Todd looks down at his almost empty plate, not moving his hand out of Bruce’s grip.

And without the need to say more, the two older men put their dishes in the dishwasher and make their way upstairs. B might put a hand to the back of his neck and squeeze a little, Jay might grip his bicep a little tight when he stops outside the younger man’s room to see him in (and B already knows Jason is just going to follow him further down the hall until Bruce made it to his own room in the next wing before going to slip inside Dick’s room for the rest of the night). But something from the past rises up and Bruce doesn’t hesitate to wrap his long arms around the boy-turned-man in front of him, to pull Jason Todd into his protection and tilt his chin up enough to rest on top of the younger man’s head.

And it’s a good thing all around when the hitch in Jason’s shoulders stops being hesitation and he can wrap his arms back around B and let himself sigh.

“I promise,” he says roughly against B’s chest, “next time I start feeling it, I’ll come to you first, okay? No bullshit.”

“I hope so,” Bruce replies. “I hope we’re at a place where you feel like you can. You’re my son, Jay.”

A soft chuff and those big fists (bigger than when Jason was his Robin) grip his shirt and the two men hold on.

Chapter End Notes
Every time I think ‘okay, enough layers to this thing,’ another one pops up. SERIOUSLY. Almost put Superbats in. Like, I had that shit THERE and changed my mind. But still, I have a shit-ton of little things, nuances. First time Red has called out to B? Yup. It’s there. Hugs and anniversaries. Ah, Relapse Redux is the first time I’ve done a first person in a long, looooong time. I didn’t want to overwhelm with Jason’s accent, so hints just to get the message. And can we talk about Karmen and Cuddle Bug, who are seriously already manipulative? Like, already?! Get sparkly tights FIRST then take after Red. And I finally got around to Steph and O and some of those things from the one drabble chapter. Yup, fighting ring. No lie, right?
There Are No Quick Fixes

Chapter Summary

Red is in full swing, sleep dep is ON, and the clock is ticking down until the Bats pull out the stops

Chapter Notes

*Peeps around the corner* I’m not dead. Sorry for the long wait, I moved and then could not for the life of me get back into this; I destoryed it THREE TIMES. The muse was really not with me for a while. Maybe I was in a messed up headspace, thus “No Home for Dead Birds” took a bit of a shape in the Distractions pile. Anmnyway, shout-out to the muses that kept on me. Special shout-out to Arkaedia (what would I do without you? Not have posted this yet or at all or maybe ripped it apart again; you give me the kick in the ass I need, you know), Titans_R_Us (baby, you already know how much I love and respect everything about you), Allseer (you make me want to be better), Azazel (we write beautiful smut together), Graywhims (your encouragement moves me), Travelfan (I will write for you forever), Anon (you always keep me honest lovely), and I can’t even think of the rest because, wow. You wonderful, brilliant people, you don’t even know how much I depend on you. Loves and hugs always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometimes, it’s nice to have quiet.

Caro (‘Cuddle Bug’ makes her feel happy, but sometimes, she just needs to be Caroline again) has her knees up to her chest, laying her cheek on them while she looks out into the wide spans of space from the Watchtower Control Room, enjoying this time where there aren’t any minds close enough to invade. She’s sleepily content to think her own thoughts. Carl is sitting at the base of her chair, his mane still braided from the Amazons. They even put beads in it. Carl looks fantastic.

J’onn, smiling gently while he monitors the few situations on Earth that could spiral enough to need JLA intervention, glances over at her with an expression Earthlings deem ‘sassy-inquisitive.’ While he had not had much experience with children, even before his people were decimated, J’on has had quite a time bonding with Leo since both of them have a degree of shapeshifting ability, Karmen as she is a beginning strategist and attempts to unravel the motivation behind his own plans, Charlie because, well, he can also turn into a dinosaur mainly (between he and Beast Boy, Leo will learn the skill as well) but also to explain alien technology, and yet he had begun the bond with Caroline over something so simple as a platonic embrace. Her errant thought it looks like he needs a hug had warmed something within the Martian Manhunter—something bittersweet that had been missing since he, the last of his kind, had come to this world.

Gently taking a knee, he had allowed the young child to come to him on her own (he is aware how strange and frightening he may seem), but to his surprise, she had not even hesitated, throwing her arms around him and holding on tightly.
He is unaccustomed to feeling such gratitude and affection outside the members of the JLA, but these children have cultivated it in him with a great deal of ease.

“I know this is not entertaining,” he begins apologetically since the little one asked to be with him tonight on monitoring patrol. “I would understand if you would prefer another activity.”

The small child in the seat next to him hums a little, raising her sleepy face off her knees. “S’okay Mister J’onn. I like it here. It’s nice sometimes.”

And yes, he does quite understand. The telepathic dampeners, when activated, can be a soothing break to him as well; he had activated only a light setting, not enough to hinder him should there be an emergency, but he feels the faint relief nonetheless.

“It can be quite beautiful,” he replies, gesturing to the view of endless sky and stars all around them. “Soothing.”

“Mmhmm. I mean, it can be scary sometimes, that there’s no end? But,” the young child makes a gesture to a far off star, “knowing there’s always someone out there is…really nice.”

Before he can help himself, J’onn smiles again. “Indeed.”

After a moment of looking out into the black, the youngest of the JLA’s wards speaks gently, “I’m glad you’re here, Mister J’onn. With me, I mean.”

Blinking red eyes, J’onn J’onzz looks over and simply allows himself just a slight push to skim the top of her thoughts, making no attempt to conceal himself. And, yes, now he understands. The small child is thinking about how worlds rise and fall, how people come to power and lose it so quickly; the history lessons with Bruce and Wally are definitely paying off.

“I am… At times, I do miss my people. It is—difficult being the last. However, the Justice League allows me a purpose, affords me friends—those of which I would even consider family at this point. I have found a modicum of peace here.”

When he looks back, Caro’s eyes are soft and warm, the feel of his thoughts honest and fuzzy, content. “M’ glad, Mister J’onn. Glad you found something good.”

The alien smiles, a pull to his features. “I have, and I hope you will as well. Things are very…hectic with you and your siblings right now. I believe once the extended members of the other superhero groups finally calm down, things will be more stable for all of you.”

And Caro sighs a little, turns back to the black, almost lies. But, she remembers who she’s talking to. He might not call her on it, but he would know better.

“Leo n’ Charlie n’ Karmen are fine with it,” she confides, “they don’t mind.” And even saying it make her feel bad, feel wrong because they’ve all done so much. They all really, really care.

“But you have trouble sometimes,” he inserts shrewdly.


And J’onn is already planning on having a video chat with Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Flash of the JLA as well as the Titans some time later with this development. As a natural telepath, the youngest of the children is more sensitive to change in her environment, new people, new emotions; the abrupt exchanges can be disorienting, nauseating he remembers from his own time at the beginning of his power cycles. Once she becomes more sensitive, more powerful, even
traveling a short distance with any of the Flash Family could be detriment to her control.

They should be taking this into account when planning the children’s care. In the last few days, several members of the extended members of the JLA have thrown their lot in to watching the children, offering their homes as havens if the senior members are in need. In such a short time, the four have certainly met their quota of heroes.

“Any time you are beginning to feel overwhelmed,” he begins gently, “please let whoever you are with know. They will bring you here if it helps.”

Caro smiles again, “I know. Everyone is really…nice.”

“The four of you have cultivated that in them.” He grins back, “Booster Gold was certainly more arrogant before Karmen began critiquing his methods.”

And finally, a small smile lights on the child’s face, “she was kind of mean, wasn’t she?”

“I would say more pragmatic.”

Caro laughs a little and the smile is genuine this time. “And I think Leo telling Ollie he was being a jerk kind of helped.”

J’onn bites his lip a little, recalling the young boy standing before the Green Arrow, disdain for Ollie written on his face. He has a copy kept in the JLA secret files for when the man becomes insufferable again (or deems it appropriate to dress down the Red Arrow for some imagined slightly—honestly, no other member is that cruel to their former sidekick, and this issue has been brought up in multiple meetings). Since then, however, the noticeable change in Ollie’s demeanor regarding Roy’s actions and heroics seem to be for the positive. Perhaps what old wounds lie between them could finally be laid to rest, and the two return to a more amicable relationship.

No, they would never be the same—not after Ollie abandoned Roy and Roy’s descent into villainy, but from here, maybe they could begin to heal. Especially if Ollie goes through with his plans to bring take-out to Roy and Lian this evening when he requested the night off.

Caroline, perhaps on the same train of thought, hums and smiles at him.

The two spend a few minutes in amicable silence, soaking in the calm.

“Hey Mister J’onn?”

“Yes Caroline?”

“I think…” the young child takes a shaky breath and immediately his attention sharpens. “I think I did something… wrong.”

And this cautious tone, reminiscent to the early days when this child feared making simple choices, feared accepting their outstretched hands—of course the effects of their time held in captivity would always be there; his hopes for one day, however, would be for all four children to lose some of their suspicion, to forget every action may have an ulterior motive.

“Could it be,” he begins slowly, “that you simply did something on accident?”

“I…maybe? But, I mean, I kind of wanted to know, Mister J’onn.” She doesn’t mention how the name stuck out, so she just wondered why those emotions were associated—and now she’s in a pickle. “I followed the path of his thoughts and—and—that wasn’t something for me to know.” The
small child slumps, dejected.

“I see,” and he pauses, hand still on the control panel, “and now—?”

“I should just pretend I didn’t do it, but I think—I think I could help?”

J’onn hums a little. This particular lesson was not in his repertoire until he was forced to leave his planet and come to Earth, to work with Earthlings who also did not always appreciate a telepath delving into their most secret thoughts. He remembers this confusion—is it wrong to look deeply if he may be able to help? The answer is not a simple one and also came with his share of I was not supposed to know that.

“I suppose the question you may want to answer,” J’onn turns his chair, facing the serious Caroline, “is if your interference will actually make the situation better, or if it will only make things worse. Consider it from the person’s point of view before you act on it.”

And, well that…But Mister J’onn has been a telepath for a long, long time. And maybe they would be upset if she told Red before they were ready.

Now, Caro looks out into the depths of space while she thinks very, very hard and takes J’onn’s advice about trying to see if from Jay’s point-of-view. At the time, his thoughts were so warm and full—the same feel when he thinks about Dick when they hug (away from everyone else since they don’t think anyone knows which is really just silly) and talk in those low, fond tones.

Would he be angry if she told? Would Dick? What would happen them if—

Caro blinks out in the vast darkness, eyebrows furrowed in consideration.

**

Sometimes, the gamble does pay off.

Being a Detective has its merits, the research, the investigation, the theories, all of it is the ground work. But sometimes, when you don’t get shit to prove a point, you have to make a logical leap and just play a wild card, hoping you’ll get more evidence to make a theory work.

By the look on Ra’s face, this is a good throw of the dice. He owes Selena for all those poker games, seriously.

“You will explain, now Detective.”

Which brings him to the Bat countdown since really, that guy and his helicopter parenting.

**Red’s Countdown until Bat-Invasion 17:00**

**(B’s Countdown: 11:00)**

The molar flying past his shoulder is cracked, so he really should have flossed. Totally a disappointment. Hasn’t he ever heard of gingivitis?

Red leaps up, knee creaking slightly when he extends the kick to do some serious damage to a collar bone. He needs to take this curiously small group of what seems to be security guys out of the game even though their main body of data is uploading to his system in the hidden Batplane a mile or so
down from the very corroded somewhat-abandoned-but-really-kind-of-not laboratory in the middle of Oman (he’s going to need one hell of a tetanus booster after this—who knows how sterile some of these ancient tools are?). Maybe, maybe, he’ll finally get what he needs to verify the ass hats creating a whole bunch of bad. More than carnivorous-beast-dimension kind of bad, if you can believe that.

Fourteen days ago, he sure as hell wouldn’t have.

In the old days (when he was that kind of Robin), he’d started pulling a Batman—you know, the paranoid thing. He started keeping track of bad guys he met along the way; the habit grew when he stared Young Justice and then on to The Titans to, well, Red instead of Robin and that second foot had almost been completely out of Gotham. In some ways, he’d kept himself stretched thin to forget. Maybe for the same reasons he’s having issues going back now (dammit, Dick…you and Jay? Just…fuck—it’s getting worse. He was supposed to be working his way back into the family, not pining after the currently dating former Robins. Besides: Family. Of. Fucking. Detectives. Yeah, they’re going to figure it out eventually—) regardless of all the good times with the Bats trying to keep his ass on radar.

Which, is why he slightly feels like a dick in keeping them out of his monitoring loop (but then again, it’s not like B doesn’t have his tight system running 24/7—satellites ftw) when things started getting more fucked-up than the normal acceptable levels of fucked-up. He keeps several systems running on a constant, coded to specific parameters on as many waves as he can keep without giving himself away. The ABC guys, the locals, the pilfered radio transmissions he manages to hack, routed emails via worm programs, fake pseudos, and whatever else might be out there the baddies use to reach out and touch each other (that…is more gross than it should have been).

He gets as much data as he can, tries to stop massive destruction and the death of innocent people, and runs the numbers in hopes of predicting where the next big bad might strike next. All of it takes a shit-ton of effort, not including the occasional what ass hat is trying to take over space/time? kind of fight; you know, the ones that get the Titans through mid-week.

In recent months, he’s been flagging the usual levels (Hood would say nine levels because he’s a fucking closet nerd and yes, Dante would totally agree) of criminal activity: mapping out routes of the arms dealers, the drug manufacturers, the human traffickers, the rogue scientists (Cadmus, much?), the psychotic, private-army, let’s take over the fucking world baddies, the Black Market suppliers for desert—because sundry munitions, yum—and maybe the everyday criminals in Gotham for a sprinkle of else.

He’s had his plate full for years now, keeping up with as much as he realistically can. Some things slide to the JLA or the Outsiders; some he hands off to other heroes on the low. Those things in their realm of specialty stay with the Titans (because fucking with Harvest? Good times—really, it’s one of their bonding exercises).

As of fourteen days ago, he’d kept the mass majority separated out into neat little groups to determine necessary intervention labeled kind of dangerous, mid-level assholes, more-than-run-of-the-mill-dangerous, ape shit crazy, and stop these fuckers ASAP. Bart and Kon helped him come up with the names. BB gave approval, so they outvoted Rave and Cassie. Miguel remained pleasantly neutral.

To their credit, a majority of the current watch-list foes and the up-and-coming terribles usually picked an area in which to excel at their badness (i.e. fear toxins—you know, those guys); sure, some of them teamed up for nefarious plots, but the they mostly had their own agendas too far deep to work well together for long. Their alliances don’t last and are seldom successful (once in a while, though, he gets a good beat-down, like the memorable one direct shipping from the Light/Church of the Blood tag-team. It was not on his top ten of fave things to do on a movie night). All his
experience is where the separation started.

But in a rare moment when everything was looking way too scattered, the sleep dep had apparently unlocked the hidden bonus level in his brain, and the *links*, the *connections* pretty much hit like a stab to the spleen.

Fourteen days ago, after a *not so fun* fight with the Insidious Seven (of which had some brutally effective *enhancements*), he started cross-referencing recent waves of tech appearing in run-of-the-mill crime as well as in the bigger fights (chemical compounds, alien tech, old *Luthor* robotics suddenly coming off *E-Bay* or some shit, and the inevitably *new* versions that look suspiciously like a combination of meta-genetic engineering), looking for a possible supplier as well as all the buyers that might be modifying new insidious ways of making humans guinea pigs.

What he *found* is a possible connection.

A personal one, buried in the smallest detail. A single thread of communication between baddies in the form of serial and shipping numbers.

Of course, the link is completely theoretical for the time being (if it’s them, the fuck-up is *real*), a guess on who/how the building blocks for the engineered weaponry are being taken from Asshat A and dispersed to Asshats B through G. Really, it might be a stretch, but the possibility that they sellers are someone off his radar until now doesn’t mean it makes Red feel any fucking better (the prospect, when he focuses on it, makes him sick, *fucking* sick).

Still. Just a theory among several *more* possible theories and connections. The more he’s been diving into the world, into data, into the labs and into the very few crates he’s been able to uncover with his own hands, the more everything looks startlingly familiar.

Thus, the last two weeks have been following a whole lot of clients, trying to find suppliers of those building blocks, looking for *any* of the labs that put all the pieces together to create the prosthetics, missing out on the main body of dealers only because *(dammit)* he’s been trying to dodge The Titans, the JLA, and some of the Bats—not to mention a small detour to help out *(stop)* Henri Ducard on a manhunt in Berlin, then to swing by Hong Kong for a night since Cass may have let slip she was considering going on a date (the guy’s already a dead man, it’s fine, he sent B a text, Cass got her “be safe and not while fighting crime” lecture, everyone was uncomfortable as hell, good times), a quick stop in Quarac because word of Deadline working muscle for the smugglers hit his radar (turned out the guy was really just on some weird vacay—even mercenaries needed time off, you know. Welp, color *him* embarrassed). And, maybe a few other sundries along the way.

Just a few.

Really.

Robin’s honor.

The last spinning back-kick goes a long way in making the five security guys (who have a bunch of *neat toys* for a supposedly abandoned research lab—duh, something still has to be here if they have some nice automatics like this) take a nice nap while he can have a little bit of time to access the *only* isolated system in the compound. Which, totally *not* suspicious or anything. Really, why not put a glaring red sign *‘Bad Guy Records Here’* and be done with it. It’s fine, just makes his job that much easier.

Red hits what he assumes is—*was*—the main testing lab, reminded of several video games with a similar creepy destroyed lab kind of themes. You know, scary experiments goes crazy and kills
everyone kind of thing. Hm, maybe he should adapt one of them for Dami’s game—bring in the Scarecrow for shits and giggles, let Demon have a little slice and dice with zombie, the fun kind, not the shuffle around doing whatever kind.

Food for thought.

Since emergency power is generally shit (and that bad guys like to cut the power in an attempt to stop him from doing that thing he does so well), Red always carries two portable power packs for just such a need, and is kneeling beside the seemingly junky work station, pulling off the side panel to try finding the conduit. Flashlight in his mouth, he pulls wires out of the way until he hits pay dirt. One of the power packs would give him fifteen minutes max with a system this size, so hurry up and get shit done time.

Much easier said than done since even the Batplane’s systems couldn’t infiltrate the isolated LAN in this room and thus the up-close-and-personal; imagine his surprise at coming across a communications dead space. In an “abandoned” research facility. Well, don’t need to be a detective to get that clue.

Once the console starts booting up, cracked screen flickering from whatever fuckery happened here (yes, that’s dried blood and a definite yes to that tetanus booster), Red strafes around the dusty lab to look for more insight on whatever the hell they were working on and how the lab is connected to his mystery dealers (go on, admit it. You think you’re back to dealing with those particular dick bags and doesn’t that just mean you seriously fucked-up, Red?).

His physical search turns up, well, nothing. A little disappointing since the usual bad guy clean-up attempt when things go south is normally pretty light; nine times out of ten, something crucial to figure out what their project of the week might be still be found in the cracks and crevices—at least somewhere to start. This time, the place is spotless (other than for dried bodily fluids, ick but he takes samples anyway)—any documentation or hold-over samples, gone. Even the machinery has been moved around (scuffs on the floor), the rest of it broken (no glass or metal on the floor, why clean that up?), and anything immediately significant (fingerprints, DNA, sparkly notebooks) gone. If he had an hour or so to spare, he could pull a CSI Barry Allen, but with the Security outside in la-la land, he doesn’t think he’s going to have that much time.

Annoyed, he starts with the hacking, hoping for some serious pay dirt. He needs answers to his many, many questions about the meta enhancements as well as more proof his terrorist ass hats are supplying the labs and private armies with more than just guns.

Since his conversation with Ra’s did not yield as much bounty as expected, at least he has the locations to cross-reference.

“You will explain now, Detective,” is not really where he’d expected this convo to go. Maybe some bad guy banter, some cryptic as hell insinuations of how the League of Assassins completes business, maybe some threats on keeping him quiet so the other teams stay off Ra’s back. Something to the usual ‘caught bad guy’ rigmarole.

Instead, Ra’s looks like he’s been caught unawares by the insinuations, which is never a positive thing.

Any good IT guy will tell you there’s always a back-door access in case a user is a dumb shit and
locks the system out because of too many damn password attempts. Really, ask Jay. He’s not the one that has to break into the Batcomputer via the remote access. B likes to put weird shit just to fuck with him.

Seriously, who else can quote The Grey Ghost verbatim? Really showing his age there.

Unsurprisingly, the encryption is tight. So, the lab has more secrets than he originally thought. Score. He’s grinning like an asshole because this might give him something to really work with finally and then he can bring in—

“Attention,” a sweet voice comes over the loud speaker just as the flashing red lights and sirens start to blare, “destruct sequence initiated.”


Red snags the flashdrive and immediately gets the ‘haul ass’ memo; bringing up the schematics in his head while the blast doors start closing on him.

“Fuck, I hate when this shit happens,” the whirlybird in one hand, a miniaturized EMP in the other for those closer-than-he-would-like- and get-out-by-the-thread-of-his-cape calls. A side slide under one door almost taking the wing pack with it, multi-tasking vent plans overlaying the blast doors. He runs back the way he came to make sure the baddies he took down are starting to come into consciousness. No way is he leaving any of them to die in a fiery inferno when they could be giving local law enforcement some shoddy details while waiting in holding.

When Red hits the main corridor, he has to duck and cover as shots ring out. The security team is up, hauling the still weak members up and running toward the entrance to get themselves the fuck out.

Civilians, check.

And to make shit even better, B is going to want a full report of everything Red’s been into since their little chat (and will play a good helicopter parent, hacking the plane’s nav system if he has to, Tim, don’t test me) when the Bat clock has finished counting down. You know, the eighteen (twelve but he’s going to fight like hell for eighteen) hour limit before the fucking Batman decides it’s time to put the satellites to good use and come after him. Knowing B, especially considering he was using that tone less than two hours ago, he would seriously pull out all the stops.

Which, considering, well, Batman, are considerable.

No, no, please don’t do that, thanks. In one piece here.

However, the question remains: what exactly is he going to tell them?

Sure, hunting down world-wide terrorist organizations bent on handing out potentially dangerous, meta-induced weaponry should be a thing for the JLA (totes their usual), but if said organization is the one Red Robin should have dismantled to the last fucking source—he totally has dibs.

And no, he’s not considering coming out with the whole thing to B (like he already has to Jason and Dick in a moment of complete weakness or, shit, trust) because he needs to or doesn’t have the resources for a full-scale hunt (“I’ve missed helping you on cases, on getting your opinion on mine.” Dammit, B). Somewhere along the line, he’s realized—he’s missed that part of it, too, like back when he was that Robin. It’s a crazy sort of thing, really, the way he can almost step back in time when the two of them worked side-by-side to put the pieces together and go take down the bad guys
as a team, and even Dick riding with them, grinning while the three of them fought together, had each other’s backs, and (he’s finally starting believe that shit can happen again).

Red grits his teeth and keeps running—putting the Bat family out of his mind until he’s not going to, you know, blow sky high.

**How is this my life right now?**

**

Karmen grits her teeth, nails biting into her own biceps. Yes, the sweater vest combo dulls the feeling, but it also makes sure she doesn’t accidentally blend in with the Tower’s décor (plaid really helps). Zatanna may have had a small freak-out. Small, really. Please don’t tell Mister Batman. Or Red. Or Dick. Please, please not Dick.

She already knows about the talk he gave Charlie on the importance of flossing.

Jay is okay. He said he ain’t no squealer. He’d laugh about it and give her a fist bump.

But the idea is still there because the abrupt sweep of hurt making her angry (because she thought maybe these three wouldn’t be like the rest of the JLA and want to baby them all the time) might trigger something and tell them more than they need to know.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Wally is kneeling in front of her, taking in the tight clench of her jaw, “Karm, Karmel-cake, it’s me here, okay? Look I don’t know how much you heard but—”

And, no, their nicknames don’t make her feel better, and because, yes, she is hurt, she bites out, “you lied, Wally. You lied to me.”

The current Flash, just dressed in civvies, wilts a little under that accusation because yes, yes he did. “I know I did, and I’m a little sorry about it, okay? But, we didn’t want you and the others to think you need to do something.” His voice goes a little softer, “not even everyone in the Justice League knows.”

She’s standing ramrod straight in the sweater-vest and shirt Cassie helped her pick out because she wanted to look nice when she, Leo, Bart, Wally, Kon, Gar, and Rachel went out for pizza and then Percy Jackson: Tale of the Lightening Thief (she didn’t know everyone wanted to see it too, but that’s okay, the could come). Walking into their conversation after Wally had vehemently denied any intense cases for the JLA and the Titans are taking a night anyway so sure, movie sounds rockin’—of course they had time.

“You told me everything was fine,” her eyes cut over to Barry, things clicking into place. “You told me the three of you were just training with the Speed Force.”

And Barry, looking tired, sighs a little because it’s so hard not to get attached—to remember these kids are so much more.

“That’s the story we’re telling everyone,” he inserts firmly, “anyone in the community asking why I’m suddenly around again. It’s not permanent, and the best story we can come up with is a partial truth. The Speed Force is changing, but…” he hesitates a little. “We don’t want to panic anyone. There’s too many superheroes with powers, and we didn’t want to chance anyone trying something they might…regret.”

“Or make things worse.” Wally shrugs at her. “We have a plan, so all we can do now is wait for the right time.”
She sucks in a deep breath, not even suspecting anything like this when she’d paused outside the kitchen and overheard them talking about it. *The Flashpoint.*

“Then—then you should have explained it, not the details, just that something needed attention or—” and now her eyes are hot, watery even though she’s angry (hurt). She understands the need for secrecy, for keeping it quiet, but—

“That—Wally, all they did was lie to us. That’s how they kept us under their control, they lied about everything.” And her breath hitches in her chest, but Karmen bites her lip hard, trying to maintain her control. To remember what everyone is trying to get her to learn.

“I’m sorry,” Wally soothes gently, “I’m so, so sorry.”

“No, you aren’t.” She snaps, sucking back the watery quality of her voice, “Don’t—“ and she pulls out one of Red’s words to get the point across, “don’t patronize me. I’m not stupid just because I’m a kid. You’re just going to do it again. The truth doesn’t mean anything.”

And maybe it hurts more because it’s Wally and she loves Wally, but he’s so solemn right now, kneeling to put them on the same level (she knows this trick—it’s to make him look less threatening, the doctors did that sometimes too). Behind him, leaning against the counter, Bart is carefully not looking at them. He’s just as serious—so different. It’s like when Dick becomes Nightwing when there’s trouble. And Clark hears a bad thing happening so he’s gotta be Superman instead of Clark.

“If,” Wally chooses his words carefully, “it comes down to protecting you, then yes. Yes, I would. Keeping you safe is the most important thing to me, Karmel-cake. If I have to lie to protect you from something bad, then I’ll do it.”

Bart finally moves, turning his head just enough to look, and nods slightly in agreement even if he’s been down this road before—the one where the adults are just looking at you and nodded, spinning bullshit to placate you. It’s a shitty feeling, knowing you have the ability, the intelligence and everyone else is looking at you like you’re going to screw it all up anyway.

And Karmen’s lower lip trembles a little more even with her obvious effort, making all three of them feel instantly like ass.

“C’mon, hey,” moving from his self-imposed super-cool hero pose, Bart is across the Tower’s kitchen and wrapping his arms around the younger child (who, realistically is not much shorter than him, so sad). “Yeah, it sucks. Maybe we should have just said what was going on, but you’re smart. How many people would panic at some shi—ah, heavy stuff like this?” If Red wasn’t off doing fuck-all, he’d totally have that guy right here to help out (or not, shit. Batman didn’t say whether or not Red was in on the whole universe destruction detail or anything).

Karm huffs and lays her forehead in the niche of Bart’s sternum, arms still crossed over her chest. “I’m very good at keeping things a secret, you know.”

Bart pointedly looks at Wally then Barry before back down at the top of her dark head of hair, “you were in a laboratory being experimented on. I’m pretty sure keeping secrets kept you functioning, not to mention how you took care of the others when you could.” It’s all mild, but all totally true, and by the look on Barry’s face, he’s putting that together with possible bad idea.

“Then you understand,” she sighs. “If they knew half of what Charlie could do, or Caro’s real potential, we would have never seen them again. They would have been dissected and studied. I had to figure out a way to keep them safe.”
“And you did,” Barry placates from his spot still at the island, “it took planning and courage to keep yourselves that far under their radar. No one is arguing your capability, Karm. But, if you know then you would have wanted to help and told the other munchkins.” He sighs a little, trying to smile, “you’re good, kiddo, but you’re not a speedster. Why would we want to worry you if there’s nothing you can realistically do?”

She turns her head, pulls away to think and give Barry her best disapproving Batman expression, “I know that, but—but I could have helped with calculations or—“

“Or be a cutie and not have to worry about it.” Bart grins and ruffles her hair without shame—it’s crazily like ruffling Red way back when he was that kind of Robin. Just...just the sweater-vest and shirt combo, it’s a tiny, girl version of preppy Tim from back in the YJ days. “You know, be a kid. Leave the crazy, universe-altering stuff to us.”

She glares back, eyes still watery because she’s angry (hurt).

Barry gets up to also take a knee and put the four of them on the same level; it’s not going to help because Karm, their Karmel-cake, for all she might not have originally wanted in on the world of crime fighting baddies, she sure as shit is keeping track of what/where/who all of them are handling at any given time. Well, since Bart knows the why behind it (you know, like, he’s been doing this stuff for a minute and shit), he doesn’t bother wondering what Diana or Kon or Batman might say to make her understand. Nope. He gets where she’s at.

Wally opens his mouth, probably to try another tactic, but Bart cuts him off since she needs to see it from the other side.

“If Caroline wanted to jump in our fight with Mirror Master, would you have let her?”

And, yes, Karm has seen the footage, it was a good fight strategically, the Titans working together well, covering each other’s weaknesses, using other another’s strengths...but, it had been frightening to watch Gar get hit so hard he wasn’t moving. She blinks, swallowing the sour taste in the back of her mouth like she did back when she used Vic’s system to get into the Tower’s saved footage server and watched the live feed.

Garfield hadn’t moved—he was bleeding and...Rachel looked scared and she never ever looks scared of anything.

“Of course not!” She spits out, trying to get the image to go away. “Cuddle Bug would have gotten hurt, Bart.”

Bart nods sagely at that answer, “right. What about Leo?”

She chews her bottom lip with narrowed eyes, calculating while Wally looks slightly up at him with a raised brow (yeah, dude, this is going somewhere. Chill. Out.).

“Leo doesn’t have his powers under control for a fight on more than one front,” she starts slowly, “he might have been able to distract them for a while, but he probably would get hurt too.”

Barry is looking up at him too, the ah-ha light going on.

“Mmmh,” Bart agrees. “Charlie?”

She shakes her head decisively, “Charlie couldn’t have controlled anything with all the fighting. Maybe if he was far enough back?”
“And if he needed to be closer?”

“…then, he would have been right in the middle of everything,” her voice gets exponentially smaller.

Barry and Wally are giving slightly sad smiles; yes, it’s important she get it for any future instances this might happen. But…but, to them, she’s still just a child—one that deserves even a tiny bit of innocence.

“Yeah, yeah he probably would have. There were way too many of them, and our attention was seriously divided.”

Wally moves back to sit with his elbow on his knees to brace his chin, blinking at his little dude handling this like a pro and thinking hard about how Bart is doing this. Since when did he get so…?

Hm. He and Barry just exchange another look since neither of them thought, of the three, Bart would be the guy handling something like this.

“So, this is kind of like that,” Bart goes on with a little shrug, “if we let you in on heavy stuff, right? If we would have leveled with you, what would you have done, Karmel-cake?”

Karmen closes her eyes, sighs because well—

Finally, while Barry, Wally, and Bart exude the ‘we’re still good bros’ vibe, she just nods with an, “okay.” A deep sigh, “okay, I get it.”

And she certainly doesn’t grip Bart’s t-shirt a little tight when he gives her a congratulatory good call hug, but, well, she doesn’t grip Wally or Barry that tight either because they have a huge, dangerous job ahead of them. And the possibility they could die looms above them, dark and thick, making the weight settle in her chest—there’s nothing she can do to help. Nothing but hope, and trust in them to come back alive.

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*Red’s Countdown until Bat-Invasion 11:00*

*(B’s Countdown: 5:00)*

On the plane, he’s running the numbers again, still pretty pissed off at the run-and-dash scenario that happened back there (at least the many, many authorities completely missed out on him while yelling at the installation’s panicking security team running the hell away from fiery doom). The worm program on his flash drive didn’t infiltrate, so all that data? Fucking gone.

Not a good day.

Instead, he dives into the upload he could get his hands on and starts with the encryption-cracking, occasionally glancing up at the big map spread out on two screens above his head.

The red dots are deliveries, the blue dots possible bad guys locales, and the green dots are drop points where the “packages” have been traced. Along each, what he theorizes are some kind of message or designation disguised as serial numbers or the commonly used tracking code for various delivery services are right there in bright yellow. His systems are working to decrypt the strings to prove there’s a relationship here between them, maybe a main source code to them.

Possibly…possibly the same type of in-depth code the White Triad used for their “merchandise” almost a year ago.
Back then when they had been dragging him through the ship’s hold, taking him to that fucking room to start up with the give us your tech, Mr. Wayne that lasted about two weeks, his nearly-eidetic memory had picked up three strands of numbers on the crates in the cargo hold he could see as they brought him through—his free time between beatings and other fun torture times (screaming when they laid the hot iron bar across his shoulder blades and held him down) had been spent trying to break those numbers down, mess with them, create something, solve every equation he could think of. At the time, he’d needed something to focus on, to keep himself from going crazy with the torture and isolation (knowing he could get out if he had to, but not until the kids were safe—and then, not until he realized he was going to die if he stayed undercover as himself). They could fuck-up his skin all they wanted, but no one is cracking his brain (toxins notwithstanding).

Day Three, when his captors started getting real about it, his brain made the connection between the three stands; how the numbers could be transposed, could actually be correlated into Persian (33 characters, thousands of possibilities—well, it did take him three whole days after all—B would have been so embarrassed).

So maybe the torture took it’s toll since he consider the strands might have held the key to certain delivery spots, maybe they determined what types of weapons or children were in the crate, maybe it was someone’s fucking birthday, whatever. As per usual, the theory did pay off when he finally cracked it.

The serial numbers were the Triad’s personal code—goods, buyers, and two-digit addition at the beginning or end that he figured out signified some kind of rating scale, the importance of the buyer and the importance of the product. It made more sense when he first slipped the ropes and was able to get several more samples of numbers, checking crates fast before trying to get the Batcomputer to respond from the ship’s control room.

His brief look into the ABCs files once the Triad was taken down, the numeric rating system made sense. The bigger (or crazier) groups of baddies had higher numbers, meaning more important; the crates with weapons were rated higher because apparently children just weren’t that fucking important in the long run (of course not, when you could just kidnap kids out of every deprived third-world country and no one would even miss them?)

In the plane, Red forces himself to calm the fuck down because this, this, isn’t the first time he had to take a step out of the objective mindset, to be more than the vigilante detective. And well, did that all just start when his systems flagged a similar pattern two weeks ago when he was seriously planning various ways to stay the hell out of Gotham for a while anyway (and hoping to get some of this… uncomfortable tension out with a few rounds in one of his previous undercover job—thanks for the advice Nick but Jack isn’t running from fuck-all).

Instead, he’d comes right up to the holoscreen and inhaled the applications possible decryption: 41 ghoul 2151 5592

_Ghoul._ An old Arabian myth of a demon in the desert, one with the ability to change his shape…

21.51 North, 55.92 East, _Oman._

His heart had thundered because, _wow_, familiar much? So a string of the numbers could be longitude and latitude if every other digit was squared and—

More digging and the next coordinates 81 asto vidatu 3568 5138

_Asto Vidatu_, one of the _Daevas_ or false gods promoting chaos and disorder. _Asto Vidatu_ was an inescapable demon of death. No one evaded him. 35.68 North, 51.38 East, Tehran.
And that’s exactly where he found Ra’s al Ghul and the new Cradle of the League of Assassins.

“Not a good way to do business,” he drawls out, “killing suppliers and such. I realize ‘bad ass’ is pretty much part of the League of Assassins logo and all, Ra’s, but the smarter criminals aren’t going to want to deal if all they get is dead.” And really, Red’s been dealing with these guys for longer than a minute—he is, however, willing to push the right buttons if it gets him the information he needs.

Even though playing Ra al Ghul could be a very terrible miscalculation on his part, Red’s good. He likes to live on the edge.

“These are not my suppliers. I do not recognize the shipping contain nor those delivering it. We do not make trades with the likes of this, nor do we murder them in public—it is…bad for business. And if anything, Detective, I am very good at putting business before pleasure.”

And that sure as hell sounds sincere (even taking into account how good of an actor Ra’s can be when thoroughly motivated). Of course, Red had known at the time how much of a control freak the immortal is about business operations, so dangling this bit of tantalizing footage in front of his face is really just a great on-the-spot idea.

Ra’s doesn’t look away from the grainy footage, watching his people hand-deliver head shots to the Red’s dealers (at least one of them isn’t Pru because he totally wouldn’t give her the Red Robin pin for their fan club)—the blip of white is obvious even if the falling bodies aren’t. The single crate isn’t opened there, the assassins are talking low among themselves before moving to get the crate closer to the back of the pick-up truck in the middle of the desert. Familiar since, well, the last time he’d dealt with the League of Assassins right on home turf like this, he’d pretty much been ready to die in a desert, too (they like to keep him travelling since then—the usual Wednesdays, you know).

So many memories, so much planning to break some systems and kick some ass. Good times, Ra’s, really.

Red stops the vid, mild with all the accusations buffering. He already has plans for if this turns into the ‘too bad you figured it out, Detective’ rigmarole (which is not what he’s banking on—this is the League of Assassins here so there’s more to the story). Aside from all the toys in his belt, he’s modified the Titan’s tracker is in his glove, one second and they’d be on the way if things went bad beyond his usual capacity for handling bad (that’s the last resort one; seriously, he hasn’t been handing them their asses with fucking luck or anything).

But, Red Robin knows how the League of Assassins works, and even this is very out of their normal. So, a little misdirection to see what he can get from Ra’s to lead him to the next clue. Another gamble, another throw of the dice.

But Ra’s looks…irritated instead of his usual calm, cool, and crazy.

And no, he’s totally not smiling on the inside. Really.

“Taking everything into account, it doesn’t look good. Your people left a mess.”

“Detective, please. After we have come to know one another so intimately, I am offended you believe us capable of such juvenile mistakes.”

Red’s brow rises above the domino, keeping himself in check, playing the game. “Really Ra’s, I can think of about twenty different scenarios where this would be your chosen course of action. I mean, if
they skipped out on the BOGO AKs or something—“

And the rolling purr is back in Ra’s tone, “if perhaps there was a threat posed to us. Or, as you know, I am against weaponry damaging to our world; in those instances, I would agree with your assessment. However, what would I have to gain from this,” a hand wave to Red’s wrist computer, “course of action?”

“Off the top of my head, I could list the usual top five motivations for murder,” Red draws out, sinking a little further back into the shadows when Ra’s turns, starts to pace. “Since we’re taking into account that it’s, well, you, I would say either the revenge angle or you want to send a message to their higher ups. Why leave the bodies so obviously if you didn’t want them to be found?”

Ra’s pauses enough to look over at him with narrowed eyes, “and yet, we again return here— I do not know them, Timothy.”

Red shrugs a shoulder, “this coming from you of all people? Who said you need to personally know someone to want them dead?”

The brow lifts because touché, one for the Detective.

“Besides, arms dealers are notorious for having a short life span just because they usually have something someone else wants.”

Ra’s slow turns, looks at him with a raised brow, “Weapons? I have weapons. And if, these...” vague hand wave, “amateurs... had anything to my taste, anything I could not simply buy, then my ninja would take it from them. Silently. Subtly. Without drawing unwanted attention.”

Hm. Struck a nerve there did he? He’s in the right spot in the shadows to bite the inside of his cheek.

Coming closer to the shadows, Ra’s is in dangerous mode, moving like a predator tracking prey. Oh yeah, definitely hit a nerve.

“There would be little point, Detective, in courting intelligent operatives and seducing the best to my side if I then use them as common thugs. And for something so base as weapons? I believe you have quite insulted me.

Okay, score one for Ra’s, too then. It’s fine, this is getting Red closer to what he wants.

“Things happen in the heat of the moment. Mistakes happen. Especially if an organization might just be a little too close to competition. Isn’t that why you sent your people into Praesidium? Knock out the competition?”

“Truly? You would accuse me of employing incompetent fools? Idiots capable of making mistakes when facing the likes of those—unhygienic riff raff? Considering you have in-depth knowledge into the inner workings of my world, I had assumed you would know I require far more critical thinking capabilities from even my junior minions than simple point, click, and shoot. Were a mishap to occur, my people are trained to adapt. Especially if I wanted a so-called weapon—one in which we have already eliminated those who know how to use it.”

“I’m aware the league has its own brand of crazy, Ra’s, but anyone can use the Black Market equivalent of Google. If your people took weapons, there a manufacturer somewhere that had the details you need. Not that hard to find with your connections to the criminal underworld.”

“Indeed, there would be a manufacturer, and if I wished it, we would simply take over their facilities and have any number of the items from those crate at our disposal.”
Now he’s trying not to smile because Ra’s is getting to that special edge of pissed off. The one that makes him glad there’s no windows in the immediate vicinity. Red holds up a placating hand, “so, my last theory, then.”

The immortal moves away to pick up his discarded wine and take a drink, the chessboard he’d been at when Red appeared in his hideout is suddenly missing two pawns.

Ra’s waves him on, eyes narrow, calculating.

Red takes a step out of the shadows, “someone is trying to set you up. Not like you don’t have enough enemies or anything.”

Ra’s expression becomes thoughtful while staring down at him, eyes narrowed as if he’s trying to see through the whiteouts on the domino.

“That is a much more…plausible theory, Detective…”

Which is how he duped Ra’s into letting him ride along to find the mystery crate and take some samples—he’s finishing up as Batman calls on the emergency line.

So, everything is looking more and more like the White Triad might have been resurrected for a totally new realm of weapons dealing. Progressive criminals are just such a pain in the ass sometimes.

The last time, he’d just had to get his ass kidnapped to stumble on their enterprise. And as fucked as it is, back when Kon pulled him the hell out of the water, got him back to the Titans, Red hadn’t bothered to do much more than trace the remaining crates based on similar parameters and let the ABC corporations take it from there—trusting in their resources while he took a small vacay to try healing from the ordeal.

More to the point, Kon refused to let him anywhere near a computer for days, instead, forcing him to rest and watch terrible B movies in the interim—there was a lot of food in there somewhere, too. It was the most junk food he’s eaten in forever. And maybe…maybe he hadn’t fought his best friend as much as he should have to get back into the game. Maybe he had just sat back for a few of those days and let himself be empty, trying to mediate during the few breaks between intense best friending.

When he finally felt like he could stand up again without something fragile, something beyond physical breaking, Bart had been roped in to watch movies and playing video games to give Kon a rest from the babysitting (even though they’d argued hardcore about the guy missing school, and yes Kon, I’ll be fucking fine as soon as the back heals enough to put on the suit again, stop hovering, literally. Stop it. My height has no effect on you being an asshat).

So, yeah, if this all turns out to be what he thinks it is, it’s going to be his mistake here in just letting the case slide off to someone else this time. His fuck-up, his responsibility to fix-it. And he’d be damned if he trusted someone else to step in and finish up the easy part this time.

Well, that’s provided this groups of terrorist, arms dealing dickbags fit the theory—a little more data, hard proof, under his belt, and he’s got them this time. Well, getting his hands on one of those crates for a little closer inspection might just put them there, right?

Thus, the map, the tracing, the encrypted data, the little visits— he can finally see the connections, and all the leg work is going to bring him right to their front fucking door (because sleep dep? Seriously necessary, even in instance that may not be as dire as, you know, mind-controlling aliens
or impending genocidal death bombs).

His phone ringing again, and this time, not Batman wanting a status update.

_Dammit._

“Red,” Cassie sounds slightly less pissed off than usual, good sign.

“Wonder Girl, how did the fight go?” A new green dot appears and Red automatically changes flight patterns, tracing the facility. He needs to get to at least one of those shipments, needs to see exactly what’s in them—and _fuck_, that must be some divine intervention or something because the dot moves right along the east coast and hovers in Gotham’s bay (because _really_, how many bad guys need illegal things there? Only all of them—not even counting the _crazy assholes_ that mostly make their own).

Cassie’s voice jars him out of his sleep dep induced deductions and plans. “Pretty smooth considering.” She drawls out and his brain hits the _uh-oh_ button.

“Injuries?”

“Nothing substantial. BB took a few hard hits, but he’s still moving.”

_Okay, good, right?_ “The Mirror Master and his people?”

“Oh, he’s down for the count. They’re being detained as we speak.”

Something is very _not okay_ here.

“Cassie, what is it?” He finally asks while starting up with the search into Gotham habor’s shipping logs; the problem with that is, progress doesn’t really _take_ in some areas of Gotham. Most the logs in Dixon are recorded on these old fashioned things, you know, _paper_.

A moment of silence while he’s planning on how to get in the city and last away from the Bats until nightfall when he can get to the docks to see for himself; the other half of his multi-functioning brain pings him because her pause means things are probably _really not okay._

“Where the hell are you, Tim?”

He sucks in a breath, closing his eyes behind the domino, “I’m tracking down some international arms dealers.”

Silence again while he moves, waiting.

“And _why_ haven’t you asked us for back-up? You’ve been _tracking_ for _two weeks_ already.” Steely determination because she already has what she needs to know. Cassie just…just always _knows_. Whether it’s him, Bart, Kon, Miguel, Gar, or Rach, she always _knows_.

“I’m doing all the background work right now, tracing the routes of their deliveries, their buyers and suppliers, pinning down what the real merchandise is. There’s no real fight just yet,” he tries placating slightly. But the deal has always been there for The Titans.

_Some things are his and his _alone_.

It’s been the agreement since Day 1 of his return to the Tower as Red, and that shit last year didn’t negate the agreement—that’s why he could get away with deactivating the sensors with them, why the satellites are only turned on during S.E.A.R.C.H. Anything more and he’d probably crash the
Tower’s systems just, well, because.

“After this, I’m going to try those breathing exercises you taught me,” she informs with a neutral tone, “so I don’t destroy anything.”

“Try them. If you still want to destroy things, we have a great training room on Floor 17. The one I programmed with those drones that look like Diesel? You know, so you can really enjoying punching the shit out of—“

“Tim.”

His hands still, “I don’t know it’s them yet,” he bites out, “I’m trying to get the proof together first. All I have to go on is theories and a possible set of numbers, Cassie. That’s it.”

“Oh, you know it’s them, Tim, don’t give me that,” she snaps back, “you knew before you left last week and didn’t even bother to tell any of us. Do you have any idea what Kon and Bart are going to do?”

Dammit.

“No,” he bites out, “I don’t. We deal with enough terrorist organizations that I have to be one hundred percent sure this isn’t linked to any others first. The variables change with each of them I eliminate.”

Now, her voice is softer over the line, “I know, I know. You’re going to run down all the possibilities. But, Tim, please, if it’s starting to look more and more like them, you have to let us know. You can’t go alone this time.”

He sighs, looks away from the screens and blinks his dry eyes behind the domino, fights the urge to rest. “I may be…calling in reinforcements.” He finally admits, “If I’m right, then I may be too close to be objective. I’ll need someone on the detective side that can be neutral enough to validate the evidence.”

“You must be serious about double-checking if you’re bringing someone else in,” but he hears some relief there and choses to completely ignore it since, well, trading one group of mother hens for another isn’t really what he wants, but what is necessary. Things are still going to fall into place, and he’s already decided to give the Bats just enough truth to keep them off the real trail. If he needs to pull a vanishing act, he has contingencies to keep them occupied.

Really, any plan including the Bats also needs a re-direct—the just in case mentality. Hood and N would be exceptionally pissed if they knew this.

“Let’s just say I’m watching the clock,” and that is just two birds with one stone. Really.

“All right. I won’t break as many things then. Call me when you hit Gotham.”

“If I can. If not, I’ll send a binary text,”

“You know I hate when you do that.”

“You’re going to hate it even more since I’ve disabled the Tower system from accessing your cell. You’d have to type it all in. By hand.”

At her outraged gasp, he disconnects, grinning like an asshole before he gets his head back in the game.
Red’s Countdown until Bat-Invasion 10:00

(B’s Countdown: 4:00)

He sighs because really.

“B,” Jay starts impatiently, talking to the pair of legs sticking out from under the jacked-up vehicle, “I’m giving you good deets here.”

And still nothing.

“C’mon, you think I like hanging out in Blackgate? That maybe, I don’t know, it’s nice this time of year or some shit?”

Nothing. Doing.

So, on with the pacing, which Jay does while he fiddles with the naked holsters under his arms and just rants his ass off.

“And I’m not too fucking happy with those ass hat guards and their shitty visitor checks, B. How come no one’s flagged that yet? Oh that’s right, some of those fuckers are just crooked as Pengie’s dick okay? No, don’t ask how I know. But, shit, we knew it was bad, but not this bad. Shaw’s been running something from the inside, and seein’ as how his visitors run like clockwork, it’s safe to assume nothing good, right? And it just somehow happens to escape everyone’s notice? For fuck’s sake, I realize this is Gotham and shit, but dammit, people. Get your asses together.” He wags a finger at B’s legs while he paces, “you need to go have a conversation with Gordon, you feel me, B? Sit his old ass down and lay it out for ‘im. ‘Hey Commish, shit’s kinda bad, I get it, I’m Batman, but you gotta help me the hell out here, yeah? I put ‘im in the slammer, you make sure they stay the fuck in. How hard is that?’”

And Jay pauses long enough to look back down at the legs, hands on his hips, waiting for B to say something. Of course, from under the car, an empty hand appears and wiggles in that ‘gimmie, gimmie’ kind of way.

Jay just throws up his fucking hands, but still bends down to slide himself under the familiar car with less than a foot between them (the last time he’d done this, he’d been a helluva lot smaller and still sporting those pixie boots; well, he’s got bigger shoulders now, don’t he?)—he’s already got the right size wrench. A light is clipped to the bottom of the very memorable red car, and Jay can see B’s working on getting the bolt out since there’s something he probably wants to modify the shit out of, but the damn thing is just in the right spot to be a pain right in the left nut.

Jay’s nudging the wrench under B’s fingers and putting some strength into it, working the angry bolt with a little back and forth action to loosen it up. Already been greased, so the two of them know what’s doing.

“So you suspect Shaw is running his racket from inside,” B finally observes.

“Dunno if it’s the same shit he’s doing time for, but something is up there, B;” Jay finally drawls out, finally getting the fucker to pop and start to turn. He cackles a little and the sonofabitch falls into his palm.

“Tell me about it,” Bruce brings out the socket next to him and starts in now that he can get past the crossbars.
“Well, his little *cavalcade* of sudden ‘family’ has been on the visitor’s roster for the last two months consistently—just *happens* around the same time Dickie almost takes a cement swan dive into the bay ‘cause you know Harvey, he’s always got some kinda hook-up outta town, right? *Then,* guy’s supposed to be serving a dime or so. Just got a parole hearing, and not because he’s been a good boy, yeah?”

Jay slides his hands up to hold the box still for Bruce to get the next few bolts out.

“Mmhm. Seems like we should take a better look.”

“Probably wouldn’t hurt ‘er nothing.” Jay looks over at Bruce’s greasy face and intent blue eyes. “Hey.”

Pointedly, Bruce pauses mid-motion, glancing over at his second son in the *you have my complete attention* way he’s got.

“…You already know who this asshole is?”

Instead of answering, Bruce brings his hands down out of the guts of the old Red Bird, giving Jay his *detective* look. “Something tells me you and Dick didn’t pick his name out of the Batcomputer’s database at random.”

“B— Bruce—”

“He’s the mole from Wayne Enterprises, the one who sold out Tim,” Bruce points the socket still in a greasy hand, “and yes, I’ve been digging into him. The increased activity flagged on my radar, too, Jay.”

The younger man sighs, staring into Bruce’s serious face. “I don’t like what this could mean, B.”

“I’ve already put a time limit on Tim. If someone is trying to move on him, we’re going to get to him first.”

“Aw, that’s what a good helicopter Dad oughta do.”

“Well, *none* of you ever take the ‘know your limitations’ lecture seriously. I have to keep up on my game with you four.”

The two just suddenly grin at one another and go back to their perspective places, B getting the bolts out while Jay uses the wrench to disconnect the wiring, sensors, and other braces. “Pfft, the fact you think you got *game* makes my fucking night, you know that, right?”

“I’m Batman, Jay, and Batman has *game*.”

“Uh-hu,” Jason moves the brace slightly, holding it so B can get the damaged part wedged out. “Di and Supes have been giving you too much ego time, B. Seriously.”

Jason glances over—and Bruce is *smirking*. The younger man’s eyes get HUGE. “No,” he whispers, *horrified*, “you’re fucking with me.”

Bruce’s eyebrows rise just slightly. He’s still smirking.

“I’m going to pretend I never learned that shit, ever.” Slightly nauseated, Jason Todd runs mental bleach on *all* his thoughts because *no*, no, no, no. That shit just ain’t right. No one needs *those* kinds of deets about his own *dad*. 
“That should teach you,” B replies mildly, not even flinching as he scrapes his knuckles getting the part out, “not to make assumptions without all the facts. I thought I raised the next generation of detectives.”

“Stop. Please, B, just stop,” Jay moans, covering his face with his hands.

“How about you stop whining and get the other brackets.”

“I think I’m traumatized. Maybe I should go lay down and curl up in a little ball for a while.” But, the younger man is still lifting the wrench back up to do as he was told.

B hums and is getting another socket attached, trying to get his hand further into the guts of the car, “before you start calling therapists, it seems the Titans are somewhat concerned as well.”

Jay blinks over at him, “which one of ‘em called you?”

“You know better than that. Wonder Girl made a request to Superboy who talked to Clark—“

“You two are like the oldest married couple in the room, no matter where you are,” Jay deadpans at the two sides come apart and B can get his hands around the second connecting part he’s looking for, “lotta shit makes sense now.”

“I assumed you figured it out back when I introduced you to him as Robin.” B tactfully doesn’t mention how Clark groped him at super speed that night.

“Some connects ya don’t wanna make about your Dad, B. You feel me—?”

And Jay stops abruptly, realizing what he just said.

B doesn’t stop moving, but the small smile on his face is soft and warm. He glances over to see the heat in Jason Todd’s face and puts this moment away, one of the few times his second son called him Dad.

“Since the Titans still can’t come to me with these things, they’re using the system of communication to their advantage—which is fine. In the long run, they’re still going to help us out, but apparently they’ve run into a new wave of specialty prosthetics.”

Jay’s brow hikes (and naw, he’s not taking that shit back), “Prosthetics?”

B pulls the second part down, ready to start on the wiring harness next, and looks over again, “yes. Ones with a particularly powerful modification. Tim is apparently tracking down suppliers and buyers.”

“You mean like Vic powerful or alien tech powerful?”

B shrugs, “I’ve seen some of the footage. Degrees of speed, strength, agility, even something embedded affecting a cellular change—false shape shifting.”

“Holy shit that’s bad. So, Timmy’s riding that train—wait, as in they’re helping Baby Bird track these fuckers down or…?”

B just gives him the look. Well, yeah, why else would they be talking it up if they were hunting down some crazy assholes with Red?

But, some of the blanks get filled in when B lays it out. “There may be a connection between Shaw and whoever is putting out the necessary genetic programming for this new line. It could explain
why he’s getting visitors and one hell of an early parole.” B’s flat tone has a whole lot of *there’s more to the story* that Jay’s chest immediately clenches tight (Fuck, Timmy, just *fuck*. Why the hell didn’t you pick up the goddamned phone, send an email, carrier pigeon, *something*).

He’s gotta get Dickie on the line and let him know they might get a shot at those White Triad sons of *bitches*—if they can beat Tim to them. Well, they need to get to *Tim*, and *tout-de-fucking-suit*.

Jay breathes a little deeper because *apparently* Gotham is some kind of magnet for ass hats, motherfuckers, dick bags, and the like. *But*, if this little line of tech has a place here, Timmy’ll make it eventually.

“Said you put a time limit, yeah?” And Jay’s eyes are *sharper* with thought, dark blue and narrow.

B just lays his tools down and slides out from under the car using just his heels; Jay fumbles with the handful of bolts, laying them down on the scrap of greasy cloth above his head and follows.

By the time he’s sitting up, B has the part in his lap fiddling with it. A thumb hitches to the big computer, and Jay finally notices the bright white clock at *03:40*.

Jay sucks in a breath and his eyes slide over to B.

“Don’t worry,” the older man looks up from the part he’s half torn apart, “in two hours, I’m calling in *Babs*.”

Because he can’t help it, Jay shakes his head a little and laughs. Trust Bruce to use what resources he can when it comes down to the people he cares about most.

And…

The laughter dies down, leaving him solemn, serious enough that Bruce blinks and automatically leans closer, greasy forearm on one knee.

“I…got something you probably ought to know,” he starts, hesitant, haltingly. He doesn’t look, keeps his eyes down to the wrench still in hand.

B sets the half formed part aside and slides around to face his second son. A massive hand, one that knows how to *break* but also how to grab and *hold on*, grips Jay’s wrist in his peripheral, the hand so massive, the fingertips touch around his wrist.

A sighs lifts Jason Todd’s chest while he closes his eyes, but B doesn’t put off the air of impatience like when he tired of dealing with the JLA’s back-and-forth, or of the Rogue Gallery’s *fuckery*. No, B is acting just like he does with the littles, all calm and cool and patient.

The other hand, grease and all, comes up to cup the back of his neck, the weight soothing just like way back then when he was still nervous about wearing the cape (*Dickie’s R*), and only B’s hand on his shoulder or neck would settle his nerves down—‘cause he knew the Dark Knight had his fucking back.

“Okay,” he breathes out, “okay, so here’s what’s doing—“

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*Red’s Countdown until Bat-Invasion 7:00*

*(B’s Countdown 1:00)*
Time is really a relative thing. Well, in regards to shit like, you know, *multiverse travel*.

However, he’s got seven hours before his eighteen is *up* and B is going to come calling. It’s time he desperately *needs*. The crate taken by the League of Assassins didn’t give him shit to go on, and he needs the real thing to take the next step forward.

Red is down by Dixon, taking in Gotham’s air, the familiar shapes and shadows while working on several levels of thought and planning. Forefront: check the delivery. Verify, validate, gather evidence, prove the theory.

The fact that he made it in and through Gotham without attracting any attention so far is really just bonus level skill right here. Landing the Batplane out of town, hitting up one of his *old* out-of-the-way safe houses off the Bat-radar (hopefully), looping the feed (for just in case), keeping out of WE, just doing civvies until he was close enough to the docks to change into the body suit and sundries. The only *problem* here is the other harness took some damage in Oman, so he’s got the spare from the Batplane on, and it’s the original one—the one that was meant to fit *Jason*.

Again, time is relative when you’re on *the clock* and bad things in crates are being delivered while you’re trying to get your ass into a tight body suit when you notice a busted spring. It’s fine, the harness get stuffed with the rest of the suit and the next step is making sure the hidden bike actually *starts* (it does and that means someone may have been here since the last time he crashed).

Red takes a breath, mentally cataloguing the cameras he *knows* O has placed around the immediate area and trying to predict where any additions might have been placed; it’s easier to circumvent them the hard way, climbing, rather than swinging, so he’s taking his time to pull a Spiderman. He’s in the shadows of the third warehouse while the night crews are calling to each other, forklifts are working, and bright lights take all the mass majority of shadows out of ground level. Two ships have come in, and Red watches the progression for almost ten minutes before deciding he *has* some time to scope out the main office and try to find the log books, maybe even copy the pages to see if similar “shipments” have been kept on the ‘low (twenty bucks and a *Inception* on movie night says yes, *Red)*.

He keeps low on the roof, glad the brights are focused more on ground level so he can keep it just how he *likes* it, light and fast. Get in, find the shipping records, get out.

The window is already open, the office empty, and Red doesn’t need to be a *detective* to guess the boss man is the rabid little grey-haired guy waving his arms around and calling out in the old low Gotham accent (*fuck, it reminds him of Jay—*). And isn’t it nice the guys decided to make a mess out of unloading *just* when he needs to have the office to himself for a few?

Red vaults down with a simple flip, sliding through the window like he sliding through water, and maybe his luck is changing since the thick, hand-written book is already laid out overtop the messy stacks of paper all over the desk. He catches random invoices stained with greasy fingertips and layered with the remnants of yesterday’s burrito, Monday’s first cup of coffee, last week’s tomato soup.

The hi-powered mini-cam goes off as he’s flipping the pages, determined not to take too long, but hopeful he can find the similarities easy enough when he’s got *time* (hopefully before seven hours is up; it’s really *nice* to make B’s brow raise when the evidence is already *there*).

Hitting the second to last page, Red scans the entries closer and—

*That’s the droid I’m looking for: 3891 7552*
His brain works the digits, the first ten catching his attention because yeah, *Gotham*, ironically, the second part could be decoded as *ahit*, unclean.

Rude. Understandable but still *rude*.

Red takes the last pictures, puts the book back to the original page and eyes the computer system in the corner (yeah, not the first time the “second” set of books for under-the-table dealings have come to light, but *really*, just leaving it out on a *desk*? *Really*, just make it *easier* for the uncommonly *large* vigilante population in Gotham, thanks).

Red jerks when noise outside, footsteps on the wrought iron steps up to the office, yelling, and dives for the open window. The edge of his cape flaps through as the door is shoved open, the boss still grumbling to himself about the idiots he keep hiring to run the machine and *goddamnit can’t those pieces of shit count? Like they ain’t got no schoolin’*. 

Clinging to the gutter, legs up, the end of his cape draped over his foot, Red rolls his eyes behind the domino because it’s so hard to get good help these days.

Once the boss is back at his desk, Red pulls himself up gingerly back to the roof, sticking to the shadows. His crate is in B-14, easy since all the storage buildings are labeled anyway.

He perches in the corner of the rafters, watching the fork lift unload and—

*Shit.*

Right through the door, five armed men in nice dark suits are holding shiny automatics.

Apparently, he’s not the only one looking for a package.

**Red’s Countdown until Bat-Invasion 6:00**

**0:00**

“You have got to be kidding me,” O sighs, watching the feed. Like she doesn’t know the inevitable next thing. No wonder her dad started going full gray after the Batman began showing up around Gotham. And if Dick ever finds one in her hair, she is going to take him out at the *knees* and smile like hell while she does it.

The familiar beep comes across her earphones, a little earlier than she expects it, but well, on the clock and all. She clicks the comm over since it’s gloom and doom time in Gotham anyway. She might take up betting with Dinah on *which dumbass is the Batman going to save this time*. Her bet is usually Supes, regardless of how many times B claims he’s not going to jump in and save the alien’s silly ass again.

“Hey boss. What can I do for you tonight?”

“I heard we have a game.”

One of her brows goes up. Apparently he isn’t watching the same feed, but well, Batman is a pretty busy vigilante. If he hadn’t called in, she would have sent him the file because, well, watching Red Robin with Ra’s al Ghul is really quality television.

“His time is up.” B answers shortly, which answers absolutely *none* of her sudden questions. “Let’s
start the *Where’s Red* protocol.”

O bites down on her lower lip before she honest-to-God *squeals*. Wait until she tells *Steph* about this.

“His *time* is up?” She really doesn’t expect him to explain; the boss rarely does, but then again, the evidence proving *something big* is staring her right in the face.

But the sound of the wind moving is him taking to the rooftops, “he’ll know.”

“Got it.” He can probably hear the smile in her voice, scramblers be damned. “I’ll send out a wave to the Bats in the area.”

“Already done,” the Batman counters. “I need you to find him. If he isn’t in Gotham yet, I’m leaving Robin with N for the rest of patrol and heading to the Watchtower. We have a program from the Titans geared for his stats and facial recognition.”

O bites her lip again as the footage from twelve hours ago keeps running: Red and Ra’s surrounded by conscious ninjas and unconscious, unmasked bodies (still breathing but she has no way of knowing for how long). Red’s body is tight, Ra’s is leering, looking him over like a side of beef (the normal really, *creepily obsessed* is how she describes it). Behind them is an empty crate, one Ra’s is gesturing to. A few more words between them and Red Robin is turning away, pulling out his phone, answering, as the ninjas part for him like the Red Sea.

Interesting.

“I think you have a *really* good instincts on this one, B,” she observes mildly and switches the feed, but the Armenian drug dealers waiting for their latest shipment are already tied up, unconscious, and the crate busted open on its side, spilling bricks of heroin out on the concrete floor.

Only slightly incriminating, *Red*. Next time he should just put a stamp on the merchandise with *Property of*. Even back when he was the other kind of Robin, he always made it easy on the police. Dad really didn’t appreciated the third Robin making his guys *lazy*.

“It’s definitely time to bring him in.”

“You’ve found something?”

“Oh, I’ve found more than I originally bargained for, but I’m very interested in hearing his side of the story. I’ll send you the feeds on that once you’ve got him in custody. Maybe we’ll make a family dinner out of it.”

“I’ll tell A to plan for it. O, what is he into?”

“Nothing good,” she grins, “but I think we have a hit near Dixon. He’s already shadow, so I’ll need to track him down again.”

“He’ll evade camera if he can,” B fills in and the sound of the Batmobile’s engine purrs to life. “Get me a bead, O.”

“I’ll do my best. If anything, I’ll be a sweetheart and ask *nicely*.”

It’s a good night when the Batman can laugh out loud; O counts it as the first win. Now, she wants to try for a second.

**
He makes it to the roof, hidden back in the shadows and just breathes. But hey, breathing? Good. Fucking. Night. Just, yes. The intel gets him one step closer to the big picture, and he even had time to snag one of the tiny devices in the crate just after taking down those dick bag drug dealers. However, he’s taken back a step because owfuck squared. Hits the usual compartment of his harness and, nothing. Not shit. Well, that's unexpected since he's usually careful about keeping the random and sundries crucial to the vigilante gig stocked (you know, bobbly heads, gummy worms, rubber bands, the other half of those little Velcro squares, whatever really), but didn't everyone get to have an off day once and a while (or a big, glaring signal he’s been too far into vigilantie-ing it up in the last week of nil to no sleep)?

It just happens to be the worst timing. Fucking Murphy’s Law.

Or, the fact he’s wearing Jason’s harness. Dammit, with the sleep dep he’s riding, he’d forgotten.

"Red. Red Robin."

He shouldn’t have worn the Bat comm instead of his own; the fact he put it in automatically before he hit the open window of anonymous safe house #3 is really telling on how far he’s fallen in with the Gotham cape and cowl crew—much farther than he originally anticipated. The Batcomm isn’t necessary because Oracle can just hack his own wave when she damn well pleases anyway; having their comm just makes it so much easier for her to be a pain in his ass (and gives the Bats a way to hit him up for some of the usual crime fighting fun times—not like they don’t have his wave either).

Well moot point really. He needs to get moving, get to his place before he bleeds out—the possibility looking better and better the more he presses on his abdomen and the pain receptors come to life. Red grabs a hand hold in the brick and mortar, pulling himself up from the ledge to climb up enough to hit the main roof. While he moves, the edges of the few busted armor plates are sharp reminders of shit, getting shot this close is ass. If he wasn’t pushing the limit (even for him), he’d feel a whole hell of a lot better about this situation and be more likely to ignore the worry in her voice—but, well, he’s pretty fucking worried at this point too.

"Red, I already saw the feed. Answer me."

Of course she did. Damnit.

"…not…now, O." His coordination is too far off, body catching up with the last two weeks of on the go. God, he really fucked up this time, but he has to keep moving on it. He can’t just—

"Where are you?" She demands instead since he's stayed out of the way of as many cameras as possible.

A few months ago, he would have turned the comm off, maybe crushed the damn thing, maybe rigged it into a constant stream of '90s rap, maybe Rick Rolled the hell out of it just because. He can’t bring himself to, not when they’ve all tried really hard (so, okay, they keep just being there for completely random bad things. Completely random—well, not for the oddly timed flashbacks—Jay and Dick holding him like he mattered. Just another fucking bullet point on the Bad Robin list; it would be easier to handle if Dick, Jay, or B were complete ass hats about it, but no. Oh no, it’s Russian Roulette for Replacements on the watch his ass scale—as in, which one is going to show up this time.Fuck, in the beginning he didn’t mean to fall back in with them, to really believe they wanted to be his family again but, welp, here they fucking are).

"Moving," he grits out. One foot in front of the other and oh yeah, someone was getting one hell of a
letter about the armor giving way under the piercing rounds because This. Is. Some. Bullshit. Seriously. Not a glancing blow or in the meat of a muscle like last time; nope, he’s going to have to dig into bone and sensitive places which is usually a recipe for disaster. Making him more pissed is the fact these weren’t even high caliber.

Dear Kevlar,

I’m so disappointed in your shit. A few .40 and ow, ow, fucking ow. Please don’t be assholes, make better armor.

Love,

Riddled with bullet holes

"Right now would be a good time to test out your trial with the bats, Red." The observation is mild, but he’s known O for a minute. She likes meddling. It’s really her only hobby.

He frowns (because take a pill, just really), coming to the fire escape, "I don’t…need—"

"No, you don’t," she interrupts, "but you could reach out, take the easier road for once, right? Besides, I thought you were getting to be okay with them now."

He chuffs a laugh and tinges of pain take his breath for a moment, but it’s still some bullshit, O. He always plans for the easy road, just circumstances don't usually chose that direction. Go figure.

“We have…Vigilante Anonymous… at the Rec Center.” Starting to get woozy. “My turn to…bring the punch.”

She chuffs a laugh, but gets right back to it, "as long as you don’t let N bring food. No one likes tofu cakes, I don’t care what he says. Okay, give me your location, Red. I'll send out the call."

(They won't come, remember?)

(Fuck that, they came to an underground Meta-making factory, dude. Shit is getting real here.)

"Not necessary. Almost to my bike anyway," he argues, but his voice sounds weaker than he thought. When was the last time he slept? Ate? Been in the Tower for more than a few hours? In his Gotham perch?

He’s not sure. His brain isn’t working at full capacity.

Shit

And he’s only got a few hours before B pulls out the best of the Bat to come looking anyway. Sure, he’d meant it when he said he’d give B the run-down (just enough to keep him out of the bigger game), but now there’s a little more than he bargained for and he needs nice alone time to test the pilfered tech in his utility belt.

Double shit.

Either way, he’s not in good enough shape to be out of Gotham before the Caped Crusader himself starts up with the terrible game of hide and seek. He could try to run, pull a hurry up and patch this shit up, and get to the Batplane to keep them away from the sitch. But, with where they’re all at now, running like hell would just make the Bats even more determined.
"Triple shit.

"That was probably a bad fight," O just throws it out there, like thanks for that observation. “Sure you want to drive a bike like that?"

"Perch isn't far." He hedges the lie, give her some bullshit while trying to think with too many variables going through his head for this amount of pain, blood loss, sleep dep, and etc. etc. Under normal conditions, he could do a hell of a lot to keep gunshots from really hitting anything vital and other injuries are just window dressings of owfuck.

Well, like he said, everyone has an off night, and with as many Armenians that were apparently out to get him, it’s a wonder, really. So, kudos to Red for not getting a dozen more.

“They’ll come if you call, Red,” she interrupts his inner monologue, picking out a crazy strand in his constantly moving thoughts, and he pauses long enough to breathe again.

On one hand, he does and doesn’t want to trust anyone to answer (not here in Gotham anyway)—the disappointment train is just such a shitty ride. Ask the Kon from a few years ago.

On the other hand, Red is a guy that takes great pride in fixing any potential fuck-ups himself.

"You would make them all really happy. Just saying. And it would save you the hassle of B pulling out the stops. You know how he can get."

The underlining meaning there: I would help him find you and laugh all the way. “You’d…tell him I’m in Gotham.” Which would completely circumvent all his hard work to stay off the fucking radar.

“You bet your ass I would.”

“Already…have.” Not a questions because dammit. Previous contingency won’t work now.

“Oh yeah, he knows.” The barely contained glee in her voice is really just too much, dial it back, O.

"Fuck," he sighs. Damn her and her meddling. Seriously, all other avenues are going to fail. His options are too limited with the resources. The alternatives are going to have to be operating within the Bats schema (on the outskirts if he gets really lucky) and hope his bullshit capabilities can throw off the World’s Greatest Detective.

Sigh. He is so totally going to regret the shit out of this.

As Red looks down at his Ducati hidden in the alley only four stories down, a wave of vertigo smashes into his skull, throwing him off enough to be worrisome. It’s been a while since that happened. Dammit, as long as he keeps them out of the plan, everything should be fine. Call the Bats, let them get him to his Perch. Have a good one. Thanks for the pick-up. How’s the knitting project going? Did you know Mr. Fries is on vacay? I’m following him on Twitter. Epic. Now you know I’m not dead, just have some international ass hats to find, not for the JLA, this one’s on me, yes I have the evidence ready, yes I’ve got it, no need to go into too many deets, peace out.

Okay.

All good.

This time his vision grays for a hard moment and he wavers close to the edge, hands tingling with numbness. Nausea from blood loss.
Welp, not good after all apparently.

Copper in his mouth and not just because of blood. "Roof. 25th and Grand… Bike—Bike’s in the alley.” He swallows hard, “Ten minutes, O. That’s it."

He can hear her hum in acknowledgement.

He sinks (falls) down by the fire escape, lays his head on the railing. Since she’s sending out the call, he can just sit for a few minutes, catch his breath. It’s better O does it so he can feel less like ass when no one shows. It’s fine. Not a big deal.

In ten, when he has to move, to run, he’d keep fucking moving, and could just take care of the current investigation without I let them down mentality. Like always, stupid shit wouldn’t stop him (suddenly glad he set the sensors on a loop since the Titans would descend like a wave of pissed off if he hadn’t and with them, if they got the full story, there’s no way he’d be able to get out if certain mother-hen instincts were overriding his bullshit capabilities—Cassie. Some days it does not pay to be part of a team of super-powered assholes).

"Good for you, being the bigger man," O cheers.

"Don’t…get used…to it." Vision a little wavery again, not out completely. Still have time, but how much? C’mon brain, get with it.

"Shit. Red, Red! Stay awake."

"M’wake." His hands press harder under his ribs. "Had…helluva…lot worse."

"Yeah, you can take a beating, I know." Her voice is more gentle but still with that edge—the one when you had better get the fuck back.

"What’s... what’s another organ... between friends?"

O laughs right at him mutter fond “dumb ass” in his general direction; it’s the thing she and Jay have in common. Besides, you know, Dick (shit, did he say that out loud?).

A brief pause and "Okay, talk to me then. What were you doing down at Dixon?"

He laughs again because she’s like a fucking cat…like one with a laser pointer and his mental image is hilarious. "Gathering...intel."

"I’m not going to tell the Bats if you need it on the down-low."

"Had to look... at a shipment. That’s..."

"Red? Talk to me!" The sound of her typing warps along with her voice, becoming tinny, faded. She still sounds pissed though, that much he can bank on.

Gotta keep talking or she might retaliate and set his BI icon the Riddler or some shit. "Wanna... wanna get the VR ready... R loved it. Swords...next time. Zombieland... double-tap, you know."

"VR? For your assassin video game?"

"...Yeah..."

“Okay. You should do that. Call me if you want some help with new encoding. But, I’m asking what’s so important that you’re in Gotham mid-week, no WE business, and the Cassie is taking point
with the Titans against the Mirror Master and his squad of crazies?”

“O—“ he sighs deeply, starting to get that half-aware type of feeling. “Not…just don’t…dammit… ask when I’m…more with it.” There’s too many sentiments that finish that statement.

Her silence is plotting against him. “You’re going to the Cave and tell B anyway. Why not practice the explanation on me?”

The laugh crawling up his chest is more fragile than he expected, something decidedly not Red. “Hell no. Don’t need…don’t want…no, just....”

“I’m not following Red.”

“Good. All of you just…lemme...” Because he’s so close to the answers. He’s So. Fucking. Close. to putting everything together. Running afoul of the Armenian Black Market thugs the just happened to be waiting on a completely different shipment at wasn’t in the damn plan, but he has to be an equal opportunity vigilante (one that is apparently on a crunch because fucking Batman and time limits). Shit could have gone down easier if he’d just—

"Holy shit, Tim,” she slips, says his name and he laughs again, sloppy and slouching, his arms feel like jelly. Oh. Blood loss babble, who knew how much of that she might have gotten? Dammit, Drake. Pull it together. Five minutes and it’s time to get the hell up and run.

"Fuck. That." He emphasizes incase, you know, she doesn’t get it.

“I’m used to you not making a whole hell of a lot of sense, but now you’re worrying me. I’m glad B put out the “Where’s Red” on you tonight.”

He blinks behind the cowl, losing some of the lethargy, realizing he’d almost closed his eyes, “wha…what?”

“We have a new game. I think Batgirl might have mentioned it to you?”

Oh no. Not on top everything else. “You’re…trolling me.”

“Not even. Once I saw the feed and told B you were in Gotham, he said he’s already put everyone on find Red duty. Something about going past the time limit.”

“Sh…shit. Knew that was… going to…complicate things.” Time to start on those contingencies for later, when he can think without the massive pauses and redirects; you know, things that come with blood loss and extreme lack of sleep.

His body is sinking harder against brick and mortar and metal again when he needs to get the hell up. He’s lived with worse, live through worse, and he’s always forced himself to move, to get himself away before—

He firms his grip and gets ready to stand.

Before he does, shadows fall, a cape brushes against his face. Movement, the fire escape under his head trembling. Seven minutes. Not bad—they must have already been heading toward Dixon since O is a fucking tattle tale. No way they could have made it that fast if they were closer to the crime centers of the city.

"Got incoming. B…B is here," he manages as half the face fills his vision, mouth set it the usual grim line.
He grips the escape with the free hand as Batman doesn’t even hesitate, just moves his other hand out of the way to pull at the broken armor plates and take in the amount of blood loss. B is aware the injury must be bad if Red allowed O to contact them. A fast prognosis, and the fragments are too deep to dig out on the roof; with the amount of blood, he could have nicked an artery. They needed to get Red to a safer, more sterile environment. He considers Red’s perch for less than a second while opening sections on his belt for what he would need to stabilize the younger vigilante for transport.

Robin stands just over B’s shoulder, keeping vigilant watch. Hey Dami. Collect any molars tonight? Red gives a half assed wave and bites back a sound of pain when the prodding starts.

"Where's the keys? I can do it hot if we ain't got shit to work with. Ducatis are fucking righteous but seriously a pain in my left nut when ya gotta do bad things. You feel me on that, Baby Bird?"

Hood too? He laughs, a little too punchdrunk, tilting his head back to look at the hovering older man, catching the helmet craned down at him. His bloody glove taps the right spot in the harness. B takes the keys, gives them a toss and Hood pats the top of his head (newsflash, that asshole knows too much about the suit's security system since he didn't get shocked) before he slides back to ground level.

"Not too bad," he assures the Batman, who is finally done with the poking, "had worse."

"I'm aware," B’s applying the tourniquet, and at a motion, Robin is just suddenly there beside him to pull Red forward so B can get around his back under the cape.

"Seriously," he defends, "O guilted me. You know…made a…deal. Don't wanna get on her bad side…"

B chuffs a laugh then, "I'll thank her later."

"Ch-cheated." Because, well, B should know that, "She saw…the feed." At some point, his hand is gripping the Batman kneeling in front of him.

"It’s a moot point. You missed your deadline, Red."

“Eighteen…hours,” he argues, gasping hard when the tourney gets tight. B’s bicep moves under his hand slightly.

“I said I’d give you twelve. You got twelve.”

“Not…enough…—“ he hadn’t pulled all the pieces together yet, he’s close but not yet. He hasn’t made the picture clear enough. Fuck, he needs more time. Time…Can’t let the Bats know about time…

“You’ve had what you’re going to get,” B fills in, pulling one of Red’s arms over his big shoulders, and the younger of the two grits his damn teeth, prepares his legs to firm under his weight to stand—

But arms, just arms under his back and knees and weightlessness. Warm, the familiar insignia is warm.

"Shit, I can…can walk…"

They all just—showed the hell up.

One or two need to be going, still patrol to do. B can get him to the Perch without a parade of crime fighters. He says so while B carries him like a fainting lily to the edge of the roof, and Robin tells him to shut up. Asshole. Runs in the family, really.

He’s light-headed enough to know flying happens without the effort on his arms and back, his stomach drops, but he’s tucked against B's neck like he's a partner again and luckily, the cowl hides his face.

Chapter End Notes

709 Comments. 585 Kudos. Holy shit, I just looked at the numbers before I threw this chapter up. Damn…
AND, everyone go to this link http://iphoenixrising.tumblr.com/post/148097216617/impossiblephantomwhispers-this-is-based-on”. My lovely Anon did a comic-strip based on the banter from Chapter 15, and I died it was so perfect and just amazing.
Ah, as I said, little bit of trouble working back into it, but I hope this was what you were waiting for. And, yangmallow babe, here’s hoping I don’t faceplant XD
Pain

Chapter Summary

It seems like the other foot is back in Gotham

Chapter Notes

Ah, the first part was written a long time ago when I first hyped myself up to start a Tim Drake fic (it's been a minute), so it needed such heavy editing to be brought up to speed, but Titans_R_Us is committed to helping out the Tim Drake fandom one fic at the time, so much awesome help from her. All Seer and Azazels let me complain a lot, lol, which is so, so nice. You know, writing can be hard. And Arkaedia is like magic okay? Seriously, I send a thing and she solves said thing and just—sigh, helps me get it together and keep the momentum. Funny shit, this post: http://iphoenixrising.tumblr.com/post/150387293037/honesty-reading-yours-and-arkaedias-comments-on because so true. Story within a story. Heh.
AND: PLEASE NOTE I cannot SPANISH fluently (sorry) but Rahndom, who is the terrible influence to my evil, and Vavare, who shares our love of Tim Drake, from Tumblr totally helped me out, so, thanks again lovelies ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Red hasn't ridden in the big car in so long, it feels like he's forgotten a little too much. The speed, the rumble under his thighs, the encompassing glass and metal overhead.

Everything whizzes by and B's trying to keep him awake when passing out would just be stellar if not a complete waste of sleep deprivation-triggered detecting skillz. On one hand, it would be easier to keep his mouth shut, to ride the blood loss and sleep dep without giving away the wrong intel. (You know, the truth?) Sure, he's the Robin that lies the most convincingly to Batman, but realistically under intense scrutiny, they're going to catch on eventually—he's good, not infallible. On the other hand, passing out would lose him the sleep dep edge, the unlocked bonus level of his brain. Once he gets the fragments and fucking busted-ass armor out of the injuries, he'd re-evaluate the truth scale and go from there.

At point, he's still lucid enough to dance around the issue, try to making everything look routine enough to throw them off since he's got a whole lot of my shit, not yours on it. Red has apparently been running from responsibility long enough, fuck you very much.

Just like he told the Titans, some things? Mine and mine alone.

The Bats? Yeah, they're not going to ride that train if he can help it.

"Data hit the system," he makes his brain work, "sent a ping…needed to check. I've got… time before the next—hits..."
B hums in the affirmative, and is hopefully taking most of this as riding the blood-loss express. "Your system flagged it how?"

"Yeahhh, wrote the code for it last..." The darkness opens wide for long shadows to move, the maw of the night with jagged teeth. "Last year when-when those synthetic... drugs...in S-San Frannn..."

When did his eyes close? It’s fuzzy and nice and he won’t talk about things better left edited. Wait, shouldn’t they be taking him to the Perch? The Perch isn’t this far away— Hold on a damn...

"Stay. Awake," B orders darkly, and Red, Tim, has no choice but to obey that tone, the Robin, so help me tone. It’s the deepest ingrained Robin instinct (even Dick still caves under it sometimes and yeah, oh yeah, he’s seen Jason flinch)—

“Don’t ever get this hurt and not tell me, Robin.”

“Do not take a risk like that again.”

“If this ever happens again—“

“You do not take on the Joker without me, not until I tell you you’re ready.”

“I said twelve, you got twelve.”

Fine, awake then. “There are 2,351 screws...holding the Batplane’s frame together.”

“You have the older model.”

“It flies...reasonably well,” and he breathes in the ghost of burgers from a few nights ago (only on good nights does he stop for take-out, always shocks the shit out of people to see the Batmobile in the drive-thru—seriously, my legs are cold, I took a beating, where the fuck are my fries?).

“Reasonable is below your normal standards,” And yes, B is probably giving him that damn arched eye brow since Batman only smirks once and a while. But in this crazy state of mind, riding shotgun, looking over at B, Bruce and—

“You’re my partner, Tim. I expect you to call when you need me.”

“I want to adopt you. I don’t want to insult your Father’s memory, but I love you just as much as the rest of my sons.”

“I’m with you tonight.”

“We’re here to try and rebuild our relationship with you.”

“You’re always going to be one of my Robins. That’s what happens when you agree to take on the mask.”

“Red, talk to me.”

“Let me be there with you, Tim. Let me have your back.”

And here the fuck he is, riding in the Batmobile like he’s still one of Bruce’s Robins (and the evidence is really in their favor at this point—which is so good in so many bad ways)...in the passing shadows as light weaves over B’s tall form driving, Red stares a little with his wavery vision, déjà vu striking him more sharply than he anticipated.
“I’ve learned ‘reasonable’…can be fine…You know, criminals are assholes and stuff.”

Strangely, his hand fumbles up to his shoulder, to make sure that shuriken R isn’t really there (it can’t be. Robin is in the back—and Dami, where would they be without Dami?). He makes himself not reach out to touch B’s arm, to test, to make sure this, this, is really happening. He’s made some stupid-as-usual comeback and B is starting to let go of the crime fighter because he’s laughing under his breath. Red’s half afraid, with the blood loss and hitting the wall on his limits (again), he might be hallucinating (not a first, really), but, well fuck, he hadn’t been last time. Come to think of it, the last few times had been pretty fucking real.

But then he catches the glimpse through the night just as the Batmobile’s headlights hit.

That tree, the massive one that took out the Red Bird once, is still standing. Only a flash of it because the car is hauling ass, but he sees the scar marring the trunk is a deep groove, the jagged edges softened over time.

And he has a crazy moment when he can feel the impact, the seat belt tightening painfully, the crack of metal and fiberglass—

He’d managed not to get his chest crushed, but when he came to, Dick was ripping the door off the hinges with his bare fucking hands, just Dick in civvies and blue eyes bright with fear, mouth moving in what was probably something important. He must have been talking for a while, yelling for Robin, for Tim, for little brother, for Baby Bird. Yelling into the night, probably making B or Alfred come out to pick them up.

At the time, the concussion he’d been riding (Max, and wow, he had been fucking awful for how much vomiting was a thing), the relief Dick is the one who found him instead of B or some fucking tourist or some shit (“and here we see the Robin in his natural habitat: trouble”) had taken an abrupt back seat; watching the strength in Dick’s hand when he wrenched the utterly beat to shit door had crossed some imaginary line, had made a closed section of his brain open up and begin loading a whole new set of parameters to the Dick Grayson file.

It was the moment when his childhood crush started changing into a complicated snarl of attraction, arousal, and very stark imagination.

Well, puberty must have hit him late or some shit because Dick Grayson is attractive. Period. He’s one of the few vigilantes that can recognized by ass alone, but Red’s brain and body just didn’t get with the program until he saw that unfettered strength at its finest. That strength directed to saving Tim Drake’s, Robin’s, life.

The terrifying realization jarred him later, after Dick held him in both arms cradled desperately, babbling how thankful he was Tim was okay and not seriously hurt, don’t scare me like that again, little brother.

And fuck if hearing the “little brother” hadn’t made a whole lot of things a lot more complicated.

(Worse, just worse, Dick hadn’t meant it in that don’t-die-like-Jason-did kind of way—like Dick as his Batman against Jean-Paul had given him some validity as himself, not as the next Robin on the slab).

But, if he started (sometimes) pulling away from Dick’s intense, needy touches after that, well, no one was the wiser.

(And those guilty other times, when he almost fell into those holds so completely—just a stupid kid
falling hard and feeling like shit about it because he always knew nothing would ever—).

Things are happening outside his own sphere of inner monologue, the now filtering in with cottony-quality that is a really good time for stitches and medical grade antibiotics.

“—reports, Father,” and Robin’s voice is the one that jars him out, back to the now, but it’s dark because his eyes...

B’s head turns just enough so he can see Red out of his peripheral since, you know, cowls and shit.

“Tim. Don’t go to sleep. Keep talking.”

So fucking familiar it throws for a few seconds too long—lost in the world when he had a right to be in the big car.

“Bruce—” I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m a bad Robin, I should have got on this long before now, I should have figured it out— shit like that? Yeah, no wonder they didn’t keep him the first time.

Fuck, though, they’re all about the second time around, and regardless of everything, it’s happening. He’s just letting them walk the fuck back into his life and just (Dick and Jason can never find out how far he’s gone).

Dami—the right Robin—reaches around from the emergency seats in the back, a gloved hand turning his face.

It’s because the barely breathed admission, a punch-drunk muttering (“Bad Robin…wouldn’t have kept me either.”) that makes Father’s head jerk over and the current Robin replaces the police scanner on his utility belt as the drugs and Armenians are in custody and other issues will take precedent.

He and Father are aware of Drake’s annoyingly low regard for his achievements and capabilities (not to mention his failures of calculating valid risks to himself in his contingency plans—fool); however, hearing him admit to it means the injuries are more grave than the initial assessment. Robin catches Father’s whiteouts in the rearview mirror while unbuckling himself from the emergency seat, they share a nod as Robin leans around the seat, taking in the blood thick down the front of Red’s abdomen and wet, too wet, to his tights.

"Red. Drake." Robin's voice, a warning. Hands on the back of the cowl, disabling the security, pushing it away for the air to hit his sweaty hair. His face cradled between gloved hands to direct his fluttering gaze. “Bad Robins? What would you know of it?”

Red’s brain stutters a moment when he’s looking into Dami’s eyes instead of whiteouts.

“Todd will take Chaucer over Shakespeare. Checkers over chess. Beer over liquor. And senseless reality television shows over documentaries. Tt. He is a disgrace to the tunic. A heathen.”

“H—Hemingway…”

“A collection of Hippie bullshit, Drake. You should be glad he is an idiot.”

Now he’s laughing while the raw edges of pain is Robin’s gauntlet moving down his abdomen, checking the tourniquet in place.

“This is disconcerting,” and Robin turns to B, “something vital. He should not be bleeding out this much.”
“It’s just… a flesh wound,” he deadpans, but only Jay and Dick would get that one since Robin totally missed how they would go for Monty Python over a bunch of other shit, too.

“You are in second place for being an idiot,” Robin replies, “I believe we agreed you would contact the Bats for your cases in Gotham.” The scowl is epic. So B it almost hurts. “Unless I have suddenly been rendered unstable with hallucinogens, you seem to be in Gotham.”

Now the pressure of hands makes him huff out a hard breath, Rob trying to save him from bleeding out? Being all worried? Man, they must be friends and stuff, which he will totally update Facebook some other time when Robin’s face isn’t an inch from his with a whole lot of killing you would be easier than this but only by a miniscule margin.

Besties, Baby Bat. Seriously.

But none of the warm fuzzies changes where he’s at. "Not—not on…this one," he comes back more weakly than expected (it’s only two, maybe three GSWs? Wtf body?). "Be scary all you want… called dibs."

Shadows pass again, too many take the color out of Robin’s face.

“Drake!” But all he can see is darkness, not even the minutes edges giving way just dark. “Tim! Wake up.”

Dami—Dami needs…promises…Can’t walk away…Responsibility… How many did I lose…How many before I ever got to that ship?

“Made promises…you…know…” And he did, too many promises, but dammit if he isn’t going to try like hell to keep them.

“Then wake the fuck up, Tim.”

And that came out of Dami…?

Pain.

Something pressing into the holes in his abdomen, something sharper than the tourniquet. He jerks, blinks when the top of the Batmobile retracts to the darkness of the Cave and Robin is solemn while pushing his gloved fingers against the wounds, force Red to be immediately aware of owfuck instead of sinking deeper into the whole oh, that’s a lot of blood—even for me.

The haze lifts for important moments so he can see the familiar darkness while the pain races down his spine again with the movement of Robin’s gauntlets. He doesn’t have enough in him to say what? It’s fine, he can express a database of information with eyebrows alone; you know, secret Bat-language.

“Honestly, I have no idea how you manage to survive this long,” but Robin sounds tired rather than the usual.

He manages offended in Bat-language.

B is already jumping out, and Red pulls out of Robin’s hands with a few sloppy pats to his gauntlets, moves to try and follow (because old fucking instincts), not fumbling like a fucking noob (much) as the Dark Knight comes around to pull an arm over his shoulders and helps the de-cowled Red Robin further into the Cave, completely ignoring the questioning noises because they were just supposed to take him to the Perch and peace out.
He—

It’s—

*He doesn’t have a place here anymore.*

“I don’t normally need to tell you when you’re being an idiot,” B deadpans against his side when Red stops moving in realization (and *dammit* maybe he said that aloud?), “but I’m going to put this one down to blood loss and sleep deprivation.”

“Thanks, Bruce.” And it’s as wiry as he can make it, his punch-drunk brain trying to wrap around a whole lot of contingencies.

Diversionary tactics are going to be tricky as shit has apparently changed. It’s in the way all of them showed up on that roof, the way B carried him, the way Dami took off his cowl without even thinking twice, the way Jay touched him with a fond hand…and now, he’s back in the Cave—just, *fuck*. The way he’s here, *now*, without anyone bothering to ask, just *assumed* because he’s one of them—or because *Nope, save that dumbass*, is vigilante credo.

“Don’t mention it. Welcome home by the way.”

And Red stumbles, almost pitching forward, stupidly grateful Batman saves him from face-planting.

Robin takes off past them, going straight for the stairs and up into the Manor, bypassing the rule about dominos and capes past the Grandfather clock to take the stairs two to three at a time.

B is mostly carrying him to the section of the Cave marked off with curtains and stainless steel cabinets for medical supplies. Same as the last time he came to kick a little ass at the yearlies. Good to see some things stay the same.

And crazily, B pretty much lifts him up on the medical gurney by the hips before Red can try hoisting himself (back then when he was *smaller*, Bruce could lift him, catch him with one hand). The echo of his own bike behind the Batmobile makes the damn bats scatter, fades in and out so he can’t tell if the bike is really getting close or—

*Brain starting to fail. Shut-down unnecessary processes.*

“That? *Fucking* disappointing as *shit*, do you *feel me*? Goddammit I’m pissed.” Which is mostly true, the Red Hood gets pissed about a lot of things—who won *Dancing with the Stars* last season, being out of milk, those stupidly hard to get open mints, assholes who think Emerson over Thoreau—*fucking* idiots; but, having Nightwing pressed up against his back and ass on the ride back to the Cave really wasn’t *so bad*. Still, be nice to be *goddammed, motherfuckin’ sure* they weren’t going to break down along the way.

“All right, all right, it’s one of the rarely used bikes out on the ‘skirts, so we go find—“

“*Seriously, Dick?* No one has shown that baby some *love* in a *fucking minute*, yeah? The timing is off, breaks are spongy, who knows what the *shit* the oil looks like, and she ain’t even *purring*—“

“Then be a good bird and take care of it when—*wow*, That? Is a lot of blood.”

“Fucking right it is. Shit!”

And the two very quickly *get with the program* even though Red is making one hell of an effort at doing it himself, *fuck you very much*.
They jump in to gingerly start deactivating the security catches and traps to the uniform in case there are any new ones; since he makes his own, they’re cautious about it (or from what he’s seen when he’s, you know, conscious). The volts on the harness alone would drop Kon (tested it because well, first prototype, Jason’s, and man was Kon pissed). So, watch that shit. He might have told them that, but maybe it was in his head after all.

He helps with hands as steady as possible, getting his cape and cowl, harness, and outer layer of body armor off. Jay twists the right spot on the gauntlets, Dick knows where the catch is for the utility belt, and just… They know. He catches Dick’s half-smile, confusion making his brows squish together. (And, no, he is not looking at those hands and thinking about it again).

In between pieces, the Batman is Bruce with just the body suit, Dick doesn’t have his domino or gloves. Hood is just Jason, laying out whatever he gets off on the second gurney; when he gets enough, he pulls his leather jacket off, going to start with sterilization without bothering with the holsters.

“How many units we got for him, B?”

“Plenty. Dick?”

“But hey, maybe he can fix the BluRay Player while he’s here.”

“Don’t think so, Big Wing, Demon chopped that shit to bits.”

“Really? Dammit, Alfred picked up the latest Captain America. Timmy will watch it with me since the rest of you apparently suck.”

“Hey. Demon’s an asshole. We’re aware. It’s all B’s fault anyhow.”

“Don’t look at me. I’m satisfied if he hasn’t killed me by the end of the night.”

Chuffing laughter, “fuck. C’mon now.”

“Never underestimate proper motivation.”

And, well, he chuckles along with them.

“There’s also theater upstairs, you know. Tim? Alfred will make popcorn if you shut Dick up about this movie. Oh, hand me—”

“All right, all right, hey Baby Bird, we gotcha, yeah? Do me a solid and—”

But Jay is just all hands, maneuvers him to lie back, and they’re off talking in a tight nit group, gathering supplies, fast and efficient. Dick already has tubing in one hand, pulling a clear IV bag with the other while B and Jay are scrubbing themselves up, preparing to take care of Baby Bird’s hurt ass before they start in with the whooozeit dunnit and whys didn’t we know before hand?

Meanwhile, laying back with the woozy view, Red’s brain kicks into shit, shit don’t pass out and bleed to death. So, get the metal and broken armor out. Default process. Right then. Red breathes in increments while the bats overhead chirp and echo in a soothing familiarity (“Welcome Home” just like Bruce, so say something important without making it seem that way, but fuck—home…). He blinks up at the darkness to make his mental processes solidify, focus.

The tools and tray are already open by his right hand. B must have started prep, and now he’s over scrubbing up to his elbows so Red is the one that releases the tourniquet without seriously screaming
(ah, holding the jagged ends of the broken armor pieces in the wound, fucking stellar) and unzips the bodysuit down to his lower abdomen, the zipper locking up because, you know, that’s a hell of a lot of blood for only taking two or three shots.

He forces himself to breathe slow, rips the zipper open, pulling up the blood-soaked under shirt beneath enough to see what he’s got to work with. His unsteady hand grab the forceps without looking away.

The first time he’d been an idiot about it (a hurt idiot) and had to dig shrapnel out of his body, he’d been scared as shit. Back then, he wasn’t even Robin yet, just the kid in the ski mask following Batman around on the low. Red had caught some debris during a fight he wasn’t technically supposed to be in. He hadn’t wanted Batman to know he was already patrolling the streets before he got the tunic, so he’d taken care of it himself. He’d been careful not to nick something crucial, and the pain had been fucking excruciating. Years later, he knows his body well enough to do this in his sleep. Before the Titans figured shit out and started up with protocols or when he was in Gotham on the down-low since things weren’t good, he’s figured out how to ride the needle and thread express himself a little more wisely. Really, not a big deal.

He closes his eyes to be able to concentrate on feeling where the fragments are, digging into the soft meat under his ribcage to fish out the main chunks of metal. The first piece comes out without much searching, a gentle ping on the table beside him black and thick, a piece of the busted armor. His free hand holds the wound open so the forceps go back in easily and nudge around to find the next piece buried deeper. He’s already too light-headed, wasted too much time, and digs with some fucking determination.

Got to get it out, stitch it back together before everything goes dark again. Can’t let the Titans find him passed out on the floor, they really…get pissed when… can’t fall off a damn roof…fire escape hurts on the way down…too much to do, too many bad guys out there with the intent to—

And part of that is his goddamned fault, isn’t it? He’s got to fix the fuck up.

Red rides out the pain, so focused (because he’s safe, isn’t he?) that he jolts when an arm grips his bicep. It’s… sometimes he still forgets, even in the Tower when those loveable assholes burst in on his floor with angry faces on—he always has a moment of oh shit, fight. But not trying to feed anyone their teeth is another telling sign.

He looks down at the hand and follows it to the Nightwing emblem, to Dick’s narrow blue eyes and —

God, I…

"What the hell are you doing?! You're not even gloved up, Timmy!" And there’s that long suffering sigh.

He completely ignores the strength in the hand gripping him, the familiar soothing circles those fingers make instinctively, and dammit the stupid, stupid impulse to just stop, to do what Dick wants—


"Trying not to bleed out…Needs to be done, okay?" Metal grates on metal and there's another piece. The forceps nudge onto it, and he pulls with a small sigh. Another ping. How many made it through the armor? Two? Three? Couldn’t have been that many—
"Jesus fuck, Baby Bird," Jay must have finished scrubbing up, the heat of his body is against Red’s shoulder, making him turn to look up at those eyes, clear and blue and he remembers when they were green and full of—

*The Red Hood under the draw of the Pit, grabbing, holding on to him like he mattered…hands and…*

"—stay with me, Tim. You're in the Cave. Sit back for a fucking minute and chill."

When Red looks up at him with dazed eyes, pupils blown, Jason knows it about time to hurry the fuck up, yeah? He grabs the bag of IV antibiotics and a second bag of blood for the transfusion from Dick, who already has the tubing out and turns to say, “don’t even look at me. I didn’t set the kit close enough for him to get to—"

Both pause and turn narrow-eye glares at B, who managed to look sheepish even though he’s still turned toward the sink finishing up with the scrub and glove.

And all of that passes right over Red because he closes his eyes, breathes and remember what the hell he’s doing.

"Almost done…with this one," he doesn’t open his eyes, not when he’s already hitting something extremely fucking tender— (and not letting any kind of mental images of Jay’s mouth and Dick’s hands)

And if anything could get him right the fuck out of that thought:

"Allow me, Master Timothy."

And—it’s a struggle to keep from jerking. Just—

That voice soothes some kind of raw ache left over during the last few years—an ache that couldn’t be pacified with something so simple as a hit on comms.

But shit has always got to be complicated; because if he really was out, then Alfred would be the telling point, wouldn’t he?

*(Leaving the Cave fast so he wouldn’t have to see the disappointment, the distance in Alfred’s eyes—like he already saw in everyone else. Leaving the Red Bird behind like leaving his fucking arm, and he doesn’t need to wait for Alfred to tell him to go—it’s fine, he knows the butler has to have loyalty, priorities…who gives a shit about the stand-in anyway).*

Tim’s eyes blink open because that shit still haunts him at times, when the Tower was silent and he’s waiting on analysis to run, or after the battle when his brain fuzzes out to static—he has enough to wonder if Alfred would have been glad there was one less person to deal with. If Alfred had been in his old room, scrubbing down, covering furniture, throwing away any sundries left by mistake—if the butler would have converted the room to storage without a hitch.

The older man pushes Dick aside with an elbow, taking in every detail of the young Master, from injuries to more subtle changes. His eyes are sharp, miss nothing as he has not had the opportunity in much, much too long (Timothy is more gaunt than he used to be, disturbingly so, and the purplish black around his eyes is telling in regards to his sleep pattern—he will note so in the medical files and begin cooking once the young man is out of immediate danger). In many ways, he understands Master Bruce’s parenting, giving the boy some room after the loss of the tunic—however, even Sir has finally come to realize the need for a change-up in dealing with his children (and it only took
until Timothy before he figured that out, honestly).

"A—Alfred." The half-broken, hoarse notes on his lip while he blinks up blearily, but the butler is already scrubbed, gloved, and aproned, his hand gentle in pulling up the undershirt to see the source of the bleeders.

“Do be certain to open the line wide, Master Jason. I have been lead to believe certain injuries have affected Master Tim’s immunities,” Alfred doesn’t look away from Tim’s dazed expression (but raises the brow that means the same thing to every Robin as the Holy. Shit. Alfred found out) while Jay tubes one of the IV bag.

“We certainly do not wish to add infection to your medical chart if it can be avoided, young sir.”

The syringe of something clear in one hand, the other is firm in gripping Tim’s wrist, to pull slowly and get the forceps out of his body cavity carefully to leave it dangle from numbing fingers.

And Tim, Tim is staring because he can’t help it; too much is welling up in his chest that has nothing to do with bullet fragments and pieces of armor.

‘Young sir’ in that almost exasperated yet fond tone, and fuck it makes his chest ache just enough. He gives Tim a very calm smile, one that reaches his eyes, and just—just, dammit. Alfred.

"It’ss’okay,” in a shaky voice, still half-hoarse while staring up at Alfred’s calm, cool, and collected, “not too much left.” Nope, no pain here. Nothing to see.

"Regardless. You need not be uncomfortable."

“Bullets, Alfred? Seriously…uncomfortable… anyway.”

A short laugh, Score.

If his head was more together, he’d probably be better at getting the hidden message there, but he’s too full of God, been too long, too damn long. And Alfred doesn’t seem angry, doesn’t seem stiff in that Master-Bruce-is-being-a-pain-in-the-ass kind of way or the I-will-only-acquiesce-to-these-demands-because-I-do-not-wish-to-clean-up-the-blood-should-I-kill-you. Yeah, just hope it doesn’t come to that. Alfred took out Superman, right?

Dick and Jay are there, looming over him on the gurney, starting to get whatever tools Alfred might need, and the butler in question, while very knowledgeable about the goings-on between the family and Master Timothy, is very well aware of how crucial this move it to them. Another step in pulling the young sir back into the family.

“I see food in your Tower must indeed be scarce, Sir,” an eye slide while Alfred assess. “Perhaps hiring a catering service would be in order.”

“…tried making your…soufflé one time,” and the laughter is caught in his belly at Alfred’s arched brow. “Awful…just awful.”

“I would believe that. You, young man, cannot follow a recipe.”

He hums a little, “improv…s’good sometimes.”

“Obviously not in regards to a soufflé, sir. Perhaps once you’ve mastered the soufflé, you may yet attempt to master the art of chess again.”
Tim relaxes back slightly, eyes for the butler, taking in the deeper lines and grooves of his face, the steady surety of those hands. He doesn't really feel the hypodermic needle go deep into his abdomen anyway, just the pressure. But it's okay because Alfred is smiling that easy smile at him while he takes the forceps from Tim's bare hand. No fight needed because, well, he's already aware he's not going to win. No one wins against the oldest Bat.

"Hey…m’real good at strategy, Alfred."

"I wouldn’t know, Sir," the older man comes back lightly, "if memory serves, I was the victor of the last game."

"You have super spy tech…don’t think I didn’t…figure you out."

"—awake, Timothy."

"Chess…” he manages, floating a little more.

"Indeed, sir. Soon I hope."

"Mnhm.” He hums, blinking again because people are moving.

And, “very well then you two. Honestly, as if I have not done such things countless times.”

Alfred is saying just over his head and more hands are on him again (Jay bracing him, Dick trying to be easy), pulling the under suit down his arms, lifting his his hips enough to get them down his legs. Boots and the rest of his suit are laid out with his gear (nice, didn’t go commando this time. Winning —Bart…always gets flustered).

Broad palms slide over his side, under the hem of his t-shirt, and fucking warm, calloused; hands that hold a .45 with accuracy that never ceases to amaze.

*Dammit.*

“Sit up for me a lil’ bit, Baby Bird,” Jay is lifting the shirt up and gripping his sides under it at the same time to pull him up slightly before he can do it himself, and no amount of blood loss or sleep dep to explain the heat in his cheeks and upper chest when it comes off, Jay’s hands following the path up.

“I also need coffee,” he slurs a little, covering his ass. “That would be totally stellar,” and with all the in-the-way shit gone, he can just lay back again and float and babble about the inconsequentials.

("B, seriously, when did you last run McAfee?")

("Good question. The BatComputer might need your expertise for a few days. It’s slow now, Tim. So maybe a week.”

*Nope, don’t go that route. Trap.*)

"I know,” he fills in, “s’been… a while, Alfred. Chess…totally happening, okay?” At some point, Dick and Jay move enough to make way for B and Alfred to work on him. The needle of another IV bag slides home, and Tim must be really riding the blood loss train since he thinks Jason Todd is gently rubbing his arm above the insertion site while the guy looks down at him with calculating eyes for just a little longer than he needed to before moving on to the next injury.

Dick, being *Dick*, is at the head of the gurney, leaning over it, out of the way without compromising
his spot. The blue of his eyes while he’s watches. And that’s a hand is in his hair, nails lightly scraping his scalp, such an old habit that is totally effective. Fucking weaknesses. Really, he should be immune at this stage of the game, but some muscle memory kicks in while he’s half-thinking straight and he’s tilting his head into it.

B is on his other side with another pair of forceps. Dami…? Dami has his gauntlets off, dom still on, also watching the movement from the foot of the gurney.

"And I shall wait with baited breath.” And even working, blood already staining the gloves, Alfred’s voice sends a pang of nostalgia and comfort through him; something bittersweet. “It has been much too long since you have come to visit.”

"Sorry,” He doesn’t elaborate, doesn’t need to. Really, the best detective in the damn house is Alfred anyway. He’s the one that figured that shit out, like post-find Dick Grayson at the circus and solve some crime time. Alfred hums an, "oh?” with eyes politely intent. He only caught two, one ricocheted off the harness and fractured. So, he needs to do some fixing and re-stock once (if) he gets away long enough to swing by the Perch for tools and—

Key words: get away

“Crime never stops,” is a rushed mess since he's starting to feel heavier now.

"You have always been dedicated to the mission, even to dangerous extents as the other young masters are wont.” The standard be more careful with yourself finger wag. He laughs because, wow. That…that is—

“Y’ know, it’d be super nice if you could, gee, let someone get the deets when the mission gets you fucked, though.” Jay inserts. “Helpful as shit, Timmy. Just sayin’.”

And Alfred guffaws, “as I’m certain he has plenty of fine examples from which to take, Master Jason.”

B smirks, asshole, and Jay looks falsely offended, waving around one bloody, gloved hand, already prodding at some of the shrapnel from the armor, “Al, lemme be straight with you. I? Am a connoisseur of ass kicking. If Baby Bird’s gotta take some fucking notes and shit, might as well be from me, yeah?”

And…Dami actually snorts. Well, almost chokes, but close enough. “Father, with every day, I question your choices more and more.”

“Be nice to your brothers,” B fills in, half-attentive, “they might be between you and impending doom next time.”

“That fucking right, Demon. I might be saving your skinny ass while you’re busy tryin’ ta gnaw someone’s ankles off!”

“Know your limitations, Baby Bat,” Dick smirks.

“There has been some mistake,” Dami deadpans, “I am really the son of Sultan and this is all a grave misunderstanding.”

Even Tim laughs out loud in-between the slight owfuck not covered by the local Alfred administered.
“Please, Master Damian, I do hate to burst your fantasy, but you are no less a stubborn, willful brat than your Father was at your age.” Alfred glances up at Tim’s face, a sly wink as Dami gapes.

“Pennyworth—!”

“Stop telling people I was the Anti-Christ, Alfred.”

Alfred chuckles to himself while working, “do not force me to begin telling stories of your exploits again, Master Bruce.”

“Oooh shit yeah, Al’s in storytime mood.”

“Spare us, please, Pennyworth.”

“What about the time Bruce broke into the lab at the academy and—“

“Dick.”

“C’mon B,” Tim slurs, grinning like an asshole, “only two frogs exploded?”

“Quite right, Master Tim, excellent recall. However, I believe the administration was more upset due to the enormous fire—“

“Not enormous per say.”

But, welp, no one’s going to believe that for a minute.

“Didn’t they have to close the school for a month?”

And they’re laughing again, all of them with the overhead lights fuzzy and shiny

B is trying to be oddly gentle with his normal get it done mentality, eyes moving back to Tim’s face while he digs the second slug out, satisfied the fragments aren’t as granular as they could be. His eyes narrow at the few gouges left by the broken armor plating, already planning how to replace the set Tim is using with his own since he is not happy with how the plates shattered rather than broke in some very key places (this isn’t what he’s worked with before; the last suit could withstand more, something experimental? Well, veto). It’s moot; he’d figure out something before Red Robin would need a suit.

Always have a plan.

Alfred exchanges a look with him over the sources of Tim’s bleeders. The sharp armor chunks did damage. More damage than the two of them are happy about considering a few nicks had the arteries bleeding out fast. Luckily, they don’t seem to be as deep or damaging. However, his immunities have the potential for trouble considering Tim looks even thinner than the last time he was in Gotham.

And since Jason Todd sees that look pass, he glances back down at Timmy’s relaxed eye brows.

“What’s doing, Baby Bird?” Just a little something to see how well he’s tracking while Jason looks at another laceration and reaches for the second open suture kit, “Pain killer hittin’ yet?”

“Yup…feels like—waves of awesome.” He hums back a little, eyes rolling up to the lights overhead, to Dick’s profile. And really, this is like Monday morning without the hangover. No, really. Only issue was blood loss. Totally could have nailed it.
“Good,” the eldest Robin looks down, “but seriously Timmy. I thought we had a talk about this and the new default contingency plan.”

“Hey.” He stares back up at that face, feeling just the slight pulls and tugs, shrapnel coming out of his body, needles sliding through broken skin. Of course he realizes Dick is just trying to keep his attention away from it. The drugs aren’t that good (but the transfusion is working wonders). “Hey. Heeeyyy. I had No. Intention. Of. Fighting, ‘kay Big Wing? None. Nada. Down there for information.”

And when the harsh bite makes him flinch just slightly in his drugged state, he is not, at all, focusing on Jason Todd’s free hand on his wrist, gripping, grounding or Dick’s face getting slightly closer to his.

Instead, his mind skips to the current mission:

He could tell the Bats about the meta-tech the Titans have comes across, show them the tracking system he’s been using to try finding dealers, give them some deets on the labs he broken into already. He could tell them he’s sure the top distributor is still in the wind, but he’s almost got them. He can tell them he thinks there may be more “merchandise” but evidence isn’t yet conclusive.

What he’s sure as hell not going to mention is the possibility these ass hats are the ones that took him on the worst romantic cruise of his life. Nope, that…that’s gonna stay on the downlow for the moment.

He might even be able to convince them the Titans are waiting on him to validate and the team intends to take the group down on their major delivery points at one time—you know, just slightly lying to Batman. Cassie would have his back anyway.

“Uh-hu. ‘For information,’ Timmy? I call buuuulllll-shit,” Jay sing songs while he’s hunched over.

“Nah,” Tim stares up at Dick’s blue, blue eyes, “not my fault—Armenians have terrible timing.”

“Still, you should have logged into BI so we at least knew you were here,” Dick comes back. *That would have defeated the purpose of going incognito.* Instead he laughs a little at Dick’s silly ass. And just, silly.

“Get a fucking PA, Baby Bird, so’s someone can text us when you get yer ass shot and shit.” Jason gives him a glance. “Make it easier, yeah?”

Both of them are silly as hell.

“Pfft. Like someone else could keep it straight?” He laughs again while looking up at Dick, thinking about too many possibilities.

“Okay, what information were you looking for then?”

“Necessaries. Meaning of life, all the missing socks from the dryer, a copy of *The Holy Grail*, proof Big Foot exists—‘ and he’s not slurring that bad, right?

“Tim—my.”

Jason is the one laughing this time while he’s got something, and starts pulling out bits of armor chunks before time to start up with the sutures. Dick looks patiently irritated, leaning down to get even closer.
“No, seriously… Joker gets lingerie catalogues—I can totally prove it, Big Wing.”

And yes, B, everyone sees you biting your lip.

“Not for Harley, I’m positive—“

“Enough, you ass,” and Dick is grinning down at him, hair falling around them and just—

God he could…

Tim’s eyes go to Jason’s grinning face while he works.

“I would be concerned about your thought processes if I did not know your odd sense of humor,” Damian deadpans from the foot of the gurney.

Tim snickers again to deflect from his hands clenching, “aww, Baby Bat—you’re making jokes about your balls okay? Don’t judge.”

Jay’s head comes up slightly, “You wastin’ prime material on Tim, Demon? If I had feelin’s they’d be hurt as fuck right now.”

“Honestly, Master Jason, it would be worrisome should Master Damian use more profanity in his humor than you.”

Now everyone is gaping.

“Alfred, Al, I’m so hurt you could ever think Brat could top my dirty mouth. I am the king of bad motherfucking language.”

“True,” Dick fills in with a half-shrug.

With his head turned, Damian smirks and mutters, “Grayson would know, wouldn’t he?”

Tim’s teeth sink down into his lower lip to keep from adding to that statement as Jay’s eye go wide and the youngest Bat gives a half-hearted wave, claiming he needs to check on Titus and Alfred the cat. Drake, you would be more of a problem in death than life—spare us the misery and don’t die.

“You’re lucky, Tim,” B fills in the empty, somewhat awkward space. “It looks like we only have two shells and they cut a clean path. Some of the armor didn’t stand up and cut into you as well. I don’t like how much blood you’ve lost.”

“Mmhm…need a lottery ticket, right?”

“A faster transfusion would be better,” B smirks.

“At least I’m conscious this time. That’s better, right?”

But the drugs finally have their moment and are pulling him down, pulling him away from everything again; (stay awake asshole) because he can hear talking again but the focus is so hard. He can’t even feel Alfred finishing up the sutures. His eyes are closed and something, something, settles down, eases.

Because he’s in the Cave.

Getting his hurt ass patched up.
Fuck, already a trap.

"…see what he was into tonight."

"Mind reader now, Dickie?"

"Big Brother instinct."

"Aww I call bullshit on you, too."

"I'm hurt, B do you hear this? Detectives, remember?"

"Sometimes I have to wonder," B is still almost smiling, pulling off his gloves, "I've got a tracer on plane. Let's see what the nav has to say."

"Like you need the nav," Dick muses.

"Evidence is better. Logic is Tim’s Achilles’ Heel."

And yup. Nailed it. And Alfred’s pizza…oh my God, Alfred pizza—

With his eyes closed, just keeping himself on the fringes of awake, getting his shit together, the laughter presses in around him again, soft and genuine.

"That can be arranged, Master Tim," from Alfred so oops.

And the sharp tell-tale of antiseptic, harsh to his senses, muscle memory twitching from it.

"Almost there, Timmy," Dick’s palms warm against his face since, well, blood loss usually comes with why the fuck is it suddenly cold in here?

"Stupid armor," he manages, opening his eyes, coming out of meditation mode, staring up at Dick’s face above him. "I’m writing a letter."

A brow arches, “oh? Mr. Tech Guy is going to write a letter?’"

Jason snorts, honest to God snorts. “You just tell ’em, Baby Bird. Fuck their shitty armor.”

“Mmhm. I’m going to be a real asshole about it.”

“ ‘Dear Sirs,’ ” Jason slides right into it, tape on his fingers for Alfred to start up with the dressings. “I’ve recently discovered your product to be severely lacking in its main function: keeping my skinny ass from getting shot. Please note, I have been fucking shot. Thus, your product is absolute shit. Please do your best to make certain it is more effective in the future because owfuck it hurts. Best Regards, The Guy What Wants to Punch You in the Dick.’ ”

And yes, that choking noise is B turning away so he can laugh properly, you know, like the night and shit as Alfred shakes his head at the antics of boys.

While Bruce and Alfred look away, Dick tilts his head up and Jay looks over at the right time—the smiles just the right kind of different and meant just for a perfect moment.

And low things warm, not from the transfusion, not from being back at the Cave (home, huh, B?), but from the things they don’t need to say. In just that instance his brain goes syrupy, they turn those looks on him. Eyes warm, satisfied.
“Very well,” and Alfred breaks in before Tim can suck in a breath, removing bloody gloves while Tim is not at all shaken, “the difficult part is finished, Master Tim.”

“Pfft,” as if.

But, he’s being pulled up, his arms laid over Jay’s shoulders, face just nestled in the side of his neck where the skin smelled like hints of brimstone and sweat and metal; big palms gripping the back of his shoulder and neck to hold him firmly in place. Dick’s hands the ones on his sides to help hold him, being absurdly gentle after that look—

“Really not that bad,” he sighs against Jay’s jugular while Alfred is wrapping gauze around his torso.

Jason turns slightly and warm breath against the side of his ear, “Yer injury scale is all kinds of fucked anyhow, Timmy. Wanna see how much blood is on the suit?”

“Taking a guess… ‘lot?’”

“Yup. Maybe if you aren’t an ass hat about staying down for a minute, might letcha help me get that bike back up to snuff.”

“Might, huh?”

“Just because yer a loveable douche bag doesn’t mean you get off the hook, you feel me?”

And he laughs a little while Dick’s hands are rubbing his back in soothing motions in between helping. That rouses him enough to open his eyes.

(Just after Alfred lays the second hypodermic needle in the used tray for later disposal—if they were very lucky, the combination would give Master Timothy seven hours).

Fuck, he thinks the same time Dick’s fingers rubs right over the old marks without pausing. B’s presence hovers by Jay’s side and they can all see it now without impending blood loss and organ failure, can’t they? The cameras all over the damn place probably have every last mark and old burn recorded.

He pulls away from Jay on instinct, haunches his shoulders away from Dick’s touch, "sorry." Alfred is tying off the bandage at his side, not commenting on the sideshow (totally cool of you, Alfred, thanks man). Tim shakes a hand at Jason,"gimmie my shirt."

"Don't be a dumb shit," Jason tisks without any real heat, but his eyes are intent—taking in everything while Bruce moves enough to take his pulse and shine one of those little flashlights in his eyes. “No one gives a fuck how scrawny your ass is. Well ‘cept Al cause he’s got his own agenda, yeah?”

“Hm,” the butler hums, “I believe pizza was mentioned.” Bending around to get the second layer of bandage, Alfred is slightly right by his shoulder and can see-

Tim doesn’t flinch, but it takes some real thought. Dick, who has no concept of personal space, just lays a hand right under his shoulder blade, fingers spread, broad palms warm enough that a shudder works its way up his spine.

And he can just focus on that touch, just focus on being touched — and there’s no pain with it…no pain.

Groan of metal and rust
Swaying

The soft sigh of leather

Fucking blood loss and shit.

“Hey,” Jay is ducking down enough to see when Tim blinks hard, “Baby Bird, stay with me. You’re with us in the Cave. We got you.”

“Not…sure,” he slurs slightly while Alfred starts winding again.

The Bats pause, eyes going to him.

“No sure of what, Timmy?” Dicks asks in a low tone, leaning down to talk in Tim’s ear and he’s smiling slightly because finally, Baby Bird is home.

Jay grips a wrist just this side of tight, eyes gauging the reaction of his eyes,

“How many…were already gone before…they brought me on board— I…how many did I lose?” And even as the words hit the air, he’s a dumbass for saying them because that’s the real bitch behind it all, isn’t it? Yeah, got the ones there when he was taken, no problem. ABC agencies ftw. But how many were already sold off before Red Robin/Tim Drake was taken hostage? He’d never get the full list, all the numbers, he’d never—

And if his new pet project terrorists were the same group operating with worse weaponry, then there had to be more and he wouldn’t be in time to save them all and just— how fucking many more?

“Fuck, Timmy,” and Jay’s eyes darken, bluer and wide. But he didn’t even know—

“If I…” and he blinks again as the lights overhead start hurting his eyes, but the thought takes languid shape from his brain to mouth, “if I had just…just figured it out sooner, you know… They were all…just a buncha kids.” Kids like Karmen and Caro, Leo and Charlie. His kids. And who knew how many more? If he’s right about the White Triad, if he’s right...

The blink is longer than he would normally be cool with because he doesn’t usually admit totally true things and find hands lowering him back down.

“Tim,” and B’s eyes are dark in the overhead lights, “it isn’t just on you. I should have flagged them if they were shipping out from Gotham—“

The younger man just shakes his head, "not your fault, B… shitty contingencies…unexpected hostage population…communications were crap…—"

Jay makes a noise and that jerks Tim out of his head, away from that ship and those horrors. He’s here, in the Cave with Dick looking at him like he’s going to hug the shit out of him and Jason’s hand is just hanging there like he wants to grab on.

Dick wraps a palm around his forearm, eyes more dark blue than usual. "It's okay, Tim. You did what you could, didn't you?"

Tim tries to nod, "…got many of 'em as I could."

"I know, Baby Bird, I know, it's not in your nature to leave anyone behind. You did the right thing. I'm sorry, Tim. I'm so fucking sorry."

Tim's brows wrinkle because he doesn't know why—
"They never should have gotten you out of Gotham," B fills in, voice *tight*, rough around the edges, and even with the (second) round of drugs hitting his system, slowing processes, infecting RAM, Tim *knows* that signature Bat-move. It’s the haunch, the tightness of the jaw, the working muscles in arms and legs like he wants to *fight*, those indications that made an obsessed little kid with a camera first realize the Batman needed a damn Robin.

"No, Bruce." And he channels as much *don’t even with me right now* into his voice as possible when he’s drugged and almost unconscious.

"*Tim—*"

"*Nope. Stopped checking…in…right? Big vigilante now,*" and he smirks because *these guys*. Seriously, B. Take a step off the guilt box.

And hands are fucking *heavy* right now, even without his gauntlets, but Tim fights to sit up and bring one to the clenching forearm, to squeeze enough to get his point across. He manages to lean up enough to press his forehead to Bruce’s shoulder without falling the hell off the gurney. *Score.*

Not like he would. Jay and Dick are hovering by the sides anyway, giving him *that look* again, the one that makes him really, *really* want to *stay* and *go* at the same time.

"Can't blame yourself…okay? Always—always a risk…in this business." And that’s *fucking right* because those are B’s words thrown right back in the reversed circumstance. The one time, he’d felt like complete *ass* because Batman got beat pulling him out of Killer Crock’s path. Well, shoe on the other foot *B*.

And he gets a rough laugh because the message is *loud* and *clear*, and he just walked himself right *out of that* lecture later. It’s better because Bruce's arms come around him, one hand on the back of his neck, grounding him (*and maybe...* *fuck, maybe he always was one of Bruce’s Robins after all. *Heh, imagine that shit*).

He might be a different man now, but they are all. Tim sighs because yeah, it's *okay*, really it is. It was all *okay*.

More hands on him, soothing him, making him warm. He flinches at the two hands on his back because he still does, but it doesn't make Jason or Dick move them, they just grip him around Bruce's arms.

He chuffs a laugh again as the drug finally takes away his vision.

He doesn't know all those hands catch him before he slides to the floor.

**

Caro’s not here, but neither Leo nor Charlie need a telepath to tell them Miguel is…*something* not okay.

Charlie is holding his hand (Leo isn’t because *he’s not a baby*) while they walk easily down the dirt road on the way to El Chilar, Bunk’s hometown. He told them he could explain to his friends and neighbors the two boys were also meta-humans in training because the people of his village were *okay* with it. They wouldn’t need to *hide* or be afraid. Taking that into consideration, Leo and Charlie immediately agreed to go since Miguel had to drop off some very nice gifts to his significant other. Well, that and riding around in Miguel’s power is seriously, *seriously* bitchin’ (almost as cool as Kon’s TTK—almost).
And neither boy expected it to be such an incredible place with gentle rolling hills and lazy breezes. Green down here and the rise of red rock in the distance. It’s so calm and easy; they don’t have to really hide what they can do or who they are under the mask of regular children (well, the tech in Charlie’s dinosaur backpack is actually a pretty good deterrent). Miguel told them people understood power here; they understood not all people with powers were bad. Instead, at the last city when they stopped to get papas fritas, all the people were smiling down at them and waving, talking to Miguel with open expressions, calling them nenes and chamacos trying to give them this sweet bread (that they both totally took because it was just too good) and the older lady grabbed them both up in a really tight hug (not as bad as Dick’s octopus hug, that is inescapable, and they have powers).

The people weren’t afraid or cautious or babyed them because of their pasts.

They were just nice and normal.

Charlie gave one of his dinosaurs to another boy in trade for more empanadas to eat while they walked, and Leo was able to get some really good samples of stuff Miguel was talking with someone. The looks he cast over when he thought Charlie and Leo were busy weren’t his usual smiles. He seemed…worried.

Which immediately worries him because it’s Miguel. So Leo is automatically looking, waiting for some attack to come.

After saying their good-byes to the village, Charlie catches on too, looking up at Miguel randomly with squinty eyes. Their walk in the heat is unbothered, easy and none of them are even concerned with the heat and humidity. No, the cold, the cold can be used to control them—

They don’t like the cold.

Leo squints up at Miguel again and is finally almost done being concerned because something is going on. He readjusts his Voltron: Legendary Defender of the Universe backpack (he rocks the Black Lion and Shiro is so, so, so cool and Clark thinks so too) because the smaller pocket in front is already full of samples to compare later. It’s just so heavy and he knows there has to be some good minerals here, and he has the big book in case Miguel’s boyfriend wants to look too. You know, just in case he might like that sort of thing.

Charlie, however, grins at Leo’s discomfort because in his backpack, his things: cellphone, tablet, three more dinosaurs (which are relatively good trading material apparently), two bags of cheddar Goldfish and some of Ma Kent’s chocolate chip cookies (he wanted to make sure they had snacks) are all much lighter and so much cooler that some old rocks and stuff. So if Miguel’s boyfriend was kind of okay with them using just a little bit of their powers, Charlie could show him how he could play Angry Birds without touching anything, and it would be just wicked as hell.

Miguel, however, is babbling on at a faster-than-normal pace, just talking about how he grew up here, who the people were, how they reacted when he realized he had powers, how supportive his small town was of him, going right in to the Titans and how they should be pulling together soon. (“Para cuando volvamos, Jefé habrá acabado de cazar.”)

(“Dos millas, veo las casas desde aquí…¿Lo entenderán cuando lleguemos?”).

And the words are running out fast, faster than Miguel’s normal. He’s forgetting his English at some points, and the boys can fill in the details with context clues, but something just isn’t—

The finality of okay, we know everything isn’t fine now, can you just not? makes Leo and Charlie
look at each other behind his back because Miguel’s hands are shaking just slightly, and he’s stopped calling them colegas or hombretones. He just seems to be filling in the silence with words, but Miguel is always warm when he talks, and now his voice is just different.

Assessing, Leo squints in the distance, and the small ridge gives way to the clay tops of houses. The village isn’t that far now, but the younger boy is going to get the full story from Miguel before they get there—he’s seen Bunker step right up to Lex Luthor’s killing machines and smile while he’s fighting; so, if Miguel is nervous about something in the village ahead, Leo needs to know too. Karm and Caro aren’t here, so he needs to make sure they’re prepared for just in case. He reaches up, grips Miguel’s forearm; he and Charlie pull slightly, making the older man’s long strides shorten and stop.

Miguel’s rolling talk also stutters to a halt as he looks down at the two.

“Hey, you gotta tell us the truth, okay?”

The Titan just arches his brows up when Charlie’s young face goes deadly serious. Leo is ready to ask about it, what they might be facing, but Charlie beats him to it…and has apparently figured something out.

“Is he mean to you?”

Oh. And Leo…Leo didn’t think of that. He, like Mr. Batman, always expects the next corner to have some kind of fight waiting for them. He didn’t think Miguel might be nervous about seeing his boyfriend, or that maybe—

Oh.

Leo, face solemn, straightens his back at Charlie’s epiphany, “if he’s mean to you, we’re gonna to kick his ass.” Because Miguel didn’t deserve to be hurt. He’s…he’s the guy that wanted to take them to their first playground and then Mount Rushmore; he plays that stupid Hungry, Hungry Hippos game Cuddle Bug loves (because she can’t unconsciously cheat), and he take time to teach them some Spanish when they’re in the Tower, and refuses to put up with Charlie’s tendency to stay up really, really past bedtime, and—

Leo’s eyes narrow dangerously. Oh yes, he can shapeshift into a wolf now. Charlie can use the tech he has on hand to create small but painful surges of power. The two of them are completely capable of taking on a human, a human that might be hurting their friend.

Game on.

Blinking, Miguel just stares down at them for a moment, trying to figure out who in the superhero world they may be talking about…? Gar can be sarcastic but bromas, jokes, yes?

“Language,” Charlie hisses, but Leo just smirks to one side (just like Red).

“What— Leo, Charlie, who are you talking about?” Miguel starts with identity so he can—

“You boyfriend,” Leo clarifies, “Miguel, level with us here, okay? You can tell us if he hurts you or if he’s not nice.” Because wolves have big teeth.

Big. Teeth.

The jolt of shock has him, “whoa, mi hermanitos— por qué…? Ah, wait, ah where is this coming from all of a sudden?”
“You’re not being yourself.” Leo points out instantly, “we know something’s wrong.”

“We can tell, you know,” Charlie pipes up.

Miguel hikes a brow at them.

“Yeah! So, if it’s because he’s not good to you, then you don’t have to stay with him. You know that, right?” Leo urges, gripping Miguel’s wrist tighter because this is important. And if he needed to activate the Titan’s communicator attached to his belt loop to get Miguel away from abuse, then you bet he’s going to. Red would say he made the right call, and Cassie would punch his mean boyfriend out into space. And he would turn into a wolf and bite really, really hard and Charlie would zap him on—

Charlie seems to be onboard, also skittering around his Titan communicator. “We won’t let him anymore, okay? We won’t let that happen.”

Because no one gets to hurt Miguel. Or Gar. Or Rach. Or Kon or Bart or Tim or Cassie—

No one.

He and Leo and Cuddle Bug and Karmel-Cake aren’t going to let that happen, not to their Titans.

Miguel just shakes himself out a little (because…Dios Mio because these two littles…he’s just wants to hug them forever) and takes a knee to grip both of their shoulders, “Whoa, no. No, he’s…we are very much in love. He is very good to me. That’s…that’s not an issue. He, Charlie, Leo, mi amorcito, he would never hurt me, okay? I would not be with someone who hurt me.” And understanding what happened here, how their young faces look very, very enojado, angry, and on his behalf.

No, no, the problem is not his novio, it’s that—

“Then tell us what’s wrong. I promise we aren’t going to get mad.” Charlie is gripping Miguel’s hand with both his now, staring up with reasonable all over his face.

“Maybe he doesn’t like kids?” Leo tries, “and that’s okay. We’ll stay to ourselves and be quiet.”

Charlie nods enthusiastically. He knows Miguel misses his boyfriend a lot because he has to be with the Titans and do dangerous stuff. So, if it would make him happy, Charlie would just look around the village and help Leo collect more dumb samples or something.

“No, no, that— He loves niños of all ages. He teaches them,” and now Miguel smiles a little since, well, he is very hot for teacher.

“Okay,” Leo draws out, chewing on his lower lip, “then you need to tell us what’s wrong before we get to your village, Miguel, or we might get in trouble.” And his eyes narrow, “on accident.”

After a second, Miguel sighs down at them and says very, very carefully, “Leo, Charlie…you understand, mi amante, he is…he is a man, yes?”

The two younger children exchange a confused glance because, well, of course they understood. Really, Miguel?

“He’s your boyfriend, so he’d have to be a boy, right? I mean, we knew that like a long time ago.”

Tinges of pink heat Miguel’s cheeks, “and we are both…men.”
Now Leo is arching a brow at him and Charlie is blinking owlishly because why is this making Miguel upset again?

“Miguel,” Leo starts slowly, “is he nice to you?”

“Yes, yes, he is very good to me.” The older Titan assures them.

“Are you’re good to him, too?” Charlie sees where Leo is heading with this.

“I think so. We’re very happy with each other.”

“Then,” and Leo narrows his eyes again for a completely different reason, “is it supposed to matter if you’re men?”

It doesn’t matter when it’s Jason and Dick (not that they really let anyone see anything), so why would it matter with Miguel? Now they’re getting all confused.

Mouth hanging open, Miguel just stares for a moment, and abruptly, he snags both boys right up in his arms, and holds on tight enough that Charlie squeals and Leo “oof”s a few times. But the mass, the pressure of his power swirls around them and lifts them into the air.

“You two? Asombroso. Amazing.” And his voice is a little thick, a little heavy.

Charlie just laughs as the pressure of power moves them, hanging on to Miguel’s arm around his waist, “we’re your friends, dummy. As long as he’s nice to you and you’re happy, we’re happy.” But the calculating look in Charlie’s eyes tells all: as long as he’s nice.

“And we are amazing, anyway. It took you this long to think so?” Leo’s eyes twinkle as he catches sight of the tall form of a young man dressed simply in a white shirt and slacks, holding a cane. But the look on his face the moment he sees Miguel, the way his expression lightens up, well, Leo guesses they aren’t going to have to kick his ass after all.

**

“You are very much not going to like this,” O singsongs over the private line to the Cave. “When I say that, just remember, boss, I’ve been one of your partners for a long, long time—”

“Barbara,” B manages that tone, and she laughs softly over the connection.

“Okay. Let me know if you have any questions after you watch it.”

“Understood. Cave out.” And B sighs a little, looking over where Jason and Dick are putting Tim in a t-shirt and sweats, holding his limp body gingerly while Alfred cleans up the used supplies and subtly keeps looking over at the lost son. Damian is in his own civvies, hair still sticking in all directions, Tim’s sweats over one shoulder while he supervises injury control (all Alfred’s doing, probably since ‘give the boy something to do to keep him out of trouble’ is really an old tactic; one he’s employed himself a time or two…or ten).

When he turns back to open the file from O, he has a lot of expectations. This? This could go any number of places. Well, it’s Barbara so he could be ready to watch anything from the Joker in downtown literally sitting on the toilet in between bouts of carnage to a linked cat video with Selena’s face edited over in a continuous loop of string playing.

Her tastes run the gambit (at least she inherited something from him).
What he gets is crucial intel, just not one that fit any of the preconceived expectations.

His brows raise almost into his hair because even though the footage is grainy, there’s *no* mistaking what’s going on in the shadowy underground bunker. (Yes, Babs. *Questions.*)

B takes it in, already moving into *detective* mode to look for any and all clues to the scene and events. The next level of his brain works at connecting this to the bigger puzzle.

- Black Market Meta-tech—dangerous *and* unpredictable
- Genetic implants to change the tech’s capabilities (which begs the question of *who are the “donors”*?)
- Shaw in Blackgate making connections with the other criminals operating inside Gotham and other contacts outside the city in the form of visiting “family” (he’s reestablishing his old network)
- Red Robin going to the Demon’s Head and not for the mentioned “Wednesday appointment” (of which B read about, *extensively* in the Titans’ database—that he *really* was accessing to do maintenance and testing, or will be the story he’s sticking to)

Ra’s could realistically fit in several ways and have a dozen motivations for each of them—B would start digging into that angle himself, but be very *hopeful* and *optimistic* Tim would trust him with the truth. Maybe this time, they could gain a foothold in the secondary objective for Plan: Bring Tim Back to the Bats.

That object, to make sure Red has a safety net, but more to the point, to try countering his instinctual, solitary contingencies. A glance in that direction is his third son dressed and seemingly out for the count.

Damian utters a low, displeased sigh over his left shoulder.

The footage continues, angles changing to catch the room full of ninjas while Red is presented with some kind of shipping container, “I don’t want to hear any gloating.”

Father and son exchange a look, and yes, that’s his little destroyer of feelings, smirking at him. B isn’t going to argue since his youngest is developing his own sense of humor whether he realizes it or not. Best not to let him know how he’s becoming just like his brothers. *That* meltdown could be put off.

“I am merely going to point out yet another piece of evidence in defense of my theory.” Dami replies mildly while the feed rolls on the big screen.

Bruce watches Red check over the crate, taking in the details.

With a few commands, his systems kick into analysis of the sketchy details. Soon they’d have a transcript, but Tim definitely has something large on his plate if he’s going to Ra’s (and Bruce has spent *time* in the Watchtower examining this maturation in the relationship between Tim and Ra’s—tracking their interactions since, well, Damian may have a *point* about Ra’s very *intense* interest).

“I’ve been dealing with your grandfather since before you were born. I’ve mentioned that, haven’t I?”

Damian sighs, trying not to let his frustrations get to him, “I am *aware* you believe me compromised in regards to——“

“No,” B turns from the system, stands from the chair to look at his youngest, both hands on Damian’s shoulders to make sure he has his boy’s attention. “If anyone knows the League of
Assassins’ inner workings, it would be you, Dami, and yes, I expect you to have mixed feelings about your mother and Ra’s. But, I do not like putting you in a position where you have to fight against them, not because I question your loyalties, but I don’t want you to fight against your own family—family that still cares about you. I don’t want to do that to you, son.”

And even though Dami will be fourteen soon, please Father stop this embarrassing display— he doesn’t fight the inevitable Bat hug. Perhaps it is simply one of those things he must eventually learn to deal with (or that he actually has come to value).

“Just because I hope you’re wrong doesn’t mean I think you’re compromised, Damian.”

And if the younger’s hands tightening at Father’s back—

“Aw, Kodak moment,” but Jay’s voice is oddly soft, teasing more than his usual hard lowbrow.

Dick just coos at the two (because, sorry Bruce, he’s the one that got Dami to withstand a hug in the first place—you’re welcome) while effortlessly holding Tim against his chest, preparing to take the injured bird upstairs for some serious sleepy time.

As B and Dami pull back, the elder Robins catch the looped feed from the beginning, and the irritation wells up from somewhere deep since they were pretty sure they’d handled this.

“Well isn’t that some shit.” Jay tisks, eyes all for the limp man in Dick’s arms, “You? Got some explaining to do, Baby Bird.”

And, yes, that shit was going to happen.

**

There’s still masking tape stuck to the ceiling.

There’s still masking tape...

He can place a case for each piece (sometimes multiple ones, depends on how good the tape is), and for some reason, his eyes go right to the yellowing corners and grey fingerprint smudges right above his head. Smaller hands back then, and well, a bouncy as hell mattress.

Lack of sleep has always been a thing for him—even from before Robin. Maybe being left alone while he was young and his parents were away caused it (you know, back when he was seven and running around the streets of Gotham looking for Batman and Robin); well, whatever because the end result was taping photos, notes, poorly drawn stick figures, and whatever else to the case he was working on at the time right up there so he could stare until it all started coming together. Until he got an answer.

And…the tape. The tape is still there.

Just like the day he left for good.

Twinges of pain when he moves brings back the memory of O trying to be a voice of reason or something equally unbelievable—and getting his shit stitched back together (thanks, Alfred…again). Now comes the part where he berates himself for not getting on the damn bike and hitting it back to the Perch while he had the chance.

**Intense scrutiny.**
Sounds about right.

Tim takes a second to eye the window because that's most definitely an option (something, anything to divert because it’s not a storage room, is it?)

Tim shuts his eyes tight, his chest expanding with something seriously heavy and dammit—

"I'm not going to wake him up, Demon. Jesus, take a pill."

Swallowing thickly, he considers lying back down to fake it, but really, Bats.

“Yeah, yeah, down in a minute.”

Jason eases the door open, sticking his head in. His brows go up when he catches sight of Tim awake and the quick dart of eyes goes back up to the window with a final calculation. Well, Jason sees that train, motherfucker. Uh, no. Not this time.

Ambling across the room in old jeans and a faded “Men cannot possess anything as long as he fears death” t-shirt, Jay stands at the foot of the bed, between Tim and the window, you know, like a ruggedly-handsome, snarky deterrent.

"Shouldn't be up yet, Baby Bird." And he grins a little when the eyes narrow at the window one last time. “How ya feeling, other than like shit?”

He grunts a little and shoves a hand in his hair, “it’s like a really bad hangover without the fun backstory. Just disappointing.”

Jason grins, wide when he laughs. “That’ll teach ya’ not to call, asshole.”

"Yeah, yeah, I suck. How long have I been in la-la land?" Because there's still work to do. He’s got a few days to recoup, and then there’s a whole lot of investigating going down.

Jason shrugs, "almost six hours. Seem to need it."

"Sleep is for the non-vigilantes, I thought we talked about it once. You know, that time I had to get the helmet off with a large, powerful saw." Tim rubs his arms like he's cold, but it's just... There’s a few new books on the shelf (since he left it empty), well old ones, just new copies. Someone, someone put a Haley’s Circus poster with the Flying Graysons depicted in a large frame, below it in the same frame, the color photo of him sitting on Dick’s knee the night his parents died. And the smile, the genuine happy that just takes the adult version over completely is right there in that eight-year old kid.

There’s...more. Little things scattered that make his throat tight in a stupid way, but he just gives his old space a cursory look, trying to remain somewhat neutral about the whole thing. (The band posters are still up—the ones he didn’t have time to get).

The look on Jay’s face when he glances around as well makes Tim wonders if the other guy was in the same place at one time. Weird throw-back déjà vu time. Ick.

“We did talk, as in moderation and shit, remember?”

Decisively, Tim gives a hum and throws back the blankets gingerly, moving to stand. A hand hovers over his aching mid-section but damn it, he’s standing. Already ahead of the game.

"Uh-hu, c’mere —" and a hand on his bicep is nice, not necessary, but Jason just keeps up with him,
stepping across the feelings this room (his room) is encouraging. And well, it’s pretty fucking crazy it’s not covered up and filled with old furniture, Bat ottomans or something.

"I'm not going to go back to sleep or out the window with you creeping on me, so in search of coffee it is." The T-shirt and sweats aren't too small or hand me downs from Dick. The clothes are new. The clothes are his size.

Jay’s hand tightens slightly around his bicep, and yes, slightly more owfuck than anyone is happy about, but the last reserves of pain meds are still working to take out the worst of the bite. They can do hallway and stairs, really, no problem.

"Oh, by the way, 'preciate you not slitting my throat in my sleep. Way to be a bro."

Jason just shakes his head with a little grin as they go slowly down the familiar hallway. “Sometimes I gotta wonder what kind of shit yer hiding behind the smart-ass this time. It’s a tell, y’know. That’s how I getcha, Baby Bird.”

And that thought doesn’t hit him several different ways. Nope, not at all. “I like to think my humor makes an impression.”

“Distraction,” Jay corrects as they take the main staircase gingerly, but really, all good.

“That too,” he breathes hard on the last step.

The hand on his bicep tightens again, pulls back. Jason just backs him away from the open dining room doors and the sound of voices, taking them around the corner. Craning his neck to make sure they weren’t spotted (like from Scooby Doo the coast is clear gang), the older Bat braces a forearm on the wall above Tim’s shoulder and leans down a little with some serious face on.

“Anything you wanna tell me before we go in there, Tim?” And it’s an easy kind of thing Jason Todd only pulls out when some not okay shit hits. He’s heard the Red Hood use almost the same tone to assure small children no, I ain’t gonna hurt cha, and yes, I’ll kick ‘im again if ya wanna I do it. Stand back. Blood and shit.

So maybe his neck gets a little hot with all the sudden attention. But really, anything he should preemptively spill? Uh, no. Not at all. It’s not your fuck up now is it?

But Jason isn’t going to give up without something, so: “I’ve been tracking some scary tech,” he admits, “it’s…We’ve come up against it, so gathering information, okay? That’s why I was in the warehouse.”

Jason tisks at him, “some truth. Some bullshit. How much of each?”

Tim sucks in a breath (and wow, they are really…close) to say something probably convincing when Jason’s brows go up a little.

After a minute, he sticks with, “truth is I’m still gathering data, but—” and cutting it close here, “with everything I have so far…it’s going to be bigger than I initially thought. The extent of how big is still under investigation.”

Jason sighs a little, but well…the hand moves from his bicep to the back of his neck, thumb moving in circles. It’s the same grounding touch from those fucking (flashbacks, it’s okay, you can say it) moments of weakness and even from the roof when the Red Hood muttered nonsense about being at fault for the duration of Tim’s capture. And goddammit if it doesn’t feel nice, wanted. Tim closes his eyes a minute so he only feels it when Jay leans in and he’s pressed against that nerdy Tolstoy shirt;
he can maybe get warm now because yeah, Jay is perma-warm like Dick is perma-cuddly.

Strange...they've come to a point where this isn't weird anymore. Where this is becoming normal.

Against the top of his head, Jay speaks low and thick, real, “You’ll tell me the deets, Timmy. Not after the fact this time, feel me?”

And just...Jason.

“I mean it, yeah? Fuck, tell Dick or Demon, just some motherfucker what knows your tendency to pick the biggest fight in the room.”

The arms get that much tighter, an inh, not enough to put more pressure on his injuries, but enough to hold him up if his legs suddenly go out or a random portal appears to whisk them away to some weird multiverse.

He hates it, but— “okay.”

The reality is he doesn’t have to specify when, like maybe twenty seconds before he kicks the shit out of the last guy or something oh, hey, just ah, letcha know I might be doing a thing—

“Say what I wanna hear.”

“...I’ll try not to be an asshole this time.”

A hum against his chest, “that’s the ticket.”

And really, this is a good way to start out the bigger plan: next Dick, then Dami, work his way up to Bruce. He’s just got to be convincing enough to pull it off while still putting his own scene together on the side, but if his brain is slightly hard-wired to be more concerned with Jason’s broad palms against his spine, well, no one would be the wiser.

**

The dining room is as chaotic as Alfred will let it get. Bruce is mostly dressed in a suit sans jacket, drinking coffee while he stands over Dami’s shoulder, looking down at school work. The Bat-language commences in a series of non-verbal cues and eyebrows, huffs, grunts, and the occasional mouth twitch. Dick is already in his uniform shirt, coffee in one hand while Alfred makes an attempt at blotting some stain out of the sleeve (blood, ketchup, or jelly, who can really tell with Dick?), the gun belt is laying over a chair.

The whole scene is very...domestic.

New clothes, old room, perma-warm Jason Todd, totally-in-his-uniform Officer Dick Grayson. Shit.

And as stupid as it is, he suddenly wants to run, body automatically tensing for it.

But Jason just pulls out a chair (his chair) at Dick’s left and looks back, drawing everyone's eyes. Bruce looks content and Dick is grinning over at him. Dami gives him an arched brow (why are you still standing? I pwn Bat-language, Baby Bat).

He moves gingerly to sit his ass down at his old spot with a rush of nostalgia (and no, not smiling like a dumbass—okay, maybe). He braces a hand on the table to keep the movements to a minimum.

Dick has his gun belt on by the time he slides down in his seat by Bruce’s left hand at the head of the table with Tim on Dick’s other side. “Morning, Timmy.”
“Mmhm, hi Dick.”

Leaning over, Dick shakes a serious finger, “after work, Captain America. The new one, okay?”

Tim’s eyes narrow, also leaning in, “you’re not even a fan.”

“So? I appreciate an incredibly unrealistic action movie occasionally. Besides! No one else I know watches them, so it’s just stupid to point out all the inaccuracies by yourself.”

Jason is at the sideboard, laughing and filling two mugs of coffee while Alfred pats Dick on the shoulder.

“Omelets, Master Timothy?” Alfred breaks in mildly. “Or something more filling perhaps?”

Just a blink, just a second, and mental processes catch up with a very important realignment based on recent facts: his room is still upstairs, and no one is trying to usher him to the door. He’s apparently staying for breakfast.

Welcome Home.

“Actually, I’m not really——” and the look from Alfred causes a reversal before he gets himself in more trouble, “uh, an omelet sounds pretty good actually. Thanks, Alfred.”

A slight bow, “if memory serves, spinach, Roma tomatoes, and cheese?”

Oh. Well, dammit, that does sound— “yes, yes, and yes please.”

“Very good, sir. It shan’t be long,” and the butler is smiling, pleased, while he whisks away the empty plates still on the table; even better, Jay puts a heavenly, steaming cup of coffee right in front of him, and just—coffee.

Dami goes back to his school work, recreating the problematic equation, “I do not see how American children are able to learn this way. Why make something so simple as Geometry this complex?”

“Because Americans are crazy,” Tim replies mildly, running a hand down his face and fighting a yawn.

Dami just gives him a flat look, "as if I had not already discerned that much. Look at you for example."

And again, the gentle mirth around the table is something different but comfortable. Almost like when the Titans hazed him for being, you know, on his shit. Tim huffs a laugh along with them, sipping with a satisfied sigh. That’s all it takes for processes to come on-line for real this time since intense scrutiny and how long are they going to wait are in the background.

Bruce nods at the solution, pats the back of Dami’s head affectionately, and takes his seat as the youngest finishes up.

“You’re going to need a few days at least, especially if you’re in the middle of something,” and B’s eyes are knowing in ways that make Tim get a little more of that unexplainable urge to run. “I’m going to Wayne Enterprises in your place for the day, but I can start helping you on your findings when I get back.”

Oh…

Working a case together (like in the early days), that’s—
B being a good Dad/crime fighter. Bonding over their common interests. That...that's very cool, but exceptionally counter-productive in the whole leave-me-my-criminals bit. Damn. It's fine. He has a plan.

“Apparently, Tam is already working on a list of tasks for me. Anything I should look out for?”

Tim clears his throat a little because apparently, no one likes to make shit easy on him. Seriously.

"Tam. Don't offer to do anything or she will put you to work. I think burying her victims in paperwork hell, where there's no hope and no escape, appeals to her sadistic side. No, I'm kidding. Maybe a little. Um, no meetings that I know of. I usually go down to R&D on light days, check out how testing is going and maybe drop by HR. They probably have some lists ready."

"Lists?"

He nods without looking up from his plate, "birthdays, work anniversaries, things that might need an email or a certificate or something."

"Ah."

“The closet in my office is stocked with anything you might need for those.” And yes, shelves of celebratory stuffed animals, certificates, chocolates, and etc. are just the beginning. Tam has a ton of them in storage.

"Good boss things, huh Baby Bird?” Jason teases lightly.

Tim grins and glances over at him because, well, always have a plan.

“Other than that, my pet projects are still in either development or testing phases. I'll review the progress over the weekend, see where we are.”

Alfred returns to disperse plates slightly to the side of Jason and directly in front of Tim, pointedly since, well, the butler only does subtlety to a point.

Tim looks up at him with a raised brow, but Alfred just folds his hands with that calm, cool, and collected expression, and he waits.

And Tim knows, he knows. Alfred will just stand there until it's all gone. If nothing is happening fast enough for him, he will slowly, slowly start leaning just an iota closer with every passing minute that food isn't eaten. And no one is safe from it, not even Bruce.

With another grin up at him, Tim puts the coffee down and picks up a fork. He doesn't need a hovering Alfred, no, no, everyone else hovering is bad enough thanks.

Bruce watches Tim eat, catching Alfred's glance and smiles a little bigger. Satisfied, Alfred moves to fill the mugs around the table, notes Master Tim is eating with appropriate energy, Master Dick seems to have slept more than an hour, Master Jason is not as twitchy this morning, and Master Damian may actually complete a full homework assignment. Miracles, indeed.

“Mm, coffee’s great, Alfred, thanks.” Dick finally seems sated, looking over at Tim apparently enjoying the hell out of home cooking. Alfred retreats for coffee cake (as a majority of the boys have an unmitigated sweet tooth—of which they learned from Master Bruce).

And while Dami finishes up his cursed homework, Bruce talks about WE business in general (Dick
and Jason do care, no matter what they say—mostly it’s just to make sure they don’t get sucked in to
duties and parties; really, B can’t blame them a bit) for the family to see what direction the company
seems to be moving. More importantly, B wants to test the waters and see how many connections to
the current case under Tim’s belt have proven solid.

Tim doesn’t realize he’s eaten the whole plate and toast until the last bite is in his mouth, and Alfred
is smiling gently down at him in approval, sweeping the plate away to set down a small bit of sweet
cake to him first. Dick moans into the first bite and Jay looks absurdly content. Even Dami pauses,
snatching the plate greedily (get it, Baby Bat).

“Energy efficiency is the wave of the future,” Bruce is saying with a shrug. “I can’t fault you there.”
Maybe just a bite and holy shit, this is great. The cake melts on his tongue of pure, gooey awesome.
“Good investment to keep up with Luthor, you know,” he manages while chewing, already looking
forward to the next bite.

“Very true,” B comes back mildly, “we’re also working on some interesting contracts from what
Tam and Mike tell me.”

Tim nods, “twelve new ones on the books so far. Most of them are either in the design phase or in
development. Pretty soon we should be moving the crucial ones to testing.”

“One in particular Mike mentioned, a monitoring system. He said you scrapped the original product
and started from the drawing board.”

Welp, ruined that next bite.

Tim pauses mid-chew, feeling something very much like oh shit, here’s the part where it’s a trap
creeping up his spine. And, he really doesn't want to go here, not with how close he is to proving the
main theory.

“The replacement system in testing.” He admits slowly. “The…initial WEToMS was—” and the
gooey sweetness clogs his throat a little, forcing him to swallow (“All of this can be over if you give
us the system, Meester Wayne. No one knows where you are, and no one will come for you.”)

A hand on his bicep has him blinking, gaze jerks over to Dick beside him and those eyes.

“Timmy?”

Dick makes sure his grip is firm but moves with the motion of Tim’s arm, not trying to make the
younger feel in any way trapped. He doesn’t want to set Tim into an episode (by the dilation and
soft, short breaths, he’s close to it anyway), but as he’s learned in the past month or so, a firm touch
or shock of pain could sometimes pull him back. Soothing talk helped keep him calm once he was,

Bruce’s eyes are calculating and concerned. (He already knows about the system. World’s Greatest
Detective, right? Dammit).

Dick and Jason exchange a side-eye without moving their heads (you know, the kind of thing old
married couples can do—some kind of mind meld or something).

Tim turns back to the plate in front of him, face heating slightly, “Uh, sorry—”

“Hey,” and Dick’s tone is soft, his half-grin not reaching his eyes and the hand on his arm tightens
just enough to notice, “you can talk about it, okay? It’s just us here. We’ve got your back, Baby
Bird.”

And *that* just…Really, Dick? Jay, B, and Dick too? Just *these guys* and their fucking supportive asses.

Staring down at the half-eaten coffee cake, he makes the explanation neutral as possible even though he’s already pretty sure this isn’t new information. He’d never gone into the details of the system that night with Dick and Jay, hadn’t seen the relevance. They didn’t care about the *why* behind everything at the time.

“The Wayne Enterprises Tactile Monitoring System was initially created for military application—keeping count of ground troops, supplies, vehicles, whatever might be needed in combat conditions. It was…a solid concept. Trackers were cheap to mass produce, small enough to go on just about anything. We had a full page, one hundred fifty, of them in less than fifteen minutes, stuck one inside a lunch box and put it on a Delta flight overseas. They’re durable, long range, and hard to see unless you know what you’re looking for.”

Dami gently closes his book without looking away from Tim Drake’s neutral expression and fixed gaze on the painting over on the opposite wall.

“Nothing important until Lucius and I agreed on a few more enhancements. We wanted to add some additional coding for reporting purposes, but then we also wanted it to be able to calculate scenarios and predict the likely places that could possibly match similar criteria. It worked amazingly well in test…” and yeah, it *did*. That was the problem. It worked too well, so much that it got unwanted attention.

B doesn’t make him say it, which is *super cool* of him

“—but, you were abducted by terrorists before it could go full-blown development.”

He is *completely* locking down that fucking file the second he’s back to his systems to access the Tower’s mainframe and just…

“…Yes.”

“Terrorists that wanted that system, that knew its capabilities.”

“…yes.” He blinks hard, picks up his coffee in a steady hand and sips.

Under the table, Bruce’s hand tightens (because they *never* should have gotten to Tim, *not Tim Drake CEO, the Bat failed him in that*), “you took them down. Exposed them and their supporters. Then you found the mole in Wayne Enterprises and corrupted the system yourself to draw him out.”

*Deep breath*, “…yes.” Because *really*, he might have sabotaged the whole *I still have a room* thing right here, right? If B knew enough (which, *duh*), then he’d know about the all fuck-ups during that little sea voyage vacay to Hell and (*Bad. Robin. Asshole*)—

“You did everything humanly possible to do the right thing,” Bruce’s tone is…pleased and it’s like that time when they’d had a particularly brutal night, riding in the big car to finally, *finally* go back, get some food, get put back together, and be glad they fought the good fight, when he was *Robin* and chosen or not didn’t *matter*. B had looked over at him, his throat throbbing like a *bitch*, and just —

“Good job tonight.” Warm and ironic with that half –grin. And he’d *known* they be up until dawn, school called off, watching stupid re-runs, eating Alfred’s leftovers, putting off reports until later.
They’d tell Alfred all about it, B would sneak chips off his plate (like he wouldn’t guess), and maybe pass out on the couch to wake up with blankets and pillows and the smell of fresh coffee.*

That abrupt memory is strange enough that Tim looks over and gets an eye full of proud Bat Dad. His mouth might drop open a little because dammit, it means something again and he didn’t even know when that shit started happening.

“Taking them down after being severely tortured, saving captive children, cleaning up WE, and making the decision to take that system off the market? Tim, you did it. I doubt anyone in our line of work could have done better.”

Dami lifts a brow, “I could, Father. Perhaps were I in you place, I would have bored them with ridiculous puns and pop culture references you call humor. Honestly, Drake, twenty minutes of witty banter should have done everything possible to kill them.”

The laugh is choked, abrupt, almost helpless while he looks at Dami’s smirk—the smirk that is worlds different than two years ago. And this, too, is becoming normal. Realizing Baby Bat is using his sarcasm to take some of the weight off, some of the tension away. It does a little even with Dick, Jason, and Bruce looking at him with affection and pride and—

Fuck, how is he supposed to handle this?

“There were a lot of fuck-ups,” he comes back finally, almost numb because, well, there were and all of them should really just come out with it already, right?

Jay just nods slightly, sipping on his own coffee, “always are in a messy op, Baby Bird. Don’t cha know that by now?”

Dick picks right up before he can really get in a breath, “Timmy, I’m pretty sure each of those kids are perfectly fine with what you did. At the end of the day, you saved them. Isn’t that what matters?”

“But how many were gone before I could? How many in the last year I didn't get? Hovers around.

“The only fuck-up I can see,” B fills in evenly, “is the fact you had no security detail with you while developing this system, which is standard protocol even for vigilantes, Tim. Everyone on that team had military police escorts except for you.”

Shit.

“…I…suspected a mole in the first planning stages,” he admits grudgingly and welp, here’s fuck-up number one, “there were too many indications someone was trying to hack into the files.”

“Jesus fuck,” Jay puts his cup down hard, loudly, warm edges of anger making him sneer, “I see where this is going. You were playing some kinda goddamned bait, yeah? That was a dumb ass move, you feel me?”

“I had a-” he starts.

“I don’t give a shit,” Jay interrupts, “because no matter how fucking good you are, there’s always the wild card you ain’t gonna be able to predict. That’s why you’ve got a team of punk-ass metas what got yer back. Them not knowing what you got on deck is on the other damn side of town from okay, Tim, you feel me?”

“Please tell me you’re having a revelation right now, seeing the error of your ways playing lone wolf,” and it’s supposed to be funny, with that teasing edge Dick can pull off, but the expression is
so, so much trying not to get righteously pissed.

“I called out for the kill-everyone bomb situation, didn’t I?” He counters, pushing his chair back and easing himself up to stand (and all of them half-rise out of their chairs when he does, but the glare puts them all back in their seats). The move to the sideboard for more coffee is enough for him to shake off the very strange appreciation, mixing a little cream and sugar while Alfred comes back out of the kitchen and eyes his half-eaten cake with a frown.

The butler merely clears his throat and puts down a bowl of fresh fruit instead, taking the cake away while Tim takes his sweet time coming back to the table (Intense. Scrutiny. Even from Dam). Damni

“The point is, the system had too many applications any terrorists could have used or that could have been used against them. At the time, I didn’t know about their organization specifically, that’s how under the radar they were, but I knew whatever parties wanted it would come out of the woodwork eventually. I just needed the mole to give them the right kind of intel.” He pops a grape in his mouth because fuck, talking about this is uncomfortable as hell. The deets were just (one more step back into Gotham) another check under the oh, you kinda messed it up column. But, diversion tactics could be tricky things, “I…underestimated them. I fully expected them to break into Wayne Towers since criminals do that type of shit. I didn’t anticipate they’d come after me directly. Only someone with top level access could have seen I had a part in the sub-routine. No one else knew that I was behind the design, not even the rest of the team.”

“That’s how y’ figured that asshole musta been someone close to the top,” Jason fills in without looking away, keeping Timmy’s gaze, try to keep him grounded.

“Yes, with the level of access needed, I was able to narrow the field,” he replies slowly, pausing to pick out another piece of fruit, chewing thoughtfully. “When I got back to WE, I scrapped the system, started over.”

“Did you really, Tim?” Dick’s voice is a little too soft and serious, too knowing.

Damnit, Bats. “The only copy is triple encoded on my ghost drive.” He admits calmly. “But, at the end of the day, I got the bad guys,” maybe, “so all good.”

It’s Damni of all of them, calling him out on his bullshit. “Good does not seem to be the appropriate description, Drake. Successful, yes, but not good. It is disconcerting to know your team was left in the dark.” But Damni’s eyes slide to Grayson—during his time in the Tower, he and the eldest Robin took time to review some of the protocols. The creation time frames post-abduction, his team realizing much as they have, how very dangerous Red Robin could be left to his own devices without a safety net.

The soft huff of laughter around a piece of melon, and Tim is throwing Baby Bat a half-grin, “they haven’t let me live it down yet.”

With eyes darker blue, Damian sighs, “tt. I was able to get Conner Kent to find you by your heartbeat. I’m aware they have Red Robin modus operandi in the attempt to counteract your idiocy. If it will keep you from getting maimed, I have no problem helping in their endeavors—specifically when you keep circumventing them.”

And here’s the tricky part, always give some of the truth—throws off the Bat-radar, “Dami…back then, I wasn’t…in a good place or whatever. They didn’t hide their protocols from me.” He bites into another piece of fruit, staring down at his coffee, “in a much better place now, thanks. There’s this loveable bunch of assholes that just happen to show up at random times, so, yeah. Better place.” And he pauses long enough to turn just enough to look at the four around the table.
Not necessarily happy, but he working them closer. The plan in action.

“Well, since some loveable assholes just showed up last night, you wanna tell us what cha were into before those Armenians fuckers hit the warehouse?”

There it is, plan A time.

Tim pauses slightly with a bite half-way to his mouth, eyes rolling over to relay nope, no I don’t really.

"…like I said, gathering intel.”

He stays calm, the fruit is good, feels better in his stomach than the coffee cake (and God there could be pizza if he just Chills. The. Fuck. Out for a minute). The other two shipments aren’t going to hit Gotham for a few days yet, so he has time to let the rawness of his injuries dull to the usual slightly less harsh owfuck before he puts effort back into the search. He also has two days to divert the Bats to the opposite end of the spectrum while he works his own angles right under their noses. Well, unless he really can escape the terrifying Bat-clutches (and yes, he is going to give it one hell of a shot).

“I specifically remember you promised to tell me all about it,” Bruce points out mildly.

“Once I can substantiate the findings and narrow down the suspects, I will,” he promises, completely sincere, giving Bruce a look. Totally the truth. When he’s busted the real bad guys, well, proven, right?

“Give us the low down then,” Dick shrugs, turned in his chair with an elbow braced on the table, cheek in one hand.

There it is, the opportunity; time to divert them away. Tim takes in a deep breath, re-calculating for a second while his too-long hair covers his profile. Coffee in one hand and perfect fruit gone, he shifts slightly, easy so he can see everyone. The Bats blink back at him, apparently surprised he’s going to give them some deets.

“So, our last pretty intense thing was against a group called the Insidious Seven.”

He gets a whole lot of who now? And yeah, yeah he knows.

“Noobs, okay? I hadn’t heard of them either. You know, new villains and such. The Tower received a distress call from the San Fran branch of STAR Labs, and the Titans intercepted.”

“Seven of them?” Dick’s brows are furrowed, probably already going through his mental rolodex of bad guys.

“Yeah. Their thing is nasty tech. Literally. All of them had some kind of prosthetic, something far beyond what we’ve faced before. The machinery has meta-induced capabilities like nothing I’ve ever even seen until. Lucky for us, none of them were that well-trained for a life of villainy and evil-doing. They didn’t have a plan once they breached the lab, couldn’t find the research they wanted,” Tim shrugs a little at the intently-listening faces because, well true, the Insidious Seven is really a bad name for those guys.

“I managed to lock-down the lab’s main server so they couldn’t break through the firewalls to get whatever they wanted. The only connection between the tech I could find in the moment was a locked network, but I didn’t have the time needed to crack it or I would have been able to take their tech off line.” And fuck, he hates admitting to that shit because he’s supposed to be the all-knowing
“In the process, a suspended generator took heavy damage, started short-circuiting everything. While we were keeping the techs and scientists out of the way, the Seven beat it out of there.” He sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose, “Kon was able to pull off a piece of *one* prosthetic, so that’s where I started.”

He gives a wave of a hand, *voila.*

Jason seems to shake himself a little, “what didja get outta the tech, Timmy? Anything good?”

He shrugs a shoulder, “I hooked it into an isolated VLAN on a secure network, the Tower’s system has been running different diagnostics on it while I’ve been trying to track down the suppliers and the Seven. So far—” He automatically reaches for his phone that…oh, right. Not there.

The modified iPhone slides across the table since, well, *Batman* and such. And yeah, Bruce is smiling under his laced fingers. You know, *sharing is caring.*

Tim thumbs down the screen, chooses the option, and slides the phone back to the center of the table. From the camera, the holographic map rises to the center of the table, *one* of the screen from the Batplane. One section of dots and small print showing the dropped shipments he’d managed to track.

The Bats stand, moving around the table to get closer, taking in everything. Tim brings his palms out, expanding the image and turning it slightly. Just like he does with the Titans, he give the run-down. Points out where he’s already been and heavily edits his findings.

With a wave, the holo-projection blinks away and he takes his phone back, standing by the table to drink the dredges of his coffee. Dick looks pensive before swiping his mug and going back to the sideboard to apparently get him another.

“Meta genetic testing and application,” B is in full *Bat-mode,* mind working at the new influx of details. And well, since Tim is letting them in on it, he’s going to take this as a positive step and try to be realistically optimistic. “This is oddly familiar.”

Tim obviously hesitates, eyes moving away. “I have…suspicions. Nothing I can prove yet, but I’m going to nail it down either way.”

And B *understands* where this is going, why Tim is breaking it down for them now. If this is going where he thinks it is, then the whole superhero community is going to want *in.*

“You think they may be into more than just carrying weaponry.” And *nope,* not a question. B’s on *point.*

“I’m pretty damn sure they might be supplying human test subjects.” His face heats, automatic anger rising up because well, *diversion* (fucking *effective* diversion), but the connection is still there and he needs something good enough to keep them occupied. “*But,* I need time and my own systems to put everything together.”

Dick automatically thinks of the first hug he could give Cuddle Bear (and how many, *many* more there would be) handing off the fresh mug to Tim, “so, your pet project might be delivering—”

“Metas, even people with the dormant gene, to use as *samples* or test subjects for shit like this prosthetics and *death* bombs.” He deadpans. “They might have *records,* so yes, I’m invested.”

Jason looks vaguely stunned, and Dami’s brows are furrowed.
“Tim,” B comes back, low, breaking into the momentary lapse, “when you went in that warehouse, what were you thinking you’d find?”

And *fuck* here’s the hard part—the *worst* of it. But, it would waylay the Bats just like he needs. So Tim sucks in a breath, staring down at the coffee in hand, “…I thought there might be kids. In those crates.” Kids just like Karm, Caro, Leo, and Charlie—*fuck*, that might be where they *came* from in the first place. The taste on his tongue is copper from the ghost memory. “I think there may be a connection to Praesidium.” To the kids, full circle.

And, if he can keep the Bats on this side of it, he can take the White Triad side.

"Jesus *Christ*, Tim." Jason's voice is rough, "Why the *fuck* didn't you *call*. What if those fuckers tried to trap you?"

He shrugs, staring down at his coffee. "I had a plan." Read as: *It wouldn't have stopped me.* "But like I said, I need my own systems to keep running the analysis. I've got little to go on from this point, but-" he sighs, "I was able to track *one* of the shipments...to the League of Assassins."

"Ra's dealing with meta tech?" Jason leans down to put his hands on the back of a chair, all kinds of attention there.

"It...made sense at the time. Why not use what you can to make the best killers in the world when recruitment is low. Besides, I have a tendancy of taking out his ninjas sometimes."

And out of sight, Dami's eyes narrow, a brief flash of the book, the tome covered with human skin gifted to Drake, his own *theory*, takes more of a shape.

"I thought we talked about this," B is really, *really* not a happy Bat.

"We did, but I had to be able to plant my own device on Ra's system without being detected and be able to check out the crate at the same time. I wouldn't have been able to do that with someone riding shotgun.” He looks down at the table, straightening, "the League might be into the tech, but if Ra's is communicating with anyone else in the faction, I can get a bead on them." Well, he already *does*, but no one needs that side of it. No, these are not the terrorists you're looking for.

"So, I'm going back to the Perch to get started on it. I've got a few days before the next shipment is set to hit Gotham," he chugs the rest of his coffee, puts the mug down without looking at any of them still standing by the table. "...I...Thanks for the pick-up. That was...that was awesome, really. Once I have the analysis run, I'll send out the results-"

A hand makes him tense, broad palm on his shoulder. And it's like he's back to those days again, a teenager under the cape of the Bat.

"I had to go," because *auto-defense* is on, "in case I fucked up and didn't get enough from Praesidium systems. They might have been getting human test subjects for *years*." *How many kids, Tim? How many got handed off to new Master?* His fists are aching from being clenched so hard.

"It's my *fuck-up*, and I'm *handling* it."

Bruce isn't even phased, just steps around to put himself in front of Tim where both hands can be on his shoulders, can move to the sides of his neck and those thumbs can press into his jaw, tilt his face up.

"I'm going to call Tam," he's very calm, blue eyes steady, "and we'll play hooky for a few days. We can do some detective work while you heal."
"This isn't Bat business," Tim tries. *Really*, he does.

"This is family business." Bruce inserts smoothly. “We’re with you.”

And again, while he’s still reeling from it all (*his* room), still planning ways to keep everyone on the sides they need to be on while he takes on the fight he thought he finished a year ago, Dick, Jason, Dami, and Bruce are all standing around him now, giving him their strength, their support.

The other foot is back in Gotham, and *fuck* if he didn’t realize it might already be too late to pick it up again.

**

And Cassie…

Just *really* wants to skip this *whole* conversation and go back to bed.

Please? She’s *really* needs to go *back* to sleep. For a week. Maybe a month. Maybe forever so she doesn’t have to spell it out for anyone.

But Bart, Kon, Gar, and Rachel aren’t going to let this *go* so easily.

Really, she shouldn’t have come down to the Communal Floor for coffee yet, she just should have stayed in Kon’s damn room and continued with much needed unconsciousness.

“Dudes,” Gar is in his fave pj pants, kitten ninjas are so totally cute and deadly, just like Rach. “Don’t get me wrong, like, at *all*. I understand the love for your bro. We all do, he’s our bro, too, kay? But this is going a little far—”

Her hair is literally matted, tangled, probably still some debris in there, and she’s clutching the dark blue and gold mug in both hands like a *lifeline* (pretty sure she told everyone about the fight with Bloody Mary along with the serious *power drain* as a result) while she stares at the back-and-forth without lifting the rim of the mug from her bottom lip. She managed to confiscate Bart’s poncho only out of vaguely worded threats.

“There’s too many other players with his ‘I am an island’ shit,” Kon fills in grudgingly. “This time, it’s a hell of a lot more than just *two or three* sections of bad guys.” And the hologram panel in the middle of the circle is showing a spreadsheet—numbers slowly climbing into the red zone. This? This is the time to make some real *plans* and start playing a little closer to home since some things have apparently slipped under the team radar.

“It might go into Wayne Enterprises,” Bart, back against the island with a very *not-happy* vibe, is rubbing the bridge of his nose, “and we’ve got no way to get in there to verify. Tim *is* our WE resource.”

Cassie blinks, and it’s a *long* blink.

“Tim would have flagged it—*probably* is what Gar would have said if the moment of doubt hadn’t made him pause. Because *that guy*, so totally on his game in a majority of fields, *but* he’s been distracted and pretty much *out* for the last two weeks. No team interaction. He could seriously be in the dark.

Kon and Bart seem to blink, come to a similar realization.

Cassie yawns, *loudly*, waits for one of them to put more pieces together.
Raven doesn’t so much move as her cape flutters out around her; it’s always an effective attention-getter. “We have put off adding certain...parties to our alert systems,” her eyes slide over to settle on Bart, Kon, and then Cassie (since Clark would be very, very happy to be included on warnings sent when Superboy finds himself in more trouble than he can handle, and Wally could stop calling Gar demanding they give him access to the tracker in Bart’s prosthetic knee. Not to mention Diana would be able to relax when Cassie is not in the Tower nor home—this bring Tim to the Bats has had a cascade effect to the rest of the JLA. Very nice of them, please stop calling, she is becoming irritated and the carnivorous beast dimension can only hold so many people at once). “Before the Meta Killer incident, we had decided to add the Bats on as possible contacts should certain protocols be breached. As we have yet to do so, now may be as good a time as any.”

“First thing, we need to find him and get him the hell out of wherever he is.” Kon just nods to himself, starting to pace. “Then we start tracking those assholes, try to find out how they’ve been accessing our data—“

“Whoa,” Bart holds up a hand, “first thing is finding him. S.E.A.R.C.H is still running and we’ve got dick to go on.”

Now the two of them are going back and forth with Gar on possibly pulling out some of the JLA to start a manhunt (this time since last time they tried was just shit, and fuck that noise, Tim, we’re calling in Dick Grayson and the Batman if we have to—)

Another sip, another yawn, “I talked to him yesterday.” Cassie sleep mumbles.

The commotion stops.

“What now?”

It might be just the small part of her that loves seeing Kon all discombobulated, far from his old calm and cool, but she manages to lower the mug a few inches away from her face to grin. “Yeah. I got back first,” she waves a hand to the wall panel, “a few alerts in the harness triggered. Those ones Raven bespelled were really genius. He hasn’t caught on to those yet.”

“Our secret until he does,” Rave promises, “now, give us the detail and we shall discuss how to proceed.”

Cassie arches a brow through her mop of hair, raising her mug back up to her mouth, the knuckles on her hand torn and still raw. “Mmhm. First, I need more coffee and something for breakfast. I also demand a foot rub. In that order.”

Bart is already gone. Gar, feeling object pity for the normally together Wonder Girl, tisks while pouring more coffee into her empty mug, glancing at her sleepy face, happy for more caffeine.

Kon makes a noise in the back of his throat because, yeah, he should have totally asked how she was the second they all congregated in the kitchen, but her narrow-eyed ‘I will rip your liver out. Try me’ look was enough for him to wisely remain silent (besides, Rave is the only one brave enough to give no shits about Cassie’s ‘I’m hurt, fuck off and die’ vibe). Last night, when she’d wobbled in through his window in the Tower, he’d only lifted the blanket once she’d thrown her clothes around and stolen one of his shirts and a pair of boxers, gently pressing a kiss to her forehead, pulling her into the heat of his body so they could both sleep.

Bart is back from wherever they go when the two of them have their own bonding days (everyone suspects they do mani/pedis, totally not judging okay? Bart has some gnarly feet), and pulls a take-out carton from his reinforced speed pack, handling it carefully.
The smell is heavenly, and Cassie sighs happily with coffee and food and Kon pulling up a chair next to her, already pulling a bare foot in his lap to work with both strong hands, looking for other raw wounds.

In the grip of lightly glowing purple power, a first aid kit floats lazily through the lounge area, and Raven stands with that look.

Gar sets silverware by her hand automatically as he pulls out a chair too.

Raven takes up Cassie’s other side with an imperceptible huff, kit floating to set itself right on the table where she would need it.

With a bite of hot, fresh biscuits and gravy, she is so, so much better for Q and A. It helps that Kon’s fingers are right on the perfect spot in the arch of her foot (the one he, um, also kisses sometimes).

“Mary needs her ass kicked,” Bart sneers since, well, energy vampires and shit.

“Mary got her ass kicked, thanks,” she comes back around a mouthful. Gar snatches her free hand out of her lap, cups the battered elbow gently, already reaching into the open kit. Raven hums at him and gingerly dabs at the still raw hide of her knees.

“It’s okay, I’ll heal pretty quick,” she tries, giving coffee a turn, and appealing to Raven’s sense of logic.

“Until you do, these will stay dressed,” Raven answers serenely…with that edge to her tone.

“No scary shit right now, Rach, okay?” Bart takes out the variety of other biscuits and puts them in the center of the table. “We’ve got an ass-ton of things on our plate right now. Like, you know, making sure Mary is chilling with her new cellmate, our bird isn’t getting himself killed, catastrophes aren’t coming down on a world-wide scale—“

“Oh, and how our future is currently hanging in a somewhat precarious balance?” And Raven looks over one shoulder with an arched eyebrow.

“Shit.”

“That is an understatement, Bart.”

“Still fits. How did you find out?”

She turns back to Cassie’s knees, humming again.

Welp, now there’s apparently a fuck-ton on their plate.

Chapter End Notes

Ima break it down: this was originally not going to be mad complicated—but it got mad complicated since things are coming together on all sides. So, yes I suck and it took longer (sorrynotsorry). The * is actually based on a panel from one of the Detective Comics with a terrible night ending in “Good job tonight,” and I totally could not find the reference to it anywhere, so sad.
Ah, two things I discovered while writing this chapter: 1. Tim voice is weird as hell in my head because of THOUGHT BOXES. Yes, yes, check out his Robin series or Red Robin and just THOSE SNARKY THOUGHT BOXES, okay? The () and side italic stuff is supposed to be that. Just figured that out. Wow. 2. Chapter titles are fun and can be used on so many levels. I went back to re-read The Wrong Reasons and was like ‘oh, I forgot I did that.’ One of these days I’ll explain on Tumblr or something >.
Connections

Chapter Summary

In Wayne Manor, several things are beginning to come together, and the connections are being made.

Chapter Notes

*Stares*
Ah, I missed my deadline by a day, so Happy Holidays, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, yada, yada. Shout-out to the new peeps on Tumblr that have let me know they dig the Fracture verse and those little things I drop in my blog. Thank-you for your encouragement.
The usual suspects, Arkaedia, Titans_R_Us, travelfan, Allseer, Azazel, and Graywhims (plus the nice things from you peeps :) got me motivated. Sorry in advance it's not well edited or would spend yet another loop in the eternal hell that is final editing, but rather than title it 'Welcome Home,' well, we're going to pause on that. 'Connections' however is very much apt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is just a little too much déjà vu because really now.

Dick just seems unimpressed as fuck with his vigilante glare of doom (he calls bullshit. The look always works for Raven). The eldest Robin leans further down into his space with narrowed eyes of his own.

The wall at Tim’s back right by the Manor’s entry way seems like one of things. You know, a rock when he’s already up against a hard place (and that wasn’t meant to sound dirty but yes…yes it totally does *mental facepalm*).

“Timmy,” is low and slightly growled, making a whole different weight in his gut than the one from lacerations due to broken armor and bullets.

The fact that Dick is dressed up as Office Grayson makes none of this better for him.

At all.

“Tell me what I need to hear.”

Crossing his arms gingerly in the space between his chest and Dick’s, Tim tisks up at the eldest, smirking. “I will probably be here when you get back,” he dutifully replies since anything else would just prove to Dick that he needs to call in for a leave of absence to help take care of the “family” problem. No, no, it’s fine. He’s going to use the big computer downstairs to do some heavy lifting; please feel free to take away some of that aforementioned intense scrutiny. “In Gotham to say the least, I mean. I’m waiting on the shipments and giving myself some time to heal, remember?” Yeah,
guy that lies. To Batman.

Speaking of which, B is looking at him from behind Dick, catching his face over one shoulder, and the expression is the same carefully crafted neutrality, like when he’s looking for the truth. Which makes it more imperative that Tim keeps the plan in mind, on how much the Bats can find out about the mission—it’s never too late to regret calling them in (but his room is still upstairs, Alfred kept his favorite mug, and dammit even Dami seems satisfied to see him here) when he wants nothing more than to work his case on his own (since you’ve got a mess to clean the fuck up, right Red?).

With a forearm braced above his shoulder (he and Jason have apparently developed that “couples mind reading” skill), Dick leans down to put their faces very close, faint breath over his mouth and chin.

Tim’s face doesn’t heat up with it, but his eyes go right to Dick’s mouth looming over his and—

“You know how Dick gets, Tim. Especially with something important.” B reminds him airily, smirking and doing nothing to help out the situation.

“Fine. I’ll be here when you get back.” Forces himself to say it slower, to stare right up into Dick’s intense gaze instead (and the brow arches sharply, quickly, and Dick’s faces goes very neutral just that fast—which means what exactly?).

“Thank-you Tim,” and his name is bit out, just slightly husky, but before he can assess the meaning behind it (because really, Dick, I would have called you if I’d been shot three times instead of two—you know, that’s excessive), Dick straightens, fits his police hat on while looking down at the shorter former Robin, gauging if he’s telling the truth (rude) and whether or not he’s banged up enough for the combined Bat-effort of B, Jay, and Alfred to keep him from running off (should have learned by now: contingencies).

“Grayson,” Dami is adjusting his tie for school, eyes sliding between the two older Bats. B has no qualms about readjusting it (just like Alfred used to do for him).

“No, you can’t play with the siren,” Dick gins over at him.

And the smallest Robin (though not by much—an embarrassing yet notable detail) peeks around B’s frame to sneer, “tt, as if I would request such a thing. Your sense of humor gets worse the older you get.”

“Hm? Rich, Baby Bat. Who’s the one apparently making jokes about his balls?”

The youngest immediately looks annoyed—and not at Tim for once. It’s nice to have a change-up occasionally.

But Dick just grins wider, “I’m not criticizing, just glad you’ve finally learned our real superpower is witty banter.”

Tim can’t help it when he snorts on a laugh, really it’s so true.

Rather than reply (as Grayson is an annoyingly horrific judge of humor, simply look at the Nightwing costume design should you need more persuasion), Damian lays an absent hand on Father’s shoulder before stepping around him to tilt his head up to look at Drake with a brow raised in expectation. B crosses his arms over his chest and waits for it.

Apparently the Robins are handling shit right now.
Tim pointedly bites down on his lower lip (laughing at Dami in serious mode is usually a good opening for a knife to the kidneys or, as Jay pointed out during the last round of vigilante tag-team, a good ankle mauling). “As I said, I will probably still be here when you get back. I might need to go to the Perch for a few hours. Might. But, I have the promise of pizza and crime fighting here. That’s pretty good incentive, you know.”

Dami’s eyes narrow (and just mini-Bruce all the way), assessing, “I shall be cross with you, Drake, should I find out you are, as usual, withholding the most important evidence.”

Oh yeah, that’s the stab to the kidneys look.

Trying to strategically slide away from the heat coming off Dick’s body without looking suspicious, Tim turns to Dami and B, holding out both hands, palms up in surrender. “When you get back, we’ll go over everything I have up to this point, in detail, so don’t break anyone’s face at school, okay?”

And there it is, another piece of evidence that he’s way too far back: Dami grins at him. A genuine smile. And his face doesn’t crack.

Damn.

“I will endeavor to control my baser urges, Drake. Grayson, let us go or we shall both be late. Father, Pennyworth, I shall see you after school. Tell Todd not to die.”

Dick pauses long enough to lay a broad palm on the back of Tim’s neck, squeezing briefly, and making him just that much more weak—

“Don’t go running off while we’re gone, Timmy. See you tonight.” And Dick’s eyes are softer, his smile bright with white teeth before the two are off, walking side-by-side (Batman and Robin) to the Manor’s main door.

After a moment, he feels like he can breathe and do better to control the churning in his lower stomach that has nothing to do with injuries or food or sleep dep or—

“You need more rest,” B observes in his no-nonsense manner, coming right up into the space Dick and Dami vacated. “Two open wounds and shrapnel lacerations shouldn’t be taken lightly.”

Tim cranes over to look up because what now? “This from the vigilante that goes out with broken ribs and bullet holes?”

B’s smile is slow, but as always, he can’t help but think how good it is to have his son at home and verbally sparring with him again. It’s a thing he’s missed.

“I didn’t say I was consistent, Tim.”

It takes a breath but Tim braces on hand against the wall and the other to his abdomen while he laughs his ass off since understatement of the year. B always has a time and place for his odd sense of humor. He’s the top troll of the Bats and Tim will just hand that award right over to the master.

“Besides, we have time to work your case. The next shipment is en route; we can even hit the ship before it gets into local waters if we need to. Taking it easy isn’t going to keep you from your collar.”

Straightening, wiping his wet eyes because wow, hilarious, B, Tim just lets his partner wind an arm around his back and steer him back into the dining room where his chair is still pulled away from the table. He’s helped back down into it (tucked against the Bat symbol like when he was that Robin, being carried when his legs were too weak to hold him up any longer and isn’t that just some kind of
metaphor for what’s going down here now?).

“You broke out the whatever game on me,” Tim finally deadpans. “Babs totally ratted you out.”

“You bet I did,” with no remorse whatsoever, Bruce leans his elbows on the table, “it was a smart move considering how capable you are. I need to use whatever strategy I can when you don’t feel like sharing details.”

Tim’s brows do that thing where they hike up into his hairline (not the answer he expected; the opposite really).

“Bat-Dad’s gotta point, Timmers,” Jay swigs the rest of his coffee, swallowing the last bite of his eggs. “We don’t getcha fast, yer already outta reach.”

Tim blinks at him owlishly.

“Countermeasures,” B fills in, “I’ve learned from the Titans’ example.”

“I—” he pauses because welp, they’ve been over this before, but here, in the Manor, after the Bats just kind of swooped in to save his ass, it just means something more profound somehow. It makes his chest tight, brings him back to the old days “Okay, I get it. Everyone wants to help. I mean, it’s not my first run-in with crazy scientists trying to unlock the secrets of superpowers, you know. It’s not even, like, my tenth. It’s my Thursday afternoon.”

“Well aware,” Jason fills in, “Like I said before, dunnit mean you gotta do it alone.”

Tim lets out a calming breath, wooo-sa. Wooooo-saaaa.

“I get it, Bat-family gets in.” And again, here’s the hard part, getting the Bats to align themselves on the right side of the fight—with the meta test subjects and people trying to play God. Yes, yes, leave the terrorists ass hats to him please. “And, really, with everything I’ve been pulling in the last few days—“ Tim blows out a breath, manages to lean a little heavier on the table (because owfuck and such, sure he could play the injury up but really no need when it’s starting to hurt like hell anyway, totally genuine)— ‘I’m going to need people. I had planned on including the team once I verified all the labs anyway, but the numbers seem to be growing. Bat help on that human experimentation and tech implementation would be just stellar at this point.’

And Bruce’s eyes narrow, already calculating on the projected data from earlier—he could see Tim’s point about the number of sects apparently in the market for meta technology and testing. The first priority is to breach all the testing sites for any captives (children, Tim had said, he believed these facilities are testing children, just like their four—the right words to bring the small part that is both Bruce and Bat to the fore). He could have some members of the JLA on it in a coordinated strike in case any of the sites are connected (which is a probability rather than a possibility); they could begin the take-down while J’onn or Ollie synchronizes the infiltration from the Watchtower. O, too. He’s sure he could even convince Overwatch from Star City to take a division (or, well, have the Green Arrow do it since those two).

“I still need to do a complete mapping,” Tim continues as Jason comes back from the kitchen and takes his chair. “You got me at the end of hitting the hot spots. Going to Ra’s was my last lead, actually. I need time to crunch data, look at the similarities, try to find the connection, so I’ll be waiting on some of the results. I’ve got about 75%, and there’s the data from the last lab I haven’t had time to breakdown.” He waves a hand down himself for emphasis because, yup, owfuck.
B just holds up a hand in a gesture, “it’s fine, Tim. We’ve got plenty of hands to do the background diagnostics if necessary. Once we know the specifics, we can have the systems in Titans Tower and the Hall of Justice start running search protocols and tracking algorithms associated with the other labs.”

“Sounds solid, B,” Jason fills in and a broad palm is right on the back of his neck, tightening enough to put pressure on the tense muscles.

And—he can’t help the noise that comes out of his mouth. Nope, not even trying. Instead, Tim drops his head down to hang off his shoulders, just gives Jason room to work. Even after a few hours of sleep, he’s still feeling the burn, like he could curl up on that one couch in the downstairs library and just pass the fuck out—

Tim blinks up, startled, and his gaze narrows right on Alfred’s calm, cool, and collected. “Omelet,” he slurs slightly.

Unabashed, the butler inclines his head slightly, “quite right, Master Tim. Eggs are known to cause drowsiness. Especially to an injured person with, what I understand as, low immunities. I suspect pizza shall be waiting when you wake up.”

Pulling out of Jason’s grip, completely ignoring the “what the ever-lovin’ fuck, Al? Gotta tell a guy when you’re being sneaky and shit, you feel me?”

Along with Alfred’s insulted, “please, Master Jason, I am absolutely capable of caring for my patients—even ones as stubborn as the lot of you. And you, young sir, are no exception to the rules.”

Nice Alfred, really feeling like part of the family here.

Tim’s already stumbled to his feet, feeling the curtain fall over his brain because sleepy, and Alfred just has a grip of his bicep to keep him up right.

“Blood loss and injuries of your caliber require twelve-to-fourteen hours’ rest,” Alfred reminds him primly, like, you know, he might have forgotten the set-in-stone Alfred’s Numerous Laws of Dealing with Injured Bats or something. It’s not his first ride on the knock-out express curtesy of one Mr. Pennyworth (and how stupid is it that he’s actually kind of warm and tingly over the fact Alfred would give enough of a fuck to do it?). “You have yet another five hours at least.”

“Titans—” the youngest present protests, even while his knees wobble.

B is just arching a brow at Alfred, blinking. He shouldn’t be surprised because of all of them, Alfred has never had an issue making any of the Bats do what’s necessary to keep themselves in the best physical condition (an impossible task, Sir, but one does his level best). B’s been drugged more times than he can realistically count, even using the Batcomputer’s calculating power. Once one of them hits over 70 hours of awake, injured vigilant-ing, Alfred’s mother-hen instincts are on.

Then again, he, along with everyone else, knew when Alfred came back from his hiatus during the Robin years, that the butler was done screwing around with the ‘oh I’m hurt but the city needs me too much to sleep.’ When Bruce agreed to let Alfred do whatever he thought necessary to take care of them, Tim and Dick had been right on that train (anything, anything to make Alfred stay so they never had to eat another Bruce-made terrible tuna fish sandwich again); Steph, Cass, Dami, and Jason got ushered into that agreement just by being Bats.

So, he’s got no one to blame but himself.

And, yes Tim, B sees the small smile before Jason scoots in his seat enough to lean over and catch
the dangerously listing bird out of Alfred’s grip. One broad arm lays Timmy out right across his
thighs (ain’t gonna letcha hit the floor, Baby Bird, and…maybe it feels s’alright, you being right
here; dammit, Dickie is gonna say ‘I told ya so.’ Asshole).

“I will be happy to contact Miss Cassie and Miss Raven, for you,” Alfred soothes in that ‘gotcha’
smarry way as Jason easily hefts Tim’s weight up in both arms as he stands, grinning down at their
bird. “Perhaps they should be made aware of the extent of your injuries as well? Ah, pardon me.
Your team would certainly already know, Master Timothy, as they have installed sensors in your
Red Robin suit, correct?”

*Fucking dammit. Alfred.* “You…suck.”

Alfred just hums, “I have a firm conviction your team would agree with my methods. Unless you rest
your injury, chances of re-opening your wounds and the possibility of infection double, perhaps
more in the case of your low immunities.” And yup, someone’s not letting the lack of spleen thing go
anytime soon. Is Alfred…pissed about that? You know, sorry, just a little, unavoidable stabbing here
and there.

Jason smells like soap and the remains of leather/cigarette smoke, enough that Tim sighs right into his
neck.

“At any hint of fever, young sir, you will be removed from rotation. Would you prefer to sit out the
night’s activities in the Cave, wrapped in blankets, eating soup?”

“No.” And he’s not sulking (stop laughing, *Jason*). That’s the drugs talking, okay?

“Then we shall endeavor to make certain you are adequately rested. Should that happen, I will have
no need to contact Titan’s Tower with an update on your status.”

*So over a barrel here. Damn, forgot how good Alfred is at circumventing Bat-will.*

“Do take heart. Master Bruce and Master Jason will be required to sleep before any crime fighting
this evening as well. That should ease your conscience.”

The rumble of Jason’s throat against his forehead and *fuck*, he’s warm, “Aw, Al—I’m good here,
yeah? Ain’t even hit—”

“There’s no need, Alfred, we have work to do—“

But the butler raises his voice just slightly, “I will hear *nothing* to the contrary. You both *will* sleep a
minimum of four hours each. Is. That. Quite. *Clear*?”

While holding Timmy up against his chest (and he can see Tim against him, all that strength
and sinews right along the line of Jason Todd’s *wants* and *needs*), Jason gives in so he can mentally
recalibrate (since *this* ain’t the *time*, not without Dickie, not without making sure Timmy is alla way
back), “crystal, Al. I getcha, yeah? Don’t break bad on me or some shit.” The soft breath against his
neck makes his muscles tighter, makes him want to (but don’t) lookit Timmy’s sleepy face.

“Four hours, no longer,” B narrows a glare, but the butler simply sniffs.

“Excellent. Off you go then. I will make certain the world does not cease to exist while the Batman
and his partners are taking a much deserved rest.”

“Lemme…down,” Tim mutters but his head is lolling on Jay’s shoulder, and he’s stupidly talking
into the older vigilante’s neck like a dumb ass; he just *can’t* be bothered to lift up and look Jay or B
“Naw, s’allright, Timmy,” Jason bumps his nose right against the younger man’s forehead, “ain’t gonna drop ya.”

But Tim’s eyes are already closed, his muscles going lax against Jason’s hold; he’s completely out by the time the older Bats hit the second floor landing, going back down to Baby Bird’s room.

B is on his shit, pulling the covers down so Jay can slide the limp bird right down and get him all nice and snug. He and B are checking out how (fucking cute, Timmy, just dammit, ya gotta stop making it so motherfucking hard on me) deeply under Tim is to estimate the wake-up call.

“We meet back early afternoon,” B is already calculating, but Jason Todd is a guy that knows the man under the cowl, and he can see it just as well as Al. B’s been working a helluva long row of hard nights, so’s good call on the nap time protocol.

“I getcha, Bruce. Batman needs some shut-eye.” And Jay just lays himself out in the desk chair by Timmy’s bed, grabbing an extra blanket folded neatly.

B only has to raise an eyebrow.

“Lookit, Baby Bird was thinking of taking the window express outta here earlier. Ima make sure that don’t happen.” And Jay already has his eyes closed, half-way under since Alf gave the mandate, leaning back in the chair and shuffling his feet up on the bed. The slightly warm touch to his forehead is what he thinks it is, and with his lip curling slightly in a smile, Jason Todd checks out for a couple hours.

B adjusts the covers over Tim automatically and leans down to press an easy kiss his forehead as well before leaving, closing the door behind him.

**

Officer Dick Grayson is just about ready to start doing aerial flips around the GCPD; the first two times were only write-ups, so he’s pretty confident he can talk his way out of a third (maybe). He’s been stuck in Paperwork Hell for the last week, and the edge, the need to move, is right there in his very bones. Too much going on at home with Timmy (because c’mon, Baby Bird, we’ve known each other for, oh say, a minute), and he’s itching to jump in the thick of things to help. It would be almost perfect: him, Jay, B, Dami, and Tim throwing in their skills and resources to fight the good fight again. Snarking and Alfred food and fighting back-to-back and finding out all the deets behind international bad guys. All right on the path to bring Tim home.

When O hit his comm last night, saying Red hit Gotham running (well, until some Armenians decided he might make a better target than a vigilante) and could definitely use a hand, Dick’s secret hope that one day, the trust would be there enough for this very instance to happen had finally seemed to be realized (damn, about time!). Tim called out to the Bats for help while in Gotham. So maybe, maybe he’d come back to the Cave and hang out? Stay over at the Manor just for the day.

They could hit two milestone in Plan: Bring Timmy Back to the Bats.

Two.

While O put an end to “Where’s Red?” over the public comm, he’d taken off like he was still wearing the cowl. Nightwing’s easy speed clearly needed to take a back seat because calling out might make his heart start warming, but regardless, the implication is injured, surrounded, or some
other type of need. Hood was closer to the docks, already en route by the time Dick had been leaping over the Wallstone Apartments.

He’d hit up O on a private line, just to verify for his own peace of mind, “Babs, did you spot him or did he actually call out?” Because, yes, he needed to know.

“Technically,” O threw out, “I convinced him to agree to Bat intervention. It’s a good idea when GSWs are involved. You’re welcome, N.”

She clicks on mute, probably talking to Red right at that moment.

It’s a bad idea to grin while flying, bugs in the teeth and such, but there he was doing it anyway. “I really think you’re my hero, O. If anyone has secret superpowers, it’s you.”

Click back. “How long did it take you to figure that out, Not-So-Boy-Wonder?”

“Please, as if it was ever a secret.”

Another mute as N throws the next line, pacing himself, waiting for the click back.

“B is on the way with R. They’ve got the car for transport—“

“Is he going to need it?”

“Possibly, Red is starting to fade out. I think he gave in because of things like bullets and blood loss.”

“That’ll do it every time.”

“I think, N, you might be a little closer to your goals in the bigger plan.”

“…I’m trying to be carefully optimistic.”

“Now who has a secret super power?”

Yup, that’s him—the positive one. Well, considering B, Jason, Tim, and Damian, one of them has to be.

And after the snatch-and-stitch, Dick is fiddling with the ballpoint pen at his GCPD desk, trying to remain hopeful all the reprimands and requests might have paid off this time—as in, Tim will be at the Manor by the time his shift ends, copious amounts of coffee will be ready, all kinds of detecting will be going down, and just—

A big win for Team Bats.

Dick rubs the bridge of his nose wishing he had called in sick today so they could get a running start on the Insidious Seven and crazy meta tech (note to self: start running down the vigilante intel chain; first, Wally and his people at Central City’s S.T.A.R. Labs division, then Ollie in Star City, go from there, see if anyone else has had contact with it and where else the next attacks could strike), and maybe keep Tim talking long enough to find out what he’s hiding (c’mon Timmy, like I’ve never met you? You are terrible when you’re hiding something—all those little ticks).

A drink of God-awful coffee keeps him thinking about the next phases and steps, probably some on the same line as Bruce, but, well, that’s what made the two of them good partners. Dick could supplement B’s plans, could always look for the alternatives, his own investigation style more hands-on and gathering intel via interrogation. Sure, he could run the forensics when he needed to, but
more often than not, he could pull events, a hypothesis, evidence together by the old school methods—getting to the people.

Speaking of which.

Dick pauses mid-grimace before the terrible coffee made it halfway to his mouth; his eyes narrow on the name.

*Prisoner transfer: Shaw, Johnathan.*

For today.

*Holy Breakout, Batman.*

Dick uses himself like Bruce uses *Brucie Wayne*, charm and charisma, hiding a majority of his real personality (the parts that are way too close to Nightwing) when something at GCPD comes across his radar as *potentially a job for vigilante intervention*, so when he falls into a chair by Beloise’s desk dramatically sprawled out, bemoaning Paperwork Hell, using his obvious appeal to the advantage, it’s really no surprise that the older cop just laughs at his antics and looks at the schedule of events happening outside the stationhouse.

“I mean, we’re good on everything, Grayson,” she shrugs a shoulder, feeling pity for his sheer boredom, laying her chin in a hand to prop up on her desk among scattered schedules. “Even the Mayor is taking a day off.”

“You have to have *something* I can do,” he whines a little, leaning forward on her desk, big blue eyes wide with hope.

“Well… I mean Inigo has a prisoner transfer from Blackgate, but if you thought you were bored before, you’ve never ridden an hour with Inigo. I mean, a wet paper sack has more personality than he does.”

“At least that’ll get me *out* of here for a while! C’mon Maria, put me on detail with him, okay? Please! I’m begging here.”

She holds up a hand with a laugh, already turning to her computer to start entering the update, “all right Grayson, all *right*. I’ll put you on and sent Inigo an email so he knows he’ll have company.”

Dick croons back at her, “you’re my favorite. *Forever*.”

“Mmhm, that’ll be enough of that. You’re young enough to be my *son*, you know.”

“Ooh! Does that mean you have some naughty *kinks*, Officer Beloise?” He wags his eyebrows knowingly.

“Don’t. Even. I swear, you have the worst sense of humor, Dick,” but Maria Beloise is smiling to herself while she finishes the changes. “There. Now, you’ve got something to do. Happy?”

And the smile might be a little heavier than he means, might be a little close to *N*, “definitely. I am *definitely* happy.”

**

Damian Wayne, despite Drake’s allegations, has *no need* to break anyone’s *face*.

The calm, cool, and collected *scorn* is usually enough to keep the fools at bay; when it isn’t, then he
may resort to actually telling whatever idiot in his path every flawed characteristic to make him unworthy of Dami's time. Even the bullies that take some perverse enjoyment out of the pain of others have had the benefit of Dami’s sharp tongue and narrowed-eyed disdain.

Only once has his school experience been colored with a physical altercation; apparently, the lesson from back then took.

The younger man with glasses hunched over on himself just over Dami’s left shoulder, however, is already sporting a black eye, had been in the center of the three larger boys now facing down Damian al Ghul Wayne.

And Damian would rather keep some things to himself, away from Father, Grayson, and Todd. One of those things just happens to be his tendency to despise instances just like this at Gotham Academy.

Father had initially refused his request to allow him to attend public school (his argument that a regular school would allow him the opportunity to be closer to crime, gangs, drugs, and the like, still Father remained steadfast, tt), and thus here he is with his finest look of utter contempt.

The older, taller students still had yet to learn.

"Disgusting," Dami sniffs, his tone utterly full of derision, "one would think with your bloodlines, you would have some modicum of decency. How…disappointing."

The younger student, bleeding lip, disheveled shirt and tie, is blinking at Dami like he's suddenly sprouted horns.

Michael Durham, son of a prominent family, uses his hulking stance in an attempt to intimidate other, smaller students into completing his homework, taking lunches, not things he needs, but whatever he can to dispirit others. As if he has a reason to hold himself in such a high regard.

Dami, at thirteen is almost the other boy's height, but his lean muscle, his other…capabilities (Robin), make the fight uneven from the beginning.

The crux, however, is for Damian Wayne to resist giving himself away. As Father and Grayson always lectured, it is necessary to know one's limitations.

His cell phone buzzes in the pocket of his slacks, but it is a secondary concern. The boy on the ground is the primary.

"You think you're so much better, Wayne." The bigger boy sneers back, scuffed fist brought up, right by Damian's face. "At least MY parents are married. I'm not some mixed bastard."

And the air changes in the yard outside the main building, a charge crackling as Damian's eyes narrow dangerously.

Durham seems to have some sense of self-preservation and pauses on anything else that might have spewed forth in his anger.

It's nothing for Damian to take that all-too important step forward, his mind working on what he could realistically do without giving himself away. He focuses on the contingencies, the best way to counter should this go any number of ways.

Well, at least he's not facing Hush.

"Coward," Dami sneers up into Durham's face. "I may be of two ethnicities, but I obviously have the
honor and bravery of both. You, however, are a pathetic sample of breeding.”

“Hey!” One of the other boys, one Dami doesn’t recognize, starts to interrupt.

Damian Wayne doesn’t bother with him. He is inconsequential, a follower, a thug. "What? As you are the epitome of Aryan, this gives you the right to oppress those who are weaker? Why not raise your hand to the Third Reicht, fool?"

Durham draws back, red-faced at the implication.

“Entertain me with your idiocy, please,” Damian eases his spine, crosses his arms over his chest. “It isn’t as though you have an original thought. Neither did the majority of the Nazi regime.”

“Y—You’re lucky Bruce Wayne is your dad,” the taller finally sputters indignantly, “they’d never let you in here if he wasn’t. We don’t need trash at Gotham Academy.”

“Oh?” Damian arches a brow, “then how is it that you are here?”

One of the followers grabs Durham’s shoulder, “c’mon. We’ll be late.”

And like the tormentor has been waiting for an excuse to leave, he just snarls out, “this isn’t over Wayne.”

“Tt, as if you are worth any more of my attention.”

Turning his back, Damian stares down at the young man on the ground while the three grumble back to the main building. Even though he should not be encouraging such things, he still digs his handkerchief out of his pocket and offers it.

“Thanks for that. I’m James Bolling.”

“Hn. Damian Wayne.”

“Yeah, I know. I think everyone does after your last fight got…intense.”

And Dami arches a brow, “that occurrence was three years ago.”

“People in Gotham have a long memory,” Bolling mops at the blood from his nose. “It’s what happens when you have crazy supervillains as your school mascot. Go…team?”

Dami blinks before smooth laughter is startled out of him (and for this one moment, he is grateful to his vigilante colleagues for lessons in “witty banter”), and he offers Bolling a hand, pulling the younger student to his feet. “Or vigilantes. Those sporting events pitting one against another would be…interesting.”

“The Batmen verses the Jokers?”

“Perhaps.”

And Damian allows himself a moment to walk James back to the main building, paying absolutely no attention to the other students watching them: Damian Wayne moves with his usual firm stride, Bolling walking quickly to keep up while they talk back and forth.

“Where is your next class?” Dami raises a brow without looking at the other student.

“Advanced Physics in Stutler Hall.”
“Hn,” interesting, Dami amends his direction toward the correct hall, “I was going to attempt taking it this semester. I am…satisfied I put it off until the Fall. I should like to get required general credits completed first.”

“Oh? You’re into physics?” Bolling grins up a little at the taller student, “it’s, ah, Science is my field. This class is kind of boring for me, but I’ll be able to get into some college courses once I get through it.”

“I see,” Wayne nods sagely, “then you may be available as a tutor once I sign up.”

“W—well sure. I mean, once you break everything down into its base components, get how the laws of nature apply to the—“ and Bolling is off, talking a mile a minute while Damian paces himself, hands clasped in one another behind his back while he listens.

He only interrupts once they’ve reached the prestigious Hall, “here you are, Bolling. I shall endeavor to remember your basics.” As if Robin isn’t already knowledgeable.

The younger student stutters a little (“y-you walked me to class?”) as Damian finally checks his phone, eyes narrowing dangerously. Bolling just stares as Damian excuses himself by merely giving a wave, already walking away and dialing.

“Hey Rob,” Bart Allen sounds like his usual annoyingly cheerful self.

It is too early in the day for such nonsense, but Dami breathes out through his nose. “Allen. You’ll have to excuse me. I am at school,” with the underlying and you are not because…?

“Oh. Sorry about that, we, ah, couldn’t get in contact with Red—“

“Drake is in Gotham, at the Manor. If I know Pennyworth, I would hazard to guess he is sleeping,” and Dami, already with an ingrained instinct to know the Titans are in need of someone in a mask, is going to his locker, picking out his backpack.

And Bart Allen become concerned teammate and friend without missing a beat, “at the Manor? How bad are we talking here?”

“I have seen worse. He will live to fight another night.” A brief stop in the office, signing himself out, writing Family Emergency as the excuse. He will blame Father if asked—possibly a skiing accident.

Again.

Damian is already striding down the long corridors, listening to movement in the background.

But Kid Flash is ready to wait him out.

Damian postpones the details until he’s out of the massive double doors, “shrapnel and two GSWs. He has been tended, given antibiotics, and has rested the night in the Manor. He has…agreed somewhat easily to share details of his latest case with the Bats.”

For long moments, only white noise meets the explanation and then Allen is talking to someone else in the background.

Dami waits for it.

(“So, good things?”)
“I suppose so?”

“The family that fights crime together and everything.”

“Well, good. They fuck it up, we’ll be on that shit.”

“It’s always nice to have a plan.”

Finally, Kid Flash returns to the line, “We need a way in to Wayne Enterprises.”

The young vigilante blinks but keeps walking. He has a Ducati hidden close to the campus for just such an emergency, and lowers his voice, “you have my attention.”

“You see, Rob, it’s kind of a long—"

“The highlights will be sufficient.”

“O-kay, hold on, I’m going to put you on speaker,” fiddling and then, “all right.”

“Hn. Continue.” Dami hikes up the rolling hills, never stopping.

“Has Tim told you anything about the Insidious Seven? Like, I dunno, a crazy fight we got into?”

“Briefly, yes. Meta-power inducing technology from what I gathered. You’ve found something.”

Cassie comes over the line, sounding half-asleep, “sure did. One of the pieces inside the sample we got is stamped with the Wayne Enterprises logo.”

And that gives Dami pause.

“The serial number and logo were originally melted off or something, I dunno. The scanner was able to get the logo and part of the serial number, so we’ve got some data to go on,” Conner Kent’s voice is more distant, further away from the phone. “We realistically could break in and look everything up, or get Vic to hack into their servers, but—“

“Why bother when you have a team member with direct access?” Damian fills in easily. He finally comes upon the small plot of land far enough from the school’s caretakers, removing the mirror cloth and vegetation covering the bike. “Understood. I am leaving Gotham Academy now. I will contact you once I arrive at Wayne Enterprises.”

**

He comes to with the thought there had better really be pizza.

At least waking up a second time isn’t as jarring.

Because now he knows the tape is still on the ceiling.

He takes a second to assess, then gives into a full-body stretch, arching, and hits into something right by his knee. He jerks automatically, muscles tensed to leap—the snort and snuffle stops him from a jump because Jason is sleeping in a chair by his bed (and the fact he still has a bed—priceless).

Sure, he can assume this is to keep him from jumping out the window (that’s probably exactly why actually), but—

He’s already slid over to the edge of the bed silent, half holding his breath.
And it’s a stupid thing. The last few months of this excruciating familiarity, the subtle but progressive comfort with Jason Todd and Dick Grayson; he’s become accustomed to the easy grips on the back of his neck, his bicep (like when they’re bantering back and forth), his ankle or calf (you know, while getting ready to do the ‘I am the night’ kind of thing), his wrist, the light scratch against his scalp, fingers tunneling in his too long hair, pressing chest-to-chest or chest-to-back when he comes out of those memories—when he’s still functioning in the extreme.

It’s a stupid thing because it hadn’t registered how much the warmth of hands and contact were severely damaging him, taking him apart without the real weight registering (until right this fucking second while he’s watching Jason’s mouth, looking at those hands resting in his elbows, taking in the long, lean stretch of leg—well, okay, who are you kidding, Red? This? This? Nothing new.).

He’s accustomed to burying these things since, well, Bart, Kon, and just Dick since way, way back in the day—

And he reaches out one hand before the planning center of his brain can spit out whoa, stop, bad idea.

Just the very tips of his fingers touch the white tuft falling over Jay’s forehead and right eye. Very carefully, he slides the feather-light touch down the side of Jason Todd’s sharp jaw, rough with scruff (that might make him shudder just a little), and he’s an idiot about it but he can’t miss an opportunity—

Tim’s heart gives a painful lurch against his breastbone when those eyes pop open, narrow on him just slightly. His breath catches as he jerks his hand away from where his thumb had come to rub over the bottom lip, but Jay… Jason Todd has had his own stint training with assassins, breaking into their world to absorb the lessons and logistics—so it’s really no stretch of the imagination that he catches Tim’s wrist and tugs back, almost pulls him out of his bed.

He opens his mouth to say something, “my bad,” “you had some grave dirt on your face,” “it was a massive spider. I saved your life,” something, anything stupid so Jay stops looking at him like that, calculating, something dark twisting under the surface.

“You were totally drooling, man, sorry about it,” is what he deadpans, giving himself about a thousand points when Jay blinks at him and lets go to swipe the back of his hand over the side of his mouth.

Tim forces a stupid grin and is up, making his knees work, keeping the cringe down to make a strategic retreat to the bathroom. Closing the door, turning on the shower pointedly, he takes a second to lean against the wall and fucking facepalm because.

He’s a dumb ass.

Intense scrutiny, remember? Alfred probably sent him up here.

Tim throws his shirt (new) off and starts unwinding a ton of bandages wrapped around his middle, moving faster with the incredible amount of sleep (in comparison to the usual) and food. The gauze is discarded in the waste bin, the tape peeled away to the neat stitches and patented Alfred healing goop.

The knock on the bathroom door jars him out of the familiar motions and please, don’t say anything, let’s just be bros.

“Give me twenty,” he calls while the dull meaty pulse still beats in the back of his mouth. He shoves
his boxers and sweats down his hips, irritated at his own stupidity and ignoring the shit out of the pain in his abdomen from the abrupt movement of getting naked. Letting Jay catch him was utterly his own fault and it’s nothing more than weakness—

“Mmhm, how ya gonna unwrap y’self, Baby Bird?” Jay slurs as he just opens the door, you know, like that time after the fear toxin train because doors are in-con-se-fucking-quential to the Red Hood.

This time, however, Jason Todd gets an eyeful.

Of naked, half-hard, scarred, muscled, (and fucking beautiful) Baby Bird.

He might have made a noise deep in his chest while Tim’s face goes hot and flushed halfway down his chest—which is also incredibly stupid because they’ve all seen each other in various states of naked. C’mon, being a vigilante is a messy fucking business. Blood and gore and alien slime are the top three of fifty thousand.

And maybe because Jason Todd is half-asleep, Tim can justify the Bat-stillness, the intensity of that stare. He could be looking at the scar from the Wanderer, the one on his thigh from Jason’s own knife, the knot of tissue on his side from Firefly…

But something low in his abdomen, a warm weight, a tightness that is very recognizable as want, the same damn tightness he gets when he watches Dick’s hands a little too closely, starts up when Jay doesn’t bother turning away or even moving. The taller vigilante is just standing in the doorway, not moving, just staring.

Tim’s mouth falls open before his brain can realistically come up with something good, “what? Is something else bleeding?” He takes a second to glance down at himself but, no, nothing else looks that bad.

Jason blinks, his head jerks up, and oh God—

His sweatpants are—

The heat in his face gets more intense, and Tim does the smart thing—ducks into the shower and slides the door closed on the fact that Jason Todd has a very impressive erection (and oh God, now, so does he). He shoves his head under the spray while his pulse pounds dully in the back of his mouth again.

Totally normal morning wood—dude, it’s fucking biology. And that’s his brain, giving him the perfect way out.

And Jay’s voice is only deep because he just woke up. “Ima get one too. Meetcha downstairs for pizza in twenty.”

“Amen,” he calls back, and if his hands are shaking slightly to grip the body wash in the shower (the same brand he still uses), well, no one would even know.

**

Jason Todd, however, closes the door behind him and pauses a minute to breathe and run a shaky hand over his face (and he ain’t gonna think about it, see? Not until Dickie gets offa work ‘cause maybe, judging by the half-hard cock, Timmy might be more interested than either of ‘em coulda guessed what with how red he got). He leaves Tim’s room and casts a glance down the hall, making sure B and Alfred were scarce, so he could get to his own room for a shower.
He takes his *time* with it, the scene he walked into replaying while he washes his hair, rubs suds over his neck and shoulders, over his chest. His skin tingles, his cock harder with the water pelting down, and scarred, smooth, pale skin in his peripheral. He bites down on his lip, blunt nails raking down his abdomen with a touch of pain to make himself harder, and dammit if his own mouth don’t catch up with him.

Talking dirty to Dickie lead them to the realm of impossibility when the older vigilante needed something to clear out the noise in his head, when he needed to be distracted enough to enjoy sex. And Jay is a man what knows how to find the right combination to make Dick *keen*, to bring him out of his self-recriminations, his traumas, to make him realize his *worth* again.

Using Timmy, describing what they would do to him, how they would get him completely undone, how they would make him *writhe*, was just one of the most effective ways.

In the last few months, it’s been working even *more*…with *both* of them. It hasn’t taken much for him to get just as hot as Dick thinking of Tim between them, screaming out when he comes.

And while Jason Todd braces a forearm against the shower wall, palming himself, panting out his pleasure while running through one of those scenarios, he can’t help but think about the expression on Dick’s face when he gives him the low-down.

Maybe—just *maybe* they could try out one of those scenarios.

The thought of Tim under his mouth, watching him and Dick suck each other, is enough to make him groan when he comes.

**

Wayne Towers brings a mixture of *too much* for Damian al Ghul Wayne.

His official career as *Robin* began here; not at the Manor or the Cave, with ghosts of his covertness for the tunic, but with a new start, a new Batman, a new base of operations. Together, he and Grayson started their own legacy, their own partnership. Becoming Robin for *Father* was…much different, more difficult. Grayson slowly worked him into certain things, thinking of the victims first, making certain the criminals wouldn’t be permanently damaged, seeing the shades of gray rather than his stark black and white of his upbringing (“*It is us and them, Grandson. That is the only designation you must know*”). He was able to go easier on criminals stealing food for their families, to be polite to the prostitutes, to feel remorse when he became too harsh; more so, as Grayson’s partner, he was able to accept the notion of *family* and a support system (much later, he and Todd were able to come to an *understanding* as fighting with one another always seemed to make Grayson utterly *miserable*—as much as it *pains* him, Grayson is the first thing he and Todd could agree upon).

He became more human, a better Robin in a much different way than he initially intended. Joining *Father*, well, *that*—

At first, he could not reconcile the two, not as a partner, not as a supplement to the Batman’s way of doing things; Grayson, during the transition, attempted to help him work better with Father, and yet, the most help remained digitally stored in the Batcomputer’s logs. Jason Todd’s old notes interspersed with profanity and brilliant deductions. Timothy Drake’s progression of steps, reading from the perspective of the twelve-year-old, catching the nuances of a detective.

From his predecessors, he *learned*. Perhaps it is why he joined the crusade to regain Jason Todd in the first place—as he saw an odd version of *himself* in the man. An assassin, a Robin, a murderer. It was only natural to understand Todd’s position and ideals as Dami had, at one time, agreed with him.
Logically, killing criminals would end their reign of terror rather than allow them to escape incarceration over and over again.

The Robin he is now, however, understands Father’s ethics more than the child assassin.

Ironically, somewhere along the way, Todd began to share in his epiphany. It would not shock him to know Grayson had a hand in that as well.

Still, the first place he was not forced into someone’s image of what he must and should be (as a Wayne, as a ten-year-old, as Robin) was here in the Bunker.

As he remembers, the underground garage is cool enough to raise the gooseflesh on his back as he pulls to the lowest sections and activates the hidden entrance, one that leads further down from the actual Bunker—rather, he’s looking for the transportation hub. Leaving the bike, he takes a few devices from under the locked seat and stuffs them into his backpack. Then he’s moving down into the dark by muscle memory, stopping to flip the breaker for emergency lights; perhaps pauses to lay a hand on the secret entrance he and Grayson used to maintain their nightly activities. It’s only a pause, however, as he needs to break into the Tower’s Data Center for direct access to any possible hidden caches or ghost drives on the WE network.

*Tt.* Drake isn’t the only Bat with hacking capabilities.

The thirteen-year-old finally comes to the most advantageous spot in the long corridor and gives a leap, getting himself up the right vent. He has his phone in one hand while lifting himself up with the other. Bracing his feet (and his boots would be helpful at this point, yet he would have to make do), he lunges easily up the vertical climb without the need of a grapple as the telecommunication room he must infiltrate is on the first floor—a grapple would be wasteful.

The young vigilante silently removes the vent plate and pokes his head up slightly, senses straining for any indication someone might be in the room. Slowly, Damian eases himself up into the mass of complex wiring, racks of server boxes, and work stations, sliding the vent cover back in place before he’s up and moving, ducking around to check the numbers on each rack. His phone is suddenly in one hand, hitting re-dial. The central connection of the network is the seventh rack over.

He ducks behind the rack, out of sight, sliding off his backpack waving his free hand in a circular hurry up motion as the phone rings.

The spare mini-computer, similar to the one in his utility belt currently in the Cave, boots up while he plugs into the spare network port.

“—Ugh, seriously? I like my liver in my body, bro. Hey, Titans Tower.”

“Garfield,” Dami greets, “Allen is the second fastest man alive and yet he cannot answer a simple call?”

“Hey Rob,” the shapeshift greets warmly, “we’re totally doing some tests, so KF is right about tied up at the moment, ‘kay?”

“I see,” he cracks the security protocols on the back door, satisfied with his time. The Bats would be pleased. “I am under the impression the Wayne Tech used for this meta-human technology is still a concern?”

Gar makes a noise, like he’s almost going to say something, but pauses.

Dami’s gaze goes down to his phone, “Garfield? What is it?”
“Well… I mean, we may have, um. Maybe I should get KF or maybe Rave—“

“Unnecessary. What is it?”

“…we may have been able to activate it. The fake arm, that is.”

Searching for the R&D server, Dami pauses this time, “able to activate it?” He asks carefully.

“Dude,” and Allen is yelling from somewhere in the background, “it was totally Cassie’s fault. She was the one messing with it.” And yes, that’s Cassie completely denying her involvement in their little experiment.

He suddenly has a smack right in the Bat-sense, “what did the prosthetic do, Garfield?”

“It gave Kon the super shitty ability to sing.” Allen calls out.

“Bro! I am hurt. You already know I can karaoke my ass off.”

“Sure because it’s fucking terrible.”

A suffering sigh on the line, and, for once, it isn’t him.

“Robin,” Raven greets with that tone, the whole please allow me to introduce you to the Carnivorous Beast Dimension.

“Ah, my second favorite,” he greets back. “What is happening?”

The chorus of whaaaat? Is easily ignored by them both as Raven breaks down the situation while Dami/Robin hacks the security keys to open system access wide.

“I would expect something like this from Bunker,” she finishes, “however, our former super seems to be simply…normal.”

“Hn. The technology is not simply an inducing piece of equipment.”

“From our current assessment, correct.”

“The initial purpose?”

“Has yet to be substantiated,” and her tone is absent, as though she is studying the results, “we have determined the prosthetic to have capabilities with gravity control and some sort of directional honing capacity.”

“Interesting. For the technology to incapacitate Superboy, it would need to have some control over the meta gene as well as induce it. Red Robin will be intrigued with this development.”

The black screen finally pops up, the DOS prompt ready for commands.

“As I understand, our fearless leader has been injured yet again,” and the darkness in her tone makes Robin/Dami pause for just a breath. While he is possibly arrogant in regards to his capabilities, he is one that understands how dangerous the powers of the occult can be.

“As per usual, Drake entered Gotham without a by-your-leave to track a shipment he believed to be connected with those distributing and creating this technology. He ran afoul of a separate set of criminals tracking a shipment of drugs,” and rather than being part of his paranoid nature (as many vigilantes are simply by rote), he believes he’s found something, narrowing his eyes while his fingers
move across the keys.

Raven makes an irritated noise and despite himself, Dami/Robin grins.

“However, N’s plan seems to be positive. Red allowed Oracle to contact the Bats for pick-up. His injuries have been assessed and treated, obviously. Agent A would allow for no less.”

“Whoa,” is KF’s assessment, “really, Rob?”

He hums in reply, eyes scanning while he attempts to break some very impressive encryption, utilizing everything Red Robin, Father, N, and Hood taught him about hacking. Regardless he strains to listen to the background conversation:

“I can be there in no time, and when I say it like that—“

“I’m coming too, man. You can run me—“

“You two knuckleheads need to calm it down.” Wonder Girls snarls and Dami/Robin is absurdly glad she is there to wrangle the two while Drake is with the Bats. The damage they could cause, tt.

“Cassie, for fuck’s sake—“

“I don’t want to hear it. Tim is in somewhat capable hands at the moment, so no shit storm is hitting the immediate radar. If he’s got something substantial in Gotham, then we let the Bats help him pan it out while we figure out what the hell this thing is doing.”

“You just want to leave him with them?” Is hissed just loud enough for Dami’s shoulders to stiffen, for him to open his mouth and almost say something—

“Dudes, chill okay? We have a powerless Blue on our hands, and…is it really a bad thing? The Bats are being better, remember? Meta bomb? Little kids with kick ass powers? Ring any bells?” Is Gar’s attempt to calm Red’s two best friends.

Kid Flash is silent, and Robin/Dami would know what expression he is making.

“There is…a plan,” he interjects, speaking into the comm unit, hesitating slightly, “concerning Red Robin.”

“Oh?” Kon grits out closer to the phone, “you wanna fill us in, Rob?”

“It is N’s idea initially. The rest of us have simply agreed to it, have aided in it. Plan Bring Red Back to the Bats.”

“Already know about it, dude,” Gar sighs, “and it’s cool, yeah? Good for you guys being on top of shit.”

“What I am trying to say,” he bites out in response to Gar’s sarcasm, “is I have formulated a plan of my own outside the initial one. They do not know.”

“Now what the ever-lovin’ fuck—“

“Simply,” he interrupts Kon, “I have accepted responsibility as the main reason for the fallout between Red and the others. If not for me and the Robin mantle, Red would not have been left in free fall. Therefore, while I had access to the ghost drive on Titan’s Tower’s network, I may have planted a special worm program. Once new data is stored, I will be alerted. Thus far it is working reasonably well.”
“Um,” Kon sounds somewhat awed at the cunning of Batman’s partner, “so, what? You get like a
*hey, shit’s going down* text or something?”

“In a manner of speaking,” and the screen he’s staring at changes *finally*. “An influx of new data will
insinuate Red is working on something potentially life threatening, and allow me to attempt to stay a
step ahead of him. Once he began uploading data to the drive, I contacted the Oracle and the Watch
Tower to request they search for his location. Honestly, how *else* do you think we’ve been able to
keep showing up to interfere with his cases?”

“You devious little shit,” Cassie blurts out.

Surfing into the hidden file, a small smile cuts across Robin’s face, “as my Father frequently intones,
*always have a plan.*”

**

Paperwork, done in *triplicate*, is the bane to his existence.

But Officer Grayson doesn’t have to do any of it this time—*thankfully*—and he hops in the special
GCPD SUV alongside Inigo.

In the back, the man that sold Timmy and WE out is ready to be on his merry little way to Central
City Penitentiary since the parole hearing apparently didn’t go *as expected*. But, when you’ve been
in the cape and cowl crew for a few years, you come to a point where everything has *possibility.*
The smallest details have a volume of meaning (like, probably a coincidence he and Jay slept in the
same bed in the Manor for the first time last night—the night Timmy finally came home) and exist in
a huge realm of possibility. He learned all this during his first year in the pixie boots when he was
still trying to be a *partner* instead of a sidekick—B introduced him to Superman, brought him along
on their adventures. He went to outer space, was there when the Watch Tower began to take shape,
when the Hall of Justice was full of heroes with amazing capabilities (Diana thought he was too
young, too impressionable for the life—she couldn’t have *known* his real story; Ollie and Arthur had
argued for him because *no, Di*, humans don’t *live* forever, let the kid do what he needs to do).

Through the years, Dick Grayson’s expectations as a crime fighter expanded. He’s kicked the hell
out of the run-of-the-mill criminal, held his own and eventually lead metas against some of the most
powerful bad guys in the world, and even stood toe-to-toe with alien invaders in outer space, fighting
for the freedom of *all mankind*.

So, he’s got quite the impressive resume, and the skill to see the smallest event, the most
inconsequential choice as the potential for something *more*.

Case in point.

There’s no multiverse out there where *this*, Shaw being transferred would be a random *coincidence*.
This is a jail break, plain and simple.

So, he has *options* on how to proceed from here (and is why he wanted to ride along with Inigo—
*just in case* someone in the GCPD is in on it or, you know, maybe if there’s a nice break-in to
Wayne Enterprises somewhere along the line), and he considers it while Inigo starts talking in that
incredibly flat tone about his Minecraft constructions—which, *everyone* needs a hobby, so why not?

He manages to ask a few questions, to steer the conversation to other things while casting glances in
the back of the armored truck where Shaw is manacled to the bench by wrists and ankles.

He’s pretty much what Dick expects, a Machiavellian bad guy—charismatic and calculating to
effectively pull off his crimes at WE. As is, Shaw is sitting in the back with a smile, not responding to any of their inquiries about food or bathroom breaks, not even when Inigo pretty much read the guy the riot act of rules.

While his mouth runs on auto-pilot, he brings up the mental case file: Shaw came from LexCorp’s IT department, application enterprise, to move up as a Project Manager for WE’s IT Department. He worked his hands into several projects in the beginning stages of development. During any of those software configuration projects, Shaw could have been put on the White Triad’s payroll to dig up the details on the tracking system Timmy was developing. If Shaw wasn’t able to access the details or a full copy, then he could at least get the Triad members past WE security to have a chance at the kidnapping plot.

Of course, the guy didn’t even have to really do anything other than sit in his cubicle and hack the iStar panels by each door for a key card. He could have procured temporary badges to look legit and manually opened the doors for the four men that threw Timmy in the back of an unmarked van and ran like the hounds of hell were at his heels. Shaw also cracked the first level encryption of system security to get the tracking software saved, but not deep enough to make it operational.

Thus the need for Tim Drake.

And thus, his and Jay’s need to kick some bad guy ass.

Less than fifteen minutes outside Gotham proper, the highway stretches out before them and Inigo is trying to entertain him with stories about his cat (and yes, he may have started it with mentions of Dami’s animal affinity), the dark sedan following them since half-way through town is slowly but surely creeping up on them, and Dick is still faced with the choice:

Let them get Shaw, track them, and then epic vigilante beat-down

Or

Let Officer Grayson step up a notch and find out more immediately whatever he can about this round of criminal bingo.

Decisions, decisions.

Regardless, Officer Grayson has a personal stake with the criminal in the back of the transport—the one that is smiling to himself. The one indirectly responsible for Tim’s abduction and torture. The one that might be a link to the White Triad bastards that seemingly got disbanded after the merry gathering of ABC agencies tore into their little operation (because of some well-meaning anonymous source, Timmy).

But, little known fact (one he’d been working from their end for the last month when Tim’s panic attacks seemed to slack off a little, or, well, as much as he could observe anyway): the White Triad was a multi-level organization with connection to major syndicates, terrorist organizations, and even suppliers of supervillains (you know, Vandal Savage and Deathstroke just to name a few). And wouldn’t you just know it, but right before Tim’s abduction, the Triad started dealing in genetically weaponized tech—oh, something like certain Meta-Killing bombs.

So, the group is probably still operating after the first take ‘em-down, and one way or another, Shaw is going to lead him right to them, and hopefully before Timmy gets wind of it.

Either way, the Bats are going to get the chance—they’re going to have Timmy’s fucking back this damn time.
Dick’s eyes go to the side mirror again when the sedan gets closer and something comes from the window.

He slowly unclicks his seatbelt, ready to let it slide off when the back tires are eventually shot out and Inigo loses control of the vehicle. He’s ready to make sure the other cop doesn’t die here, and he’s damn sure ready to kick a little ass.

**

“Honestly,” Dami/Robin rant-whispers into the comm, “it is a tome made of human skin. One containing the secrets from the Demon Head’s own hand. How else to explain why Grandfather would gift such a thing?”

The horrified silence on the comm line is enough to convince him they believe. And somewhere, it is vaguely satisfying, to be part of—

Nonsense.

He already has a partner—partners.

Someday perhaps. Once the younger ones were prepared to make their choices—they would need someone to guide them through the first year at the very least. Something to consider.

“Whole new meaning to the Wednesday appointments,” and Kon sounds vaguely sick.

“Just, Rob. Dude. Okay. Couldn’t you have, I don’t know, dropped this bomb sooner or some shit? We could have been more proactive about keeping a buffer between him and the Creepster.” Kid Flash does not sound any better.

Robin/Dami pauses long enough to shrug and returns to searching, eyes narrow on the screen. “The partial serial number?”

“I’m still traumatized,” Gar claims from the lab in Titans’ Tower, raising a hand. “Not sorry about it.” But he gets back to the immediate oh-shit sitch and pulls up the holoscreen with the earlier scans to read the partial over the intercom. He’s pulling from the Watch Tower’s satellite feeds, backtracking Tim’s last moves and inhaling the transferred files.

It’s brutal and terrifying in parts, reminding Garfield Logan of kneeling down in another lab, in another life; back when it was the Teen Titans and their HQ had been New York City. Once upon a time when Dick was Robin, Wally was Kid, Donna was Wonder Girl—and he and Raven were doing that awkward dance, circling the other, waiting for a break.

So, he gets it immediately. Red would be on something like this.

Kon is grimacing, sitting on a spinning stool across one of the lab tables from Bart and Cassie—the smooth metal encasing his right hand cradled in both of Bart’s while Cassie works inside the half gauntlet’s control panel with small silver tools confiscated from Tim’s drawer (of which were hers in the first damn place). Her brows are furrowed in concentration, hands extremely steady as she works in the complex circuitry and motherboard.

Raven is very calmly watching the live feed of Damian Wayne in the server room of Wayne Tower, only a shift in the shadows behind a massive rack of towers. She has already looped the feed so Security will not interfere with the operation.

“I believe I may have found something,” Robin’s voice echoes from the intercom, “a reference to—“
And he lowers his voice, head snapping up as muffled voices come closer to the door. “A moment,” he unplugs from the port and leaps up as the card panel activates and opens the door.

“And I mean tits. Just big, beautiful, and juicy, Mike. You shoulda been there!”

“Next time invite me, asshole!” This Mike comes back, carrying a server box under one arm. “Diane wouldn’t have minded.”

“A strip club visit?” The other technician gives Mike a droll look, “she would have cut your balls off and maybe given them back to you at Christmas.”

Mike laughs a little, “nah. Believe it or not, she knows I’m only coming home to one lady, and that’s her.”

“If this is what twenty years of marriage looks like, I’m calling the ceremony off,” the technicians starts to unplug the server box by the control panel while the ceiling panels overhead slide back into place.

“Robin?” Is Raven’s quiet, unshakeable tone—the background noise has gone silent.

Braced between the tiles, he moves like he is already wearing the tunic, breathes the ghost of a noise, “Company.”

The two technicians remove networking cables and slap a red Decommissioned sticker on the side while he watches from above. The second unit replaces the first while the two continue their banter.

And it takes him less than a second to calculate the possibilities (that server was actively running, why remove it now?), but he finally speaks quietly to Raven, “the Wayne tech, run a diagnostic against anything on the ghost drive. There is a possibility it could be connected to a larger system.”

The files he’d traced via the partial number belong to the new tactile monitoring system still in Research and Development at WE—the one Drake hesitantly spoke of that very morning; thus, it stands to chance the system, Wayne Enterprises itself could be compromised—a group of terrorists after a tracking program created by Timothy Jackson Drake. Robin is not happy with the implications, of the possibility another group will be after the daytime persona, perhaps to attempt another abduction. Robin’s eyes narrow as he frees his hands and begins to move, following the two technicians as they finally see their way out of the main Data Center. He will follow long enough to cause a brief distraction, just enough time to map the hard drive to his computer and wipe whatever is necessary.

Luckily, he has learned an “old school diversionary tactic” from Grayson—and each floor has several fire alarms to trigger.

Once the two technicians board the elevator, he slides through the vent (which is not getting any easier the more he grows—tt, Todd’s bitching may be…somewhat valid) into the elevator shaft, only a hop needed to grip the cable and silently light down on top the transport.

It gives him enough time to fish a domino out of his backpack as well as fit a comm in his ear and forward the phone, freeing his hands.

“Ow! Ow-ow-ooow, for shit’s sake, Cassie!”

Gar deadpans, “dude. Seriously, without the invulnerability thing, you are whiny and annoying.”

“She’s trying to set this thing on fire!”
“Perhaps if Kid attempts to dismantle it using his speed?”

“I would not suggest it,” he interjects, crouching as the elevators begins to ascend.

“And?” Raven prompts, busy running through the gambit of feeds back in the Tower.

“I have tracked the partial number to a project in R&D,” he inserts shortly, cupping a hand around the comm in his ear to be heard over the noise of the elevator’s mechanics, “I am not familiar with the details. Red, however, is.”

“So... there’s something about this wave going down. I mean, Wayne Enterprises is dealing in meta powers and controls now?” Of course, Gar covers the concern, tracing the signals from all the littles just, well, you know, metas as guinea pigs and shit.

“I do not believe that is accurate. The file is for a tracking system currently in testing,” and his eyebrows furrow with thought, “however, it would stand to reason anyone creating these enhanced soldiers would want to implant tracking devices.”

Collectively, once the implications sink in, the Titans breathe out an, “oh shit” and turn their gazes to the half-gauntlet. One probably leading the Insidious Seven right to their front door.

**

In that twenty minutes, he has time to mentally recalibrate, explain what he thought might have happened back there (every guy gets morning wood, biology can indeed suck it), and plan on what details from his little trip around the world evil laboratory edition, to pull out for the Bats to start working.

*Files on the test subjects*

*Procedures and experiments*

*Tech analysis*

*S.T.A.R. Labs footage and file search*

Hopefully, the Titans have something good on the Insidious Seven, so if he works everything just right, he can have all the groups in the right spots for things to come off without a hitch.

Titans Bad Guy Group A

Bats on Bad Guy Group B

Him on Bad Guy Group C

All right.

Plan ready.

Alfred already has pizza cooling on the table and a grape Zesti with a glass of ice sitting at his spot.

It’s jarring for a hard moment—making Tim stop with the abrupt déjà vu, his mouth suddenly dry.

“Ah, Master Timothy. Feeling well rested I hope?”

Alfred comes out of the swinging door with another pan, olives and pineapple. Well, that’s all B.
Instead of pretending to grumble and bitch about it, Tim Drake drops into his chair and reaches for the Zesti, a half-smile giving Alfred all he needed to know.

He’s already devoured four slices by the time Jay comes downstairs, hair still wet from a shower, and Alfred sitting across from Tim at the table, drinking a warm cup of tea.

As usual, the one-on-one Alfred talks are full of innuendoes, implications, and insinuations (and is this how it is with anyone else? Somehow he didn’t think so), the two of them exchanging data coded in a casual conversation, a verbal chess match and venting session all in one, but really. The butler is the first detective of the Bats, so didn’t that just make sense?

And it’s so just the way it’s always been even years later that he finds himself giving Alfred what he wants to hear: yes, the Insurgents Crisis sucked and he got hurt more than the normal array of normal; the team took some hard hits, gained new baddies, and yes, Alfred, his responsibilities just seemed to keep growing with each new layer of holy shit, what are we trying to fight again? they came up against. It’s fine he’s handling it.

Jay walks right into the middle of it, waving Alfred to sit back down when the butler has already half-risen out of his chair.

“S’alright,” Jason picks up a slice without one of the small plates, winking at Tim, and innocently chewing through the self-suffering sigh. Apparently, though, the butler has learned how to pick his battles.

“Honestly, Master Jason. You are too old for such nonsense.” Leaning back in his chair, their one-on-one over, not necessarily to his liking but sufficient for the time being, Alfred Pennyworth, former intelligence operative in her Majesty’s service has learned enough over the span of twenty or so minutes to understand both sides of the story. He is a master of reading into those things best left unsaid.

“Mmhm,” Jay agrees, eyes half-lidded because damn, no one makes it like Al, “ ‘least m’ not eatin’ some organic shit in m’ Lucky Charms, you feel me?”

The noise that comes from Alfred’s throat makes Tim’s eyes go wide. “Tofu in a children’s cereal. Honestly, at some point I must have failed Master Dick in his ability to discern taste.”

And he doesn’t snort Zesti out of his nose, but it’s a close thing.

Jay even half-stands up to wack him on the back while he dies, cackling like an asshole.

The two older Bats are eyeing him with satisfied looks while he gets himself under control, slouching back in his chair to wipe at his eyes because yup, sounds like Dick.

“Thanks for that,” he wheezes slightly.

“Aw, that ain’t even funny, Timmers,” Jason waves a hand with the half-eaten slice around, “Demon was off on a thing, n’ got his face broken in front of that girl he likes, Ducard’s kid or something.”

And what now? Baby Bat and NoBody? He leans an elbow on the table, chin in hand, “Oh, how bad?”

Jason smirks at him, “broken nose, fractured cheekbone, whole lotta stitches kinda bad.”

“That? Totally sucks, man,” he laughs a little. It’s worse than busting ass in front of bad guys. Or when you’re, you know, new to the Robin thing and swing past intended targets (so totally
embarrassing).

“We gave him shit for a week, Tim. Ya missed out.” Jason polishes up the first slice and goes for the next, taking a stupid damn little plate and shit so’s he can lean back in his chair.

Alfred sips his tea, brow raised, “I also recall patching up a certain helmet wearing individual, as he slipped and fell down several levels of fire escapes before righting himself.”

“So, you wound me here, yeah?”

“Ah, but isn’t turnabout fair play, Sir?”

And the three of them laugh a little as more stories of instances he missed out on come to the fore while Jay scarfs down two more slices and consumes more coffee. It’s comfortable again, without the tenseness from that guy saw me naked and I totally wanted him.

Good, no need to make Jason feel like ass because Robin the third had a thing (for him and his acrobat boyfriend—just nope, please ignore the pining behind the curtain).

They’re still laughing about an apparently terrible instance of a punchdrunk Dami literally biting Harvey on the fucking ankle (so that’s where that little hilarity came from, huh?) in one of those I’ll tie up the sidekick and use him as leverage kind of plans when a wavering Bruce manages to look half put-together on his way into the dining room.

Alfred doesn’t even wait but is in and back out through the kitchen door with fresh coffee and migraine medication with barely a glance over his grown charge.

“Hey B, no offense, but you look like ass, and not th’ kind I wanna tap, you feel me?” And why is Jason doing the eye slide at—

And even still somewhat loopy from only four hours of sleep in the last eighty or so, B manages to look slightly sick because Jason is his son and no, no don’t tell me you have sex. Ever. Even though you and Dick are obvious. The Bat doesn’t need to know details, just be safe and take care of each other. Maybe we should scheduled a talk—

B grunts out something that might be a vaguely veiled threat about booby-trapping the helmet or something while Alfred immediately puts caffeine down before Master Bruce in hopes no batarangs will take out any of his nice lighting fixtures...yet again.

And no, they’re not both silently judging Bat-Dad as he inhales two pieces of pizza before the whole cup of coffee is gone and he manages to be almost lucid.

Tim’s biting his lip, hiding behind the coffee Alfred put in front of him. Jason give no shits on laughing out right at the Batman’s hair sticking up on all sides with a face full of crease marks. Well, at least they’ve made it up to grunts. Progress.

Jay has the errant thought if Clark deals with B better in the mornings—

He shudders slightly, “a’right, a’right. Getcha shower, get alive and shit, you feel me B? Me and Baby Bird,” Jay is half-drinking from his cup of coffee as he gets to his feet, and snatches up Tim’s in the other hand, “we’re gonna get this show ona road, yeah? Start with getting the gear up t’ snuff. Get some prelims outta the way.”

B might say something to the effect of save some the good stuff for me and waving his two sons away toward the Grandfather clock.
Since, well, *coffee*, Tim’s eyes lock on his DNA: *Checks itself before it wrecks itself*, extra large mug that only existed in the Manor because he’s the nerd of the family, and follows the line of shoulders and back walking in front of him.

Jason works the clock to open the secret entrance, and it takes longer than usual to get down the stairs. Owfuck you know. And even though Jason isn’t riding the pain train, he still takes his time, sipping on his own coffee and pacing beside Tim as they take the spiral down into that familiar dark.

Lighting does the usual thing when the triggers on the steps are activated, the row of original suits, the big car rising up, turning on the rotating pedestal, lights over the main computer, lab area, medical area, and four metal work benches.

Jason picks up the harness and utility belt (and just that, no sign of his *suit* anywhere) from the medical gurney recently *occupato*, and Tim *knows* what he’s thinking before those brows even furrow down at the harness in his hand.

“*Yes,*” because answering the question before it’s asked might just deter away—

“Aw Timmy,” and Jason grins, wide and white, “lookit you being sentimental and shit. Wanted to have me with ya in spirit, yeah?”

And it’s just *stupid* that he laughs helplessly, “my other two on the plane were *busted as hell*. I didn’t have time to go back to the Perch or the Tower to get another spare. Yours just happened—“

Jason just chuckles low, “so mine just *happened* to be in the plane, Tim? Keepin’ me with ya? Makes me get all warm and fuzzy.” And Jay grins when he really wants to cross the room and—

*You were my Robin, Jay. Nothing’ll change that for me.*

Tim just smirks back and takes his gear, already planning for a little *pit stop* to pick up an extra suit, “I have no idea why I hang out with you. You’re an asshole, Jay.”

“Wouldn’t have me no other way, Timmy,” and the soft look is back when Jason gives up the equipment, the corner of his eyes crinkling before he turns away, takes himself over to a work bench with his helmet already sitting on it.

And Tim just blinks because *oh God*, it’s *so true*. He taps the busted harness with his fingers while Jay seems to start pulling open drawers and cabinets, he just shoves a thumb over his shoulder, “that one there, Baby Bird.”

Tim blinks up, “what?”

“The bench over there is yours,” he pauses and spins around on the stool. “Demon’s by the steps, Dickie’s over there, B’s a fucking slob so his shit is everywhere, but that one? That one’s you.”

Instead of giving in to the, *okay, what’s*? He does what Jason expects and ambles over to the sterilized clean workstation, crossing his arms over his chest, and looking at the stocked shelves and empty workspace.

Jason’s the one that gets up, pulls out a drawer with a pretty sweet laptop inside, the Red Robin insignia on the top. His brow arches (well, the logo isn’t that hard to create, right?), but Tim dutifully watches while Jason pulls open the upper cabinet. Two Bat-designed harnesses are there, two corresponding utility belts that look oh so familiar (he redesigned his own, so apparently someone—Dick—was paying way too much attention), and tools for fine and more general work mounted inside. Of course, only Dami really knew which kind of tool kits and solder guns he liked to use
when it was time to do the delicate work; really, he was the only one that cared when it came to
getting motherboards ready for the next toy.

The usual bag of fun to stock the compartments are at the bottom in labeled plastic containers:
Smoke, small blast, medium blast, watch your ass (like I don’t know whose terrible handwriting
this is), knock-outs, jacks, and misc. Wow. Miscellaneous could apply to a gambit of things that might
happen when he tosses it at someone (that one time with the glob glue was not a good surprise
for him or the Riddler; seriously, this is one of those painful instances B has a fucking sense of humor).

Tim’s eyes take it all in because, well, he sure as shit didn’t expect this either.

Jason opens the next cabinet over, and there’s more of the know thy ally there: tech. Hard drives,
gadgets, wiring and cables, generic motherboards, circuits, empty casings, and a whole ton of fun.

He doesn’t realize he’s staring or what expression has taken over his usually neutral features, but
whatever is there makes Jason reach out, broad hands not even hesitating to grip him.

“Hey. You okay?” And the guy is bending down a little so he can look at Tim’s face from the side,
one brow arching up into his hair line, the red and white tuft falling into the brow (and soft).

“I’m good,” but he’s all for looking at this workspace with something, something sparking in his
chest because this is…unnecessary. Fucking righteous because wow (tape on the ceiling). but—

He shakes it off since there’s work to do.

Jay doesn’t really believe him, the fingers moving against the tight muscles underneath. When he
speaks, his voice is low and serious, “just you an’ me, Tim. S’aright. I been where yer at.” The hands
squeeze, just like when Jason is trying to ground him, and Tim lets out a long, slow breath.

“I know,” Jay pulls him in roughly, “what when ya keep thinking— there ain’t no place here f’ me
anymore, and how fucked ya get when there is. Almost guts ya, yeah?”

Tim might just give into temptation and let his forehead rest on the Red Hood’s shoulder (seriously,
another growth spurt would be perfect). He doesn’t have to say anything, Jason already knows.

“It’s been there a while, so’s ain’t going anywhere, you feel me? Plenty a’ shit on the big
workbench in the back. Should ya wanna.”

But—

He pulls back slightly, smiling faintly, and takes his time, opening and searching for the things he’d
need, and Jason seems satisfied, sauntering back over to his own space, picking up the helmet again
to break it open and try a new sensory array. There’s a bin at the side of his station, one with empty
casings that Tim doesn’t have to really think hard when he considers the guy is probably doing his
own reloads.

Gingerly, like he’s going to be caught doing something he shouldn’t be, Tim eases down on the
stool, laying his harness out on the clean, unblemished top, eyes darting over to Dick’s station with
the obviously ironic bumper sticker on the side Have you had your zen today? The other: Jesus loves
you, everyone else thinks you’re an asshole.

Another glance at Dami’s and there’s My day isn’t complete until I’ve terrified a stranger. The
second one: I brake for animals. Then an easy look over at the side of Jay’s Be Nice to America or
we’ll bring Democracy to YOUR country. Of course, I’ve used up all my sick days, so I’m calling in
dead.
It’s a good thing he’s not drinking his coffee—because it would be pouring out of his nose.

So, Tim eases to the side, looking down at the base of this work desk and: My Honor Student Kicked the Shit Out of Your Honor Student. Tim blinks, reads it again. Blinks again. And, well, Dick. His second one is as appropriate: Not Found. The requested URL/sticker.html was not found on this server.

Hilarious asshole.

The tool kit is pretty perfect, close to what he usually carries whenever he’s between Gotham and San Fran or out in the world looking for bigger baddies that might be trying to ruin someone’s day. He checks the two busted compartments damaged when one of the shots at him last night ricocheted in the right spot to dent the edges. He’s hunched over the things, working it out with furrowed brows.

He gets lost in the gentle hum of the big computer, the echoes in the Cave, the familiar light sources and shadows. It’s all just so (“Welcome home”) easy, being here.

He has no clue how long he’s lost in the mechanical motions: fixing, stocking, booting up the PC, checking it, upgrading, accessing the Batplane, starting the data analysis.

The ping noise coming from his wrist computer, laying on the shelf means oh shit, suit up and kick some ass time.

Tim immediately jerks, lurches to a half-stand regardless of owfuck, and thumbs the screen with his brain already working on how fast he could get to the Tower if he leaves right now and dresses on the way.

The alert blinks once, his algorithm triggered by… Cassie? A few taps and he’s looking at the Tower scans of her injuries from the Mirror Master fight compared with the newer ones from—

Oh.

Tim breathes through his nose while he flips to the next alert, the injuries along with lack of sustenance means cranky half-goddess kind of thing. His calibrations for each Titan are tied with their capabilities, and Cassie, no matter how bad ass she is, has her own set of limitations.

The second alert is a little more how the fuck? Kon triggered this one and—

“That—“ Jason butts right in, pointing a finger from his own workstation, “is not a happy Timmers look.”

“My people give me shit for pushing it,” Tim fills in smoothly because nope, not pissed. Not. At. All. “But sometimes, things change when it gets to be one of them.”

Jay’s brow arches up while Tim makes a few integrated taps on his computer and sets it down on his workstation, crossing his arms over his chest, bare-faced. Eyes narrow, he waits for it.

The wrist computer starts projecting the hologram with alarming clarity; Titan’s Tower with his teammates apparently working on something—considering they’re all together, moving around the lab. He can hear the chatter, catch sight of the blur that is Bart Allen, see Rave’s unamused expression (oh shit), and the screen behind her is tracking…Dami?

“Anyone want to tell me what the hell is going on?”
And only Cassie, Bart, Kon, and Gar jump, probably getting whiplash from turning so fast to the hologram in the center of the Titan’s Tower main lab.

“Oh,” Bart drawls out, “he’s alive. Well, will you look at that.”

“I checked in,” he sneers in return, eyeing the small bandages on Cassie’s knuckles while she works on the gauntlet somehow attached to Kon’s goddamned hand.

Seriously. How many times does he have to go over this? Just because the Tower systems ran analytical scans doesn’t mean whatever is on the slab isn’t dangerous as fuck.

“So, I get shit for going after bad guys, but you can take out Bloody Mary right after a team battle? Like, no harm, no foul?” Not. Mad. At. All.

And Cassie pauses, quirks a brow at him.

“Since, you know, there’s sensors in my suit—“

“The ones you constantly hack?” Raven deadpans.

“—and protocols,” he continues, arms crossed tight over his chest, “and a right bitching when I do something like that.”

Kon smartly mouths a right bitching? to Bart, who is trying to keep a hand over his mouth.

Cassie looks over at the holo-projection, waving a pointy tool at it, “…you have a point, Red. Next time, I’ll send a message to the team—“

“Or Diana,” Gar cocks a brow at her. “She would have totally rocked an ass kicking sess with her fave gal pal.”

Cassie freezes a second, as though calling her mentor hadn’t really occurred—

And the fact it hadn’t sends her reeling slightly, reassess; when new villainous jerks were collared and possible evil tech and arms dealers (like if it’s not the White Triad, take ‘em down; if it is, beat the ever loving fuck out of them, and then take ‘em down), she and Di were going to have a girl’s day. Mani-pedis, hair, make-up, and probably kicking Cheeta’s ass.

Raven, working at the main terminal, glances over at the guilty Wonder Girl who is going back to the gauntlet and then to Red’s bare face with the background of the Batcave. She connects the lines to keep the confusion to a minimum (or make the attempt anyway).

“I see the alert system is working,” she deadpans, moving closer to the projection. “But perhaps we should be posing that query to you, Red. What is going on?”

He sighs because, well, Rach.

Luckily, Jason steps in close behind him, leaning over his right shoulder to check it.

“Well I’ll be shit,” he drawls, pressing into Tim’s back, “what’s doing Titans?”

“Hood!” Kon unconsciously uses the gauntlet hand to wave, making Cassie snarl in frustration and snag the hand back.

“Aw! Bat bonding time!” KF snickers.
“Leave ‘em alone, KF.” Gar waves a hand, going back to the main screen, “Hey man, how’s it going on the Bat front of things?”

“I am almost there,” a voice over the Tower’s system says in a hushed whisper.

“Dami?”

“Demon?” He and Hood say at the same time and then turn to look at one another with mirth before going back to the projection.

The Titans stop and the line is eerily silent.

“Ain’t some little asshole ‘sposed ta be in school or some shit?” Hood tisks, loudly.

“Ah, we kinda asked for a favor, you know?” Gar’s face comes into view, “since we’ve got this little piece of tech that might be sending out our location to some gnarly guys and made our alien bro a little less special if you know what I mean.”

Tim groans when Kon just looks up from what Cassie is trying to do and shrugs with the not-my-bad kind of expression. He seriously facepalms because these guys.

“All right,” he rubs at his temple while the plans come together, “Cassie’s on point with deactivating the normal-guy setting. Are you going for the power supplies?”

She doesn’t even need to look up from what she’s doing, “mmhm.”

“Okay. We’ve got a possible tracker. Kid?”

Bart looks up then stands, cracks his neck since ready-for-it-dude, and grins.

Tim nods back with a smirk, “we need a magnetic field to disrupt the signal, right?”

“Why, yes, Red, I think we do,” and like a little kid, he’s bouncing on the balls of his feet, “does this mean what I think it means?”

“Well, I’m already aware you want to try out the new and improved suit, so why not take it for a test drive and see if the modifications work?”

And no, he didn’t fangirl squeal but it is a close thing; however, an all-right fist pump and finger gun at the Red projection and Kid is off…in a flash.

In twenty-eight seconds he’ll be several floors down in the Tower’s R&D play area where the experimental yellow and red reinforced Kid Flash suit was waiting for some real world testing. He’ll have configured it to the outgoing signal wave and will be on his way down to the ground floor to just, you know, stretch his legs a bit. Going fast enough around the base of the Tower, running lightly, just skimming really, the suit will emit a magnetic wave to focus on the outgoing signal without killing the whole system.

So basically, he gets to skip any lectures to go outside and play.

Score.

“What do we have Rob on?” Tim continues now that the immediate uh, is handled, but he’s on his lap top to access the Tower’s security system for a little insurance.

“In my defense,” the hush whisper is back on the comm, and Raven waves a hand to tilt the
projection enough to see a row of cubicals, “this is a perfectly justified reason to leave school.”

Tim shrugs, “the Titans can take it up with B as far as I’m concerned.”

Each of them throw a finger to the nose, even Kon, with a not-it motion.

Rave waves it off, agreeing to take one for the team rather than let Bart handle it by default.

Gar brings up the scans in Red’s projection, the name and partial serial number—something that gives Red and Hood pause from the other end.

“Oh,” Red says faintly.

“Fuck,” Hood just follows it up.

“What else do we have?” B pipes up from behind his sons, scaring the living shit out of them (because, you know, Batman is a troll).

The projection blips, and Red’s laptop pings with readings from the new KF suit. It’s working beautifully, just, so much win for that idea. He’s going to write a letter to S.T.A.R. labs with a thanks for the collab.

“Almost got it,” Cassie interrupts, “Red?”

He goes back, and flips a hand at his phone, bringing up a secondary screen, enlarged the image of the tools she’s using to work into the guts of the device. Tim stands from the laptop, gets close enough to see to walk her through disabling the gauntlet without possibly hurting Kon—or causing a more lasting effect.

“Okay, the blue wire and green circuit board—“

Hood goes back to his station for a sip of the cold coffee, hoping Al might get an itch to meander down with some fresh and all. Wayne tech getting used by these ass hats. He snags his phone out of his sagging pocket, shooting Dickie a quick heads up on the detecting front. When he comes back to Timmy’s workstation, Gar is filling in the deets for B, de-arming the tech seems to be a little tense while Baby Bird’s eyes are narrowed in concentration, and the secondary screen he can see shows two guys walking in a cubical with a PC tower, setting it down where shit must get stored. There’s a work bench with extra monitors, keyboards, and alla shit in between.

“Rob is on point in Wayne Enterprises. You know, just following a lead,” Gar grins at B (since he’s been dealing with the Dark Knight for over a decade, and this? This? Is nothing compared to the time he had to explain to the Batman why his Robin was caught on the news in a fight against the Brotherhood of Evil stark naked. Kory had been just totally amused and the rest of them pretty much traumatized. Even Donna.

Well, magic users and insane bad guys are just such assholes sometimes. Madame Rogue thought it would slow the then Dick Grayson Robin down enough to beat him—she’d been wrong.

They made him go back to Gotham for a month after that.

“It’s a good move,” Tim interjects for a second after he tells Cassie in an no-nonsense way to just breathe out. Stand up, walk around, shake it out, then back to it. Kon looks slightly pale, staring at the thing on his hand and wrist. The hidden trap they’ve encountered puts a little bit of a damper on things, “some things can be hidden best on an isolated drive, not accessible outside of WE.”
The two IT people leave the computer tower sitting on a desk and exit the cubical.

Robin jumps down from above, ducks behind the desk, and goes for the power cord, senses straining for the low murmur of noise and office talk in the cubicles surrounding him. It doesn’t take long for the tower to boot up and he’s already plugged back in.

“Robin,” is all B needs to say—his partner already knows.

“School was boring today,” the youngest talk-whispers back, “besides, you had a skiing accident… again.”

B chuffs a low laugh, but the look he’s giving Gar would probably make anyone else cringe. “Next time, I get a heads-up before you leave school for crime fighting.”

Gar holds up both hands in surrender while Robin simply tt’s on the line.

Glancing at the screen Rave is also keeping an eye on, Red comes back to the schematic as Cassie re-takes her seat and cracks her knuckles, all kinds of let’s get it done.

“Rob, can you patch me in?”

Statics flicker, no sign of the Seven, and his own trackers might be able to piggy back on the previous signal before they decided on a little need for speed.

“A moment, Red,” Robin/Dami whispers from his hidden spot, eyes narrow on his wrist computer.

He goes to the still-seated Kon, who is getting more and more pale the longer the device is on him, “Kon? Talk to me,” he soothes while Cassie gets the tools back to the trap by the power supply.

“Weak, not like kryptonite weak, but dude—“

“I know,” he soothes, “it’s strange tech, it’s affecting you differently than kryptonite because it’s negating your own power for the one provided by the gauntlet, okay? You should be able to manipulate gravity like a boss though, at least from what the scans found.”

While working, Cassie is the one that pipes up, “gravity?”

“Yup,” he flicks another finger to pull up the scans and projections from the Tower’s system, “the one we pulled this device from was able to flash around like that because the gauntlet is all about gravity control.”

The Titans not working on dangerous tech, exchange a glance because bad guys and their fuckery.

“It’s fine, Kon. Once we deactivate it, you’ll be your usual super self,” and Red moves to the next screen, watching Robin work while setting up a diversion on the floor. Oops, the card panels are just not working, wtf?

A flicker and the blur of KF is circling the Tower, just, you know, taking a nice stroll and shit.

And Hood just takes a second to watch the whirling cycle of get shit done that is Red; it strikes him hard, that he works on the ‘low like B to keep his people taken care of whether they like it or not (or when he’s gotta do what needs to be done—whether they might approve or not), and then how he keeps them moving, rallying them together like Supes does with any of his team, and at the same time provides support like Di, not letting ‘em get all kinds of fucked when things start sliding to the bad side—keeps ‘em moving forward.
It’s a crazy realization after all this time trying to get Baby Bird back, after watching him direct them in a fight when lives are at stake and baddies are all about world domination, to see this side after the Titans pretty much gave them a terabyte worth of Red specific protocols and directions what means they try to keep him on his feet and running. To know Red is their compass, the force that makes the Titans keep fucking moving.

Now it’s little wonder he’s always sleep deprived and overworked. Half of that is trying to keep the group of teenagers on the up and up.

Hood glances over at B while Baby Bird takes Cassie through the last steps of deactivating the hidden trap in the gauntlet, monitoring Kon’s vitals on screen, keeping the outside security feed up as KF runs, checks out the last few days of records to see if anyone else got themselves into something deep while he was out and about.

“I have what I need,” Robin finally removes his wrist computer from the server, already wiped the hidden drive. He unplugs the unit and connects into the Batcomputer, holding his breath, listening for the direction of the office murmur. He catches grumbles about damn things never work as someone passes by the opening to the cubicle he’s hiding in but no one returns.

The young boy leaps up, masked, carrying his backpack, and still in his Gotham Academy uniform. School is already out for the day anyway.

Red nods and looks over his shoulder, eyes seeking out—

Alfred puts the fresh carafe of coffee down on Master Dick’s workstation and inclines his head, turning to make his way back up the Manor stairs. He would start up the Rolls, meet Master Damian at WE for a ride home.

“Rob, Agent A is on pick-up.”

“Tt. Unnecessary, Red Robin. I was able to make my own way here,” talk-whisper while he take above the ceiling tiles.

“I don’t have a bike in the Bunker,” Red just shrugs, “and you can work the system over comms while he drives.”

“Hn. Very well. I will begin analysis while bribing Pennyworth to stop for milkshakes.”

“Aw, c’mon, Rob. Bring ’em home, too?”

“I will make certain yours is a bratwurst flavored one, Hood.”

Kon’s horrified face? Priceless.

“Gross,” Gar observes mildly. But since their fearless leader is back in action for the moment, he can go back to being deep in the lab reports, trying to find any indication of their little dudes and where they might have come from. Part of him doesn’t even want that (because they might have to give them up, right? If their parents were still around somewhere and wanted them back), but the other half of him, the part that continually animates him to keep coming back, to keep stepping the hell up for the next bad guy, the next world-ending plot, the next round of pain and psychological damage, the part of him that is a superhero (the part in all of them), at least has to know.

“It might not be that bad,” KF fills in from his place downstairs. The reverberations from the magnetic wave make his back teeth ache and his prosthetic knee twinge at odd intervals, but if he’s learned something as a speedster—it’s to know when you need to skip around while using the speed
force. So, nice suit, but it’s going to end up in an owfuck and probably a little visit to get something in his knee replaced.

“Naw, sounds pretty fuckin’ awful, Demon. I’ll pass, yeah?” Hood smirks from Red’s immediate right, thumbing his phone, waiting for Dick to hit him back.

B’s eyes slide down to Red from under the whiteouts.

“I GOT IT!” Cassie crows in victory, very nearly making everyone jump out of their fucking skin.

“Of course you did,” Red replies, offended, “now, the green motherboard and two wires we saw before.”

For the Batman casually leaning over his shoulder, watching all the screen and data coming across, Red throws a finger up to the enlarged screen where Wonder Girl is almost through with the gauntlet.

And there it is, a small black device, one that’s oddly familiar, Red thinks sourly, stolen from their own R&D—even with the logo burned mostly off, he knows his own tech.

“All right, KF, tracker is offline. Take a breather.”

“Copy that.”

“Tower security is enhanced in case they got enough of a signal to still pin your location. Everyone keeps on their toes for seventy-two hours at least,” he starts in, watching a de-masked Damian Wayne make his way easily through the back stairwell of Wayne Tower, heading for the Bunker below.

Kon breathes an abrupt sigh of relief when the mechanism splits open at the seams, freeing his hand at the same time, making his heart hit a beat faster before his familiar strength rushes back. Like the norm, he closes his eyes to assess the range and intensity of his senses.

Cassie breathes out a long breath, laying the tools down. She throws herself back in the chair and looks over at the projection—Red’s eyes are dark blue while he wears the old smirk, the one when he was that kind of Robin, meaning everything and nothing.

With the whirl of motion around them, the case apparently in full swing, the two of them have an absurd moment of good work and wouldn’t trade this life for anything.

Hood’s phone finally goes off as B stands and hitches a thumb at the Batcomputer, apparently going to start with the detecting and shit.

Hood gives a smirk as he reads the message—

And sucks in a choking breath—

Before he starts laughing his ass off.

“Uh-oh,” Red deadpans, watching Bart come back upstairs, catching the noticeable limp immediately.

“Gotta tell Al,” Hood shakes his head and shows Red the returned text (Have fun sleuthing *heart emoji* I’m trying to get kidnapped, so don’t wait up and don’t watch the news *poop emoji*), “N’s gonna be late for dinner.”
And this time? The facepalm is so totally *legit*.

Chapter End Notes

I know there's so much happening, lol, but this wasn't near the length I wanted. I thought I could go ahead and throw it up so it didn't end up being yet another month. And ah, pining time okay? Here's where there might start to be some movement. As always, I love your comments and questions and opinions and whatnot. Always feel free to hit me up on Tumblr where many mad drabbles await

Running out of time, Part I

Chapter Summary

This...is really not where he expected to end up tonight, but just--time is running out.

Chapter Notes

When I said on Tumblr the plot was literally killing me, I was not just whistling Dixie, okay? Just so much. Thanks to my muse, Arkeadia. There was poking. A lot of poking because I’m a bad author and jumped into other, ah, things? A Blind!Tim thing, a Doctor!Tim fun thing, an AOB thing, just...branching out? I’m a little ashamed because this story is my baby, the place where it all got started and it kind of fell to the wayside. But did I mention the plot was killing me slowly. My writing soulmate, Titans_R_Us showed me the wonders of Google Docs, so she was just AWESOME in helping me get through this chapter (Ugh) and the other distractions I've thrown down in the last few months. And finally, FINALLY Azazels, babe, here is the masterpiece of the Architect. Ah, I hope this chapter brings things together for you a little better on how all the seemingly random things could possibly be connected (thanks, B. You've got my back on this). Heh, *evil grin* enjoyyyyy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of all the places he expected to end up tonight, on his back with Dick Grayson’s hips between his thighs was not among the top five (nope, that’s a whole different Top Five).

However, that is exactly what happens.

(And whatever forces motivating the universe to keep doing this to him? Really just need to fuck off and die).

**

It’s five hours until the Bats can move in full regalia, and it’s going to be the longest five hours of his fucking life (and yes, he’s pretty sure Jason is right on that train with him). It’s not going to be a happy five hours, but things still need to be put in place.

Like, a lot of shit needs done.

According to the tracker in Dick’s standard-issue GCPD body armor (because B, who has several more in the gear of other GCPD officers and explained it to him one time as that much back-up means something is going down and I probably want in), he’s been moved back toward Gotham proper, stopping at the warehouse district (probably being “stored” until better transport arrives). The real question is if the bad guys are keeping Dick because having a cop as a hostage is always a little more “insurance” or... possibly to be used as leverage to get what they want out of holding the ward of Bruce Wayne (and, you know, now he’s got every reason to bitch at Dick—for life).
With the Titans on video chat, Robin en route, and Hood taking a look around the GCPD database, he’s running an algorithm on traffic and security cameras and very carefully not thinking about the possibilities (but, well, there’s a little more to the story, isn’t there? They could be waiting to get him to the docks, put Dick on a fucking ship and—).

(Nope. Not. Fucking. Happening.)

And B?

“I’ll be there in less than fifteen.”

B is putting on a terribly tacky suit and mustache because Matches Malone is very, very cozy in the warehouse district of Gotham City.

He’s going to get their eyes and ears on the inside.

Before the terrible suit went on and the Matches persona came to the fore, Tim was unceremoniously pulled away from the (his) workbench and laptop, directed by one of B’s palm between his shoulder blades while he starts laying out his side of what Hood designated Plan: Get to Dickie’s Stupid Ass (now...all he needs to do is convince them he’s good, or sneak out of the Cave once they’re all gone, whichever becomes necessary). B stops them by the fabrication space and—

Really now?

He’s feeling more of the damn warm fuzzies, and the Bats really aren’t even trying.

“I thought Alfred was going to put you down for a nap, Bruce,” Tim managed to deadpan even though the new suit already on a mannequin figure looks pretty boss (because, well, the Batfamily has a knack for this kind of thing) and B might have done it while he was passed the hell out in his room. You know, the one still upstairs.

It makes him feel oddly warm, knowing he was part of Bruce’s absent contingencies again.

“Did I mention your armor shattered?” B counters conversationally with an arched brow and just—

Fuck. He’s grinning up at B while they’re surrounded on all sides with a hell of a list and very little time to work all the details, and it’s just so familiar and a constant theme in their partnership, their lives that he laughs out loud, one hand against the bandages under his t-shirt.

“I expected the opposite reaction,” he wipes at his eyes and approaches the suit, looking at everything (wondering how many trackers are in it) and notes the lack of cowl, the slightly altered design, the domino and full cape instead of a place for his wing pack. It’s a slight deviation from his Gotham usual, but...damn if he doesn’t really like it. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I fully intend to be out there with Dick compromised, but I was pretty sure you’d try to fight me on it.”

B arches a very unimpressed eyebrow, “We’ve met before, you realize. At one time, I could have grounded you, put you here to work out the back-end processes, but if I try it now, you’re out of this Cave in twenty minutes flying solo.”

Welp. True story, B. Good call.

(Welcome Home.)

“I might still remember some useful ways to sneak out.”
“Mmhm. I’m sure, but do you really think I’m going to let you do anything in a ripped up suit with busted armor and malfunctioning equipment?” That brow goes up even higher. “Against the criminal who sold you out?”

And B sees the reaction, knows Tim is trying very, very hard to hold it together, but the World’s Greatest Detective can see all the evidence might finally be settling in. Even with Dick playing the helpless card, a new group of supervillains, and a Black Market meta-tech dealer on their horizon, he has a moment to bask in Tim standing back in the Cave, staying in the Manor where he’s always had a place.

B feels good about how far they’ve come considering eight months ago, Tim had removed himself from the BI database without a hitch, certain no one would even give a damn.

Well, he knows better now, and that is enough for B to count this situation (criminals and injuries notwithstanding) as a win.

“Technically, Shaw isn’t going to know it’s me, Bruce.”

“Semantics.”

He almost says it. Almost. But the grin cracks his jaw because, c’mon now. He takes the undersuit prototype to put on until time to fly.

“And this if you insist on going,” from beside the suit—a Batcomm.

A new Batcomm…with the Red Robin symbol on the side piece.

And he can’t help but stare at it in B’s palm, finds himself blinking rapidly for no good fucking reason other than Bruce making things specifically with him in mind (and a new suit...B made him a suit with his logo and a workstation with a laptop and...the tape is still on the fucking ceiling).

He takes it, smirking a little to cover his ass, but yeah, that’s his voice cracking just a little, just enough, “aw, the gifts that just keeps on giving.”

But Bruce sees it, how Tim’s expression changes, just a flicker before settling into neutral lines, and no, he doesn’t need him to spell it out; how much it all is. Jason seemed to go through the same sort of shellshock his first few days back in the Manor, once the realizations started to hit: Jason’s room remained the same, just with some upgrades; the books he favored stayed in the same places he hid in to get a few spare moments to read (and yes, that’s Edumund Spenser’s The Faerie Queen still niched above one kitchen window, and God only knew how many times he and Alfred looked up to see just a corner sticking out, Jason the last one who touched it), and, of course, the glass case in the Cave.

And just like he did with Robin #2, he moves to pull Robin #3 in by the shoulders, resting his chin on top of Tim’s head, Tim who was slightly taller, Tim who was all muscle and sinew, not as broad as he’d been back when B gave him the Red Bird and the Carriage House (it would be fine, Alfred weighed him when he was down for the count after the bullets and shrapnel came out—if anyone was going to get him back to peak weight, it would be one Alfred Pennyworth). It takes him back to a haunted, too-thin Red Hood, standing close to the same spot with the same painful expression (and it had taken time for the Red Hood to step back and Jay to start peeking around the edges of the mask). Jason had been taller, more skittish. Tim is all snark and having his next moves ready—anything outside the realm of his contingencies enough to break through Red and get to Tim.

“The suit is full of trackers, isn’t it?”
Bruce hums in reply and obligingly lets Tim step back when he’s had enough. “The Titans sent me
the design, you can blame them.”

Of course they did. At least he’ll know how to reprogram them if necessary. “Rats. Foiled again.”

B runs a hand down his face to cover up the laugh. “All right. O is going to be back online within
the hour. Alfred probably gave her an ultimatum too. Let her help you coordinate. As much as I
know you won’t, try to keep yourself on the lighter details. Besides,” a pointedly not subtle eye slide
to Jason’s broad back. And the two of them, him and B, exchange the look.

Because standing at the big computer, he’s already in the Red Hood body suit for the night sans
jacket, holsters, and domino (it’s fucking unfair while he’s trying to put a whole lot of things into
place), mouth turned down in the whole gloom and doom usually reserved for B. But, Tim gets it.

Even though Dick was the first of them, was a detective, an ass kicker, worked undercover, saved
them all time and time again, was motherfucking Batman, he still feels the twinges of fear in the
lower part of his abdomen at the thought of Dick in the hands of terrorists. None of it is any better as
the live footage of the prisoner being loaded and Officer Grayson hopping in the passenger seat of
the armored vehicle (and yes, the three of them sigh in tandem when Dick glances over his shoulder
and winks at the direction of the camera—you know, like an asshat, before he’s pulling the door
closed) is playing on the Batcomputer’s main screen.

“All right,” was B’s first observation, “we need everything.”

Which included Matches Malone to meander down in his part of town and make a little magic
happen.

Once the whole terribly tacky ensemble goes on, Tim keeps a straight face, but damn if it isn’t a
stretch. He goes back to the top of (his) the workbench where the utility belt is the next thing to get
stocked up, glancing at the working screen of the laptop and all the usual processes kicking ass.

He’s in WE’s database (getting another annoying reminder of the Gala in a few days for that one
charity he supports—please Tam, just stop killing him slowly) to pick up the particulars on the stolen
tracking devices in the meta-tech, checking the back doors for hack attempts while Dami is tapping
into the pilfered data for more deets on the who and how and maybe a little when thrown in.

He also has a few pings on security cams, but nothing to show how or when the prisoner exchange
went south or if the other officer with Dick managed to get out alive. He has no other faces to try
tracking or any vehicle information if they didn’t make a switch-out (then again, smart criminals
aren’t going to be drive an GCPD INMATE TRANSPORTATION van willy-nilly around a city
like Gotham). Jason has the police radio playing low, waiting for the GCPD to pick-up on the
jailbreak to find out more deets. Until they get something else, the tracker in Dick’s armor is all they
have to go on.

Also running is the mirror application to the research LAN in Titan’s Tower (and yes, he’s scrubbing
this laptop when he’s done with it. The Bats already get into his systems without his own help) so he
can get an eyeful of his team working their own sides of the case because, you know, bad guys aren’t
going to catch themselves.

Scans indicate Kon is back up to (“100% all bad ass.” “Or whiny-ass, but who’s counting?” “Aw,
dude. Do you need some water for that burn?””) normal. Cassie already has butterfly bandages on her
knuckles (Rave), Bart looks none the worse for wear after a little bit of a stroll, and his favorite
couple were playing at the usual intel gathering/mother-henning the rest of the group. He then checks
to make sure the tech is safely stowed (this time) and deactivated without the power source. The
microchip from WE is scanning for any unknown alterations (even though he’s pretty sure he’s good
on all the deets—nope, the real question is how they got a hold of his tech and if it means they’ve got the passcodes needed to activate WETMS).

(Still, he’s going to eventually need to check the physical inventory, in person, once other emergencies of the night are dealt with—Dick)

B has already put the Batcomputer to work with the Batplane’s database of information from the last few weeks’ worth of investigating.

From his own laptop, he’s in the center, making sure everyone gets just enough but not too much to put it all together (welp, except Cassie who already suspects his theory the Triad is still out there might be more than just a theory)—or so he thought.

“All right,” B flips the keys to a terribly tacky Monte Carlo that is exactly the right look for Matches and draws the two of them out of appropriate sleuthing, “here’s how we’re gonna run it. Once I’m down, I’m a hitch up wid’ the skinny. ‘Til I do, we need ta know who ‘dis Shaw character’s been talkin’ ta.”

Jason’s eyes go wide and a hand over his mouth tells B everything he needs to know. Yup. Nailed it.

Tim is biting into his lip, very pointedly not saying anything to get himself in trouble when B with the veneer of Matches Malone turns narrowed eyes on him.

“An’ Jase is gonna run front ‘n center, Red. Y’ hear dat? Let ‘em do da heavy liftin’ so’s dose hurts don’t start up again, ya feel me? Dem fuckholes getcha drop on ya and we’s got two birds down.”

Now he’s trying so hard not to laugh, just so hard because right now isn’t really the time for it and just, B, you’re leaving him with Hood after all that? Jason stays facing the Batcomputer, but in the lower half of the screen, he can see the reflected expression of frustrated fondness that could really be a knife to the throat or a good discussion of Harper Lee and why people are fucking Philistines, Timmy. So he’s going to go with all good and waves B off to Matches’ ride while he absently moves the new undersuit on his workstation to the side to get into soon as he’s sure everything is caught up enough to step away from the working laptop for a few minutes.

He doesn’t see Jason look over his shoulder to catch Bruce’s gaze, a nod between the two in understanding. He also doesn’t see Jason’s phone lighting up with incoming texts, Diana assuring him the JLA is moving to get the littles gathered together and moved to the Watchtower, and her string of emojis when she wishes them happy hunting.

That’s Di for you, always spoiling for the next fight.

It’s why they’re BFFs, really.

The Red Hood smirks when he puts up his phone, a few more things in the works while the tracker just eases for a while. His eyes move over Tim’s hunched form as he processes and analyzes on his laptop, working the angles ‘cause Baby Bird is all about being on top his shit. Well, he ain’t the only Bat what tries to get the drop on nasty motherfuckers (and like he don’t know how Dickie thinks, like he don’t know his fine-ass boy is trying to find out if they’re up against the baddies that kidnapped Timmy in the first fucking place. Ain’t the only detective in the family, you feel me?). Hood has already started tracing a hell of a lot of in-coming ships to the two harbors in Gotham while the police radio plays in the background. Since Demon’s got WE systems literally in his fucking hands, Hood can get the deets on the kidnappers to put the picture together on the Bat-side of the house.

And if he finds out Timmy has been doing some crazy shit, like hiding the White Triad bastards from
them, he was gonna get the ass-kicking of a lifetime (and his arms know the feel of gripping Tim hard through the few flashbacks he’d let them witness, Baby Bird’s voice a hoarse mess when he recounted the two weeks he’d been on that ship while he and Dickie sat on the ledge of that building and kept him between them).

When he’d finally given in some, just enough to let them in, and taking into account he hasn’t tried hitting the door yet, plan’s looking good. They keep Baby Bird close enough to make sure they know where he’s at, keep a keen eye on the deets he’s trying to keep on the ‘low (which is inevitably where he’s going to take off for at the first possible fucking moment. Timmy’s a master of redirection. Ain’t gonna work this time, asshole. We getchu now).

Another eye dance, and he unintentionally gets a recount of skin and scars, the flush pink on his chest, the way he’d bitten his lip—

And Jason? He’s a man what knows the look of want, when a man’s got to turn away, to deflect, to hide, so no one else knows what’s doing, so he can hide what he needs, what he feels, can hide when he likes what he sees.

And everything from that scene less than a few hours ago in Tim’s bathroom tells Jason Todd he’s done a whole lot of passing shit off that shoulda oughta been evidence he and Dickie needed to get the ball rolling with Timmy’s fine ass. The half-hard cock, the deflection when Jay caught ‘im touching, it was the final evidence he needed to believe there was more than the smart ass affection in their bird. And fuck if he hadn’t almost missed it. In trying to be careful and considerate, in trying to avoid the shit that would scare him back out into the world or make him run full speed back to the Titans, all their workings to make sure Tim knew he was safe in Gotham, all of it made them blind to those little cues.

As B made last adjustments to the hidden catches in Matches’ suit, Jason is side-eyeing Timmy with the smallest of smirks while Baby Bird gets all his ducks in a row.

But now that he realizes, now that he gets it, gets where Tim’s been for a while, can take a second to run down the clues, look back at the smallest details of their interactions through the months, he berates himself silently on being a seriously shitty Detective, yeah? And it ain’t just the fact Baby Bird got half-hard just from a look. Naw, a lotta things that have been nagging at him, catching right in his brain pan and whirling about, shit he’d just passed off as wishful-fucking-thinking are starting making a whole lotta sense. The more comfortable Baby Bird had been getting with them and casual touches, an arm around his shoulders, a grip to the wrist, a niche right in his lap during the bad episodes. And Jason can mentally track the more Tim’s body language and nonverbal cues had unintentionally given him away all this motherfucking time.

He and Dickie are the dumbasses that didn’t take it at face value, wanting to do the right thing. It made more sense when the excess trackers in their uniforms showed up, the data provided via email before a case started getting messy, the more frequent trips into Gotham, the subtle pauses when clothes came off to treat injuries. All the small things that had missed his notice, or been explained in some other medium, gives Jason something else to think about instead of gnaw more on the worry still deep in his guts for Dickie’s assured health.

Instead, with the division of his attention, he plans out how he’s going to pull it together for Dick so they can come up with a little something that might have to happen after they help Timmy blow this case open wide.

(And he’s going to remind Dick of the look Tim gave him while he was too honest riding blood loss and injuries down in the Cave, he’s gonna make Dick think about all those aborted moves and bitten lips in the last few weeks, and he going to make Dick a believer—that they can have.)
The side plot gives him the satisfaction he needs to keep himself from doing anything to break the ring of work going down, lets himself call out updates, and listen to whatever new move is happening between Tim’s working hands. He can keep the running details coming together, can be the Red Hood while his boy is out in his daytime skin in the clutches of murders and thieves.

He can give a hitched nod to B on his way to be a scummy low-life and not make it too obvious how much he likes looking once Tim comes back from putting on just the Red Robin body suit. He manages, but it ain’t as easy as it sounds (’cause he already knows where the catches and latches are on that baby, you betcha ass his fingers give a twitch like he’s already across the Cave to take it right off).

But if anything, Jason Todd is a man that knows how that thing called patience? That shit pays off in the end, and once they get Dickie back, take down these dirty motherfuckers, teach ‘em a lesson on fucking with the wrong CEO, well, their reward is gonna be So. Fucking. Sweet.

Behind them, the Monte Carlo purrs on the way out while a sly, satisfied smile slowly curves Jason’s mouth.

**

—The Architect—

It’s become more than a distraction between rounds of agony, of what she would do if she could only be free.

Now, that she is, it’s a mission.

The concepts of time in contrast to space along with a defined, calculated set of actions and associated reactions, are key determiners in the path of the future. The Architect is one that knows this, knows this down to her bones. (Bones that have been broken, bones that have been twisted, turned to dust in the pursuit for their perfect weapon).

And to alter the paths to the future, to use the power of time and space, the Architect must have patience—must be able to use all the tools at her disposal, cannot leave anything, even the smallest occurrence, to chance. To weave a future free of torment, free of destruction and downfall, it’s necessary to go back into the past, to map out the exact events making the future stray away from her desired course. Once those events are altered, the future smooths out, combines into one.

Her objective will be complete.

No more bad days.

No more dying parents and planets, no more sick, twisted criminals holding the world hostage. No more experimentation on children. It will be a future without the need of vigilantes and superheroes, a world without evil, a world without agony and torment and suffering. A world where the heroes can be free. A world where all the innocent people hurt in the wars waged between good and evil, light and darkness, twisted and serene, can live without fear.

To accomplish the goal, it has become an unfortunate necessity to work with the worst kinds—the ones the Architect is ultimately fighting against. It’s not the preferred method, not what is wanted, but rather what is needed. The evildoers of the world helping to alter the timelines for what they believe is their ideal futures will be disappointed once the final alterations are put into place.

For a long time, for so long, the Architect has worked in the time streams to find the breaking points, all the minute details and decisions that caused a fracture, a delineation, a multiverse—and those
multiverses would have a future based on that tiny, seemingly insignificant deviation, that choice.

This only makes the Architect’s job, the ultimate goal that much more difficult to achieve, for those multiverses must also be mapped, be altered, be redirected just as the Architect has designed. Zoom and the Anti-Flash, Lex Luthor and Vandal Savage are only a few that have joined in the effort; when the Architect approached them with the master plan, they believed they were working toward eradicating their nemeses, creating a future in which they could rule without opposition. No super aliens, no metahumans, no Bats, no Arrows, no Speedsters, no Angels or Demons, no legacies for the next generation of heroes. Behind and around and under and to the sides of them, the Architect plots other points without their knowledge, begins to connect their courses along with everyone else—factors in the instances that made them what they are, and plans on making them better, to either conform to the inevitability.

Or be erased.

Once all the nuances are complete, all the events that will be are triggered, the multiverses will collapse and finally, finally converge into a singular timeline. And her job, her mission, will be complete.

She will create a utopia. A future that will never want for justice. A world that will never know the kind of destruction and degradation she’s experienced in her own line, that she’s seen in others —countless others. A world that will be, by definition, perfect. Once all the plotted points are discovered, once the Architect has set the stage for those events to change, only one remaining event will be the catalyst for the great downfall. One action is all it will take, and for that, well, she has, ironically, plenty of time.

**

His nose itches.

It really itches.

Humming to himself, Officer Grayson shifts just slightly, wiggling his nose in an attempt to alleviate the annoyance since his hands are bound behind him (kinky) and he can’t just slip the impressive zip ties to get the itch even though it wouldn’t be a problem.

After the ten very obvious out-of-towners did the usual bad guy thing by setting up a trap in the center of the highway en route to Central City (in which Dick hadn’t said a word about to Inigo because vigilante jackpot), he’d given them the standard, calm, “I’m a police officer, don’t make this worse for yourself” speech of which Inigo himself had just sighed and been the one to take his gun, restrain his arms then shove a bag over his head.

Of course, having one of their people infiltrate GCPD meant Shaw is more important than he or Jason initially theorized, so getting himself maybe a little caught keeps getting to be a better and better plan.

They ditch the inmate transport and throw him in the back of a panel van in time to hear:

“You can’t do this! You swore if I took the fall you’d leave them alone. I’ve been serving time so you’d leave them the hell alone—”

“Unfortunately, plans change.” Another voice tisks, “and we are in need of your expertise again.”

“Are you kidding? You just broke me out of jail. They’ll be looking for me everywhere, there’s no way I can hack into—”
“That’s very sad news for Mary and little Jenny then, isn’t it?”

And he hears it for himself, the tinny quality from a mobile phone, crying, young and middle-aged. Every instinct, everything that makes him a vigilante comes to the fore.

“You fucking bastards—” But Shaw is choking, probably staring at his wife and child with fear and horror.

And this? This changes some things up.

“They were easy to find, Johnny. Do this for us, and you’ve got a new ident, a ticket to Costa Rica, and your family. It’s a generous offer.”

He hears Shaw choke, the rattle of his manacles.

“All right, Grayson,” Inigo interrupts the monologue from the front of the van, giving Dick the distraction he needs to move his arms just slightly and press on the back of his GCPD vest to activate the camera. One more tap to the pocket in his gunbelt and the recording device also starts (and well, when they take the gun belt, he might be lucky enough that they keep it in an important place so he can get even more evidence for the Commish—who started bitching to B about the capes making his guys lazy).

“I don’t know what you’re doing with these guys, Inigo,” and Dick has to be careful how he plays this, has to seem like he has no idea what the underlying story is, has to seem like he just stumbled into a much bigger picture (and if he’s very lucky, he might even get a bad guy monologue revealing their evil plans), “but there’s still a chance to get out of this before anyone gets hurt. Let me help you.”

“Yada, yada, yada. Sorry, man, I picked sides long before I ever met you.”

“If it’s the side of good guys with donuts, then you’ve chosen right. Since it doesn’t really appear—”

“Don’t you ever shut the fuck up?”

“Haven’t you ever heard wit is a sign of intelligence?”

“Silence is a sign you’re going to live to see tomorrow. Look, Grayson, you know the routine. Don’t make any trouble or I’ll probably just shoot you to avoid any future complications.”

“Man, and I was so looking forward to inviting you to our weekly poker game. The disappointment is overwhelming.”

“I should have fucking gagged you. Damn, I knew it.”

He shrugs it off, slipping the zip tie this time to palm a few pellets, getting himself back in them easy. “Well, you could come to confession and tell Father Grayson why you’re involved with these terrible men instead.” C’mon, c’mon, you know you want to give me the deets.

“This has nothing to do with you. It was just your bad luck they put you on my detail or you’d still be at the station with your damn donuts.”

He could go for a vanilla creme one right about now— no, no, focus Dick, yummies later. “Honestly, I do have the worst luck,” and Inigo might not be able to see him smiling, but he most certainly is.

Inigo’s quiet for a few seconds, “You seem alright, so as long as you keep quiet and don’t cause
trouble, we’ll leave you somewhere safe. The GCPD can find you after we’re gone.”

Dick almost hums to himself because sure they are. Inigo really isn’t instilling any confidence in a hostage he wants to behave. But, he needs to stay around long enough to find out where they’re keeping John’s family. If he takes them down too soon, stops a check-in, the hostages would be dead before he could trace them, and that’s something Dick can’t chance. Instead, he has to make himself valuable somehow.

So, time for a different angle. “You know why I joined your detail last minute, Inigo?” And he makes it with a slight edge, some reality in with the game he’s playing. “I asked for it.”

The bad guy, at first, seems pretty lost, “is this supposed to be going somewhere—?”

“The prisoner we were transporting is serving time for cyber crimes against Wayne Enterprises.” He turns his head in the direction of Inigo’s face, the guy probably leaning against the back seat, gun trained on him. “I’m Bruce Wayne’s ward. C’mon, man, put it together.”

There it is. The ah-ha.

He smirks at the noticeable pause (oh yeah, let’s see if WE happens to get their hair up because then he gets the Detective Gold Star Award—sorry, Timmy). There’s shifting of cloth, movement and low voices, an undercurrent of something new. Dick almost shakes his head a little (it’s so, so easy sometimes, dangle a little bit of bait in front of them and wait for it) since well, gotcha.

“I gotta say, Grayson, I’m surprised. And here I thought you might be just another pretty face.” But now Inigo is musing, turning over the information and how they might be able to use a completely different son of Wayne’s to get what they need.

And while he didn’t see the blow to the back of the head coming, he feels the creeping presence of the guy in the seat behind him shift; Dick forces himself not to tense up with it, to move just enough to make it look convincing

**

Kon...is not feeling much better with this little twist.

“Okay, so, let me just get this down,” and he idly looks back over the stolen tech that was just, you know, stuck to his fucking arm and shit, one that negated his powers... and gave him something altogether different, heavy, nauseating, something he was just trying to keep controlled while Cassie was trying to get the damn thing the hell off him (and okay, more lab safety procedures—Rave totally has a point this time since thou shalt not put on wicked-looking bad guy tech isn’t part of the standard protocol).

“It can do more,” Cassie repeats from her spot by the holoscreens, reading over the results. “It can apparently instill the meta gene and supplement whatever genetic markers the programmers want. I mean, it’s basically messing with your DNA. I don’t even know—”

All eyes turn to him, and even for a super, he feels a little sick and looks down at one slightly trembling hand with wide eyes. With his already unstable DNA, with how much Luthor and Cadmus have already fucked with him—Kon swallows back the sour taste in his mouth, closes his eyes, and breathes out slowly.

“Kon,” Tim’s voice over the intercom, “chillax, dude. It’s the usual bad guy rigmarole. The tech isn’t meant to leave permanent changes, but, we’re going to play it safe and do a diagnostic, right?”
Blinking owlishly, the teenager nods firmly (and it’s...weird that he suddenly wants Clark there just-just because it would be nice and all).

“Gar,” Cassie starts calmly, smiling gentle even though it doesn’t reach her eyes the whole way, but her soothing it’s okay, we’re going to handle it still makes Kon feel less shaky, “could you and Bart —?”

The two of them are already moving to Superboy from their positions in the lab before she needs to finish that sentence—oh yeah, they need to get their boy scanned, need to know he’s not going to suffer any effects from this. Gar is all easy hey, buddy, no problems, ‘kay? And Bart looks his usual combination of sassy and worried once someone on the team takes a hit (magic and weird bi-tech notwithstanding).

“All right, bro. Let’s hit the med floor and do some scans, right?”

“C’mon, we’re with you, man. It would be nice if you would stop—I don’t know—getting your DNA messed with, but we’ll just handle it like usual.” Bart’s hand is just above the inside of his bicep, pulling him along to the elevator.

From the main screen, Tim’s eyes move with the three to the elevator. He’s already remotely warming up equipment in the med floor and setting up the tests he wanted—the usual have a plan for that shit mentality.

Cassie turns to come closer to the screen, Raven joining her as they bring their results and observations.

“Finding the creators will be more difficult than we first imagined,” Raven flicks her fingers, bring up scans of the gauntlet’s schematics. “We have found little that could lead us to a culprit. The materials, the technological components. We are fortunate the two of you could even identify the power source to free Conner.”

“I’ve almost got the memory storage unlocked so we can look at the programming.” Cassie sighs, her eyes flickering back to the elevator.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. The tech just isn’t even close to this,” Tim admits as soon as his bestie is being carted away for his own good. “Even Luthor isn’t anywhere close to this kind of genetic alteration on the fly. I mean bam put it on and you’re a superhero.”

“Or a supervillain,” Raven replies idly.

“Well, they do have cookies,” his voice echoes over the connection while he’s looking at the prosthetic code and…

“Oh,” Cassie says nearly the same time he puts it together.

In the Cave, Tim almost falls down in the chair by his work station, staring.

“Baby Bird?”

Jason’s boots don’t shake him out of a fast scan to double-check the findings.

His voice is low, pained, “in addition to this extreme gravity controlling ability, the prosthetic can be programmed to instill other powers in the wearer…specifically telepathy, shape-shifting, and-and technomancy.”
That pulls Jason up short, makes Raven turn from the tracking screen, seeking out the Insidious Seven—her eyes go to the station Gar was at, the labs Tim had traced and all the data collected, used to make these abominations from children (their children).

Cassie’s loose hands fist tight while she reads the same results with narrowed eyes (and what those bastards did in order to make this-this thing).

“I think we know who gave the creators of this piece of crap all the data on the meta genes,” he deadpans, looking over at Jason’s tilted head. “This fine product is sponsored by the assholes in charge of Project Genesis.”

Tim whips his phone out, already dialing Miguel and hoping Wally was just, you know, hanging out.

“Motherfucker,” Jason snatches his phone up and bends down over his shoulder to read over the findings, “Di and Supes a’ already on it, Timmy. Gathering the little shits as we speak.”

Well, family of detectives, right?

“The genetic coding of each Meta gene matches certain marker of the kids, Jay. They may not have built it, but Praesidium provided all the necessary data.”

(And no, he’s not going to think about how close Jay is to him right now, and if Tim literally just turned his head, he could just open his mouth and bite down on Jason’s jugular, and why the fuck is he—shit)

A deep breath, woo-sa. Woo-saaaaaa.

He misses the pleased, teasing smirk on Jason’s face even while the older vigilante leans slightly lower, closer to the laptop screen that “inadvertently” puts his chest against Tim’s shoulder while he inhales the findings from Titan’s Tower.

And...even if it makes him an asshole, like the worst person in existence (because hello, this is Dick’s boyfriend and he wouldn’t hurt Dick like this), the simple contact, the warmth and solid weight of Jason, the sigh of their suits sliding, the heavier, broader touch— it’s more than he’s had in...so long, too long, and it’s an easy thing to relax back into it, to lean back on a solid, grounding touch.

But even if it ain’t the right time, Jason sees those eyes fall half-mast for just a blink, just long enough to catch. The subtle cues again, Tim leaning back into his shoulder and arm where he’s got a hand braced on the back of the chair with his phone still in the other hand. It must be the day for epiphanies or some shit because now he can see how Baby Bird is bordering on touch-starved (even with Dickie’s more constant hugs and grips, an’ well, he’d been a lying fucker if he said his own body didn’t know the feel of Timmy’s skin and breath and heartbeat...yeah, he hadn’t put much stock in how it had become more of a thing, reaching out, pulling him in, not letting him wiggle away until he’d finally stopped trying), so’s it’s a good thing he’s got not one but two vigilantes that want to do a whole lot of giving back.

It’s hard not to let himself tilt a lil’ more so he can rub his five-o’clock against Timmy’s throat to let ‘im get nice and bothered. (But, since alla ‘em are big inta havin’ evidence before they go sprouting a theory—maybe he needs just a lil’ bit more what ta convince himself)

The screen in front of them pops up a new alert, one with results of Super clone’s tests. Baby Bird doesn’t feel like he’s gotta straighten up or nothing, just let himself be braced. So maybe Timmy needs more than he originally thought.
The security cams show Kon is shirtless, hanging out in one of the stasis tubes while the lights flash around him, finishing the scans.

Gar already had the saliva samples going through the usual rigmarole of “standard” testing, but hey, at least there’s an app for that. Which is why he’s scanning his phone idly, his side plastered against the glass above Kon. On the other side, Bart is leaning his back against it, talking to the clone over one shoulder.

“Everything is looking normal on this front too, dude. I think you’re in the clear.” Gar looks up to give his version of a charming smile, but...it falls a little short. The issue of Kon’s unstable DNA had come up in the past, just the standard oh no, I’m powerless for a minute or the hey, I can actually fly this time. Gar and Bart are aware and concerned. (Once the guy left, one of them would activate the Charlie Lima October November Echo protocol to make sure the guy was on watch. Seriously, no injured or out-of-control supers needed at present).

“Agreed. Spectro says there’s no difference between your last sample,” is Tim’s cautious, disembodied voice from the speakers, “how do you feel, man? This is a no bullshit zone right now.”

Gar and Bart move accommodatingly while Bart uploads results to the Team Drive and Gar helps a bro out by popping the hatch.

“I mean—I was not a fan, dude. Zero stars, would not want to wear again.”

“All right. Why not jump down to the training floor and start trying to hit your peak power output and we’ll compare data just to be sure. As far as we know, the prosthetic negates an existing the Meta gene for it’s programming, but doesn’t otherwise affect the whole system.”

Gar and Bart follow him to the elevators, the steady sound of Tim’s echoy typing (and yes, it’s not really a secret where that guy is atm. Bats totally get a gold star) following them down to the training deck.

“That sounds like some freakishly scary weaponry we should be tracking down.”

“If we find any of the Insidious Seven, then we follow them to whoever made the device.”

“Systems are running for possible labs that are even close to this level of design. My top five aren’t even in the running and that includes LexCorp and Wayne Tech.”

Bart massages his forehead and holds up a bro fist for Kon on his way to the training deck while he and Gar continue back to Raven and Cassie.

“Those rejects from Cadmus are probably doing something with their time,” he fills in shortly after Kon stepped off. “We already went through Praesidium systems for as many of their suppliers and buyers as possible.”

The intercomm systems clicks when it picks up Raven’s voice to broadcast, “we did not, however, find the source of their funding. The project is a long-running one, keeping the children.” (and no, she does not call them The Littles, not as formidable as they are), “for several years. Someone would need to be backing their research and facilities, providing them the necessary tools to make the weaponry centered on the Meta gene.”

Tim’s sighs out hard, eyes narrow while he thinks and more processes move across his screen. He only blinks slightly when Jason lifts the hand braced on his chair to grip his shoulder and squeeze before straightening up to go back to the big computer (and he totally does not shiver at the feel of Jason’s jaw sliding, scratching along the base of his throat when the older vigilante straightens).
And if Baby Bird’s breathing don’t hitch when he does it? Well, Jay ain’t gonna tell nobody. (Til the time is right.) But he sure as shit can grin like a nasty bastard at Timmy’s slightly pink face.

Looking over his shoulder because I am just seeing what I want to see is something he needs to prove to himself. After that—that thing in the bathroom (not going to think about it—fuck, I am thinking about it), he’s pretty much on-board with biological imperative…until Jason Todd’s eyes go dark, a very different kind of dark.

“Jesus fuck, Timmy,” and the low, dangerous growl makes his eyes get wide because that isn’t the usual ‘Red Hood’ voice—it’s something more feral, something that makes incredibly different things come to mind (you know, messy sheets, crying and begging, gripping anything possible because—whoa, being this pathetic is starting to get irritating).

“What did I—?” But his throat is dry for some reason, unable to finish.

“If’n ya’d just a’ told us, we coulda been—” is Jason’s dark eyes, is a step back toward the chair, those big hands still glove-free and calloused, used to holding guns and knives, hands that rubbed circles between his shoulder blades when he was nothing less than utterly fucking pathetic.

And for a second, for just a second, he thinks Jason might be coming at him to pull him from the chair, tilt his face up by a hold on his jaw, and lean down enough to—

“I despise your re-directs, Drake!”

Breaks the moment, makes both of them take a breath because if he really thought Jason would do that when he has a whole lot of handsome vigilante dating Dick anyway, then he really is getting desperate as well as pathetic. Which is just really not his style.

He swallows a little, but a slight laugh takes the tension out of his shoulders as he shoves himself up to meet the little Demon starting to make his way down the winding staircase from the Manor proper.

He smirks up at Jason’s still smouldering eyes, grips a shoulder and squeezes because just ha-ha, asshole, good one.

“Nice one, Jay. Almost had me for like two seconds,” before he moves away to the big computer, still smirking and ignoring the hell out of the uncomfortable clench in his chest, just laughs it off anyway.

Where he can’t see, can’t look, Jason’s eyes narrow dangerously, mouth taunt. It’s going to take some doin’ on their part to convince Timmy it ain’t all justa fucking laugh. “Almost had ya’”? He tisks under his breath, “Baby Bird, we’re gonna have ya’, jus’ don’t know it yet.”

And if he feels the heat of Jason’s eyes when he starts looking at the data on the big computer and Dami huffs up at him like a sulking, wet cat, well, he’ll believe it’s just because he finally gets the joke.

**

Raven, however, is never, never caught unawares.

Until she sees the expression on Tim and Jason’s faces in that incredibly crucial moment. She had managed to turn just enough, opened her mouth the say something about the subroutine Tim was trying to use to trace the Insidious Seven (but the signal is simply not…it is not possible) from the gauntlet—
When she realizes Jason’s eyes are half-mast, and the twist of his lips is very far away from his usual humor and sarcasm (when she realizes the look on his face is one given to Kory and Roy once upon a time and currently reserved for Dick Grayson). And Tim… his cheeks are very, very pink, and before her eyes, the man behind Red Robin bites down on his lower lip hard enough to puncture while the small motion on the screen is obviously him shuddering.

And—

Her mouth drops open.

Before Cassie realizes Raven is staring, before the two men in the Cave realizes she has seen them as such, Raven turns hastily and reviews the rhythmically fading words on the screen in front of her, the blinking search in progress… does nothing to stop the heat from suffering her face and the very small smirk of satisfaction regardless of some second-hand embarrassment.

When the elevator doors open for Gar and Bart, she is the first to gain everyone’s attention with a trail that may lead to the location of the Insidious Seven, drawing them away from the Bats on screen.

**

And it’s his side’a da’ city, ya get that, asswipe? On ‘dis side o’ the street, anyone who’s anyone knows ya come ta ole Matches when ya’s dealing ‘n information.

He likes keepin’ it on the ‘low, just a few stoolies and squealers what keep an ear ta the ground, see?

S’ when he just happens ta puta word out, he knows it’s gunna go places. Maybe somebody oughta know some terrorist fucks hidin’ in Gotham, fencing kids n’ shit. Dunn’t matter whatcha need n’ dis dirt-ball ‘burg, ain’t no body gunna look da other way wid’ kiddies fa sale.

He might throw some names, might give a low-down. Might haveta wait a minute for sumthin’ back.

In the meantime, the alter ego is kneeling low on the roof of the old sardine factory, staring down from one of the dirty skyline windows. Sharp eyes see the two tied-up captives against one dilapidated wall (ten guards, heavily armed, ill-fitting clothing, a few tech tools on a beaten-up table along the far wall—not a permanent hideout, just somewhere to stash “the goods”). One is Dick playing unconscious police man, and the other must be Shaw, still in prison orange with cuffs on his wrists and ankles.

The guard glancing at them every now and then isn’t attentive enough, and B lifts Matches’ shirt up enough to get the modified air gun, fitting in a tracer/comm. The window pane comes up enough to send a sharp slice of light across Dick’s closed eyes (isn’t this familiar? He’s not in the boots anymore, Bruce.) to give the signal to his first Robin.

The minute shift of shoulder, a flicker of fingers.

That’s what he needs to know.

Dick isn’t freeing himself and taking them out because he doesn’t have what he needs yet. Or he’s walked into something he wants to explore further.

Still, B aims carefully over the rim of Matches’ dark shades. The air gun is virtually silent and powerful, firing the comm a foot or so above Dick’s elbows.

His ward cracks an eye to train on the guards crowded around the laptop (Tim would be very angry
at that piece of crap) and talking too low to be heard, then makes sure Shaw is looking away before he slips the zip tie and picks the comm out without moving more the his arm, and fits the device in his ear, slips his hand back in the tie.

Since Dick is laying on his stomach, it’s easy to turn his face enough to hide his lips moving while he talk-whispers, “onto something. Good to go.”

“What are they going to do with you?” B counters softly.

“Not sure. Don’t think they planned it. I just joined the transport.”

Okay, this isn’t forethought. Good to know they didn’t try to kill him instead—they might have blown Nightwing’s cover.

“You’re not part of the plan, so you could be a problem they’re waiting to solve.” Is B’s sage advice while loading the air gun with a different cartridge.

“Gave ‘em a reason to keep me around.”

B fires into a crack coming down the opposing wall, far enough from the group of disguised kidnappers, already loading another camera to place. One, however, breaks off from the group, approaching the man still in a prison jumpsuit. He’s pulled to his feet and shuffled, still shackled, to the vacated chair and his handcuffs unlocked.

“Criminals don’t usually appreciate your sparkling personality, Dick,” B observes dryly, listening to the almost-silent snort across the comm. “Is Shaw in on the prison break or not?”

And there’s the detective in him: never assume, always expect the unexpected (just a rule of thumb when one dresses like a bat to fight dangerous and usually mentally unstable criminals).

“Guy was coerced,” is Dick’s breathed reply, “need you to go find his family.”

B hums, the request filling in the blanks, laying the air gun by his knee, pulling his sleek phone from the pocket of Matches’ awful suit. He needs a better vantage, and uses his phone to point and zoom the camera. There’s no way to tell what’s on the laptop screen the prisoner is now furiously typing away at, but he can certainly bet his favorite utility belt it has something to do with a technical company that just happened to have his family name it the title (why else take the prisoner with the most success infiltrating their system?)

Bruce pauses at that, already activating the equipment to feed directly into the Cave. “I don’t like leaving you here.”

“Pfft.”

“You can’t be Nightwing and Officer Grayson this time, GCPD has already found the abandoned transport.” Thus, the where’s Dick Grayson card would be pulled—one of the unfortunate setbacks to his son’s day job. It’s a good thing they had people to help them stay ahead of the game, B thinks, and the feed into O’s systems, opening the comm line in case she might be recording. (The second she comes back online, she’ll have sightings, feeds of him thrown in the van for the police techs to “stumble upon” Jim...might have a point about his people, like Bullock, getting lazy. Ironically, his own daughter is the worst offender, not that the guy in the cape really needs to inform Commissioner Gordon of this anyway).

“No suit under the uniform,” answers B’s observation. Combined with O’s evidence, Officer Grayson is going to come out of this with an insane amount of luck and good backstory. Fielding the
questions like a pro (because hiding a secret identity from an entire police squad? Charm and talent—both of which Dick has in spades).

But. It’s always good to have a contingency.”I’m leaving a suit up here under the lip of the skyline.”

“M’ good, Bruce. I need to know his family is safe before I can move on them.”

_Dammit, Dick. If anyone knows all of B’s tells (other than Alfred, Clark, and Diana—and all three of them are iffy at any given time), it’s his first Robin. This is the kid that jumped out of an a burning helicopter in his first three months after he earned the tunic. He made several jokes about giving B a _Bat-attack_, laughing with his suit still smouldering and probably several pulled muscles from finally catching himself on the side of Wayne Tower._

B didn’t kill him then, but it had been a _stretch._

He sighs hard through the comm, makes sure Dick can _hear it._ All those lectures will pay off one day. “All right, I’ll find them,” the World’s Greatest Detective allows while frowning, watching Dick breathe and John Shaw concentrate. A muscle in his jaw jumps, “no matter what, don’t let them take you out of the city.”

He doesn’t need to see to know Dick is smirking, “like that’s going to happen a second time, boss. Go. I need Batman on this.”

If he gets beat up too badly, B has every intention of siccing Alfred on him, and that gives him what he needs to back away, the vigilante moving in the skin of Matches Malone—he’s down the side of the building, taking in the two vans sitting in the loading bay. It takes him no amount of time to plant what he needs inside and out, searching each vehicle for the usual clues. The comm is still in his ear as he’s walking down the trashy alleyway, long, brisk strides turn into an easy, slouching walk. The air gun is in the back of his pants, looking every part of _real_ but with pellets that are going to sting long enough to keep someone occupied.

He expects O’s wave, subtly checks the time, and then fills her in on the spread of networks they’re knee-deep in at the moment.

“I take a _nap_ for _Four. Hours._ and—”

“I know,” he grumbles around the matchstick in the side of his mouth.

“I’m not the one with sidekicks, you know—”

“Mmhmm,” B hums and pauses, taking a second to lift his chin at the dirtbag likewise slouching his way. There’s a fifty in the palm of his hand when they shake in passing, the dirtbag giving a quick, timid nod— _shipment coming in tomorrow night still solid_—before he’s scuttling away.

“—I’m going to Kick. His. Ass.”

“We have a complicated case, Babs. I need him functional.” Is a mild observation.

“Oh, believe me, when I get through with _him_—”

“He has it handled,” as he finally comes to the Monte Carlo parked right on the cross-section of Kryssing and Grummet—the perfect place to be seen by the right kind of people. “Calm down. Tell me anything about this situation is a _surprise._”

“Wait until I talk to Tim, then we’ll see how much of a mess we’ve really gotten into.”
“It’s all related,” his fingers ride up the sleek hood as he puts the partial pieces together, “I mean all of it. A terrorist organization dealing in specialized weapons and human cargo, a new crew of villains using the same kind of altering tech? Shaw’s prison break? The tracking system tracers from Wayne Enterprises? The littles? All of it, Barbara”

At her place below the theatre, she takes a minute to breathe in the implications “...has he confirmed, boss?”

B raises a brow while he pilots the car out of the warehouse district. His distinct lack of answer makes the soft sound of Barbara facepalming that much more obvious—she usually saves that kind of thing for Stephanie, but, with circumstances being what they are, it’s warranted.

“I suppose a vacation is out then?”

The smile lights up Matches’ face and he guffaws, “you like the juicy ones just as much as the rest of us.”

“I do,” she admits shamelessly, cracking her knuckles and chugging the last bit of warm coffee, cracks her neck on both sides, rolls her shoulders. Ah, time to get to work.

“You also like getting revenge when possible.”

“Oh, you know, I do.” Now there’s a series of commands, Oracle warming up with something like hacking into the traffic cam grid.

“And you’ll have a reason to ask Felicity to visit Gotham.”

Oracle doesn’t squeal, but it certainly sounds like she did. “Yes, there is nothing like a Girl’s Day after the end of a satisfying case.”

B hums a little, starting to speed up as he comes out of Gotham proper, checking the live feed on his phone to see Dick now propped up against the wall, the bindings on his ankles cut, the bag brought up over his head enough to let him drink an offered bottle of water.

The carrot he’d dangled in front of these guys is enough to get him water, at least.

“You haven’t had a mani-pedi in too long, sweetheart,” he drawls out in his best Brucie Wayne, making her laugh while she works.

“I’m a busy lady. Certain people keep me neck-deep in bad guys,” and yes, she’s smirking, Bruce. “You get back to the Cave and let me know what you find out on the Shaw family. I’ll take it from there. I’m already into his recorder and cam. We’ll convene an hour before time to fly.”

“Sounds good. Talk to you then,” and he taps the comm off, Wayne Manor visible over the rolling hills. His mind works furiously, plotting the way tonight is going to go, how the next succession of days is going to go, and who he intends to call in. He has a plan for the littles, to keep them out of anything linked to Genesis or those bastards that hurt them. He has a plan to keep Tim in their sights. He has a plan for who he is 99.9% positive are the residuals of the White Triad that kidnapped and tortured one of his son and currently has a hold of another. He has a plan for the labs and weapons designers using people to create soldiers with the capability of mass destruction.

All he needs is whatever criminal mastermind is pulling all the strings. And that? Is just a matter of time.

**
“They have recalibrated it,” Dami uses two fingers to widen the image of the WE tech implanted in
the gauntlet, then holds his phone screen out for Tim and Jason to tilt their heads slightly to the right
in thought.

“They messed with the trackers,” and Tim’s eyes go from the original design specs dug from the old
server back to the scans taken in Titan’s Tower less than an hour ago. Well, it’s not like he really
needs to see the old schematics. Some things just kind of stay with you, right?

“They have made it suitable for their needs,” the fifth Robin corrects and lays his phone down on the
Batcomputer’s console, typing a few commands, he zooms the image to the corresponding location.
“It functions as a tracking device as you originally intended. However, added circuitry and a small
motherboard here,” and the image moves further down the new scan, “will allow it omit a burst—”

“EMP,” Jason fills in, arms crossed over his chest, beating Tim to it because the younger vigilante is
deep in his own thoughts, “so’s they can kill the tech what when someone maybe starts havin’ a little
strike of free will or some shit.”

“It’s smart if they don’t want the configurations at risk should anyone get the prosthetic off one of
their people. If the thing hadn’t been damaged in the fight, it probably would have activated anyway
and taken down our plane.” And even with, you know, fliers on team, he’s not a fan of how that
scenario could have panned out for them. Just really. He hates to be impressed by bad guy tech,
hates it, but at this juncture, he has to admit the new design is really pretty bad ass.

While the detectives go over the files Dami brought to the table and Alfred arranges for dinner
upstairs, Sirs, the purr of the returning Monte Carlo is enough for all three to tense, to move out of
the other’s peripherals just in case, well, fight time.

B, however, stands up in the niche between the open door and car, sunglasses sliding down his nose
so his eyes can be that blue. He sees it, the way the three of them (all three of them) automatically
add the others to the count—how they look very much like a team. He puts the observation on the
backburner, adding it to the mental tally of items to prove Tim is back.

“Sarry, fellas, looks like we gotta change a’ plans,” followed by a slick grin and Matches’ wink.

**

And it’s…odd. Suiting up in the Cave right at sundown again is just like waking up to realize his
bedroom is still just that. It’s bittersweet, past and present in a crazy kind of convergence in his brain
pan. His locker hasn’t changed; the shitty hair crap he used to use (because spikey was just the so
cool at the time—nerd) in his first few years in the R is oddly still there. New can of it along with
other sundries, things he thought he’d left behind to end up in the trash.

Dressing from the locker three spaces from the end, those unshakeable blue eyes are dark with that
same innate knowledge Jason had of how crazy this all is for him.

He swallows lightly staring without moving. “I…it’s still…” But his throat is tighter, enough that
more words get stuck, don’t make it out.

B, however, just grins a little sadly and nods, “yup. Still yours.”

And if his fingers hesitate away from the roll of white binding tape, no one would even see it, but he
can tell it’s the thinner, more flexible stuff he personally prefers. Glancing further back and yup, new
additions because there’s a bottle of antibiotics sitting in the center, an obvious don’t forget me if you
feel like ass.
The man getting ready beside him is moving further and further into the Batman, even if the cowl is the last thing to top off the evening wear, but even still, he hears the soft burr that is all Bruce—

“Tim? You okay?”

And he glances over to see most the Batsuit on and ready, sees B in mid-reach, the hand on his shoulder gloved and gauntleted, familiar, gripping and grounding.

Shit, how long had he been standing here staring at the inside of his old locker?

Long enough for the World’s Greatest Detective to take note. Well, shit.

“Good. I’m...good,” and yeah, he means it surprisingly. He really fucking does.

Like he gets something, B smile changes to the one when he’s genuinely pleased, and the hand squeezes again. “After we pull a rescue of another self-sacrificing son of mine, we’ll get you back to your Perch for your own tools if you’re workstation is missing something.”

Tim finally starts with wrapping his hands and ankles with the usual precise movements to work himself into the coming night, into what he would need to be in the next hour (something Robin couldn’t be). “It...pretty well stocked,” he replies carefully because if he mentions something, then it’s going to appear there next time and just— (yeah, he thought it: next time). “My isolated systems, however, yeah. Yeah, I’ll need to access it.”

B is stocking the hidden pockets in his suit, fitting the last ditch contingencies in his gauntlets as well as the hidden spots in the small of his back, over the side of his ribs, and on the sides of both thighs.

“You can connect the set-up directly to your laptop here.”

Yeah. A few config changes from the Perch should do it,” he replies softly, something in his chest on this crazy edge of breakable. He keeps half-turned away just on fucking principle while he wraps his hands six and one half times from palm to wrist, ankles and heels the same. The familiar motions are soothing, getting him where he needs to be, giving him some kind of grounding when it’s possible he might just hit the streets running and conveniently fail to look back.

(But...it’s a little too late for that isn’t it? He’s got plans from here on out, how to find the threat the contain it, but not-not how to get himself back out of Gotham.)

“Good. That will make it easier to coordinate. We’ve got more irons in the fire than I initially intended.”

“Sucks when a piece of it has to do with the secret ident.” He deadpans, “It’s not good publicity for your company, you know.”

“Our company,” Bruce corrects, fitting on his utility belt while blatantly looking over at his third Robin (and those moments are right in his peripheral—a shorter, younger, more innocent version of this man in red, gold, and green. His Robin), “and it’s fine. My CEO is going to find out all the particulars since he’s only slightly annoyed when bad guys use his tech.”

Yup, now he’s laughing like an asshole. That’s B for you, playing the troll when things are getting heavy and tight.

Between the bench and his locker, he’s stretching, slower and more precise because residual owfuck, making his hips get with the program. The discreet check of the bandage is clean before the armored
tunic, gauntlet and gloves, running a check of the computer. Down to socks and boots, then the more necessary hardware.

His fingers catch all the seams, all the padding, looking for the inevitable tracers since, you know, whatever design that might have come from the Titans should have an epic array.

Bruce is just standing there easy and patient, waiting for him to get on with it because he already knows Tim’s rituals. And it’s good to know some things don’t change.

And it’s a moment, a clear thing that makes him ache in all the best ways because he’s grinning, remembering when they were in these same spaces, talking about cases and crazy bad guys between how was the history test? Is Ariana going with you to the movies tomorrow night?

It’s just—

It’s the same way he felt...you know, as the other Robin. All of it, past and present existing in this space, between lockers, getting ready to take and deliver a beatdown with a little detecting on the way to the inevitable end. And it’s a moment, a scary, heady moment that Bruce was right on—

(Welcome Home)


**

“Something is off,” Leo says low once J’onn drops off Cuddle Bug with the other in their section of rooms in the Watchtower. “Something is really off.”

Caro hugs Carl the Unicorn and her eyes slide to the side of their communal area. The other littles grab random things, a book, a puzzle, a tablet, and the four migrate to the beanbags in one corner of the room (the corner furthest away from the security cameras—they could have gone to into one of the bedrooms that didn’t have anything, but none of them wanted to seem suspicious, not when Caro can create a neural network anyway).

While it seemed like they were doing things on the outside, Caro holds up her book with Carl in her lap, and starts weaving their minds together into a bridge.

Karmen sniffs, starting the 1,000 piece puzzle of the Louvre, “all right. Clark talked to Bart, Barry, and Wally before we left.”

“Miguel looked sick when Diana came for us,” Charlie confirms.

“J’onn blocked me so I wouldn’t get it from his mind.” Caro tilts her head a little as the nursery rhyme goes through her conscious thoughts so if J’onn was listening, he would initially think she was just reading.

“I don’t like this,” Charlie sighs a little, tablet in his hands starting to flicker, the coding flashes black and white binary for a second. “I’m going to see if I can find something.”

“Good. Don’t let them trace you,” Karmen agreed. “I’m going to let them get further away and then I’m going to go to the secondary control room.” The annoyed tinge to his thoughts comes through on the bridge, the others raising brows at him.

“Good idea,” Leo replies, pulling out his samples to compare with the big book Mr. Batman gave him. “We need to know what we’re up against.”
“They don’t mean anything by it,” Caro defends, “they just want us to be safe.”

“They want us to be in the dark,” Leo sighs, still annoyed.


Karmen clears her throat, loudly. “We’re not going to fight with each other. We need to agree on what we’re going to do. We’re a team, remember? We need to act like it.”

Leo and Charlie straighten up just like Karmen intended. And they’ll help get a decoy so she can sneak into the control room and use Red’s disruptor (that she might have, maybe, picked up the last time they were at the Tower. Sorry, Red) to access the JL’s database and find out why the alerts.

Caro, however, visibly twitches, her head turns just slightly. Unconsciously, she holds Carl the Unicorn just that much tighter.

“What is it, Cuddles?” Leo asks, eyes moving around the room. His hand under the back cover of the book, shifts just slightly, fingernails becoming sharp claws in case they needed to defend themselves.

“I just…” her thoughts trail off, her eyes distant, “I thought I felt someone. we used to know.”

The kids exchange a glance, pass it off as a fluke of her powers. No one they knew from Genesis survived. No one but them.

The smallest just lays her cheek on Carl’s fluffy flank and shakes her head at them, and they go back to their seemingly busy activities, Charlie’s thoughts a background noise on the bridge as he scans the current message board coded for the JL members on world—a way for the mass of bodies ready for the next wave of supervillains could easily communicate with the space station. He goes through the next set of channels when nothing leaps out (Karmen’s jolt makes him pause when he sees Barry is on one of the “projects” in testing, but she promises to fill them in later).

He sighs and pulls up the Titan’s Tower mainframe in a smaller screen, already working carefully to get around Red’s security. If he hadn’t been introduced to the system by the admin himself, the cyber smack-down would be sever enough to fry whatever device he’s using—luckily, Charlie learned from him and Vic.

Charlie.

Leo is looking at him, making an eyes dance to the cameras.

Oh. Sorry, he blinks and settles into the Watchtower security of their room (and there’s still so many places he can’t get to here, but if his time in Genesis taught him anything, it’s to always try and control the room he’s in—no matter what). He breathes out slowly, having to pull out of the Titans system so he could concentrate enough to—

Four.

Karmen’s body tenses.

Three.

Leo gingerly places another sample from the Grand Canyon.

Two
Caro releases her death grip on Carl.

*One.

And he loops the feed long enough for the four to leap out of their beanbags, grabbing one of the child-sized dolls in the corner, propping it up with blankets, filling it out, facing away from the camera. Caro puts pigtails in the same way as Karm wears, Leo placing the hands on puzzle pieces, Karmen throwing her t-shirt off, giving it to Charlie to put on the doll. She can change better with just the tank-top underneath, and is already shifting her skin pigment, becoming the color of the bland walls.

Sweating with the strain, Charlie gasps and the children scatter back to their positions as the vent cover is removed and Karmen starts through.

When J’onn switches screens to check on the children, realizing it had been over an hour since they’d all been brought to the Watchtower, he relaxes when he sees them all safe in their communal area watching *Moana* on the big screen.

He will check on them after he assigns the newest batch of intel from the Titans, lab records he believes, and perhaps offer to make them the popcorn which, as he has been educated on by Kara *more than once*, is usually an appealing snack of movies.

J’onn checks the time again. He has another hour before Shazam is sent to relieve him, and a movie sounds quite appealing.

**

The language is Kurdish, and Officer Grayson is now *intrigued*. They didn’t have to say his name, but the description: “Tall, dark-haired Romani.”

That’s all him. And *apparently*, they’re going to take him somewhere out of Gotham. They have transportation waiting, so not going to kill him (which is nice for once). But, he’s going to get a first-class ticket to their super bad guy hideout without really *trying* that hard, so *bonus*. He’s going to call this a winning scenario. The muffled argument seemed to be a fifty-fifty there for a while, the person on the other end of the line insisting they didn’t need any *more* hostage, and the guys with him in the here and now point out how having someone associated with the name *Wayne* would make it easier to get what they need should Shaw be unable to *perform*.

“Inigo, I’m going to need to use the john eventually.” He says conversationally, hoping to get a little closer to the conversation.

“Not getting your hands free, understand?”

“Oh? I’m mean, I’m *flattered*, but usually *ladies* offer to hold it for me while I—”

“I’m warning you to shut it, Grayson, unless you want to be shot by your own piece” A hand on his elbow gets him to his feet. He pretends to weave, off-balance because of the bag over his face, tries to make it seem like his orientation is off.

But, the weaving gets him in the right position to activate the comm in his pocket while he’s lead to the bathroom, catching more of the conversation, times and places for *something*, and if he’s smiling under the bag, well, the bad guys would never know it’s because of how *easy* it is to rope them into doing just what you want. Delivering them into the hands of cops and vigilantes is really going to make his *day*. 
With the whiteouts up, Red is staring at a house on the outskirts, close to the middle of nowhere in the span of distance between Gotham and New York City. As far as hideouts go, it’s not a bad location, close enough to be within communication limits, far enough out that no one is going to come looking.

On the other half of the screen, the security footage from the warehouse plays in real time, Dick and Shaw in their places along the far wall while the baddies are scrambling to pack-up the temp hideout. They needed to get moving and now.

With the Titans on their end of the find the bad guys and/or dangerous tech, he’s good to go with the Bats. In the forty-five minutes since she joined the land of the living, O is apparently running full speed ahead, coordinating with his people as well as the routes the Bats intend to take tonight. She’s confirmed the littles made it to the Watchtower, the Insidious Seven must be recouping underground since the last fight did a right amount of damage, and she’s single-handedly doling out assignments with the intel he opened up in the Batplane’s home drive. Not to mention, she might have dropped a little hint, hint in Commissioner Gordon’s email because you know, there’s a manhunt going on for everyone’s favorite boy in blue.

Everything coming together because damn she’s good.

His wrist computer is set to ping with the necessary updates for his side projects, all steadily working, falling into place, and his head is tight for the game. (Not going to think about it.)

“I got the location from a mobile I pinged at N’s location” O is saying over the line, “Google Earth is a wonderful thing when I’ve got no other live feeds.”

With Jason right behind him, looking up at the big screen, eyes narrowed behind the domino, Tim has a sudden awareness of how close they are, how close Jason’s hand could be to his hip if—

Fuck. Focus. Just a joke.

“We’re going to have to do this in one move,” he finds himself saying to keep his thoughts on the mission.

B hums, the only thing left is to put on the cowl, and BOOM, Batman. “True. If they realize we’re onto them, they might kill the hostages.”

“Easy,” Jason draws out, “B goes after the goods. We getcha word s’all copesthetic, then me, Timmy, n’ Demon take a little time with Big Wing’s new friends, yeah?”

Dami tuts, adjusting his hood over his head, eyes dark behind the whiteouts. “For once, Todd, I believe your plan has merit.”

Jay has no problems pointing a gloved finger right at that little motherfucker, “don’t start bitchin’, Baby Bat. I always getcha outta whatever situation y’ might fall inta.”

Behind the dom, Dami is arching an eyebrow, “as you are so fond of saying—ditto. I am not without my own talents.”

The smirk cuts across both their features even if Jason guffaws back at him, “aw now, yer just still pissed y’ didn’t get the takedown on Mask last time.”

“I earned the finishing blow, Todd,” Dami snarls with his nose in the air, “I was the one who found
him in the first place. The situation was under control. You, just showed up.”

Jason gives no shits about shoving the hood back to rub his knuckles in the top of Damian’s skull, “mmhm. Didn’t even send an invite, you little shit. What’s fiddy or so baddies ‘tween friends?”

The duck-and-spin is becoming habit because for some reason, Todd foolishly shows his affection in this manner. It does not, however, warrant a knife in his kidneys as that would probably anger his father and earn him, at the very least a grounding.

Instead, Dami doesn’t miss a beat. “A well-spent evening, of course.”

And yup, Tim snickers, looking at the two over his shoulder while B shakes his head a little, looking over the map (don’t think no one sees you smiling).

“Be nice to your brother,” B decides to add off-handedly as he leans down to send a message to the Watchtower about the Titan’s newest threat, “it’s nice to have allies in our line of work.”

Dami and Jason exchange a look because it’s time to divert B from starting into a lecture. The helmet goes on, and Tim fits—still a little odd—a domino. The cape isn’t the usual pizo-electrice he uses when he not in a cowl, but it’s slightly heavier than the normal, only enough to notice without throwing him off his game. It’s good for him, flows in just the right way (dom and cape combo like when he was—still kind of is—that Robin).

They move as the message is sent and the cowl goes on. The big car rotates when they walk across the platform, adjusting automatically to the motion, and line up with the Ducatis Alfred prepped a few hours ago. Comms are tapped, synched, legs are thrown over seat, minute adjustments made, last-minute life-savers stored in side pockets and in spans of reinforced armor. The big car starts, the deep rumble under their boots (a variable reminder of the day is saved), and it’s just the start they’re all waiting for.

Hood, Red, and Robin look up, ease back on the bikes and helmet up. When B gives them one last look before he slips down into the driver’s seat of the Batmobile, one last silent be careful, it’s an understanding that they are going to have a good fucking night.

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The boys follow him through the darkness, staying in a tight formation until they hit a mile out of Gotham. He sees them break-off at the pre-determined section of town, coming from different angles for anything else going down in the city tonight.

The police scanner is playing in the background, Jim’s voice barking out orders as the undercover vehicles are starting to mobilize. Batman ss going to reach the scene first, take down the kidnappers, question them within an inch of their lives, and leave them tied up for the police. He’s going to make sure the hostages haven’t been harmed before he teaches their tormentors why criminals in Gotham City fear the night.

Once he gives the signal, the boys are going for the next piece of the puzzle and get them a hell of a lot more clues to tie everything together.

It’s B’s intuition leading him to see the strands of connections, the evidence starting to add up to a much bigger picture, one possibly crossing Barry, Wally, and Bart’s pending problem. The moment the analysis from Titans’ Tower indicating the gauntlet could use gravity for transportation, something inevitably clicked. J’onn would make sure the designs are sent to Barry and see if the disturbances they’ve been coming across could be caused by this technology (he’s betting his utility
belt on something from Earth—and no way is Hal going to collect).

His usual back-alleys and side roads are cleared without compromising speed (ETA ten) with the car’s complex system and O’s directions in his ear. The screen in the dash is showing Dick and Shaw being brought to their feet, being moved, obscured by massive, black duffles, and the glint of available semi-automatics. The trackers in the boys’ Ducatis tell him they’re already on scene and ready to move.

He switches feeds to the map as he gets out of the city proper and on the span of open highway, he shifts to the higher gear, and brings out the speed.

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“Baby Bird.” Is Hood over comms while the two of them ride side-by-side after watching Dick and Shaw already being loaded into separate vans and a third vehicle pull away with a squeal of tires and air of something crucial. The quick hack into their cell line (thanks for lookin’ out, O) is just exactly worst case scenario. They’re taking Shaw further into Gotham, another hideout, and Dick...is on his way to Dixon Docks until “the ship” comes in (and yes, he sees the helmet automatically swing his way, a gloved hand on his wrist before he can jerk away because the asshole knows what kind of things still grate on his nerves). The last wonderful addition to the plan is whatever sazî could be (“device”? Can we be a little more vague, please?)

“I know.” Because he and Hood and Rob are on the same page, and that shit? Not. Happening. They’re not getting Dick out of Gotham, they’re not killing the guy’s family, and they’re sure as shit not getting away. He hits the accelerator, talking calmly through the comm in his helmet because, welp, he’s that guy, isn’t he? “We’re going to have to split up. Rob is on Shaw, B stays with the family, Hood is on whatever they’re transporting, and I’m going after Dick.”

The static clears up once they hit more open road. “Don’ like it, Red. Gettin’ stretched thin here.”

“We’re good for it until B gives us the all-clear,” he manages over the comm in his bike helmet. He hits the Ducati to take it up another five...ten...fifteen. “Besides, like I can’t handle a few terrorist asshats, Hood? I’m fucking insulted over here.”

“Don’t be an asshole, Red. He’s only got two with ‘im, but watch’ya ass anyhow, you feel me?”

“Shaw is still en route.” is the youngest vigilante’s low growl, apparently unimpressed by the plan. “The tracker is functional, there is no reason I cannot—”

“They might peg him as a liability, Rob,” Red tries to be sensible about it all, “could take him out once they get wind we’re on to them. We can’t chance it.”

“Goddammit, Red, you’d better not get more chewed up, do you mother-fucking feel me?”

“I love you too, Hood. Now, we’re going to follow the bad guys, get our vigilante back, and stomp them for using innocent people in the first place. A nice little revenge while we figure out who the hell used our kids for this shit, and then we get to beat some more ass. Everyone on point?”

“Fucking righteous.”

“Understood.”

“Good. We’ll hit back on comms in thirty if random shit doesn’t start exploding first.” He doesn’t pause, doesn’t look over at Hood’s taller figure on the bike next to him; he veers off the back path and hits the main street of Gotham, already following the second van with Dick in the back.
From the mini-LED screen on the upper right of his visor, he watches the blips (Hood, Rob, B) moving to their separate locations, and even if they’re in hot pursuit, all systems _Go_, the anticipation of a good knock-down-drag-out, one that _might_ have some certain asshats that held him in a goddamned ship for almost two weeks, rises up to override the pain from the injuries. At this moment, nothing short of his own funeral is going to keep him from the fight and possible rescue (_hold on, Dick, just hold the fuck on, they’re not getting you out of the city. I’m not going to let that happen_).

And as far as his luck goes, the truck is not nearly as heavily armored as inmate transport, but is more bulky and boxy (their attempt at flying below the radar-seriously, terrible bad guy calls) giving him more room to hide so the driver doesn’t catch anything other than the normal road noise when they take the big bridge connecting main Gotham to the east side (and going toward the docks, just like the last time—). He needs more room, less people around to take the vehicle out once B gives the signal (because they weren’t getting Dick that far, _that shit isn’t going down_).

The comm is still going in his ear, Hood biting out he’s got the surprise secondary transport in sight heading North, probably going to take the highway to get to New York City if there’s merchandise to deliver. B is in the final questioning stage of _who do you work for_ and _I haven’t even started on the real pain yet_ after a very nice demonstration of the _Motherfucking Batman_ in all his ass-kicking glory (and B usually _does_ get a little more violent if innocent _kids_ are involved). He reports he was smart in putting a fidget spinner and Magic Markers in his utility belt because Jenny seems to be enjoying herself with making evil mustaches on the tied-up kidnappers. B kindly looked away when Mary seemed intent on kicking the utter crap out of the remaining four. Rob’s breath hitches and he’s on the move as well, following the third vehicle to track wherever these asshats are taking Shaw. He’s going to hold off, let them get as close as possible before nabbing the innocent guy.

And even with the mass of utter _fuckery_ going down right now, Red is completely focused, completely in control of himself and his emotions; he’s _one hundred percent _in the _game_. All he needs it just _one more thing_.

B gives it out in the nick of time: “We’re good. GCPD is almost here,” is B’s deep growl, “take them down.”

A flick of the hand and a whirlybird is in hand, ready to skim lightly across the ground between him and the transport, ready to affix itself to the undercarriage. It would activate in under a minute, the mini-EMP taking out the engine without a hitch. He shoves his helmet on the hook at the back-end as he sets the autopilot, thighs tensed and ready to jump, a whole lot of _hold on, Dick_ in the forefront of his vigilante brain pan, and he _finally_ is going to get the opportunity for some _real_ payback.

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When the charge he missed in a hidden compartment of the van counts down to 0:00:00, Red is already trying to throw himself out and on top of Dick (because, you know, armored tunic and shit), but his load of _owfuck_ hurts too much when Dick fights him in the little mid-air free fall away of the vehicle and twists them so Dick is the one on top to get any of the fiery consequences. Red managed to get some scraps of paper and the GPS nav in the windshield before the nice _boop, boop, boop_ caught a whole lot of attention. Ten seconds though was awful nice of them, right?

Red almost wrenches his left arm up at least throw his cape around Dick’s back and body, to get his forearm up and blocking the back of Dick’s head in the case of like, you know, painful-fucking-debris.

It’s an unconscious thing, throwing the cape around the unarmored Officer, other arm around his
back to grip and hold, pull the older man into his body for a better chance at protecting him from the fallout. He gives no shits about Dick pretty much laying on his abdomen while the big boom hits, fire flaring into the night, burning hard enough to reach the gas tank and another explosion follows right on the tail, sending flaming car parts to hit the ground around them and the two unconscious baddies Officer Grayson had already secured by the time he pulled the dying van over anyway. The bomb had taken them both by surprise, the two squawking “trap!” over comms in mid-leap. Dick is curled over him, a hand in his hair, shoving his face right into the vest.

It’s a good night when nothing burning lands on you. Just, really winning tonight.

The two of them give it a second before looking over at the calming enferno and visibly relaxing when nothing else is seems to ignite for yet another explosion.

“Thank God, Tim. Good catch,” just as more of Dick’s weight falls on him like his strings have been cut, and there’s a nose in his bare neck while his adrenaline is still slightly pumping, and so much of his attention narrows down to just the puff of breath across his throat and Dick’s mouth is so close to that spot on his neck that makes him—

Even with the night around them, even with things like burning getaway vehicles, and considering what their life consists of, it’s a crazy thing, a telling thing on how fucking long it’s been, when he makes a stupid, low noise in his throat, and his hips twitch just slightly up into Dick’s hip resting between his legs.

And the mortification?

Is fucking real

(This is all Jason’s fault— who’s he kidding? It’s Dick’s too dammit)

Because Dick freezes and he can swear he feels the brush of lashes when those eyes get wide (I heard that Timmy—I heard that), and Dick slowly, slowly raises himself up on his forearms, looks down with his bare features half-lit in the smouldering light, and just—

(How is this his life right now?)

He starts talking, trying to play misdirect, “you okay? That was a pretty impressive explosion considering what an epic piece of shit those vans are. I mean, I only needed one whirlybird, Dick, so you know—”

“Timmy,” is low and deep, cuts him off completely because Dick’s hand moves to his jaw, thumb running along the line, “Tim.”

His chest stutters because this is so wrong, too wrong, and if Jay ever found out how he feels or if either of them find out, if something ever slips—

He might need to leave Gotham to finish this case up after all because the two of them are fucking killing him. Automatically, he licks his dry lips and in the scant light, and he can plainly see Dick’s eyes go down to the motion, feels the pressure of the thumb on his jaw bare down.

“Seriously, are you okay? You don’t have armor,” but it’s really a desperate, last ditch attempt because he hasn’t pulled his arms away, still holding on. Dick is still wrapped up in his damn cape even. His feet are just suddenly braced against the ground (ready to work his hips up again, right against—) and he hasn’t rolled the bigger man off, hasn’t tried to get up (because of how fucking good this feels).
Dick doesn’t answer, just tilts his face a little, just *enough*, and his forearms are lowering him down while Tim’s eyes go wide and his breath catches, his arms *tighten* because *Oh God, he’s going to...he’s really, really going to*—

Sirens split the night, closer than either of them even noticed, and both vigilantes jerk upright immediately.

“*Fuck,*” Dick spits out, kneeling over his thigh at a half-crouch, a very N move. “They have to find me.”

Red subtly pulls his legs up and is on his feet *fast* because making sure the bad guys are ready to be found without, you know, zip ties, and any clues in the wreckage to scavenge, any excuse to get the hell away from what that—*that*—almost was and—

He doesn’t even get his hips swiveled enough to turn around because Dick’s hand catches him by the wrist, and those *eyes* are bright enough in the night that something low in his abdomen clenches. He follows the move when Dick rises to his feet with his characteristic grace, smooth motion, looking up, breathless, his brain coming up with a whole lot of *nada* on how to even *handle* this right now.

“Don’t even think about running,” Dick pulls his wrist, making him stumble a step forward, catching himself with a hand on Dick’s shoulder, “we’re going to *talk*, and you aren’t going to duck away.”

The underlying, *I come find you now* followed up by the very serious *and I will* is all right there for him to pick up what Dick’s laying down.

He blinks rapidly, wishing he’d put the whiteouts up again, “there’s...Dick, there’s nothing to talk about. I mean, that was one hell of an *adrenaline* rush. You know, kidnappings and near-death make people do— do crazy things, so we’re just going to write this off as a *holy shit* moment, okay? That’s—That’s—”

“There is no way you’re going to just—”

The approaching Ducati is hard to miss, beating the sirens by a slim margin, and Red grins, pulls away while Dick is rolling his eyes and sighing in frustration. But with time ticking down (*again*), they get with the program. He assures the Bats they’re okay over comms and makes sure Hood has the device with his baddies all nice and waiting for the GCPD to come for a pick-up. Rob is clearly unimpressed with *everything* but is assuring the prisoner his family is safe and yes, *I will take that GPS*. B is right on Robin’s scent, wanting to have some words with Shaw and his assigned thugs before GCPD send out another dispatch. Red gets to the charred remains of the vehicle, swipes the random, surviving smartphone blown out of the car (it’s an Android, it’ll survive anything), mourning the melted laptop. Dick takes the zip ties off the two beaten-up bad guys and picks out where he’s going to be “found.”

Red is zip tieing him back as Hood pulls up and throws down the kickstand, he looks none the worse for wear after his own fight-and-snatch.

“Howz ‘bout it, boys?” A slight motion is Hood’s gloved finger against Dick’s neck, and Red takes a nice, subtle step *back*, pulling the cell from his cape pocket, looking *oh so busy* at the moment, *sorry*. Bad guys and such.

“It’s nice when they leave things for me to hack,” he shrugs a shoulder, ignores Dick on his knees (*Oh God, that image*), looking up at him with dark, *dark* eyes, and just turns slightly to the obviously approaching cops. “But, I digress, we need to get going.”
“S’ bout time all good vigilantes get ghost,” and Hood hitches a thumb over his shoulder to the bike, “c’mon Red, give ya a ride, yeah?”

And yes please, get him the hell away from here, from this, and just—he needs to be working. Now. Right. Fucking. Now.

“Aw, you should really consider joining Uber. Saving the day and all that,” he puts the cell phone he really wasn’t paying attention to anyway in his center compartment.

“Tim.”

And it’s an automatic gesture, a mistake to look down and see the very different smile cutting across Dick’s face while the older vigilante is kneeling and zip tied at the wrists, none of it making him forget the power of Dick Grayson laying between his thighs and all that strength keeping him down.

(Master of diversions. Let's see which bad guy asshat is next on the list. Please, please, stop thinking about this shit)

“We’re going to do so much sleuthing when you get away from GCPD. It’s going to be great, really,” he rambles stupidly, stupidly breathless, and it just makes Dick’s smile get darker with something his brain refuses to process.


Slowly, the helmet tilts up so Hood must be looking at him through the night as well. There’s going to be some…questions (start working on a plan, Red).

“I have terrible bad guys to catch, remember?” He swallows, hands suddenly awkward enough that he lets the cape slide around to cover him. “But we’ll see you back at the Manor.”

“Yeah,” is modified with the synths, but there’s something off there, “don’t get snatched again, Dickie, you feel me? We got a full plate ta deal with as is.”

“And you’ll piss off Alfred. He saved you dinner,” he calls over his shoulder, gratefully already moving to the Ducati, giving the boyfriends a second to do their usual ‘glad you’re okay, baby’ kind of thing. Away from them both, he can get his head back in it, can pass off what he thought might be and realize he’s being a complete dumb ass about it all. Really, it’s Dick and Jay for fuck’s sake.

He works the bike, starts it up and slides back, turning on the tracker for his own a few miles back.

He’s not looking at Hood taking off the helmet long enough to say a few words and then (Oh God, not looking, not looking. Shit! Totally looked) fit their mouths together in something quick and still just—

He’s still looking at his wrist computer, trying to hide the fact his face is probably on fire while Hood swings a leg over the bike and it’s get with the program time.

The cool air is rushing when they spit gravel and take off, his cape flying behind him, hands gripping the seat right behind his ass instead of around Hood’s waist. He doesn’t look back at Dick, who they’re leaving behind, and when they get back to the Cave for the reconvene, he’s probably not going to be able to look at Jason in the face either.

Chapter End Notes
The whole “forces motivating the universe to keep doing this to him?” Yeah, it’s me XD #sorrynotsorry Tim. Ah, how many things can I possibly squeeze into one chapter *gestures.* Oh, recent Tumblr post I happened to see—something to the tune of Dick Grayson isn’t some weepy, super emotional hug monster, he’s pretty badass. Well, yes, yes he is, so have badass Dick Grayson, please. Give him mad props for his own long and sordid past in and out of the cape. And finally, my love, Azazels helped me put down the specifics behind the Architect forever ago, and it’s finally time to break it out. For those of you on Tumblr that leave me such nice things, you have no idea how much strength it gives me. True story. I go back and read the Asks and stuff just for myself sometimes to keep me motivated. And, you know, thanks for reading and sticking with me through this even if you might want to kill me a little. Feel free to throw down some thoughts in the comments.

Works inspired by this one: see how you broke me (see how you lost me) by redbirb, Call to Rememberance by Raliena, Disturbance by scorbusfics, Fracture [Podfic] by Titans_R_U

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